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Telegenic Schroeder, dour Stoiber face TV debate

By David Crossland

BERLIN, Aug 23 (Reuters) - Gerhard Schroeder, postwar Germany's most telegenic leader, confronts media-shy challenger Edmund Stoiber on Sunday in an unprecedented television debate billed as the highlight of the election campaign.

It is an unequal contest. Schroeder is as famous for his smooth performances in public as Stoiber is for his awkwardness.

Media are hyping the fight like a World Championship boxing contest. But few expect it to decide the outcome of the September 22 election, unless conservative Stoiber crumbles under Schroeder's steady gaze.

Stoiber's uncertain performances in media interviews, where he often appears tense and hesitant, have been a problem for the conservatives throughout the campaign. Schroeder's easy charm has made him much more popular than the dour Bavarian.

But Germany elects chancellors via political parties rather than directly, and high unemployment has given the conservatives an opinion poll lead in recent months that is only now narrowing after Schroeder's statesmanlike handling of a flood disaster.

At stake in the election is the direction of Europe's largest economy and Germany's stance on major foreign policy issues, including a possible U.S. attack on Iraq and the reform of the European Union.

Schroeder has more to lose in the debate because he has to live up to his own high standards, said Richard Schuetze, chief executive of a consultancy specialising in public relations coaching.

„Stoiber has made some progress, there are fewer ‚ums and ahs‘ in his speech and he comes across a bit less afraid in interviews, not quite as shy and reserved,“ said Schuetze.

„If he rises to the occasion a bit and Schroeder shows any weakness, the debate will be a draw, and that would benefit Stoiber as it will strengthen basic sentiment in his favour.“

There is no love lost between the two, who have sparred before in two debates published at length in leading newspapers where witnesses described the atmosphere as frosty.

**APPEARANCE IS EVERYTHING**

The key now for Stoiber, who often appears stiff and tense, is rest and vocal practice, said Schuetze.

How the contestants are warming up is a closely guarded secret. Experience of U.S. presidential election debates shows rest is crucial, because appearance can count for everything.

Some say the first such TV debate, in 1960 between Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon, won Kennedy the election because he appeared relaxed and youthful, sporting a tan and occasionally flashing a toothy smile.

Nixon wore an ill-fitting suit, sweated a lot and often looked haggard and angry.

Such face-to-face debates are a first in Germany. Schroeder, well aware of his skills, is the first incumbent to agree to one. „Saying no wouldn't be my style,“ he said this week.

Past leaders including Helmut Kohl shunned debates because of a fear they would raise the profile of challengers. They also have an air of show business frowned upon in Germany's staid political scene.

Then came Schroeder, quickly dubbed the „Fun Chancellor“ for appearing on a game show, modelling suits in a magazine, and never missing an opportunity to kick footballs at public events.

Schroeder has a knack for selling himself. He speaks calmly and eloquently in short, simple sentences, often displaying a flash of wit-particularly unusual in Germany.

Like boxers, the contestants' vital statistics have already played a part in preparations for the showdown.

White-haired Stoiber, 60, has the height advantage, being five inches (12.7 cm) taller than Schroeder's five feet eight (1.73 metres). He scored a pre-debate victory when his team negotiated that both stand.

On the downside for Stoiber, known for his number-crunching abilities and obsession with details, the candidates will not be allowed to take reference notes with them to the podium.

Sunday's 75-minute prime-time clash will be broadcast on two commercial networks. A second debate, hosted by two public stations, will take place on September 8.

„The election impact is hard to quantify but it could be one or 1.5 points in one direction or the other,“ said Manfred Guellner, head of the Forsa polling institute.

It is uncertain whether the debates will catch on because Germans harbour misgivings about showmanship in politics.

„People say that's theatre in the sense of manipulation and we have deep mistrust of that, especially in Germany,“ said Schuetze. „We invented the propaganda ministry with Joseph Goebbels, we've seen it all before.“ ((David Crossland, Berlin Newsroom, +49 30 2888 5142, [david.crossland@reuters.com](mailto:david.crossland@reuters.com)))

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