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Schroeder fails to win TV debate as Stoiber shines

(Recasts following end of debate, snap polls, fresh quotes)

By David Crossland

BERLIN, Aug 25 (Reuters) - Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was knocked into the defensive in Germany's first U.S.-style TV election debate on Sunday as rival Edmund Stoiber performed better than expected in a battle commentators declared a draw.

Schroeder, often described as the most telegenic politician Germany has ever had, failed to throw the knock-out punch he had been seeking against the media-shy Stoiber, who surprised many with a string of aggressive, fluently delivered attacks.

The chancellor adopted a statesmanlike calm, smiling disdainfully as Stoiber accused him of „irresponsible“ foreign policies. Stoiber assailed Schroeder for the „national disaster“ of high unemployment which lowered Germans' living standards.

Schroeder appeared tense at times and displayed none of his usual wit in the contest against the Bavarian state premier, a dour master of facts and figures.

Political analysts said the draw had favoured the conservative Stoiber, who had not been expected to win because of his past awkward and uncertain appearances on television.

The debate was too inconclusive to determine the outcome of the election campaign, analysts said-remarks borne out by two snap polls following the debate.

A Forsa snap poll declared Schroeder the winner, with 48 percent rating him more competent, compared with 41 percent for Stoiber. Of those polled by Forsa, 57 percent also rated Schroeder more charming, against 35 percent for Stoiber.

An Electoral Research Group poll, however, narrowly favoured Stoiber, with 37 percent saying he performed better, against 35 percent who said Schroeder did a better job.

But Schroeder missed an opportunity to build on the momentum gained after his strong handling of the flood disaster that had narrowed the conservatives' lead in recent opinion polls a month before the September 22 election.

„This debate was a draw,“ said Juergen Falter, politics professor at Mainz University. „They both landed some good points.“

The debate, billed as the highlight of what has been a dull election campaign so far, grew heated at times as the two accused each other of lying and often interrupted one another.

„Mr Chancellor, you made a disastrous mistake in your tax reform which is now having dramatic effects. People today are worse off than they were when you took office four years ago,“ Stoiber said, staring at Schroeder standing to his left.

„You accuse me of reading too many files, but you should read them more-then you wouldn't make mistakes.“

Stoiber, sporting a light tan acquired on a sun bed he has at home, appeared assured and avoided the blunders which marked previous performances after he was nominated to lead the conservative banner in January.

STOIBER IMPROVED

„I think Stoiber won on points, he surprised me by turning in a good

media performance," said Richard Schuetze, head of Ipse Communication, a Berlin consultancy specialising in public relations coaching.

„He's found a role for himself in being the attacker," he told Reuters. „And he's got better by managing to keep his sentences short. Both appeared nervous at first, Schroeder looked even more nervous.“

Television commentators said Schroeder may have made a tactical mistake by accepting the challenger's offer of a television debate-something previous leaders such as Helmut Kohl refused because it raised the challenger's profile.

Stoiber occasionally raised his voice as he criticised Schroeder, avoiding hesitations which have dogged previous speeches. Only once did he get bogged down in long sentences filled with confusing numbers.

He criticised Schroeder for ruling out German involvement in a possible U.S. attack on Iraq, and when Schroeder ruled out forming a government with the ex-communist PDS party, Stoiber retorted sharply: „I don't believe you.“

Schroeder stuck to defending his record, saying Germany's economic weakness was caused by factors beyond his control such as the September 11 attacks on the United States.

But Schroeder may have scored important points near the very end against Stoiber when the debate turned to women.

„Naturally I talk to my wife about politics and her advice is important to me," Schroeder said, contrasting with Stoiber, who said: My wife doesn't comment on current events. She supports me.“

The debate was a unequal contest between two men vastly different in appearance and background, even though their policies are startlingly similar, with a focus on the man in the street and pledges to cut back the privileges of big business.

Stoiber, 60, white-haired and stern, hails from a comfortable background and has been married to the same woman for three decades. State premier in Bavaria, he displays none of the earthy joviality associated with his home state, and seems more like an austere Prussian.

Schroeder, 58 and married four times, appears more youthful with full brown hair-he sued a news agency earlier this year for suggesting he dyed it.

He often refers to his rise from a poor, underprivileged background in a rural northern town. His mother once had to take on five cleaning jobs at the same time to feed the family.

The two networks broadcasting the debate said they expected nearly 70 percent of prime-time television viewers to tune in. All major networks carried programmes analysing the debate.

(Additional reporting by Erik Kirschbaum)

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