

Chancellor candidates debate

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BERLIN -- German conservative leader Angela Merkel delivered a robust performance in a televised election debate with media-savvy Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder yesterday, robbing him of what may prove to be his last chance to catch up in voter surveys two weeks ahead of a national election.

Snap opinion polls released immediately after the debate showed viewers saw Mr. Schroeder, known for his media skills, as the clear winner of the 90-minute face-off, the only U.S.-style confrontation between the two in the campaign.

But Mrs. Merkel, who had fluffed her lines in recent interviews and at times appears uncomfortable in public, managed to exceed expectations by starting a fluent array of attacks that, at times, took Mr. Schroeder aback.

"In contrast with the chancellor, I have the backing of my party for a course of modernization," she said. "Breaking promises has become the trademark of your government."

A snap poll of 1,219 viewers by the Electoral Research Group for ZDF Television showed 48 percent thought Mr. Schroeder performed better in the debate, while 28 percent favored Mrs. Merkel. However, 54 percent of viewers thought Mrs. Merkel was better than they had expected, compared with 18 percent for Mr. Schroeder.

"Merkel profited from her underdog role, and 40 percent of viewers said they had a better view of Merkel after the show than they did before," Matthias Jung of the Electoral Research Group told ZDF Television.

"I was surprised by Merkel. She delivered a strong rhetorical performance," said Richard Schütze, director of ipse Communication, a consultancy that coaches politicians and businesspeople in how to handle the media.

"She often faced Schroeder while she was talking, she spoke in short, clear sentences and, at times, put Schroeder on the defensive," he said.

Occasionally, Mr. Schroeder seemed more assured than his challenger, however. When asked to comment on whether she thought the U.S. government had failed in its response to Hurricane Katrina, Mrs. Merkel evaded the question, stressing that she would strive to eradicate poverty in Germany.

Mr. Schroeder answered the question directly and managed to score points by referring to the way he handled the far less devastating floods in eastern Germany in 2002. His swift, strong response to the floods was cited as one of the reasons he narrowly won re-election that year.

Mr. Schroeder said: "The U.S. president himself said it was unacceptable how the relief effort happened. It's not criticizing him to confirm that; it's a fact. It shows something else, that we're well-advised to take a very close look at the question of how much government we need.

"If you look at how we have coped with such national disasters, there are clear differences, and I think it's linked to how we say that for such situations, for people who need help, we need strong government, not weak government."

By David Crossland