

# TheNational

## Merkel's popularity tops charts

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BERLIN // Angela Merkel is more popular than any German chancellor since the Second World War, according to a fresh opinion poll that reflects how the reserved pastor's daughter has become increasingly adept at manipulating her public image, a skill widely expected to win her a second term in next year's election.

A survey by the Forsa polling institute published last week indicated that 62 per cent of all Germans want her to remain chancellor after the autumn 2009 election. Her steady rise in popularity and the consistently high ratings are unprecedented for any German leader since 1945.

Even a majority of supporters of the rival centre-left Social Democrat party, 56 per cent, want the conservative leader to win a second term, the Forsa poll showed.

The results are surprising given that Mrs Merkel, who turned 54 last week, has been unable to implement much of her radical economic reform agenda and has failed to stop persistent quarrelling within her uneasy coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats.

“Other chancellors have seen their popularity spike to similar levels but it was never this consistently high. Merkel has had a clear upward trend ever since she took office in 2005. That's unique,” said Manfred Güllner, the director of Forsa.

“She seems to have risen beyond the fray of domestic politics and is almost like a president. She manages to avoid taking position on issues that could hurt her popularity.”

The 2005 election campaign betrayed Mrs Merkel's shortcomings as a speaker, and even though she failed to exude charisma, she narrowly won because of public anger at welfare cuts implemented by Gerhard Schröder, her predecessor, to boost the country's competitiveness.

One of her strengths, commentators said, is that Mrs Merkel has always been underestimated, even though she has mastered every political challenge since she entered politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

“When she became chancellor, expectations were so low that people were happy when she managed to avoid falling over on red carpets,” Mr Güllner said. “She actually astonished people just by walking straight.”

Mrs Merkel grew up in East Germany and trained as a physicist before entering politics after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A Protestant by confession, she joined the Christian Democrats and steadily rose through its west German, male-dominated ranks, skilfully outmanoeuvring rivals to win the party's nomination in 2005.

She has never looked back. Germany's first female chancellor was well received on the international stage where her no-nonsense approach helped her to broker accords on a number of European Union issues and on climate change.

She also won applause for her criticism of Russia's human rights record and her meeting with the Dalai Lama last year, a move that angered China.

At home, she is seen as someone who did her homework and got things done for the good of the country rather than her.

Her apparent lack of interest in self-promotion won her points among the German public, which had tired of the showmanship displayed by Mr Schröder, who courted the media by being jovial with journalists, kicking footballs at every opportunity, appearing on a game show and declaring his love for his wife during a televised debate. Yet Mrs Merkel has been quietly working hard at her image. Some commentators said she has even more media-savvy than Mr Schröder because she is more subtle about it. “Her apparent lack of self-promotion is all part of her self-promotion,” said Gerd Langguth, Mrs Merkel's biographer.

Soon after taking office, she ditched her boyish hairstyle for a more feminine look, and she listened to advisers who told her to frown less.

Divorced once, she is married to a dour chemistry professor who does not often appear by her side, and she has no children.

“She's becoming increasingly conscious of her femininity and its ‘weapons’ and she makes use of them,” Richard Schütze, director of a communications consultancy, said.

“That combines with her high intellect and innate quick-wittedness, which makes her hard to beat in debates.”



Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, comforts Michael Ballack after Germany lost the Euro 2008 final in Vienna. AFP

“Her smile can be mischievous, which makes it flirtatious,” Mr Schütze said. “Her hair is now cheekily combed back behind her ears. But she’s remained an ordinary woman. She doesn’t show off with status symbols.

“She has remained modest. She’s not trying to be the nation’s darling or superstar. But she is becoming just that because average citizens can recognise themselves in her.”

The German public has noticed the changes and welcomed them. The Forsa poll showed that 49 per cent of people thought she had changed for the better since coming to power. Only 12 per cent thought that she had got worse.

Mrs Merkel has become very particular about how she looks on television. During one photo opportunity last month in Bavaria, she spotted a cameraman who was filming her from what she thought was an unfavourable angle. Briefly dropping her guard, she frowned and switched into a broad eastern German dialect.

“What’s going on here? That’s not a picture,” she snapped, commanding a bodyguard to get out of the way so that the camera could portray her from a better angle. Then she switched her smile back on and made her statement.

Her apparent passion for football has also helped her ratings. At the 2006 World Cup in Germany and the European Championship last month, Mrs Merkel attended a number of matches of the German team, cheering, punching the air and giving post-match commentaries on TV.

“I don’t know if she really is a football fan, but she diligently worked herself into this role,” said Langguth, who recalled that she had been able to give a perfect explanation of football’s complex offside rule during an interview with Bild, a tabloid newspaper, before the World Cup.

“A lot of people were impressed by that. As I know Merkel she asked her advisers what questions she would be asked and she did her preparation.” She still lacks charisma. But she has learnt to overcome that.

“The office of chancellor itself exudes a charisma, and she knows how to use that,” Langguth said.

Part of her strength lies in the weakness of the rival Social Democrat Party, which is going through a lengthy leadership struggle and looks unlikely to field a candidate capable of seriously challenging her in 2009, analysts said.

One risk is that her own popularity has not rubbed off onto her Christian Democrat Party, which remains about 36 per cent, close to its result in 2005.

But Mrs Merkel is now so dominant that many analysts expect her to lead the next government, whatever form it takes.

“I think she is suitable for a number of different coalitions and that she’s likely to be in office for longer than many people suspect today,” Langguth said.

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