

Center for the Study of Democracy



Political Strategy in Party Government

A Comparative Study of Strategic Governing Processes under Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder

Paper prepared for the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, 14-19 April 2009, Lisbon

Workshop 8 "Party Government and Parliamentary Democracy in the New Europe"

– Work in progress –

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1. Introduction

We can identify growing attention on strategic aspects in political contexts. The notion of strategy is used by an inflationary trend. Politicians are eager for knowledge of how to think and act strategically, think tanks and consultants in the political branch provide ‘strategic’ concepts and techniques, and governments put great efforts in creating the capability prerequisites to govern in a strategic manner in policy as well as in politics. In political science, the term may be ubiquitous but there is no substantial conceptual debate (Burnell 2005: 364-365). To cover the gap between the frequent use of the term strategy and its meagre theoretical foundations, I consider essential bringing forth a scientific discourse about the question of political strategy. We should know more about the conditions and requirements of strategy in political context in order to explain whether and how ‘strategies do matter’ in politics.

In general, strategy may be seen as an instrument of creating choices. Strategy is always confronted with various alternatives and takes place under a certain degree of uncertainty (Sjöblom 1968: 30). We should conceive strategy as a goal-orientated instrument for actors to deal successfully with the fact of uncertainty by developing a pragmatic structuring of their specific environment. Strategy might help to strike a balance between incrementalism and the impossibility of long-range planning in politics.

This paper aims at making a theoretical and empirical contribution to the issue of political strategy in parliamentary democracies in Europe. Theoretically, it offers a framework to analyse political strategy in the context of party government. Empirically, it provides a deeper understanding of how governments in Britain and Germany have been organised and run to enable strategic governing.

The argument is elaborated by four steps. First, the discussion of different strategy approaches will lead me to estimations on their appropriateness for gaining the question of political strategy in parliamentary democracies. Second, ‘party government’ is marked as the here examined political context. In a third step I introduce a conceptual framework for the analysis of strategy-making processes in the context of party government. Finally, this framework is applied within a comparative empirical study of party governments in Great Britain and Germany. The empirical cases are the first two terms of Labour government (1997-2005) and the German red-green government (1998-2005).

2. Political strategy

Although strategy is an extensively used notion in practice as well as in science, thus far we still fail to see common grounds for the understanding of political strategy and deeper foundations for analytical

purposes. In most instances, strategy is used to designate concepts that are based on long-term considerations with far reaching implications. Additionally, sometimes strategy is also used to describe sophisticated and intelligent actor operations. In political science, more elaborated concepts of strategy have mainly occurred in two strands of discourses: strategic studies and game-theoretical approaches.

Strategic studies reflect the connection between military means and political goals and, therefore, require knowledge of both politics and military operations (Baylis et al. 2007, Lonsdale 2007). More precisely, strategy in this context signifies “the theory and practice of the use, and threat of use, of organized force for political purposes” (Gray 1999: 1). *Game-theoretical models* are used by political scientists to explain phenomena ranging from international relations to differences in electoral systems (Gates/Humes 1997, Morrow 1994, Ordeshook 1986). Within these approaches, the notion of strategy basically marks one rational option for action in a finite actor constellation (McCarty/Meirowitz 2007, Scharpf 1997).

Only recently a new *political strategy* approach has been introduced. It tries to cover the strategy issue from a different vantage point (Raschke/Tils 2007, Tils 2005, Raschke 2002). This approach serves to explicitly relate the dimensions of policy and politics for analytical purposes (Tils 2005: 87-100). Basis therein is a general definition of political strategy raising a claim to be non-specific and universally applicable. Accordingly, *strategies* are success-orientated conceptions for action which extend the actual situation and are based on goal-means-context calculations (Raschke/Tils 2007: 127-132). By contrast, situational calculations of this kind would lead to tactics. Success-orientated conceptions do not consist of definite rules or sequences of fixed operations but define a scope of actions which is particularly promising to attain the end one has in view. Making goal-means-context calculations a subject of discussion is to ventilate a crucial element of strategy. *Strategic calculations* are the basal thinking operations in the process of strategy-making. They differ in form and type and should be defined as success-orientated estimations of one’s own advantages. Points of references for such kinds of calculations are the goals actors strive for, the means they dispose of, and the actual relevant contexts they are operating in. Within this political strategy approach the entire strategy-making consists of ‘strategic capability’, ‘strategy development’ and ‘strategic steering’ (Raschke/Tils 2007: 273-440). *Strategic capability* of actors entails their capacity to act strategically. *Strategy development* means to create and formulate a strategy, and *strategic steering* describes the process of realisation in which the collective actors try to reach their goals.

In the following, I will argue that both strategic studies and game-theoretical approaches are less suitable for a comprehensive actor-centred analysis of political strategy in party government than the politi-

cal strategy approach. Reasons for this are their analytical scopes and focal points. Strategic studies as well as game-theoretical approaches provide strategic frames designed for definite purposes. These specific styles of design restrict the possibilities to discuss the subject of political strategy.

To begin with, in the field of *strategic studies* we can detect two different ways of understandings of strategy: a narrow and a wide one (Baylis 2001: 2-6). While the narrow definition claims strategy to be the direct bridge between military means and political targets it only focuses on armed coercion for supporting foreign policies. In this perspective, strategy is restricted to the question of using war as a political means (Gray 2006, 1999) or, to put it briefly, “how to win wars” (Mahnken 2007: 68). In the broader sense of ‘Grand Strategies’ the concept of strategy encompasses all the resources at the disposal of a nation to exercise control over sets of circumstances to achieve states’ goals in external relationships (Yarger 2006, Rosecrance/Stein 1993, Liddel Hart 1967).

It seems to be obvious that a notion of strategy which is confined to the use of war for achieving objectives may not be straightly adaptable to considerations on ‘non-war’ strategic action. That said, irrespectively of wide or narrow ways of understanding strategy, the analytical focus of strategic studies remains constantly on states as entities and their mutual relationships (cf. Yarger 2006). If we are not only interested in states as principal actors but also endeavor to analyse strategic interactions between individuals and collectives and among collectives *within* the state, we should look for another approach. A strategy concept that assists discussing strategic aspects at international and national levels and between several types of actors should be more suitable. Only in a very broad sense strategic studies may provide some discernment for the problem of strategy in parliamentary democracies. This just applies if strategy is, generally speaking, qualified as a bridge between policy and operations that integrates different realms and criteria and allows elements on either side to move to the other (Betts 2001: 24).

In case of *game-theoretical approaches* strategy is, among players and payoffs, one of three fundamental concepts (Scharpf 1997). Individual or collective players, who are capable of making purposeful choices, dispose of alternative strategies (as sequences of moves) in a finite actor constellation. The third element, payoffs, “represents the valuation of a given set of possible outcomes by the preferences of the players involved” (Scharpf 1997: 7). Thus, games of ‘strategy’ cover situations in which for each player the best course of action depends on what he or she expects the other player to do (Schelling 1960: 9-10). As such this means that strategic situations are a subgroup of social situations in which players are interacting, come to consistent choices, and their interdependent decisions jointly determine the situational outcome (Morrow 1994: 1).

Our main concern is whether and how such conceptions may apply to the question of political strategy in party government. In this piece I argue that even if mutually dependent actor constellations are crucial elements of political processes in parliamentary democracies, those kinds of finite interactions do not cover all relevant factors that have lasting effects on strategy and politics. In particular, the phenomena of strategy can not be comprehensively covered by narrowing down the context of a finite social interaction as game-theoretical models do (cf. Gates/Humes 1997: 8). Because of minimalism, rigidity and formalism of game-theoretical modeling (Gates/Humes 1997: 7), the analyses of political strategy could benefit of using a multi-dimensional and all-round applicable strategy approach. Basing the following considerations on a general definition of strategy as conceptions for action which are based on goal-means-context calculations, on a broader concept of calculations, and on a strategy-making process that implies three dimensions (strategic capability, strategy development, strategic steering) may yield to a richer understanding of strategy in political context.

As distinct from game-theoretical approaches, in this contribution, strategy marks a conception for action that is based on comprehensive calculations connecting the usage of available means with one's own aspirations against the background of a particular context. Strategic calculations vary in degree of abstraction and range. We should distinguish interactive calculations, reference calculations, and basic calculations (Raschke/Tils 2007: 249-271). *Interactive calculations* deal with the selection of choices that satisfy one's own preferences while taking the influence of other players' choices into account. Interactive calculations are the ground from where game-theoretical approaches proceed to develop their analytical tools (Gates/Humes 1997: 8-10). However, calculating concrete strategic interaction games is just a small proportion of strategy. *Reference calculations* mark a different type of strategic considerations which refer to concrete features in respective areas of activity, be it a 'centre-calculus' within the left-right-scheme in party competition politics, calculations on 'news factors' in order to consider probable effects of one's own action in context of mass media or the 'cohesion factor' which is of assistance to calculate someone's assertiveness in government and opposition. In the same manner aspects such as expectations, performance, emotionalisation, or symbolisation may be references of calculations. The choice of references follows the particular strategic goals and contexts. *Basic calculations* are the most abstract form of strategic calculations. Their characteristic is versatility. Various calculations of this type may be shaped in a bipolar way, for example: attack vs. defense, concentration vs. diversification, imitation vs. innovation, growth vs. stabilisation. Those kinds of calculations might lead on to basic directive principles for future activities.

3. The context of party government

Although the here presented political strategy approach in its fundamentals presents a comprehensive framework for analysing strategic processes in various contexts, in this contribution I will concentrate on a specific political environment. This is because contextualisation is needed for a detailed analysis of strategy. *Context*, in a broad sense, describes the environment in which actors and their actions are embedded. It consists of rules, procedures and organisations which set the scene for the actor's room of maneuver and affect actors by constraining their range of options. Contexts enclose specific conditions, opportunities, and limits of political action and offer a set of characteristic roles actors have to fill. Context is a dynamic variable, not fixed once and for all. As it includes formal and informal rules, distinct practices and certain expectations, some elements are more likely to change than others but, ultimately, all are the product of social decisions (Riker 1980). Thus actors have, in principle, a choice. They may act accordingly to the existing context or make efforts to change it corresponding to their desires. Even though an existing context opens a wide scope for action, simultaneously it sets some distinctive 'rules of the game' and brings about characteristic types of goals actors are seeking for.

The context addressed here is *party government*. This way of proceeding allows us to itemise the specific operational meaning of political strategy in a particular kind of scenery. In parliamentary democracies parties are the crucial actors for managing and solving 'collective action problems' within a society, not only in symbolic terms but also for the material output that is produced (Keman 2006: 171). In these contexts, parties have been considered the central institutions for providing linkages between society and government (Sartori 1976). They move in a competitive electoral context and organise the alternatives that face the voters (Powell 1982: 3). Whilst victorious parties, exclusively or in coalition with other parties, are entitled by the voters to set up the government they are granted responsibility for enhancing public welfare. As the representatives of the public with delegated powers, political parties gain a mandate to govern and to make policy choices (Keman 2002: 207-208). The essential functions of parties in government are to control policy-making, policy implementation, administration, and to take public responsibility for policy outcomes (Strøm 2000: 183). More abstractly, the "irreducible core" of parliamentary democracies, governments executed by parties, can be modeled as party governments (Keman 2006). Party government comprises at least three conditions: "Firstly, all major governmental decisions must be taken by people chosen in elections conducted along party lines, or by individuals appointed by any responsible to such people. (...) Secondly, policy must be decided within the governing party, when there is a 'monocolour' government or by negotiation among parties when there is a coalition. (...)

Thirdly, the highest officials (e.g. cabinet ministers and especially the prime minister) must be selected within their parties and be responsible to the people through their parties” (Katz 1986: 43).

The behavior of political parties and their individual representatives in parliamentary democracies is largely conditioned by the context of party government. Government and opposition in party government involve the interplay of party organisation, government and parliamentary actors. Political elites in party government have to follow different logics of action to succeed in policy-making as well as in politics. They make their choices in the tense atmosphere of policy, office, and vote (Wolinetz 2002, Müller/Strøm 1999). In this type of government, combining policy and politics implies knowledge of problem solving and policy-making processes as well as mechanism of party competition, mass media, lobbying, coalition government, matching government, parliament and extra-parliamentary party activities or coordinating central and decentralised state levels (Tils 2005). In particular, it is essential to consider the multiple orientations of elites in political processes which alter from policy and problem solving aspects to the political power rules in a specific system (Wiesenthal 1990, Elster 1986). It is assumed that political actors are both policy-seekers *and* power-seekers (office/vote).

4. Political strategy in party government

The strategy-making process, as conceptualised here, consists of three basic elements: strategic capability, strategy development, and strategic steering.

The *strategic capability* of collective actors entails their capacity to act collectively in a strategic mode (Raschke/Tils 2007: 273-334). It is a core requirement for the entire strategy-making and may be seen as a ‘reservoir’ of strategic capacities. The specific strategic capability of party government actors requires leadership, direction and strategic competence in the fields of party organisation, policy-making, party competition, and political communication.

In view of strategic capability, *leadership* implies achieving clarification on the *No. 1* within a party organisation and establishing an accepted *strategic centre* which is able to work. Beyond the scope of parties’ regular ‘officials recruiting function’ (Katz 1986) in party government, establishing and maintaining a strategic centre with an all-respected No. 1 as first leader are considered the two core elements of strategic capability. It is small group of actors, No. 1 being the head, which provides strategic functions. The strategic centre is defined as an informal network of a few individuals who hold executive positions and have high influence on collective strategic activities (Raschke/Tils 2007: 282-284). Configurations of strategic centres do not directly result from formal positions. Strategic leadership in party government remains without specific institutional coverage in cabinet, core executive, parliament or

party. In the majority of cases, the centre consists of core actors like the head of government, party leader, chief of staff or the Chief Whip. As we think of dissimilar institutional structures and situational conditions in party government, various leadership constellations are conceivable, such as single, dual, or collective leadership.

However, with regard to strategic performance, a definite hierarchy and role allocation within the strategic centre remains indispensable. Strategic capability leadership includes arranging a working composition of different complementary strategic functions. The strategic centre is accountable for strategy development and steering processes, for procedural and material performance. This is not to say that the centre actors must do all the work, but the overall strategic performance will be attributed to them. If they fail in both, responsiveness and accountability (cf. Keman 2006), this may have serious consequences for their own position. It is a particular task of the centre to make sure that efficient operative management is taking place and adequate strategic advice capacities are established.

We are able to observe various strategic centres in party government. If a party is capable to execute strategies, it usually disposes of *one* strategic centre. By contrast, several strategic centres in *one* party are symptoms of crisis. Although strategic centres are a general phenomenon in all types of party government, their number and attributes depend on the specific systems characteristics. The structure of the party system and the number of parties in government and opposition give rise to specific formations of strategic centres in a particular parliamentary democracy. For example, coalition governments dispose of two strategic centres, one for each coalition party. In such cases, coordinating and synchronising overall governing direction and concerted strategic action induce a demanding task.

Centralisation and linkage are the crucial elements that characterise the result of efficient strategic centres. Centralisation means bringing together powerful actors within the government machine in order to set the government agenda, manage and control the decision-making process and supervise the overall direction of governing. Linkage ensures coordination between all fractions of a party: party in government, parliamentary party and extra-parliamentary party. Synchronising and harmonising political activities in order to generate a coherent government action turns out to be one of the most important duties and responsibilities of the strategic centre. Within the centre, strategic goals, important guidelines, programs and timetables of the whole government formation are discussed, strategically calculated and pre-decided.

Direction is the second essential component of strategic capability and means deciding on the overall course of a party formation. Defining a direction can be considered a basic purpose of political collectives, point of origin for orientation, motivation, and legitimisation. Direction encloses political prefer-

ence formation (economic distribution, libertarian vs. authoritarian principles, see Kitschelt 2004, 1994) and self-definition that should be analysed by categories such as values, goals, and interests of parties. Combined and integrated direction may appear in more general political ideas (Nationalism, Conservatism, Socialism, Third Way etc.). In this sense, political ideas serve as practically relevant frames of political direction on the basis of values, goals, and interests. Direction of parties in party government implies, for example, issue choices, policy positions, coalition preferences, communicative-symbolic frames and, hereby, it brings about a specific 'direction profile'. The leadership group, in responsive social interaction with other party actors, is a central figure in this process.

Strategic competence is the final piece of collective actors' strategic capability. It encompasses action ability and knowledge skills in central realms of party government which may be featured as party organisation, policy-making, party competition, and political communication (Raschke/Tils 2007: 161-243, Tils 2005: 79-87).

In recent years, parties as political organisations (Farrell/Webb 2000, Scarrow 1996) and balances of power within parties (Katz/Mair 2002, Scarrow et al. 2000) have faced profound changes. In view of strategic capability *party organisation* signifies a central resource and field of attention. This means that from the viewpoint of leadership party organisation may be seen as an *instrument* for the aspirations of the party in external arenas and, simultaneously, as an internal *arena* (Sjöblom 1968: 52-53). Organisation provides the basis for goal directedness of the party as a collective actor and, at the same time, constitutes a constant source of concern. The leadership group takes responsibility for creating the competence prerequisites of strategic action in all three organisational party faces: party on the ground, party central office, party in public office (Katz/Mair 1993). It is a leadership task to balance the challenges of coordination, participation, cohesion, and reciprocity within the party, and in doing so to provide self-steering competence. As this seems to be difficult for opposition parties, it will be even more demanding for parties in power which have to fulfill extended functions managing the party-government and politics-administration nexus (Goetz 2006).

Policy-making competence requires problem consciousness, recognition, knowledge, expertise for problem definition, policy instruments, program formulation, implementation as well as management skills for public policy decision-making processes (including awareness of involved actors and institutions). Therefore, the policy-making competence of political parties encompasses both problem solution knowledge and in-depth understanding of decision-making processes. Parties' overall policy performance correlates with these two parameters and may be described as a decrease of discrepancy between what is and what is desired (Sjöblom 1986: 75-80). Since problem solving does not occur as an 'objective'

procedure, the public and voters' perceptions of party organisational problem-solving contributions and capacities will be attributed especially to ever-present leaders of political parties.

Policy-making and problem solving depict only one half of politics. Party government actors are seeking for policy *and* power goals (Strøm 1990). The key to understanding power-seeking in party government is *party competition*. Even supposing party competition is a multi-dimensional concept (Bartolini 2002), its nucleus can be characterised by two principles: first, competing parties accept the legitimacy of their opponents and of the constitutional system, second, they cannot be certain about the next election results, since office is to be won and lost (Robertson 1976: 3). At the individual level, inter-party competition effects on political attitudes and behavior, at the organisational level it causes a parties' struggling for votes, and at the systemic level party competition describes a specific polity (Strøm 1989: 280). Viewing party competition as a competence of strategic capability indicates that parties ought to be received as the best choice compared to their competitors. Consequentially, party competition competence implies the capability to draw distinctions. Distinctions against other parties are made by, for example, issue positions and competences, direction, personnel, symbols. Selection and configuration of these elements are in a large part subject to strategic choices of the leadership group at the top.

At last, political processes in modern party government cannot be analysed without taking into account the impact of mass media and importance of parties' *political communication*. The 'third age' (Blumler/Kavanagh 1999) of political communication proceed. Mediated politics (Bennett/Entman 2001, Bennett 1983) and mass media as political actors (Page 1996) lay increased emphasis on political communication competences. Different types of 'public strategies' (Kriesi 2004) are at the disposal of political actors. Parties in governments, for example, attempt to manage political communication as a 'permanent campaign' (Blumenthal 1980) in order to influence public opinion and to use the media to promote their political and policy goals (Pfetsch 1999). All parties compete for affirmative public response to convince voters of the legitimacy of their goals, their professional competence, their capacity to act, their power to enforce decisions, and in so doing try to create trust and mobilise support. It is a small group of party actors in leadership positions that is the central stage of 'personalised' political communication processes (Mughan 2000) and shall achieve positive effects on parties' images in these respects.

From the findings above follows that only the triangle leadership, direction and strategic competence provide the strategic capability of party actors. Usually, there is a sequence of operations: first leadership, second direction, only then a party is well grounded to prepare its strategic competence. Without acceptance of principal and strategic centre, direction stays freely floating. Without the unit of direction

and leadership strategic competence is lacking in substance and connection. Merely on rare occasions direction is set first. In this case leadership has to follow suit.

Strategy development means creating and formulating a strategy (Raschke/Tils 2007: 335-386). Therefore, collective actors have to identify their *goals*, calculate their own *positions* as well as environmental *circumstances*, generate *options* and come to a *decision* about the favored line of action (*strategy*). Although I argue that strategy-making is a collective phenomenon, particularly in the process of strategy development the leadership group at the top is challenged with making a substantial contribution beforehand. Preparing alternatives for course of action and strategies remains a leadership function in the face of all desires for responsivity within party organisation and towards the public. While processing strategic methods, tools and techniques such as scenarios, SWOT-analysis, response management to weak signals, strategic opinion polls, cognitive mapping, brainstorming, prognoses and projections may be used (Raschke/Tils 2007: 376-386). In practice, an ideal-typical strategy development which consists of several analytical steps is scarce but various types of evolving strategies appear as the normal case. Viewed in that light, we can assume strategy development patterns ranging from *strategic emergence* to *conceptual strategy*.

As the last step of strategy-making, *strategic steering* describes the process of realising strategic goals (Raschke/Tils 2007: 387-440). Government steering processes in general imply complex social interactions between official and unofficial actors, elected politicians and bureaucrats (Peters 2007). The same applies to strategic government steering: translating strategies into practice does not follow a logic of scheduled implementation. Since political processes in party government are characterised by their dynamics, this form of guiding involves execution, adoption and revision of the strategy concept. At the same time, maintaining collective strategic capability requires permanent efforts of party representatives. Steering activities in party government proceed in the realms of party organisation, policy-making, party competition, and political communication, as introduced above. Strategic navigation should ensure cohesive organisational self-steering in 'mediated' arenas of policy-making and competition politics. All these activities should be brought into line with one's own strategic concept. The strategic centre performs to manage and supervise the relevant arenas for steering activities. Five specific leadership tasks in strategic steering processes can be identified: sustaining leading power, navigating direction, enforcing decisions, mobilising, and orientating.

Although it might sound paradoxical in the context of leadership *sustaining leading power* is of capital importance for the strategy process – and for the political success of leading actors. As strategy-making is a multi-dimensional, dynamic and interdependent process, the capability and acceptance to act as a

leader is never assured and has to be restored continuously. Political actors in leadership positions spend a lot of time with claiming, maintaining, and defending their leadership in external interactions and within their own party. Even in the interplay with fellow party members the claim of leadership is sporadically contested and varies over time.

According to Robert Tucker, “a political leader is one who gives direction” (1995: 15), and this point leads to another essential leadership-obligation in steering processes. *Navigating direction* means to permanently adjust the “course of action” (Tucker 1995: 31), and this turns out to be a second challenge for strategic leaders. Directing can be understood as the sum of measures carried out for guiding the programmatic positioning as well as steering the line of action in policy-making processes and competition politics. The way in which leaders give direction is assumed to be one of the most important features of political leadership at all (Mouritzen/Svara 2002: 52). We are able to distinguish between different patterns of navigating direction. ‘Transactual leadership’ (Burns 1978) as a “give-and-take-leadership” (Burns 2003: 23) which responds to “short-term, popular desires” (Elgie 1995: 23) contrasts to ‘transforming leadership’ (Burns 2003) which implies a substantial, non-incremental change of breadth and depth. Transforming leadership does not automatically refer to far reaching changes in outcome but include cases of resistance by actors who are supposed to be ‘followers’.

Enforcing decisions has a double meaning. First, channeling and insisting in decisions concerning the strategic goals. Second, moving forwards and achieving decisions in political processes with reference to the chosen strategy. As strategies need to be exercised and continuously filled with issues, personnel alternatives, symbols and communication, the strategic centre has to provide internal decision-making on the basis of strategy as well as to guide decision-making in external interactions among actors from different political institutions (e.g. legislative, executive, federal or regional levels).

Leadership strives for receiving positive perception with regard to leading power, direction and decision-making. This kind of response will not come up automatically. Because of this fact leaders are called to *mobilise* for their course of action. Assembling support can be achieved by using different instruments, ranging from persuasion to threat. Leadership covers the mobilisation of individual actors by direct interactions, collective entities such as parties or the administration as well as parts of the population or the population as a whole (Blondel 1987: 16).

Placing contextual *orientation* is the last challenge for strategic leaders that refers, closely connected to the aspect of mobilisation, in particular to the communicative side of leadership. Providing orientation requires answers to basic questions such as: Where are we now? Where are we going? Therefore, leaders define the current situation for the political community and combine it with overall mission statements

and objectives. As actual “political problem situations” (Tucker 1995: 49) have no objective evidence, the community’s purposes and concerns are a result of interpretations. It is the attempt of political leaders to regard themselves as the natural custodians of society’s concerns and to envision the community’s way into the future (Tucker 1995: 47-59).

5. Strategy and politics under Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder¹

By applying the introduced political strategy approach to an empirical study, the aim is to focus on specific characteristics of strategic governing processes under Premier Minister Tony Blair (1997-2005) and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005). In this paper, I will only sketch some key elements of the overall strategic profiles of both governments and illustrate these findings empirically.

Conditions for strategic governing in both countries are different on macro levels. In view of Robert Elgie’s contributions on leadership and democratic regime types one can distinguish different “relational properties” (Elgie 1998: 224-228) on a systemic level that provides specific constitutional resources and constraints (Elgie 1995: 13) and influence the potential to govern strategically. Elgie accentuates three aspects of institutional structures: the structure of resources within executive branch of the central government; the structure of resources between this branch of government and the other branches and levels of government; and the structure of resources within and between political parties (Elgie 1995: 13-20).

Summing up our empirical cases roughly within this framework, the British state is characterised by a unitary government, a single-party majority government coupled with executive dominance (cf. Kavanagh et al. 2006). The British prime minister disposes of strong institutional resources as, for example, patronage, control of cabinet, organisational power within Downing Street and Whitehall, right of proposal, veto and delegation of power and responsibility to ministers and departments (see Heffernan 2003). Due to this kind of institutional setting, the opportunities to centralise politics and steer from the centre are better than in Germany where, despite the characteristics of a ‘chancellor democracy’ (Kanzlerdemokratie, see Niclauß 2004), the federal structure of the state is dominated by coalition governments and institutional veto players (Schmidt 2003).

This study draws the picture with an actor-centred framework. In this perspective we can identify key elements that make a difference in Blair’s and Schröder’s strategic governing profiles:

1. *Active strategic capability building under Blair stands in contrast to non-active strategic capability building under Schröder.* The strategic capability of collective actors is based upon answers to three questions: Who is the leader? Which direction to go? Do we have strategic competence in the fields of

party organisation, policy-making, party competition, public communication? Tony Blair and his political allies spent much effort to ‘modernise’ the Labour party with respect to organisation and program and tried to build a ‘New’ Labour before reaching governmental power (Russell 2005, Gould 1998). This concept continues in power. During his premiership Tony Blair reorganised the British core executive several times (Library Research Paper 2005, Burch/Holliday 2004, 1999) in order to optimise the possibilities of conducting the government as a whole. By contrast, Gerhard Schröder did not spend much effort in optimising the government machine in a strategic perspective. For example, the strategic planning unit within the chancellery was completely detached from government steering process and, later on, suspended (Fleischer 2009: 207-208). Furthermore, Schröder did not feel that the artfully arranged double leadership with Oskar Lafontaine demanded an integrated leadership (merging the poles of innovation and social justice) after Lafontaine’s retirement in March 1999. The slogan of the Social Democrats for *Bundestag* election 1998 ‘innovation and justice’ had been personalised by Schröder (innovation) and Lafontaine (social justice). Without this balance the strategic capability of German Social Democrats could not be restored in ongoing processes. Lafontaine was not only a programmatic ‘complement’ to chancellor Schröder but also leading counterpart as the chairman of Social Democratic Party (Raschke/Tils 2007: 508-515).

2. *Attempts of coherent strategic governing under Blair stand in contrast to fragmented steering activities under Schröder.* If strategic steering is conceptualised as a continuum to greater or lesser extent with a non-dichotomised structure from emergent to conceptual strategy processes (Raschke/Tils 2007: 336-339), the Labour government steering under Tony Blair was a more coherent process than the steering activities from Schröder’s government. One example in the field of policy-making was the attempt of Blair’s government to achieve modernised joined-up government (Kavanagh/Richards 2001, Ling 2002, Bogdanor 2005). Labour government has expended effort to carry out holistic as well as consistent objective-driven policies that were based on evidence and also focused on outcomes and delivery (Marsh 2009, Mulgan 2009, Barber 2007, Cabinet Office 2006). For this purpose, the government set up project related teams, operating outside the umbrella of one specific department. Blair himself spent a lot of time with ministers and senior officials to review progress in achieving the government’s overall objectives (Kavanagh/Richards 2001: 9, 13). In contrast, Schröder basically counted and leaned on his powerful head of Federal chancellors’ office, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, for government policy steering. Steinmeier was a typical representative of the “administrative type” (Müller-Rommel 2000: 92-95) who is excellent in managing department coordination and day-to-day bargaining but not much interested in project-driven policy-making or an

overall governing line. The government operations *modus operandi* in most cases corresponds approximately to the concept of ‘negative coordination’, which implies that policy initiatives suffer because all involved specialised administrative units examine policies and eliminate their detrimental side effects only from the perspective of their own jurisdiction (Mayntz/Scharpf 1975: 147). Another example of coherent versus fragmented strategic government steering was the use and organisation of public communication in the central government. Tony Blair created the Strategic Communications Unit on Downing Street to coordinate and control, or more exactly, to ‘steer’ announcements across government and manage a coherent government communication (Heffernan 2006, 1999). The New Labour government’s approach to media management was characterised by the features of centralisation, professionalisation and politicisation (Kuhn 2007: 124-127). In contrast, Gerhard Schröder trusted in his personal competence in situational communication and left the double-structure of separate Federal Press office (Bundespresseamt) and chancellery in its original shape, with a suboptimal overall result (Sturm/Pehle 2007, Mertes 2007). The evidence was visible in the political communication performance during the policy-making process of ‘Agenda 2010’ – a complex reform that contained measures in fields of labour market, health, retirement pension, education and research (cf. Schmidt 2007). The Government campaign started too late, used an incredibly technical vocabulary (Agenda ‘twenty-ten’ or ‘two-thousand and ten’, ‘Hartz IV’, ‘Ich-AG’) and continued with changing argumentations and a potpourri of objectives (Klein 2007, Meyer 2005). A communicational simplification and concentration on two or three essential goals that would have been communicated permanently never took place: “What is missing is a comprehensive communicative strategy that is performed and taken full responsibility for by the power holder himself.” (Meyer 2005: 82).

3. *Blair’s claim for strategic leadership stands in contrast to the ‘situational’ approach of Schröder.* Contrasting institutional steering capacities at the ‘heart of government’ in Great Britain and Germany are mirrored in personal attributes of these to heads of government on the micro level. Tony Blair himself believed in the possibilities and chances of overall leading a government and providing strategic leadership functions such as navigating direction, enforcing decisions, mobilising support and placing contextual orientation. He possessed ‘political will and skill’ (Shonfield 1965) to lead Labour’s government strategically. By contrast, Gerhard Schröder was more sceptical of general political guiding and trusted in his experience and competence in acting instinctively. According to insiders he assumed that loose decisions in policy as well as in politics in a holistic view will appear as ‘good governance’. Moreover, the continually changing policy directions under Schröder’s chancel-

lorship demonstrate his lack of strong personal convictions and of a clearly identifiable political vision: “He tries to find out what is considered necessary and acceptable for a majority relevant to him, assesses the risks to his own position that are connected with any single policy decision, and then decides whether to surf on consent, or to fight – with probable success – against resistance, or to simply wait and see if immediate action can be avoided.” (Patzelt 2004: 285).

Even though Blair has tried to develop and implement a more strategic approach of governing his government was confronted with substantial strategic problems. Some of these problems were caused by circumstances but in large part they result from Labour’s specific way of strategy-making.

We can notice a declining *strategic capability* of the Labour government during Blair’s Premiership. One major reason for that were ongoing internal conflicts within the strategic centre between Blair and Brown on competences, policies, direction, and, most of all, on the question when Brown would succeed Blair as Prime Minister (Seldon 2007, 2004, Naughtie 2001, Rawnsley 2000, Kavanagh/Seldon 1999). Peter Hennessy (2005a: 4) has characterised this model of governing as ‘dual monarchy’: “(…) Whitehall, since May 1997, has been more of a dual monarchy of a very peculiar kind with rival courts around the Prime Minister and the Chancellor constantly sniping at each other with endless percussions of briefings and counter-briefings drumming the dispute over matter great and small into ever-willing journalistic ears.” In addition to that Tony Blair lost persuasiveness and power as No. 1 over time, in particular with his decisions concerning military intervention in Iraq which produced significant opposition within Labour party (Heffernan 2005, 2003, O’Malley 2007) and unfavourable public response. Furthermore, Blair and his team, architects of New Labour, made the experience that it is easier to establish a basic strategic capability of an opposition party (pursuing one main goal to win elections) than to ensure an advanced strategic capability of a whole government that brings together the party and government nexus as well as the nexus of politics and administration (Hennessy 2005b: 7). Added to that Blair had no experience how to organise governmental machinery and followed the principle ‘tried und trusted’ (Seldon 2004, Rawnsley 2000, Hennessy 1999). Results were informal networking with his trusties and a ‘parallel structure’ of special advisors and civil servants (Wilson/Barker 2003). According to involved actors, that led on to distrust and inefficiency.

Attempts of *coherent strategic governing* were affected negatively by ‘over-steering’ and ‘over-managing’ as well as by overlapping and inconsistent governing concepts. The media management activities of Blair’s New Labour tried to secure favourable media coverage of the government (Heffernan 2006) and to realise a coherent government steering that integrates ‘big ideas’ (like ‘Third Way’ or ‘Modernising Government’) with the government’s policies by means of political communication. In this media manage-

ment process the government overdid things, especially during Alastair Campbell's tenure in charge for the Prime Minister's communications operations, and attracted widespread criticism for its obsession with 'spin' and 'control freakery' (Jones 2001). The blame on communicative 'spinning' was, in part, additionally caused by the nature of Labour's reform agenda. Highly abstract concepts like 'Third Way' or 'New Labour' required a lot of communicative effort to connect day-to-day realpolitik with Labour's 'big ideas' (Sturm 2006). At some point in this process, people did not want to hear just another new story but wanted to see substantive results. Furthermore, the 'Modernising Government Agenda' may be seen as an example for an inconsistent concept which can not provide coherent government activities. It entails top-down and bottom approaches, centralised and decentralised elements, joining-up and fragmentising initiatives (McAnulla 2006: 143-164).

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed at making a theoretical and empirical contribution to the issue of political strategy in parliamentary democracies in Europe. It introduced a framework for analysing political strategy in the context of party government and applied this framework within a comparative empirical study of the Labour government under Prime Minister Tony Blair and the German red-green government under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

Compared to Schröder's chancellorship the era of Blair may be seen as a remarkable attempt to govern strategically. Labour's active strategic capability building, attempts of coherent government steering and Blair's claim for strategic leadership stand in contrast to non-active strategic capability building, fragmented steering activities and the 'situational' approach of Schröder. Measured by Labour's own aspirations, the Blair government underperformed. It needs to be further explored if Blair hit the brick wall of strategic governing in general or just struggled against himself. My assumption is that Blair's individual strategic style, impatient and control-orientated (Hennessy 1999: 7), caused some of the earlier addressed problems. His greatest concern was to achieve many changes in very short time. It seems to me that Blair's premiership was characterised by his uncertainty that his government could deliver what he wanted to prove: Labour in government can guarantee economic welfare, carry out strong political leadership, and at the same time modernise no less than the British Constitution and the system's public services.

Acknowledgement

The paper presents findings of a research project called “Strategic Steering in Party Government”. I would like to thank the German National Science Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) which is financing this project.

Note

¹ The empirical study is based on documents, literature and interviews with relevant government actors (politicians and civil servants) in both countries.

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