

Setback for Social Democratic Party in Bavarian elections

Peter Schwarz
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A state election in Bavaria, two weeks before the German federal elections, has delivered a serious setback for the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Opinion polls had predicted an increase in votes for the SPD and losses for the Christian Social Union (CSU), the conservative party that has ruled Bavaria for the last 36 years and the biggest coalition partner of Chancellor Kohl's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). The SPD were so confident of the outcome of the Bavarian vote, that they presented it as a 'trial run' for the Bundestag (federal parliament) elections, putting up posters saying 'the change starts here' and organising no fewer than 18 public meetings for Gerhard Schröder, SPD candidate for chancellor.

In the end, the social democrats' vote fell well short of their own target of over 30 percent, as they managed just 28.7 percent. Their share sank by 1.3 percent compared to the last state elections in 1994. The CSU were able to increase their own share of the vote very slightly to 52.9 percent at the expense of the SPD and the Greens, who just scraped in with 5.7 percent, barely above the 5 percent required for entry into the state parliament.

The SPD has now embarked on a damage control exercise, saying the vote was a purely Bavarian affair that will make no significant difference to the outcome of the national elections on September 27. Bavarian Prime Minister Edmund Stoiber had indeed tried to distance the poll in Germany's southern-most state from the political events in Bonn. The CSU campaign centred exclusively on Stoiber's record as a state politician. Chancellor Kohl was permitted only one brief personal appearance and hardly featured at all in the CSU election propaganda. The decision to hold the Bavarian vote two weeks before the national poll was also taken for political reasons. The CSU sought in this

way to separate itself somewhat from the problems that have beset Kohl and the CDU.

Whatever specific factors played a role in Bavaria, the result remains a devastating indictment of the course that the SPD leaders have chosen to follow in its federal election campaign. They have hoped that the anger that has built up after 16 years of the Kohl government would translate into votes for the SPD without having to oppose the content of the CDU's policies. The SPD strategy has been to make few concrete statements and to remain as noncommittal as possible. They attempted to transfer this to Bavaria where their election posters read 'CSU=Kohl'. Not a word about the aims of the SPD. It was an easy matter for Stoiber to present his own political successes by comparing Bavaria's economic data with the considerably worse figures for Lower Saxony, where Schröder is prime minister.

There was no lack of grounds for conducting an energetic campaign against the CSU, whose own election campaign bore many similarities to those of several of the neo-fascist parties. The CSU has stirred up xenophobia and racism on a scale that is unique for an establishment party in post-war Germany. They have sought to undermine support for extreme right-wing parties such as the Republikaner by adopting their anti-foreigner policies and slogans.

One example of this is a CSU election poster with a slogan urging those who wished to accept 'more criminal foreigners' not to vote for the CSU. The poster depicted a 14-year-old Turkish youth whom the Munich authorities are trying to deport for committing several minor crimes, despite the fact that he was born in Germany to parents who have lived there for 30 years.

Pro Asyl, a group that supports asylum seekers,

accused the CSU of an 'unparalleled orchestration of prejudice against refugees'. Ignatz Bubis, the chairman of the Zentralrat der Juden (Jewish Central Council) told the press that by employing such populist slogans the CSU was preparing the ground for the right-wing extremists. For its part, the SPD remained noticeably quiet: last year they had employed similar slogans themselves in Hamburg.

The social and economic situation in Bavaria is by no means as rosy as the picture presented by the CSU. The Ministry of Social Affairs has kept a 'report on the social situation in Bavaria' under lock and key for months as the figures it contains relating to the growth of poverty do not tally with the propaganda of the state government.

According to leaks from this report, 9.3 percent of the population of Bavaria live in poverty, i.e., their income is less than half the average. In addition, higher than average rents mean that one-fifth have insufficient living accommodation. The situation of Bavaria's many small farmers, important clients for the CSU, has also considerably worsened. Their income now lies some 16 percent below the national average. In the last five years, one in eight farms has been abandoned.

If the SPD had taken up these questions then the Bavarian elections would certainly have had a different outcome. There are political reasons for their inability to decisively oppose the CSU and CDU. The nearer the date of the general election approaches, the more the impression grows that the SPD does not want to achieve a convincing election victory. Increasing circles within the SPD hope that, faced with the growing international and domestic crisis, only one outcome will prove possible: the formation of a grand coalition of the SPD and CDU.

This question is now a subject of frequent discussion. An article in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* recently argued that even if a 'red-green' coalition of the SPD and the Greens were to come about, it would not be able to 'resist the immense burden of national and international politics.' 'One way or another, we have to reckon with a grand coalition at the federal level, either at the start of the new parliament or during its course.' There can be no doubt that such considerations have found support within the SPD.

Similar conceptions can be found in the CDU leadership. If *Die Zeit* is to be believed, there is

growing support for 'a grand coalition as the best political constellation in Bonn/Berlin' around parliamentary fraction chief Wolfgang Schäuble and Defence Minister Volker Rühle. The main argument runs, 'a grand coalition with a strong government team would possess more competence and ability to get things done than every other formation.'

One thing is certain, following the poll in Bavaria: the final result in the federal elections is completely open again.

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[12 September 1998]

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See the election web site of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party--PSG)

[In German]



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