

The German elections

A change of power in Bonn

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The federal elections in Germany delivered a devastating defeat to Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) he heads. After 16 years in opposition, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Gerhard Schröder was swept to power.

The CDU and its sister conservative party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU), received only 35 percent of the vote for their party slates. This is the worst result in the parties' history. Since 1953 they have always attained well over 40 percent, and have on occasion polled over 50 percent.

The SPD's 41 percent vote approaches the level of support it received in the 1970s under the leadership of Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt. For the second time since 1972, the SPD is now the largest party in the *Bundestag* (parliament). Its lead over the CDU/CSU has never been as great.

Each German voter has two votes. One for a direct candidate elected by parliamentary constituencies, and a second vote for a party slate. If the election had been held on a 'first past the post' basis, as in Britain, the swing to the SPD would have been even more drastic. The CDU lost half of its constituency seats to the SPD.

Also in the *Bundestag* will be the Greens, with 7 percent, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), with 6 percent, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) with 5 percent. The PDS is the successor organisation to the Stalinist party that ruled the former East Germany. For some time it looked doubtful that the PDS would gain sufficient votes to secure representation in the *Bundestag*. In the event, their vote increased slightly and they passed the 5 percent 'hurdle' for the first time. As in the last general election, they also won four direct mandates in East Berlin.

The extreme right-wing parties fared badly. The German Peoples Union (DVU), which had gained seats in the state legislature of Saxony Anhalt with a 13 percent vote, saw its vote there slump to just 3 percent. The total national vote for the DVU and other neo-fascist outfits such as the National Democratic Party (NPD) and the Republikaner only amounted to 3 percent. In the state of Mecklenburg

Pomerania, where there were simultaneous elections for the state legislature, the extreme right had concentrated much of its election advertising, but was still unable to win any seats.

Schröder will be elected as the new federal chancellor at the first meeting of the new *Bundestag* in about four weeks. However, since he lacks an overall majority, he must first discuss the formation of a coalition government. For the first time, the Greens look set to achieve cabinet representation in a new 'red-green' federal government, which would enjoy a majority of 21 seats and could also count on the 35 PDS deputies for support.

Arithmetically, a coalition of the SPD and the FDP would also be possible, as would a 'grand coalition' of the SPD and the CDU. Indeed, faced with a tense domestic and international situation, many commentators have called for such a solution. Schröder himself indicated several times that he was not hostile to such a possibility. However, after the poll, a number of leading CDU/CSU and FDP politicians ruled this out and insisted the SPD form an administration with the Greens. They fear that were they immediately to enter such a grand coalition following their election debacle, their own parties could break apart into warring factions.

However, the result allows the possibility for changing the composition of the government at any time during the legislative period without calling an election. Indeed, Kohl is the first chancellor to lose office as the result of a national election, rather than a coalition partner withdrawing its support.

The election represents a watershed in the German Federal Republic. After 16 years in office, Kohl's election defeat is due, in the first instance, to the build-up of dissatisfaction resulting from cuts in social programs, mass unemployment and falling living standards which affected broad layers of the population. Above all in the east, in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), the terrible social conditions are put at the door of the 'Chancellor of Unity', Helmut Kohl.

The success of the SPD is due to the fact that they were regarded by many as the only possible alternative to the previous government, and are, for historical reasons, seen as

more strongly in favour of social justice than the CDU. This was despite an election campaign conducted along similar lines to those of Tony Blair in Britain and Bill Clinton in the US. The campaign largely concentrated on the person of Gerhard Schröder and appeals to what the SPD termed 'the new centre', i.e., better-off layers of the upper middle class.

An indication that social questions played a large role in the minds of many voters was the fact that the PDS, which portrayed itself as the representative of the most oppressed layers--first of all, the east Germans--was able to increase its vote. The Greens, on the other hand, who presented themselves as the friends of small business, lost votes.

Despite the clear election result, Germany faces a period of severe social and political upheaval. A Schröder government will not be able to fulfil any of the expectations workers have in it. Its programme can hardly be distinguished from that of Kohl. Indeed, it will pursue even more rigorously and consistently the policy of 'economic modernisation', a euphemism for cutbacks in social spending, wage reductions and deteriorating working conditions, combined with lower taxes for the rich.

For several years prior to the election, the ruling coalition of the CDU/CSU and FDP was politically paralysed. Faced with deep conflicts within its own ranks, the coalition found it increasingly difficult to overcome opposition to its policies. It relied on the support of the SPD, which holds a majority in the upper chamber of the parliament, to implement the cuts in social spending and attacks on democratic rights which it succeeded in pushing through.

An SPD-Green coalition will not face such problems, as it enjoys a majority in both chambers of parliament and can also rely on the support of the unions. Schröder's first act of government will be to convene a corporatist body called the 'alliance for work', where the unions, employers and government will collaborate closely.

The content of the new government's policies will be largely determined by international events. Schröder continually stressed that his election pledges were made on condition of their 'financability'. The very modest social reform promises made by the SPD and the Greens will soon fall victim to the international economic crisis.

The SPD and Greens have promised continuity with their predecessors as far as foreign policy is concerned. With the preparations for NATO intervention in Kosovo now largely completed, it may well turn out that the first military action by the German Army since World War Two will be ordered by a cabinet minister from the Greens, an organisation that originated in the 1960s student protest movement.

Such a political change is not without crisis. The smaller the political differences between the establishment parties, the greater the tensions within them.

The CDU/CSU might well share the fate of its sister conservative parties in Italy and France, which virtually disintegrated following similar election defeats. Up to now the CDU was largely held together by Kohl, but he has already announced his resignation as party chairman.

Under the impact of sharp social conflicts, the SPD will hardly be able to avoid similar pressures. As it is, all of the important decisions are being taken by Schröder and party chairman Oskar Lafontaine, over the heads of the party's elected bodies. All dissenting voices are strangled by this dictatorial inner-party regime.

The gulf between the party leadership and the rank-and-file is even greater in the Greens, who only have 50,000 members nationally. The party's leading representative, Joschka Fischer, has moved sharply to the right in recent years, a course which the party has only reluctantly followed.

Confrontation between broad layers of the population and an SPD-led government will inevitably bring up the question of a political alternative. Support for the SPD is already somewhat shaky. According to opinion polls, a quarter of the electorate only decided whom to cast their vote for at the last minute. The sharp swings for and against the extreme right is also an indication of instability.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG--Socialist Equality Party) was the only party that fought the election on the basis of a socialist alternative to the present social order. The PSG received 6,273 votes for its party slate in six states. The best result for the PSG was in Saxony-Anhalt, where it received 2,395 votes. This state was the industrial heartland of the former GDR, and today suffers the highest level of unemployment in all Germany. Although the number of votes for the PSG was small, they were consciously cast for a socialist programme.



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