

A resounding setback for Schröder

German Social Democratic Party loses state elections in the Saarland and Brandenburg

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8 September 1999

The German governing coalition of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and Bündnis 90/the Greens have suffered a devastating defeat in state elections in the German states of the Saarland and Brandenburg.

Following 14 years of single party government in the Saarland, the SPD must now hand over power to the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which won 45.5 percent of the votes (1 percent more than the votes for the SPD) and a majority in the state parliament. In elections five years ago the SPD received 49.4 percent of the vote—11 percent more than the CDU.

According to German election law parties must receive a minimum of 5 percent of the vote to enter parliament. The SPD coalition partners, the Greens, received 3.2 percent (compared to 5.5 percent in 1994) in the Saarland election and are no longer represented in parliament. The German Free Democratic Party (FDP) with 2.6 percent, the extreme right-wing Republican Party (1.3 percent) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—successor to the East German Stalinist SED), which stood for the first time and obtained 0.8 percent of the vote, also failed to enter the parliament.

In Brandenburg, with 39.3 percent of the votes, the SPD remains the strongest party. However its reduced share of the vote (15 percent) in Brandenburg was much more dramatic than its losses in the Saarland and the party will be forced to enter a coalition. Possible partners are the CDU, which received 26.5 percent of the vote (an increase of nearly 8 percent) or the PDS, which increased its vote by 5 percent and won its best result so far—23.3 percent. The fourth party to enter the state parliament is the neo-fascist German People's Union (DVU), winning 5.2 percent of the vote. The Greens (1.9 percent) and the FDP (1.8 percent) failed to reach the necessary 5 percent.

The results in Saarland and Brandenburg confirm a pattern which emerged last February in state elections in Hessen and European elections in June: following their landslide victory in the national elections of September 1998, the SPD and the Greens are continuing in an equally dramatic fashion to lose their influence. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented: “Never has a chancellor lost support so quickly and dramatically as Schröder.”

The SPD majority in the Bundesrat (second house of the German national parliament), which the party lost in February following the defeat of the Red-Green parties in Hessen, has been finally

buried by the change of government in the Saarland and Brandenburg. For all future intended changes to the law, the national government is dependent on the support of the opposition. The chances of the government regaining a majority in the Bundesrat are negligible.

Further state elections are due to take place over the coming weekend and the SPD can reckon with more massive losses. In the East German state of Thüring (elections on September 12) it is possible that a CDU state government will replace the existing CDU-SPD “Great Coalition”. For a long time the state was regarded as a sure candidate for an SPD-PDS coalition. In the East German state of Sachsen (elections to be held on September 19) the CDU is expected to retain its majority and in Berlin (October 10) any change to the existing CDU-led “Great Coalition” is regarded as unlikely.

SPD functionaries are now anticipating upcoming state elections in North Rhine Westphalen in May of 2000 with extreme nervousness. Local elections this coming Sunday in the state will take place against a background of numerous corruption scandals. Should the SPD suffer a defeat as severe as that in the Saarland and Brandenburg, it can no longer be excluded that the party could lose power in May 2000 in a state which is home to a quarter of all German citizens.

What is behind the dramatic losses for the SPD and the Greens?

The government itself and the media, which support the government's political course, have blamed the “bad image” of the Red-Green coalition for the election defeats. During the summer months considerable conflict—primarily inside the SPD itself—erupted around the government's policy of massive spending cuts in line with a right-wing social programme jointly put forward by German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and British Labour Party leader Tony Blair. The disputes took place in public and dominated media headlines.

Numerous opinion polls, however, as well as the election results themselves, make clear that voters are repelled not by conflicts over the government's course, but rather by the course itself. They expected more social justice and effective measures against unemployment from the SPD. Instead they are experiencing a ruthless programme of cuts which hits the socially disadvantaged hardest of all.

A poll by the Institute *Infratest dimap* is unequivocal in this

respect. According to the poll 74 percent of those questioned were dissatisfied with the government on the basis of its failure to carry out the majority of its election promises. First priority was given to the fight against unemployment: 78 percent were of the opinion that the government had failed to carry out its election promise in this respect. Seventy percent were of the opinion that the government had done nothing to contribute to the creation of more social justice.

On this basis it appears contradictory that the conservative CDU, which under Chancellor Helmut Kohl was the pre-eminent party of social welfare cuts, has been able to profit from the defeat of the SPD. In fact in the Saarland the CDU success was based on the high number of former SPD voters who did not turn out to vote. In comparison with its results in 1995, the CDU lost 12,000 votes in the latest election, but the SPD lost even more, 90,000.

In Brandenburg the situation is somewhat different. Here elector participation barely changed from the extremely low figure of just over 50 percent five years ago. The CDU, led by the right-wing leaning, former professional soldier and Berlin Interior Senator Schönbohm, increased its total by 90,000 votes. The PDS vote rose by 60,000. The SPD lost 150,000—a quarter of its electorate—and the Greens lost 10,000.

This flux is bound up with the history of the new German states where the established West German parties first became active after 1990. In the former East Germany there are far fewer traditional voters for the main German parties. A change of mood in the population therefore finds immediate expression in a changed standpoint in the elections.

It is significant that the neo-fascist DVU entered the state parliament for the first time, winning 60,000 votes. Following its successful candidacy in state elections in Sachsen-Anhalt, the party now has representatives in two East German parliaments. The party itself has something of a phantom character. It is run by a publisher and multimillionaire based in Munich, Gerhard Frey, and although the party barely has any members, it has been able to effectively divert the frustration and disappointment of many voters into racist channels.

The representatives of the SPD, Greens and CDU dutifully expressed their “anger” over the success of the extreme right. But it is their own policies of cuts and the destruction of social gains which, without doubt, served to drive voters into the arms of right-wing rabble-rousers.

On the evening of the elections the German Chancellor and SPD Chairman Schröder appeared before cameras and defiantly declared: “More of the same!” He admitted that the loss of votes for the SPD was primarily a result of the policies of the government: “There could be no doubt that the unusual and ambitious programme adopted by the government to renovate the country’s finances and pension schemes had played a role. But there was no other possible alternative.” He insisted, “We will stick to our course.”

He could not have more clearly expressed his contempt for the electorate. “You can vote for who you like, we will do what we think is best anyway”—was the message.

At the same time he announced a new structure for the SPD leadership which has been planned for some time. In the future,

alongside the chairman, a general secretary, responsible for party organisation and the presentation of policies to the public, will lead the party. Schröder is well known for his antipathy towards history. Otherwise he might have sensed the irony of announcing a new general secretary for the SPD 10 years after the resignation of Eric Honecker and the collapse of the Stalinist SED. Even the most powerful of general secretaries is powerless when confronted with explosive social questions.

Schröder will likewise be unable to prevent the breaking up of the SPD. The conflicts inside the party will inevitably intensify as numerous functionaries and office holders, who comprise the active membership of the party, realise that their posts and privileges are under threat.

Opponents of the government course have drawn attention to the fact that SPD losses in Saarland (5 percent) were substantially less than in Brandenburg (15 percent). They claim the reason for this is that the leading candidate for the SPD in the Saarland, Reinhard Klimmt—a close personal friend and political collaborator of the resigned party chairman Oskar Lafontaine—openly opposed Schröder’s programme of cuts and even went so far as to declare he would vote against the measures in the Bundesrat. For his part, Lafontaine has announced the forthcoming publication in October of his new book with the title *My Heart Lies to the Left*, in which he deals with the existing course of the government.

Chancellor Schröder gives the impression that he is not so impressed by the election defeats for his party. The growing domination of the CDU in the Bundesrat makes a new governing constellation on the federal level increasingly probable, one which, it is presumed, Schröder secretly favours: “a great coalition” with the CDU.

The Greens, also considerably weakened in the latest elections, have become less and less suitable to play the role of government partner. With the CDU, on the other hand, Schröder would control a comfortable majority in both chambers of parliament and be able to push through unpopular measures.

Much will depend on the form of coalition decided on in Brandenburg. In Berlin it is stressed that Brandenburg Prime Minister Stolpe will be free to decide on his coalition partner. But there can be no doubt that behind the scenes pressure will be exerted for a deal to be made with the CDU. Stolpe himself has never made a secret of his aversion to the PDS, although in his own party there does exist a wing which would prefer to make a coalition with the PDS.



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