

State elections in Saxony: German Social Democratic Party in free fall

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For the third time in three weeks the SPD (Social Democratic Party) has suffered a drastic reversal in a German state election. Following the loss of the party's governing majority in Brandenburg and the Saarland at the beginning of September, its exclusion from the government of Thuringia and a massive defeat in local elections in the traditional SPD stronghold of North Rhine Westphalia, the party has now plummeted in state elections in Saxony (formerly part of East Germany). With just 10.7 percent, the party registered its worst result in post-war German history.

During the election campaign the chairman of the Saxony SPD had declared his support for the national party and defended the SPD's intensely unpopular budget programme. He offered his resignation on the same evening the debacle for the SPD was announced.

Following the election results of recent weeks it was expected that the SPD would lose votes in Saxony, but the extent of the defeat shocked the party. The SPD lost 6 percent from its already low total of 16.6 percent in the last state election five years ago. In the national elections which took place last September the party had won 30 percent of the vote. This means that since taking office, the SPD has lost two-thirds of its voters in Saxony.

In view of the result, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Saxony can easily continue governing alone for a third term since German reunification (1990). The main party to benefit in the election, however, is the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism—successor party to the Stalinist East German SED), with 22.2 percent. Not only did the PDS overtake the SPD, as was also the case in the East German state of Thuringia, in Saxony it left the SPD far behind with an advantage of over 10 percent.

The Green party, which shares power in the ruling

national coalition government with the SPD, lost 40 percent of its voters and dropped to just 2.6 percent. The party's leading candidate, Gundula Röstel, made clear that for the last two years the Greens have not increased their vote in state elections. Particularly in the East, the Green party has been rejected by young voters disenchanted with Green support for the Kosovo war.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP), which before the national elections of a year ago shared power in the conservative coalition and occupied important posts, was relegated to the position of a splinter party, with just 1.1 percent. The party was relegated to eighth position in the poll behind the conservative CDU, the SPD, the PDS, the Greens and three parties of the extreme right. The FDP is now fighting for its political survival.

A group calling itself “ProDM” recorded twice as many votes as the FDP. Central to the ProDM manifesto is rejection of a joint European currency, restrictions on foreigners, including those from other European countries, and state forced-labour programs for youth and the unemployed. Taken together with three other neo-fascist organisations, the parties of the extreme right won 5.4 percent of the vote—three times higher than their total in state elections five years ago.

The plummeting fortunes of the SPD in Saxony are a further blow to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and a clear rejection of his budget policies. According to an opinion poll, 47 percent of voters declared the issue of social equality to be far and away the most important issue in the election.

At the same time the result is the voters' response to the national Red-Green coalition's arrogant dismissal of the electorate in recent weeks. After every election defeat, the government has declared it will not budge from its package of cuts, declaring there to be no

alternative to drastic savings in all areas of social services and pensions.

Particularly in the East of the country, the feeling of political impotence and the experience of a government which imposes its line over the heads of the population awaken memories of the political collapse which took place 10 years ago this autumn. The resistance to the Stalinist regime in East Germany was especially pronounced in the industrial towns of Saxony. Demonstrations, which grew by the week, were held every Monday in the principal Saxon city of Leipzig. Much has changed since then, but living conditions for the great majority have not improved.

Official unemployment in Saxony is 19 percent, and often rises to over 30 percent in the main population centres. Many young people are without jobs. Those who 10 years ago anticipated that free elections would result in policies in the interests of the people have been bitterly disappointed.

Rarely has an election revealed so clearly a shift in voting patterns. Electoral participation (61 percent) increased by 1 percent compared with the state election five years ago. The PDS, which has its biggest membership in the state of Saxony, was surprised by its own results. The PDS increased its vote by 145,000—exactly the number lost by the SPD and Greens combined.

The chairman of the Saxon PDS, Peter Porsch, declared that the party would constitute a “hard opposition” to the governing CDU. However the promises of vigorous opposition are contradicted by the party's election manifesto. The programme calls for measures to bolster the middle class and state subsidies for small businesses. Porsch declared to the press: “The lighthouse concept does not work.” He was referring to the existing policy of the CDU state government, which has concentrated on building up the main Saxon metropolitan centres of Dresden, Leipzig and Chemnitz.

Porsch, an Austrian by birth, moved to East Germany at the beginning of the 1970s. To assist his career as a professor of language and sociology at the University of Leipzig, he joined the Stalinist SED (Socialist Unity Party) in the 1980s. In 1990 he entered the state parliament as a candidate of the SED, and later became PDS chairman in Saxony.

In the election campaign he roundly and verbosely

attacked the policy of the German government and called for “a change in distribution relations” and the building of “organised poles of opposition”. He failed to explain, however, that in those regions where the PDS is influential in government—in the East German states of Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg West Pomerania—instead of “building poles of opposition”, the party has been active in supporting cuts in social programmes.



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