

The German state election in Schleswig-Holstein: business as usual?

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Judging by the comments of leading politicians, there were only winners in the recent regional elections in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD) was pleased with the fact that it recorded its first increase in votes since national elections in 1998. The party will therefore continue to run the state in the person of its leading candidate, Minister President Heide Simonis. The SPD received 43.1 percent of the recorded votes, an increase of 3.3 percent compared to the state elections four years ago. SPD general secretary Franz Münterfering described the result as confirmation of the work of the Red Green (SPD-Green Party) coalition both in Berlin and Schleswig-Holstein itself.

The Greens were happy that, although losing votes, they were still able to exceed the 5 percent threshold which must be achieved to gain representation in the German political system. The party lost 1.9 percent compared to four years ago and garnered 6.1 percent of the vote.

“When you have received the last rites, resurrection is a particularly happy event,” was the comment of the Green's National Secretary Reinhard Bütikofer. A failure in the state elections would have placed a question mark over the continued tenure of the governing coalition in Berlin.

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost 2 percent and recorded one of its worst ever results, with 35.2 percent. Nevertheless, in light of the current corruption scandals, the party was relieved that the losses were not much heavier.

According to CDU Chairman Wolfgang Schäuble (who has resigned from the post but is still in office until a replacement is found), “in light of the extraordinarily difficult conditions” the result for the CDU was “very respectable”.

The pro-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), which was able to profit from the crisis of the CDU and overtook

the Greens as the third strongest party in the state, saw their own result as the beginning of a national trend. The party regretted its decision prior to the election to only consider a coalition with the CDU. At the next state elections in North Rhine-Westphalia the party has resolved to keep its options open for a possible coalition with the SPD.

All of the parties praised the fact that the expected political earthquake had not taken place. Universally well received were, in particular, the low percentage (1.4 percent) recorded by the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS—successor party to the East German Stalinist SED), which stood for the first time in a West German state, as well as the failure of the ultra-right to make any impression in the election. The far-right Democratic People's Union (DVU), which entered parliament in 1992 and only just failed to reach 5 percent in 1996, did not put up candidates this time. The other main right-wing party, the NPD, won just 1 percent of the vote.

A sigh of relief could be heard as the results were announced. A very different outcome had been anticipated in light of the corruption scandals that have embraced both the CDU and SPD in recent months, together with the success of Joerg Haider in Austria. Now the sentiment is growing within political circles that they might have panicked too easily, that they had survived with just a few bruises and the crisis was over. Normal political life would return.

When one takes the election result as a whole, astonishingly little has changed compared with the elections four years ago. The governing and opposition camps have maintained their former positions. The changes which have taken place have mainly occurred inside the two main camps themselves. The FDP were able to take some votes from the CDU and the SPD benefited at the expense of the Greens. Almost 70 percent of the electorate went to the polls, comparable with the

figures of four years ago.

Not just party representatives, but also many media commentators drew the conclusion that the fuss of recent months had been enormously exaggerated. A commentary in the *Süddeutschen Zeitung* was typical: “It was a perfectly normal election which, contrary to the expectations of the class of political journalists who have a penchant for gazing at their own navel, did not become a court of punishment for the CDU.... This means that all the scenarios of the impending collapse of politically organised conservatism, sometimes poignantly formulated, remain fantasies.”

So: all-clear, back to the old political routine!

There could not, however, be a greater illusion. Upon closer examination, the election result makes apparent that what is at work is not a long-term trend, but rather a temporary mood which can rapidly turn about.

First, there are the large shifts on the part of the electorate which have already been expressed in previous elections and opinion polls. The result of the latest election corresponds in percentage terms almost exactly to the result of the national election held in 1998—only the SPD received 2 percent less. But in the European elections, which took place between the election of 1998 and now, the result looked completely different: the CDU won over half the vote in Schleswig-Holstein, the SPD just 35 percent, the FDP just 3 percent.

Voting patterns according to the age of the voter have also changed. Formerly the SPD and the Greens were clearly favoured by voters in the 18-24 age group, now these parties have been overtaken by the CDU and FDP. The Greens in particular have lost massive support in this age group. Four years ago they had three times the support in this age range as compared to the FDP, now the latter has won 10 percent, more than the Greens from such voters.

Both developments express a profound alienation between the political parties and broad layers of voters. In the past many voters remained faithful to a particular party in the expectation that they could thereby influence political events. Today hardly anyone expects an answer from these parties to the most pressing social problems, such as unemployment, the crisis in education, and the lack of a future. The political programmes of all of the parties are virtually identical.

The consequence is rapid swings in voting patterns which can be easily influenced by short-term moods, massive abstention (in the European elections of 1999, just 40 percent of the electorate took part) or protest votes

for right-wing demagogues (which in 1992 levered the DVU into the state parliament of Schleswig-Holstein).

Although such extremes have not emerged in the latest Schleswig-Holstein election, this should not be seen as an indication that the parties have won back the confidence of the electorate and re-established themselves. Rather the election expressed a certain shock on the part of the electorate with the never-ending stream of political scandals—a nostalgic desire to return to the ordered political relations of the past.

Such moods are also evident inside the CDU itself. This is the only explanation for the elevation of Angela Merkel to the position of favourite candidate for the post of party chairman. Somebody whose competence is generally regarded as suspect has suddenly become a symbolic figure for the worried and unsettled CDU membership, yearning for calm and security.

In the state of Schleswig-Holstein, a region lacking big towns and the accompanying social tensions, such moods could well be a factor. The role of the growing Hamburg “green belt” should also not be underestimated. Hamburg is a city-state and the largest city adjoining Schleswig-Holstein. Growing numbers of wealthy Hamburg residents have sought to flee the pressures of the city in favour of a quieter existence in neighbouring Schleswig-Holstein. Such elements constitute the “new centre” which SPD leader Gerhard Schröder has in his political sights.

SPD Minister President Heide Simonis, who combines the features of a modern, emancipated woman with a ruthless policy of cuts, is popular among such layers. It will not be possible, however, to keep covering up the profound social rejection which her policies precipitate. The moods, therefore, which are currently benefiting the SPD will not last long.



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