

Germany's Social Democrats and Greens suffer further losses in state election

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19 May 2000

In elections to the state legislature in North Rhine Westphalia last Sunday, May 14, voters once again punished the governing parties: the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens.

While they held onto power, the SPD and the Greens taken together lost over 6 percent of their previous share of the total vote. The SPD received a 42.8 percent share, 3.2 percent less than in the last state elections five years ago. It is the worst result for the SPD in the Rhine-Ruhr region since 1958.

The Greens polled 7.1 percent of the votes cast, down 2.9 points. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), which had failed to pass the 5 percent hurdle for seats in the state legislature in 1995, did surprisingly well, winning 9.8 percent of the vote.

North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) is Germany's most densely populated state, with some 18 million inhabitants, and includes the Ruhr area, Europe's most heavily industrialised region. Voter behaviour in this latest poll becomes clearer when one examines the absolute figures. Turnout was only 56.7 percent, a record low.

In 1980 the election turnout in NRW was 80 percent, and prior to that rose as high as 86 percent. Five years ago, when turnout fell below 70 percent for the first time, the abstention rate caused consternation among prominent federal politicians. Since then the governing SPD-Green coalition in the state capital Düsseldorf has conducted one campaign after another to improve their image, but growing numbers of voters have repudiated them.

The SPD and the Greens were unable to mobilise their former voters despite their control over the propaganda apparatus of the state government and the participation of leading federal politicians in the campaign. Not even the party finance scandal that has rocked their main rivals, the Christian Democrats (CDU), could save them from another electoral setback.

Compared to 1995, the SPD lost over 674,000 votes, a decline of almost 18 percent. The number of people voting for the Greens slumped to 518,000 from 830,000 in 1995, a loss of almost 38 percent.

The CDU also lost votes (412,477, or 13 percent), but because of the low electoral turnout, they only lost 0.7 percentage points, ending up with a 37 percent share.

Already in last September's local elections the SPD suffered a massive drop in their former urban strongholds in the Ruhr. In the NRW election, apart from State Premier Wolfgang Clement and Labour Minister Ilse Bräuer, all other ministers failed to win a seat in their constituencies.

According to election analyses, the SPD lost most votes among

the unemployed (down 15 percent) and workers (down 10 percent), as well as among those under 30 years of age (down 8 percent). As in the local elections last year, it lost votes not so much from defections to other parties, as from the abstention of its core voters.

Turnout in some coal mining constituencies in north Essen and Duisburg dropped well below 50 percent. In Marxloh, a "poverty ghetto" in northern Duisburg, only a third of registered voters went to the polls.

Numbering 5.6 million, the "non-voter party" is by far the largest grouping in NRW. By comparison, the SPD received 3.1 million votes.

These figures reflect widespread and increasing opposition in the working class to the SPD. "The citizens of North Rhine Westphalia have attempted several times to shake off the SPD," commented Bernd Ulrich in the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*. "In the 1995 state elections, the then-state premier, Johannes Rau, lost his absolute majority, and many cities and municipalities experienced a landslide in favour of the CDU in the local elections last year." According to Ulrich, the principal reason for the election result is "that the voters saw no tangible possibility of voting the SPD out".

The Greens lost out particularly with younger voters, among whom they are no longer seen as an alternative to the SPD. Among voters under 30, they lost 6 percent compared to the last state elections.

In contrast to the massive drop in votes for the SPD, Greens and CDU, the FDP made some surprising gains. The Free Democrats not only doubled their share of the vote as compared to 1995, but with 721,387 votes cast, they also doubled their vote in absolute terms.

The FDP made above average gains among the under-30s, with an increase of 13 percent in this age group. The FDP's vote in the more affluent cities and municipalities outside the Ruhr area, as well as in the university towns, was above its state-wide share of 9.8 percent. In the election campaign, FDP state leader Jürgen Möllemann made a direct appeal to up-and-coming yuppie layers who live near the 52 NRW universities, arguing that the state needs a high-performance elite.

Möllemann's "American-style" election campaign was an accommodation to these layers. The FDP chief was parachuted in to election meetings and participated in all kinds of gags and antics. As far as political content was concerned, he remained at the level of advertising slogans. "The success of this approach

leaves many fearing for future elections,” noted Heribert Prantl in the *Süddeutschezeitung*.

Möller, who had been economics minister in former CDU Chancellor Helmut Kohl's government, sees himself as the representative of the "independent, free and mobile high achievers of tomorrow". The fight for this social group, which also calls itself a "new founder generation", will dominate future election campaigns.

The gulf between the large majority of the population, whose lives are made increasingly difficult by drastic cuts in the social sphere, and the traditional parties, who are moving ever-closer together and whose programs are virtually identical, was tangible in this election campaign. The policy differences between the parties involved only nuances. They compete primarily for the mantle of pursuing the most business-friendly course.

No matter how emotion-laden and urgent the general population considers a problem to be, nobody expects a serious response from the traditional parties or trade unions. Since the structural economic changes called for by all parties have been under way, intensifying social polarisation, the parties have seen their traditional mass bases erode.

In this situation it is possible that the election results of individual parties—like that of the FDP—can rise and fall again as quickly as shares on the stock exchange. Thus a party's decision as to which advertising agency it engages or how effectively their top candidates use the media can assume a far greater role than any programmatic statements.

The elections in NRW will have a greater effect on federal politics than at first appears. The reason is not only the 18 million-strong population—more than in all five east German states put together—and an electorate of over 13 million. (State polls in NRW have often been called "mini" general elections).

More importantly, the unexpectedly good showing by the FDP increases the possibility of a coalition between the Free Democrats and the SPD at the federal level. Although technically that was possible before, under the previous federal leadership of Wolfgang Gerhard the FDP committed itself to an alliance with the CDU, for better or worse. That now changes.

Within the FDP, a section that is more inclined towards the SPD is gaining the upper hand. Those like Möller and the minister of the interior in Rhineland-Palatinate, Rainer Brüderle, who are already suggesting the FDP take a "bigger, stronger role" in federal politics, have now been joined by FDP Secretary General Guido Westerwelle.

“The time to distance ourselves further from the CDU" has come, was how Berlin FDP politician Martin Matz expressed the change in direction at the party's head office. The present chairman, Wolfgang Gerhard, will soon feel the consequences of this change within the FDP. After being outvoted some weeks ago in the Hesse regional organisation, where he was chairman for years, Gerhard's days at the top of the FDP are now numbered.

Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) has already made known that he appreciates the option of a coalition with the FDP, even if he is not immediately seeking it. The existing coalition with the Greens—who have suffered losses in every election since taking on ministerial posts in Berlin and have been cowed by the

possibility of a change in coalition partners—is much easier than would be a coalition with a strengthened and self-confident Möller and FDP. Moreover, a too-rapid change in the federal coalition government would give the Greens the opportunity to present themselves as an opposition party.

In Berlin as in Düsseldorf, the threat that the SPD might change coalition partners will be the whip with which the SPD drives the Greens forward and dictates policy to them.

This will only intensify the crisis of the Greens and accelerate their rightward course. The Greens have broken with all points of their original program, on the basis of which they were able to achieve a vote in double digits in 1995. As in the last legislative period, they will have to swallow a few more "bitter pills".

Their cave-in regarding the setting up of the Garzweiler II nuclear power station and their acceptance of open-cast mining certainly cost them votes, and not just in this region. For example, in Erkelenz they slumped from a 31.5 percent share to just 13 percent.

The disputes in the CDU will also intensify. With the reorientation of the FDP towards the SPD, the Christian Democrats have lost a viable perspective to regain power for the foreseeable future.

Moreover, in the NRW election the strongest and most influential of the CDU's regional organisations suffered a defeat. Under these conditions, the fight over the party's future course, suppressed with difficulty during the finance scandal, will now break open with greater force.

As a result of the NRW election, the pro-business policies being pursued in Berlin and Düsseldorf will be advanced even more vigorously. Already, in reaction to the state election, the first employers' representative has called for the Schröder government to deregulate the jobs market.

The elections to the state legislature in North Rhine Westphalia have created the conditions for further shifts in Germany's political landscape. The Greens are still needed in the government, in particular while the largely conscript *Bundeswehr* (federal armed forces) are transformed into a professional fighting force which can be sent into theatres of war around the world. But how long before the spinelessness of this party destroys its remaining support in the population?



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