

Germany: Record abstentions in recent state elections

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State elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate last weekend were regarded as an important test for the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) elections in 2002. Although no change of government in the state legislatures was forecast—in Baden-Wuerttemberg the Christian Democrats (CDU) are in coalition with the Free Democrats (FDP) and in Rhineland-Palatinate the Social Democrats (SPD) govern with the FDP—the two polls were expected to provide a clue to the balance of power at federal level. Accordingly, the various spokesmen at party headquarters in Berlin endeavoured to interpret the results of the elections in their own favour.

SPD chairman and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder analysed his party's gain in votes in both states as an overall success and confirmation of his own policies. CDU chairwoman Angela Merkel spoke of an "excellent day for the CDU", although the Christian Democrats only gained votes in Baden-Wuerttemberg, and achieved their lowest result since the war in their stronghold state of Rhineland-Palatinate. The FDP suffered a clear loss of votes, and had to console itself with the fact that it came ahead of the Greens in both states and so will continue to be part of the governing coalitions. The Greens were the only ones unable to talk up their devastating defeat.

A closer look at the election results shows that they provide few grounds for optimism by party officials.

Election turnout was extremely low for Germany. Only 62 percent of voters went to the polls in both states—whereas until the beginning of the 1990s it was regularly over 70 percent, and over 80 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate. Despite increasing their percentage share, the parties have hardly won any new voters.

Although in Rhineland-Palatinate the SPD improved its vote from 39.8 to 44.7 percent, in absolute terms its vote stagnated, or fell slightly. The CDU fared similarly in Baden-Wuerttemberg, where its percentage vote increased

from 41.3 to 44.8 percent, winning the election with a big lead.

Even in relative terms, the election results are not as impressive as the party headquarters in Berlin made them out to be. Under their 36-year-old leading candidate Ute Vogt, the SPD in Baden-Wuerttemberg added over 8 percent to their total, but with 33 percent of the overall vote the party only regained the level of support it had always enjoyed until the end of the 1980s. Under state Prime Minister Erwin Teufel, the CDU improved its vote compared to the state elections of 1992 and 1996, but it still lay well below the level it achieved in earlier years, when it regularly won 50 percent or more.

The two larger parties benefited at the expense of the smaller ones. This time in Baden-Wuerttemberg the rightwing extremist *Republikaner*, which had entered the state legislature in 1992 and 1996 with approximately 10 percent of the vote, failed to clear the five percent hurdle. Their votes largely went to the benefit of the CDU. The FDP lost more than one percentage point into both states, receiving approximately 8 percent of the vote in each case. The Greens suffered drastic losses. In Baden-Wuerttemberg their vote fell from 12.1 to 7.7 percent, and they only narrowly cleared the five percent hurdle in Rhineland-Palatinate.

Many commentators ascribed this boost for the large parties to the personalised nature of the election campaign. In Baden-Wuerttemberg the campaign strategy of the SPD rested entirely on the young "fresh" face of the always smiling Ute Vogt, while the CDU led with the image of the experienced, caring and frugal father of the state, Erwin Teufel. In Rhineland-Palatinate Kurt Beck (SPD) played the role of the state father-figure with local roots, while the CDU's attempts to scratch away at this image became increasingly desperate and aggressive, which finally rebounded on them.

It may be that concentrating the election campaign upon

a duel between the respective leading candidates contributed to the weakening of the smaller parties. But this phenomenon itself requires an explanation. It is an expression of the same development that was revealed in the low turnout—an increasing alienation between the mass of the population and *all* parties.

While increasing economic and social uncertainty marks the daily life of broad social masses, no party provides an answer to their concerns and problems. Their political programmes are like peas in a pod, and exclusively reflect the interests of big business. The fact that two in every five voters no longer go to the polls has a simple explanation: They no longer believe they can change anything by voting. The parties, for their part, compensate for the lack of any political alternatives by transforming the election campaign from a political discourse into a beauty competition, where only the image, the appearance and the impression of the individual candidates counts.

Political life thus acquires an extremely unstable character. Coincidences, scandals, inconsequential events—whose importance is then magnified by the media—can influence public opinion in the short-term and decide elections. The parties themselves concentrate their election campaigns to a large extent on such outward show.

In this regard, the behaviour of the CDU in Rhineland-Palatinate was typical. It tried to make capital from the “national pride” campaign of the CDU at federal level, by collecting signatures for the resignation of federal Environment Minister Juergen Trittin (Green Party). Trittin came under fire after he accused the CDU Secretary-General Laurenz Meyer of having the mentality of a skinhead, because of his nationalist utterances. The attempt to use this in Rhineland-Palatinate failed miserably, however. In the state where Helmut Kohl was once Prime Minister, and which it had continuously governed for 40 years before losing control to the SPD 10 years ago, the CDU lost a fifth of their voters compared with 1996.

This, along with the high abstention rate and the election result itself, contains an element of the voters' protest against federal politics, but one which lacks any positive objective. Both Erwin Teufel and Kurt Beck owe their confirmation as state premiers not least to the fact that they presented themselves as state politicians without any political ambitions at federal level. In particular, Teufel's election campaign distanced him from the federal CDU and their loud and vociferous propaganda.

The Greens took the brunt of the widespread opposition

to Berlin politics. In Baden-Wuerttemberg, where they have sat in the state legislature since 1980, they lost 230,000 votes, well over a third of their electorate. Among young voters they only achieved 10 percent, just half the 22 percent they won in this layer in 1996. At first, Juergen Trittin's skinhead remark was made responsible for these losses. But when the full extent of the defeat became clear, the leadership swiftly dropped this interpretation. It was far too obvious that the rightward turn of the Greens in Berlin had repelled their own voters.

The losses of the *Republikaner* are due to the fact that the asylum question played hardly any role in this election. In 1992 and 1996, the CDU and SPD stressed the importance of this question nationally and conducted campaigns against the right to asylum, which, in the long run, benefited the *Republikaner*.

What conclusions about federal politics can be drawn from the elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate?

On the one hand, it is becoming increasingly questionable whether the “Red-Green” federal coalition government will survive the next *Bundestag* elections, in view of the decline in the Greens' vote. Their constant movement to the right has undermined their own base, without having any replacement in sight. At a press conference after the elections, Chancellor Schroeder expressly refused to commit himself to a continuation of the coalition with the Greens. The Social Democrats had several options, he said, meaning a coalition with either the FDP or CDU.

The self-assurance displayed by Schroeder, like the analysis of the election results, is to a large extent illusorily. The momentary strength of the SPD is based upon the continuing crisis of the CDU, and not on any reinforcement of their own support in the population. In the ebb and flow of the election results one thing remains constant, however: the increasing gulf between all official parties and the mass of the population.

See Also:

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[23 March 2001]



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