

# Right wing in German CDU senses new opportunities

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23 March 2001

In the first communal elections to be held in the German state of Hesse since the eruption of a finance scandal inside the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), the Christian Democrats, led by Minister President Roland Koch, increased their vote considerably. The official result of the election, held March 18, is still not available due to a new, complicated system of voting, and will only be announced in the next few days. Nevertheless, the initial projections by the State Office for Statistics in Wiesbaden identified a clear trend. According to their figures, the CDU has increased its vote by 6.6 percent to 39.6 percent, and has in all probability supplanted the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as the strongest political force in the communes of Hesse.

On average across the state, the SPD was able to increase its vote only slightly, by 0.2 percent, to a total of 38.2 percent, losing ground in some of the main towns, such as the state capital of Wiesbaden, where the SPD vote declined by 1.5 percent. According to provisional figures, the CDU increased its vote in the city of Frankfurt by 4.9 percent, in Darmstadt by 7.1 percent, in Wiesbaden by 3.2 percent, and in Kassel by 3.4 percent.

In Darmstadt and Wiesbaden the CDU took over as the main party in the town halls. In the city of Frankfurt the party increased its majority to a total of 41.2 percent.

The FDP (Free Democratic Party), which jointly rules in the state, was able to slightly increase its vote. Having won just 4 percent of the vote four years ago, the party received an additional 1 percent this time around.

The main loser in the election was the Green party. The state of Hesse is regarded as the traditional centre for Green politics and is the state where in 1982 Germany's current foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, became the first ever Green state minister. Now the party, which formerly described itself as a "Green alternative", has lost a quarter of its voters, compared to previous state elections four years ago. The party's vote dropped 2.3 percent to 8.7 percent. Green losses were especially high in the university towns: 5.3 percent in Darmstadt, 4.8 percent in Marburg, and 3.7 percent in Frankfurt.

The political manager of the Greens and state deputy from Frankfurt, Sarah Sorge, assessed the party's disappointing result with the words: "A few years ago it was clear that our supporters would turn out solidly in elections; this time they have stayed home" (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*).

The Green party is making a new experience, i.e., receiving the same sort of correspondence as the other main parties in Germany. The contents: torn up election forms and accompanying letters declaring, often in vehement terms, that it no longer makes any sense to vote—it changes nothing.

Immediately after the election booths closed on Sunday evening, worried commentators drew attention to the fact that voter participation was 12 percent lower than in 1997. Just 54 percent of a total electorate of 4.6 million bothered to vote. In many towns non-voters were in the majority. In terms of absolute, numerical figures, this means that all of the parties lost votes heavily.

Election researchers have explained the drop in voter turnout as the product of a new, more complicated voting system. For the first time the Hesse electorate were able to "accumulate and split their tickets" with regard to local parliaments and county councils, i.e., to vote for candidates from several parties, and give individual candidates up to three votes each.

This, however, does not account for the low vote: the new procedures were presented as an alternative and did not necessarily have to be followed by the voter.

The widespread abstention expresses growing alienation from the main political parties and the political establishment as a whole on the part of the electorate. This process is currently evident in many countries, and is taking more and more distinct forms.

Two-and-a-half years ago, as the long years of stagnation under the right-wing coalition headed by Helmut Kohl came to an end, many hoped they could influence government policy with their vote. Since then, such hopes have dissipated.

The fact that the SPD-Green party coalition government has carried out much more extensive cuts in social welfare

and more drastic tax increases than its political predecessor has led to losses in local elections for the SPD and Greens over the last two years. With increasing frequency, Chancellor Schröder has appeared before television cameras as election results were announced to declare he would not be swayed in his policies by the opinion of the electorate. Voters have been effectively disenfranchised.

The latest elections in Hesse express a broad sentiment within the population: you can carry out your dirty work, but without us. The dangers of such a development, however, were also visible in the election, and have repercussions that extend beyond the state itself.

Right-wing lobbies in the CDU feel strengthened by the vote, and will make their presence felt in an even more aggressive manner. Two years ago Roland Koch, the chairman of the Hesse CDU, won state parliamentary elections with an openly racist campaign directed against plans for dual nationality. Afterward, a scandal emerged in which it was revealed that the CDU had financed its activities over many years with illegal bank accounts abroad, covering up the deceit with falsified bookkeeping.

Although Koch had clearly violated German laws governing the activity of political parties, and had lied to parliament, he refused to resign. Instead he turned his contempt for democratic rights and legal norms into a personal trade mark, and emerged as the leading figure for right-wing nationalist forces inside the CDU.

A large part of the population vigorously oppose such policies, but the growing opposition to Koch can only assume, under current conditions, a negative form, i.e., voter abstention. Neither the SPD nor the Greens provide an alternative. The state chairman for the SPD in Hesse is Hans Eichel, Germany's finance minister and the man behind the attacks on the welfare state and other budget cuts pushed through over the past few months.

Eichel has justified the social devastation arising from his measures with purely bureaucratic arguments over the necessity to lower costs as dictated by international finance markets. He appears unperturbed by the social or political consequences of his actions. In this respect, the attacks on Germany's social welfare system have been grist to the mill of the right wing inside the CDU.

CDU General Secretary Laurenz Mayer described the provisional result in Hesse as a "splendid victory for the CDU". On German radio on Monday morning he said the Hesse result placed the CDU in an extraordinarily strong position in advance of state parliamentary elections to be held in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg on March 25.

The Hesse CDU has undertaken a marked turn to the right under the leadership of Koch. This was confirmed in the

communal elections. While some commentators declared that the only thing positive about the Hesse election was the loss in votes for the ultra-right Republican Party—it lost nearly two thirds of its previous total and won only 2.5 percent of the vote—quite the opposite is the case. Instead of marginalising the ultra-right, the CDU in the course of the election adopted the major ultra-right themes, thereby lending them an aura of respectability.

Koch feels a wind of change behind him and his arrogance will continue to grow in the next period. It is his wing inside the CDU that has led the attacks on Foreign Minister Fischer and Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin. Attorneys from Hesse are currently conducting an investigation into Fischer's past, and a close party friend of Koch is supervising these activities in his role as state secretary in the Hesse Ministry of Justice.

As the political establishment becomes more and more detached from the population as a whole, it is also clearly moving further to the right. A glance across the Alps shows this development in chemically pure form. In Austria, Jörg Haider has utilised growing popular opposition to decades of corruption and nepotism by social democratic governments to win influence on the basis of racist slogans and open anti-Semitism.

The only alternative to the current offensive of the right is the construction of a new party which takes seriously the issues of democratic and social rights and is prepared to subordinate the profit interests of big business to the broad needs of working people.

*See Also:*

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