

Berlin elections reveal instability and divisions

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Last Sunday's elections for the Berlin city-state legislature have brought to light the political instability and social gulf that marks the capital and, increasingly, Germany as a whole. Although the last ballot was only two years ago, the electoral fluctuations go far beyond what has so far been usual in Germany. At the same time, divisions between the Eastern and Western parts of the city are deeper than ever before in the twelve years since the fall of the Berlin wall.

The result overturns the outcome of the 1999 elections that led to the formation of a grand coalition between the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD). The financial scandal that broke out in the capital earlier this year, led in June to the collapse of the coalition in the Berlin Senate (as the city-state legislature is called) under Eberhard Diepgen (CDU) and the calling of fresh elections. But this scandal alone is not sufficient to explain the large fluctuations in voting behaviour.

The main loser in the election is the CDU, which, with 23.7 percent of the vote, recorded its worst result since 1948. Two years ago it had won 40.8 percent, making it by far the strongest party in the Senate, with more than the combined votes of the SPD and Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, successor to East Germany's Stalinist party of state). The CDU's decline is particularly drastic in East Berlin, where it lost over half its votes, sinking to 12.4 percent.

The CDU's losses do not look quite so bad, however, when compared to the *Bundestag* (federal parliament) in autumn 1998. At that time, the party won 23.7 percent, exactly the same voter share as last Sunday's Berlin elections.

This already makes clear that the extreme variations in voting patterns has a lot to do with increasing social discontent. In the absence of any real alternative, this expresses itself in the party regarded as chiefly responsible for social misery being "punished".

The 1998 *Bundestag* elections were marked by discontent with the cuts policies of the previous CDU-led government under Helmut Kohl, which in the long run benefited the SPD and the Greens. In 1999, when the "red-green" government under Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder embarked on a course of strict austerity, the pendulum swung in favour of the Christian Democrats, who enjoyed a number of spectacular election successes in the state legislatures, including Berlin.

In spring 2001, the CDU was hit by the Berlin finance

scandal. Many voters saw a direct connection between the corruption and arrogance of Berlin's CDU leaders Eberhard Diepgen and Klaus Landowsky, who drew princely salaries and dispensed billions to their supporters, and the financial misery suffered by schools and other public facilities, which they experienced every day.

The SPD, which had for many years also participated in this Berlin sleaze, succeeded in giving itself a new image by selecting the relatively unknown Klaus Wowereit to be Diepgen's successor for the mayoral office. Nevertheless, the Social Democrats were only able to make limited gains at the expense of the CDU. A section of CDU voters simply changed to the Free Democrats (FDP), who rose from complete insignificance (1999: 2.2 percent) to become the fourth-strongest party (9.9 percent).

Although for the first time in 30 years the SPD is again the largest parliamentary grouping in the Berlin Senate, the 29.7 percent it achieved is below its own expectations. In a city where it had once provided such prominent SPD mayors as Ernst Reuter and Willy Brandt, the result was one of its worst. It only looks good in comparison to its devastating result in 1999, when it won only 22.4 percent.

For the seventeenth time in succession, the Greens have lost votes in state legislature elections. They managed to contain their losses to one percent, and with 9.1 percent of the vote came just behind the FDP. The relatively small losses might be due to the fact that for a long time the Greens were not involved in the Senate and its Berlin regional organisation contains some prominent critics of the national party, such as Christian Stroebele.

The winner, on the other hand, was the PDS, whose vote increased by 4.9 percent, and with a 22.6 percent share of the vote moved close behind the CDU. The party's successes were particularly spectacular in East Berlin, where it was by far the strongest party with 47.6 percent of the vote—8.1 percent more than 1999. In the West it exceeded the five-percent hurdle for the first time, and, with 6.9 percent of the vote, came in fifth place.

The most surprised by this result was the PDS itself. The *Berliner Zeitung* quoted PDS election campaign manager André Brie saying: "We'll win 20 percent. I did not believe it."

The PDS had once regarded participation in the capital's government as a possible springboard for a later coalition with

the SPD at national level, and sent its most well known representative, Gregor Gysi, into the race. But after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the relationship between the SPD and PDS cooled noticeably. Chancellor Schroeder no longer invited the PDS to confidential briefings in his office. In the context of the “alliance against terrorism”, the SPD and Christian Democrats drew closer together. The successors to the former East Germany’s ruling party were no longer wanted. The PDS sagged to 16 percent in the opinion polls.

At the beginning of October, the PDS party congress in Dresden adopted an appeal for peace, in which it was the only Bundestag party to reject military strikes in retaliation for the terrorist attacks in the USA. Gysi, who had originally opposed the party making such a decision and supported the use of military force, gave way and voted for the resolution. After that the number of press reports increased saying he had lost the desire to fight the election and was merely doing his duty.

Now Gysi himself also attributes the PDS’s surprisingly high election result to the statement against the war. “It benefited us that we put forward a clear position regarding the war against Afghanistan”, he said, although his own position had been anything other than clear.

Also some representatives of the SPD attributed the low result of their own party to the fact that against a background of US military strikes in Afghanistan and the expressions of unlimited solidarity from Chancellor Schroeder, many SPD voters had defected to the PDS—an acknowledgment that opposition to the war is much greater in the population than is officially admitted.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that the PDS advocates a principled stand against the war. Since it has entered local and regional government in East Germany, it has again and again proved its readiness to sacrifice its election campaign promises to the needs of the state.

The same applies to its calls for “social justice”, which again formed part of the PDS propaganda in the Berlin election campaign. As long as it is in opposition, this slogan brings it some support. But in the election campaign, Gysi left no doubt that he stood as a candidate in the role of a tough moderniser in the highly indebted capital, and was ready to “carry out harsh cuts”, as he said in a newspaper interview. He told the *Tagesspiegel*, “In a red-red Senate, the PDS would be responsible for the fact that people—even if they were suffering from austerity measures—would have the feeling: At least it’s being done fairly.”

Since the SPD’s lead candidate Klaus Wowereit categorically excluded forming a coalition with the CDU both during and after the election, only two possibilities remain open: a so-called “traffic light” coalition of the SPD, FDP and Greens or a red-red coalition of SPD and PDS.

Behind the scenes, the SPD leadership around Chancellor Schroeder is pushing for a “traffic light” coalition, although in public it is more reserved, stating that the decision belongs to

the Berlin regional organisation. The SPD leadership is afraid that a coalition with the PDS in the capital could supply the Christian Democrats with ammunition for an anti-communist campaign in next year’s *Bundestag* elections. A “traffic light” coalition would have a majority, however, of only of two seats. Due to the rivalries between the Greens and SPD it would be extremely unstable. The SPD, FDP and Greens only managed to win 34 percent of the vote between them in East Berlin, meaning the eastern part of the city would be underrepresented in such a coalition.

In Berlin’s political circles, therefore, preference is given to an SPD-PDS coalition. It would have a more stable majority of six seats and could be used in order to implement unpopular measures in the eastern part of the city. “Only a red-red coalition of SPD and PDS can presently rely on broad support throughout Berlin”, writes the *Berliner Zeitung*, which strongly favours such an outcome. “This should be used now to overcome opportunism and those who deny reality, and to thoroughly modernise the bankrupt capital.”

This could prove to be a crucial test for the Berlin SPD. Sections of the membership, who have grown up in the divided city in the atmosphere of the Cold War, object to any collaboration with the PDS no less vehemently than the CDU.

Following their election debacle in Berlin, the Christian Democrats also face new internal disputes. Ironically the defeat of the CDU’s lead candidate in Berlin, Frank Steffel, who was imposed by the rightwing with the active support of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl against the present party chairman Angela Merkel, could benefit Merkel’s rival, Edmund Stoiber. The chairman of the Christian Social Union, the CDU’s sister party in Bavaria, Stoiber is pushing himself forward as the lead candidate of the CDU/CSU to challenge Schroeder in the 2002 *Bundestag* elections.



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