

German elections: Social Democrats and Greens retain power with a narrow majority

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With a narrow but clear lead, the governing coalition of the SPD (Social Democratic Party) and Green Party, headed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), retained power in Sunday's national elections.

The two parties will have a total of 306 deputies in the new parliament. This is four more than the total required for an absolute majority and eleven more than the total number of deputies (295) for the conservative opposition, consisting of the Union parties—the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) and CSU (Christian Social Union)—and their coalition partner, the FDP (Free Democratic Party). The PDS (Party for Democratic Socialism—formerly the Socialist Unity Party, the Stalinist ruling party of East Germany) won just two seats and, for the first time since the unification of Germany in 1990, will no longer have its own fraction in parliament.

At the conclusion of vote counting, the SPD and the Union parties had identical results, both winning 38.5 percent. With a minimal advantage of 8,864 votes, the SPD remained the strongest party overall and was able to form the largest fraction in the parliament due to a peculiarity of the German voting system, which awarded the SPD four extra seats. Compared to its result in the last national election in 1998, the SPD lost 2.4 percent of its vote, while the Union parties increased their total by 3.4 percent.

The decisive factor for the SPD-Green majority was the vote for the Greens, which increased from 6.7 percent in 1998 to 8.6 percent, leaving them clearly ahead of the “free market” liberal FDP. The FDP vote rose by 1 percent. Its total of 7.2 percent was a disappointing result, well below its proclaimed aim of winning 18 percent.

The PDS, which slumped from 5.1 percent in 1998 to just 4 percent, failed to achieve the minimum requirements for official status in the new parliament—five percent of the national vote or three directly elected deputies. The party was reduced to just two deputies, who were elected as direct candidates in their constituencies in East Berlin.

The parties of the extreme right—the Republicans, the NPD (National Party of Germany) and the Schill Party (led by the Hamburg senator, Ronald Schill)—each received less than 1 percent of the vote. The three parties won a combined total of just 1.8 percent.

The voter turnout of 79.1 percent was slightly below that registered in the 1998 election.

The final election result emerged only after a long and eventful evening. Normally, it is possible to say with a high degree of certainty who has won a national election in Germany soon after the 6 p.m. closing of the polls on election day. This time, vote counting continued for many hours before the result was determined. The official preliminary result was first published at 4 a.m. Monday morning.

Election projections swung back and forth until midnight, and the predictions of the two major television channels, the ARD and the ZDF, differed widely. At 6 p.m. the ZDF predicted a close race between the two main camps, while the ARD reported an electoral advantage for the Union parties of nearly 3 percent.

Despite the fact that the final result remained unclear, the Union parties held a lengthy, festive victory celebration for the benefit of the television cameras. Union candidate Edmund Stoiber of the Bavarian-based CSU appeared first in Berlin alongside CDU Chairperson Angela Merkel, and then later in Munich—on both occasions surrounded by frenetic supporters. As the evening progressed and the SPD totals cut into the initial small lead of the Union, Stoiber continued to declare that the Union was the strongest party with the biggest fraction in parliament. Further results proved that both statements were false.

In light of the jubilation in the Union camp, many election commentators failed to note that the Union parties, despite their gains over 1998, had registered the second worst result in their history. With the exception of the last national election, the Christian Democrats had recorded a vote total of over 40 percent in all national elections since 1953, and had only been overtaken by the SPD on two occasions—in 1972 and 1998.

When Stoiber's defeat became undeniable on Monday morning, he made clear that his posturing as victor was not just a misunderstanding on his part. He all but refused to accept the decision of an electorate that had banished him to the ranks of the opposition for a further four years.

In an interview with the ZDF, he declared that, based on the small majority for the SPD and Greens, he expected that the new government would not be able to deal with Germany's economic problems. He added that the so-called Red-Green coalition was isolated on the international stage, a reference to the open breach between Schröder and the Bush administration over US plans for war in Iraq.

Stoiber continued: “I do not think the government will last long.” Claiming that the Union parties had won a “strategic victory,” he said, “Inside a year the government will have to be constructed anew.”

Stoiber told the ARD that he would be ready to take up the post of chancellor should the SPD and Greens prematurely lose power.

His comments amount to an open threat to work for the destabilisation and demise of the newly elected government, in as rapid a manner as possible. They have no precedent in post-war elections in West Germany or the 12 years since German reunification. Governments of the Union parties have ruled in the past with majorities even smaller than that obtained in the current election by the Social Democrats and Greens, and the losing parties have never questioned their legitimacy. Under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer the Union parties formed a government with a majority of just one seat, and more recently the Union parties governed under Helmut Kohl with a majority of four seats.

Stoiber is able to speak with such self-assured arrogance only because his provocative stance is backed by Germany's most powerful business organisations as well as the American government.

Just prior to election day, the US government intervened openly in favour of Stoiber, denouncing the Schröder government following off-the-cuff remarks by the German justice minister, Herta Däubler-Gmelin. [See “Bush administration abets right-wing provocation on eve of German

election”] On Monday, the Bush administration went out of its way to make clear its hostility to the re-elected government in Berlin. As of Monday afternoon, Washington had failed to send an official note of congratulations to the winning candidate, an action judged by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to be a “deviation from diplomatic procedure and equivalent to a slap in the face for Schröder.”

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld pointedly refused to meet with his German counterpart at a NATO meeting in Warsaw on Monday, and charged that Schröder’s campaign, which centred in the final weeks on opposition to US war plans against Iraq, “had the effect of poisoning the relationship” between the two countries.

Many leading business figures also responded negatively to the election result. The *Spiegel* news agency summed up their reaction with the words: “It could not have been worse.” The chief analyst of a private bank commented: “From the point of view of the stock market it is an awkward situation.” He complained that a razor-thin majority for the future government could worsen the weak economic situation and further depress the markets. On Monday the most important German stock market index, DAX, lost 5 percent.

Just a few weeks ago all of the main opinion polls were predicting victory for Stoiber. The situation changed dramatically, however, when Chancellor Schröder openly opposed the US plans for a war against Iraq. The vote in favour of the SPD and Greens is a clear rejection by the German electorate of Bush’s war policy.

Schröder’s opponents are clear on this point. Appearing on a television talk show, Günther Beckstein, Stoiber’s specialist on domestic politics, complained that the most persistent theme at election stands set up by the CSU was the issue of war, with members of the public asking if it was true that a vote for the Union parties was a vote in favour of war.

Anti-war sentiment served to galvanise layers of voters who had turned their backs on politics out of disgust with the right-wing and militaristic policies of the SPD-Green government, but now, in protest, voted in favour of Schröder. The election result at the same time reflected widespread opposition to the pro-business policies supported by both electoral camps, but generally associated more directly with the Union parties and the FDP.

A map showing the voting results resembles an atlas of the social decline in Germany. It depicts a sharp polarisation not only between the east and west of Germany, but also between the north and south of the country. [See map at Spiegel Online: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,214492,00.html>]

In the south, where incomes are highest and unemployment is relatively low, nearly all of the direct votes cast were in favour of the Union parties. In Bavaria, the CSU increased its vote over 1998 by a very large 11 percent, winning nearly 60 percent of the votes cast in that state.

In a discussion with reporters from the ARD, the SPD minister for home affairs, Otto Schily, raised the possibility of vote fraud in Bavaria, referring to the town of Dachau, where the local CSU was accused of a massive falsification of the vote in municipal elections held last April.

Baden-Württemberg, the second biggest state in the south of Germany, recorded a less spectacular 43 percent in favour of the Union, but, with the exception of a few constituencies in large cities, all of the directly voted candidatures were won by the CDU.

In the other western states the majority of cities are firmly in the grip of the SPD, while the CDU exerts influence in rural areas. In the large industrial region of the Ruhr, where the SPD had suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the CDU in local elections, the SPD lost ground slightly compared with 1998, but still won between 50 and 60 percent of the vote. Many voters who have been disillusioned by the SPD’s record in office nevertheless once again voted for the party. In the state of Hessen, where a coalition of the CDU and FDP had replaced an SPD-Green coalition in state elections, the SPD and Green Party re-established a

majority of over 50 percent.

The Greens were able to increase their vote totals mainly in big cities. They also benefited from the German system of second votes (votes for a party as opposed to first votes for an individual candidate). In protest over a war against Iraq, layers of the middle class in large cities cast votes in favour of the Green Party, whose campaign centred on their leading figure, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

The vote recorded by one leading member of the Greens, Hans-Christian Ströbele, is worthy of comment. For the first time in the party’s history, a Green candidate, Ströbele, recorded a win as direct candidate in the Berlin constituency of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. Ströbele, who, in the past defied the Green Party parliamentary fraction and voted against German participation in the Kosovo and Afghanistan wars, had been relegated to what was considered a hopeless constituency by the party leadership.

With the exception of the eastern German state of Saxony and a few isolated constituencies on the coast, the German states in the north and the east of the country are in the hands of the SPD. In the east the SPD was able to increase its vote by 4.6 percent, winning nearly 40 percent of the vote. This contrasted with the party’s total in the west of the country, where it lost 4 percent.

The Union recorded just 28 percent in the east, compared to its 41 percent in the west, where it emerged as the strongest party.

The PDS has never been able to establish itself in the west, and this election was no exception. The party recorded just 1.1 percent in the west of Germany on Sunday.

At the same time the party lost a quarter of its electorate in the east, recording just 16.8 percent. Some 300,000 PDS voters switched to the SPD, and a further 300,000 did not vote. Following its participation in eastern state governments, where it has supported drastic cuts in social services, the PDS has lost virtually all credibility as a party of radical social protest. It lost most heavily in the two states where it has shared power.

The election result reveals a profoundly torn and divided society. The regional and political contradictions exposed by the vote are a distorted expression of intense class contradictions. By introducing the issue of war into the election campaign, the SPD and Greens have given rise to certain expectations that they will be unable to fulfil. But the mood of anti-war protest will prove difficult to suppress.

After the events of the past four years, there can be no doubt that the SPD and Greens will do everything possible to measure up to the demands made upon them by big business. It was no coincidence that on the evening of the election result the word used most frequently by representatives of both parties was “discipline”. It is not a disadvantage when one only has a small majority, they stressed. It helps in disciplining the parliamentary fraction.

On Monday, Herta Däubler-Gmelin gave notice of her intention to resign as justice minister, a move intended to appease the Bush administration. At the same time the SPD general secretary, Franz Müntefering, known for his brusque military style, has been made responsible for maintaining order in the SPD parliamentary fraction. It is already clear that the new coalition plan drawn up by the government will involve many cuts in the country’s social safety net that were postponed for the period of the election campaign.



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