

German state elections: dramatic losses for Schröder's Social Democratic Party

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Four months after its narrow victory in the national elections of last September, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) suffered a devastating defeat in the February 2 elections to the state (*Länder*) parliaments of Hesse and Lower Saxony. There has been no comparable electoral sea-change in the western part of Germany since the 1950s.

In Lower Saxony, which has been ruled by the SPD for 13 years—including 8 years with the present German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, heading the state government—the SPD lost almost 15 percent of its vote compared to the previous state elections, receiving just over 30 percent. The conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU) gained 12 percent and came close to an absolute majority. The vote of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) rose by more than 3 percent. With 8 percent, the FDP did slightly better than the Greens, whose vote increased by half of a percentage point.

Compared to the results of the national elections held last September 22, the reversal is no less dramatic. In Lower Saxony, the SPD and the Greens received a combined vote of 56 percent last September, while the CDU and the FDP received 41 percent. Last Sunday, it was the other way round.

In the former social democratic stronghold of Hesse, the SPD lost more than 10 percent and saw its vote plummet to below 30 percent. The incumbent head of government, Roland Koch, was not only the first CDU minister president ever to win a second term in office, his party also gained an absolute majority in the state parliament and will be able to govern without its previous coalition partner, the FDP, even though the latter's vote increased from 5 to 8 percent. The Greens gained 3 percent, which brought them up to just above 10 percent.

All analyses and polls agree that the massive turn of voters away from the SPD was a reaction to the policies of the national government, an SPD-led coalition with the Greens. Some analysts spoke about a second national election, others described the recent ballots as by-elections. Chancellor Schröder admitted as much when he said on Monday: "I bear central responsibility for this defeat."

Last September, the SPD and the Greens swung the national elections in their favour when, in the last several weeks of the campaign, they came out against a war on Iraq. Even disappointed SPD voters who had retreated from politics were

mobilized by this opposition to war and decided to once again vote for the SPD. The pre-election boost for the SPD was also a protest against the big business agenda of the CDU.

As soon as the ballots were sealed, however, Schröder thwarted the hopes he had awakened. Under pressure from the voters who had elected him on one side, and the demands of big business on the other, he proceeded to wobble from side to side on a troubled course that inevitably took him further and further to the right, and eventually alienated virtually every section of the population.

While the business associations and the media hammered away at the government—demanding drastic social cuts, accusing Schröder of lacking the necessary zeal for reforms, and being too dependent on the trade unions—various ministries came forward with a flood of proposals as to how social services, medical care and old-age pensions could be cut back. These proposals were invariably retracted, only to be replaced by new, even more brutal schemes. Wolfgang Clement, SPD minister for Labour and the Economy, adopted large portions of the CDU platform and announced a thorough transformation of industrial law.

When the top candidates of the SPD in Hesse and Lower Saxony proposed to campaign for the reintroduction of the tax on assets (abolished by the previous CDU government under Helmut Kohl), in order to display some token opposition to social inequality, they were swiftly called to order by SPD headquarters in Berlin. Posters that had already been printed had to be pulped.

In the course of this disarray, one thing emerged with absolute clarity: The SPD was not prepared to take on the powerful groups that dominate economic life. Their only answer to growing unemployment and the worsening social crisis was to retreat further and further, and eventually grant all the demands made by big business. Thus, old-age pensioners, workers and public employees grew increasingly angry, and owners of small businesses more embittered. Disappointment and disgust toward the government spread like wildfire.

This process is illustrated by figures. According to the Forsa opinion research institute, 40 percent of those who voted for the SPD four months ago turned their backs on the Social Democrats last Sunday: 560,000 in Hesse, almost 1 million in

Lower Saxony. They either abstained or voted for other parties. In Lower Saxony, 300,000 former SPD supporters voted for the CDU. Still, the absolute figure of CDU voters did not increase significantly. Essentially, the CDU benefited from a much lower turnout than in the national elections.

On the eve of the state elections, the SPD failed in its attempt to turn the tables by taking a pronounced stance against the Iraq war. In Hesse, the Social Democrats put up red posters proclaiming, “No to War against Iraq,” and at an election rally in the city of Goslar in Lower Saxony, Chancellor Schröder announced that Germany would under no conditions agree to a war resolution in the UN Security Council. However, unlike in the national elections, the effect was zero.

This is despite the fact that popular opposition to the war has not decreased. According to Forsa, 86 percent of the population remain opposed. But they no longer trust Schröder and his foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, because in the immediate aftermath of the national elections, Schröder and Fischer assured the US government that it could use German military bases and that its warplanes could cross German airspace. They also suggested that Germany might agree to a war resolution in the UN Security Council after all.

People have voted for the CDU out of a variety of confused motives—anger toward the SPD, a desire to send the Social Democrats a message, or some vague hope that things might get better under a new government. The election successes of the CDU do not reflect any broad popular support for attacks on social programs. But this is precisely how they are being interpreted by the political establishment and the media: as a carte blanche to do away with past social gains, some of which were introduced under Bismarck back in the nineteenth century. The results of the elections in Hesse and Lower Saxony are taken as a starting point for “reforms” that are, in effect, counter-reforms.

The right-wing and financial press are celebrating. They see a chance to do away with any democratic sensibilities or concerns for the opinion of the people. A de facto, informal coalition between the CDU majority in the Bundesrat (the upper chamber of parliament representing the state governments) and the SPD-Green government will make it possible, they argue, to push through unpopular measures, if necessary against resistance from within the established parties themselves.

“Schröder must make use of what is probably his last chance to not only announce the necessary changes, but carry them through,” said the *Handelsblatt*, a major financial newspaper. It continues: “The election calendar gives him until the spring of 2004.... As soon as elections in several states, slated for the autumn of 2004, make themselves felt, the time for unpopular reforms will have run out for a long time to come.”

The newspaper continues: “It seems ironic that the loser of yesterday’s elections is our hope for today. Who else but Gerhard Schröder can push through the necessary changes in

the field of social and labour market policies?” Only Schröder, with his authority and his tactical finesse, can break the resistance against such a course within Social Democracy itself and within the trade unions, the newspaper writes.

Immediately following the state elections, Schröder declared his intention to live up to these expectations. “2003 will be the year of reform,” he stated in a programmatic document, drafted by him personally, which the SPD presidium adopted on Monday. All of the envisaged projects have long been prepared in the ministry for Labour and Economics—above all, the dismantling of protections against unfair dismissal and the lowering of unemployment benefits. The CDU, for its part, has announced that it will not block any such measures with its majority in the Bundesrat.

Through this impending collaboration between the SPD, the Greens and the CDU, the population is being disenfranchised and pushed out of the political process. As the *Handelsblatt* candidly admits, the “unpopular reforms” cannot be carried out “under the shadow of elections,” because the majority of the people simply don’t agree with them. While social antagonisms intensify, the population is being deprived of its democratic rights.

This raises the necessity of a political alternative. Such an alternative cannot be found in a return to the old, failed conceptions of reformism, as Oskar Lafontaine and others in the SPD are claiming. In the era of globalization, social gains can be defended only on the basis of an international socialist program that unites the working people of all countries in a common struggle against capitalism.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) stood on such a program in the Hesse elections and received 1,331 votes—twice as many as in the national elections of 1998, when it last put up candidates in this state. While still small in terms of percentage, these votes are an unmistakable sign that more and more people are beginning to consider our political alternative.



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