

State elections in the Saarland: support for Germany's SPD plummets

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For the third time this year, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has suffered a devastating defeat in state elections. Following defeats in Hamburg in February and Thuringia in June, electoral support for the party led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder collapsed completely last Sunday in Saarland.

All indications point to a continuation of this trend in state parliamentary elections two weeks from now in Brandenburg and Saxony, and then in the state elections scheduled for next spring in the SPD heartland of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW). In the event of a defeat in NRW, the conservative opposition parties would gain a two-thirds majority in the upper house of parliament, and the future of the SPD-Green Party coalition would be seriously threatened.

Saarland is a small state with just over a million inhabitants, located on western Germany's border with France. Compared to the state elections five years ago in Saarland, the SPD lost over 100,000 votes. Five years ago, the SPD won 247,000 votes; this time around, just 136,000. With only 55 percent of the electorate going to the polls, voting was at an all-time low. Five years ago, 69 percent of the eligible voters cast their ballots. With just 31 percent of the vote, the SPD recorded its worst results in 44 years. In 1990, the party gathered its highest vote ever, with 54 percent support.

The conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was able to slightly increase its share of the vote to 47.5 percent and increase its absolute majority in the state parliament, which will now comprise four parties instead of the previous two. The Green Party and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), neither of which were represented in the last parliament, just barely topped the 5 percent vote hurdle, which according to German electoral law allows parties to enter parliament.

In absolute figures, however, the CDU lost a total of 44,000 votes. According to an analysis by Infratest-dimap, a total of 61,000 SPD voters and 34,000 CDU voters did not turn out to vote this time. Eleven thousand voters switched from the SPD to the CDU, while the remainder voted for smaller parties—along with the Greens and FDP, the ultra-rightist German National Party (NPD) (4 percent), the Family Party (3 percent) and the Party of Democratic Socialism (successor party to the East German Stalinist SED) (2.3 percent).

The miserable results for the SPD are the expression of widespread opposition to the federal government's so-called reforms. In the states of former East Germany, tens of thousands

have taken to the streets on a weekly basis to oppose the Hartz IV measures aimed at rolling back the German welfare and social state. For the same reason, thousands of traditional SPD voters refused to turn out and cast ballots this time around in the Saar region. According to poll analysts, the SPD lost 28 percent of its traditional voters. The analysts speak of "a dramatic collapse in votes by workers."

Remarkably, the CDU was barely able to profit from the SPD's losses. Since the beginning of the regular Monday demonstrations against the Hartz IV legislation, opinion polls have recorded a drop in support for the CDU, which is calling for even more severe cuts in some social welfare programs. The CDU prime minister of the Saarland, Peter Müller, regarded as a popular figure in the region, had originally estimated that his party would win more than 50 percent of the vote.

While many former SPD voters simply stayed at home, a minority cast their votes for the NPD, which ran candidates for the first time in Saarland. The party was able to win 17,600 votes. Of this total, 5,000 were former SPD voters, and an equal number were former CDU voters.

Last year, the German government had sought to ban the ultra-rightist party, which maintains close relations with militant neo-Nazis. The government action collapsed after it emerged that German intelligence forces had massively infiltrated the party at leadership levels. Given its vote total in the Saarland, it is expected that the NPD will obtain enough votes in the Saxony state elections later this month to enter a state parliament for the first time since 1968.

The NPD, which has traditionally concentrated its activities on propagating xenophobia, raised the issue of the Hartz IV centrally in its campaign in the Saarland, deliberately appealing to protest voters. "We've had enough" was one of its election slogans. It was able to win a certain response amongst the unemployed and socially disadvantaged. According to election analysts, 10 percent of workers and 14 percent of the unemployed in the region voted for the NPD. In the former steel town of Völklingen, the share of the vote for the NPD rose to 9.7 percent.

The votes for the NPD do not reflect a stable base of support for right-wing movements, but are rather expressions of a diffuse protest sentiment that, in the absence of any alternative from the established parties, can be diverted into reactionary channels.

In the 1960s, 10 percent of the Saar region's population worked in the steel and coal industries. Since then, the area has suffered

continuous economic decline. Of the original 100,000 jobs in coal and steel, just 19,000 remain. Out of a total of 18 coal mines, just two remain, one of which will soon close.

With a largely Catholic population, the Saarland, which only became part of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1957, was originally a stronghold for the CDU. With the intensification of the crisis in the steel industry in the 1970s and widespread protests by workers, the political balance shifted. In 1980, the SPD for the first time won more votes than the CDU. In 1985, it won an absolute majority, enabling the party's candidate at the time, Oskar Lafontaine, to become state prime minister.

The dismantling of the coal and steel industry in the region continued under Lafontaine. He worked in close collaboration with Kurt Hartz, the head of the IG Metall engineering union and chairman of the SPD fraction in the state parliament in Saarland, a figure who embodied the traditional synthesis between the SPD and the trade unions. Together, they were able to mollify workers and quietly implement the destruction of thousands of jobs. Karl Hartz's brother Peter, a top executive at the VW motor company, has been instrumental in developing the new counter-reform laws that bear his name.

In the 1999 state elections, the CDU managed to return to power in the region with a very narrow majority. In the meantime, Lafontaine had moved on to Berlin, assuming the posts of chairman of the national SPD and German finance minister—only to resign all his party and parliamentary positions a few months later.

The CDU had promised new jobs for the Saar, but the economic decline has continued unabated, with 9.3 percent unemployed in June of this year. The state's substantial debt, amounting to 7.5 billion euros, also continues to grow.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that voters are increasingly turning their backs on both the SPD and the CDU.

The SPD has reacted to its electoral debacle in Saarland just as it has to previous defeats—with the refrain “More of the same!” One party leader after another appeared before the press to emphasise that there would be no alterations to Hartz IV and that the “reform course” would continue.

Peer Steinbrück, the SPD prime minister of the state of North Rhine Westphalia, where local elections are due to take place in three weeks along with full state elections next spring, appeared on ARD television on the evening of the Saar election. “I am in favour of implementing Hartz IV as it is,” he said. One should not give way, he continued, to the arguments of opponents of the Hartz IV measures. The SPD must not appear to be tactically orientated, opportunist or populist. In other words, voters and demonstrators can do what they want—the SPD will stubbornly stick to its policies.

Steinbrück is typical of a whole layer of SPD apparatchiks who regard the electorate with contempt. After finishing school, spending two years in the army and four years studying economics, he pursued a 30-year career in various ministries and chancelleries without ever standing in an election. Two years ago, he inherited the post of prime minister of the state of North Rhine Westphalia from Wolfgang Clement, who was promoted to the job of German economics minister. Next year, Steinbrück will stand in

an election for the very first time—and will most probably be thrown out of office.

Echoing Steinbrück was his labour minister and state party chairman, Harald Schartau, a long time IG Metall functionary, who declared: “One cannot make a reform and then distance oneself from it shortly afterwards.”

In a bizarre distortion of reality, the chairman of the Greens, Reinhard Bütikofer, declared that the SPD had lost votes in Saarland because leading SPD personnel had distanced themselves from the government's reform course. For their part, the Greens were able to increase their vote, although they identify themselves completely with government policy. A recent study by the University of Mainz has revealed that it is the Greens who deserve the title of “party of the well-off,” rather than the liberal FDP. The study focused on how many voters receive a monthly income of 3,000 euros or more. Fully 32 percent of Green voters earned this much, compared to 26 percent of CDU voters and 20 percent of FDP voters. With just 17 percent of its voters coming from this more privileged layer, the SPD trailed even the PDS.

The SPD headquarters has organised a grotesque campaign aimed at blaming Oskar Lafontaine for the election defeat. A chorus of functionaries has declared that Lafontaine stabbed the party in the back in the middle of the election campaign, contributing to the SPD's defeat.

Initially, the former party chairman had supported the SPD regional candidate, Heiko Maas, and was a featured speaker at election rallies. Then, when the demonstrations against Hartz IV commenced, he called for the resignation of Chancellor Schröder in an interview with the *Spiegel* magazine, and subsequently spoke from the platform at the Leipzig anti-Hartz demonstration.

In fact, Lafontaine shares responsibility for the policies and the decline of the SPD. His criticisms of Schröder are hollow and demagogic—after all, he has repeatedly defended very similar policies and ideas. The policy he proposes—a return to the reform policies of the seventies—is illusory and ignores the changes that have taken place on a world scale. His rhetoric notwithstanding, Lafontaine unconditionally defends the foundations of capitalist society.

This, however, is not the reason he is under fire from the SPD. They accuse him instead of adapting to the mood of the demonstrators and criticising the government's Agenda 2010 policies—a blatant case of confusing the messenger with the message.



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