

German election data highlight social divisions

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A close examination of the results of the German election held on September 18 reveals the extent of the social and political divide in the country.

At first sight, Germany seems to be split primarily along regional lines between east and west, as well as between north and south. Maps plotting the election result are overwhelmingly red-colored in the north and the east, corresponding to the party color of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which received the most support in these areas. The south is colored blue in accordance with the party color of the conservative Union parties (Christian Democratic Union, CDU, and Christian Social Union, CSU). In reality, profound social divisions can be detected behind the geographical differences. The fundamental dividing line in Germany is between top and bottom earners, rich and poor.

According to opinion polls, the crucial issues in the election were “social justice,” “unemployment,” and “tax policy.” This is why both the SPD and the CDU/CSU lost substantial votes as compared to previous elections.

Voters expressed their opposition to anti-social policies—in particular, the so-called Hartz reforms of the SPD-Green Party government led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD). However, contrary to previous post-war elections, the conservative parties were unable to exploit the electorate’s discontent with the government. As the social consequences of the radical tax reform proposed by CDU candidate Angela Merkel’s tax expert, Paul Kirchhof, became clear, the CDU/CSU increasingly lost support.

For the first time since 1953, the main parties received a combined vote of less than 70 percent. Taking the electorate as a whole, only every second voter cast a ballot in favor of the Union parties or the SPD.

The division between those who sought to defend social gains and those eager to smash up the welfare system as rapidly as possible can be seen in the pattern of voters who switched their allegiance. The research body infas-Institut analyzed this phenomenon on the basis of constituency results.

Infra concluded that there was no noteworthy switch by voters from the camp of the SPD, the Green Party and the newly formed Left Party to that of the Union parties and their ally, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), or vice versa. Instead, voters who switched did so between parties within the two main political camps.

The SPD lost a large number of voters to the recently formed Left Party led by Oskar Lafontaine and Gregor Gysi. Across Germany, the SPD lost over 1.3 million votes (or 2.1 percent) to the Left Party. In addition, 528,000 former SPD voters (0.69 percent) switched to the “camp of the abstainers.”

Altogether, the SPD received approximately 2.5 million fewer votes than three years ago. Compared to the Bundestag (parliamentary) election of 1998, the Social Democrats lost as many as four million votes, i.e., in the course of its seven years in power, the government camp lost a fifth of its voters.

A similar picture emerges with the CDU/CSU. The losses of the Union parties are to be explained predominantly by traditional conservative voters switching to the FDP. Altogether, nearly one million former CDU and CSU voters voted this time around for the FDP.

Because a grand coalition of the SPD and Union parties was a likely result of a close vote, many former Union voters decided for the FDP in order to prevent such an outcome. According to the infas-Institute, 41 percent of those who voted for the FDP admitted that they were politically closer to the CDU/CSU.

This loss of votes to the FDP is mirrored by the failure of the Union parties to mobilize their voters. Nationwide, 687,000 former Union voters refrained from voting. In absolute terms, the Union parties lost approximately 1.8 million votes.

The national trends expressed in the election—the breaking up of the so-called “people’s parties” and the economic and political polarization of society—also made themselves felt in the state of Bavaria, which has been politically dominated in the post-war period by the CSU. The CSU, led by Chairman Edmund Stoiber, received just 49.3 percent—9.3 percentage points less than in the Bundestag election three years ago.

“Everyone knows in Bavaria,” the *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote, “that for the CSU a result of less than 50 percent of the vote is a disaster... Now the CSU is surprisingly far away from its target.” Even the head of the Bavarian state chancellery, Erwin Huber, who is regarded as a sure winner in his constituency in Lower Bavaria, lost around 12.5 percent. In the constituency Schwandorf in East Bavaria, the CSU lost around 14.0 percent, and it lost 7.1 percent in the state capital of Munich.

With a loss of approximately 800,000 votes, the CSU was responsible for the lion’s share of the Union parties’ losses. This means twelve fewer CSU deputies in Berlin, which will shrink the party’s Bundestag delegation to 46. Formerly the third strongest party in the Bundestag, with 58 delegates, the CSU now has the smallest faction in parliament.

The Greens lost 370,000 votes, with most of them (240,000) going to the Left Party. Along with the FDP, the Left Party was the actual winner in terms of vote gains. The Left Party received two million more votes than its East German predecessor organization, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), won in 2002, and will enter parliament with a delegation of 54.

The media have made much of the divisions in the electoral result, arguing that Germany is divided between east and west, and between north and south.

In every German state, with the exception of the southern states of Rheinland-Pfalz, Baden-Württemberg, Saxony and Bavaria, the SPD received the most votes. The distribution of votes of the Left Party shows that it received around one quarter of all votes cast in the states of the former East Germany, and thereby the second highest number for all parties in that part of Germany—greater than that for the CDU. At the same time, the Left Party received only 5 percent in the west.

In the German capital electorates of Berlin-Marzhan-Hellersdorf and

Berlin Lichtenberg, the Left Party received 34.4 and 35.5 percent of the votes respectively, winning these seats. Gesine Löttsch and Petra Pau, who up to now were the only PDS members in the Bundestag, were re-elected, having first won these seats in 2002.

When one considers the rate of unemployment, the rate of poverty and the economic strength of any given region, the following picture becomes clear: the poorer the region, the higher the unemployment, the greater the population density and the poorer the economic prospects, the greater the vote for the SPD and the Left Party.

The distribution of votes between the two parties followed historical patterns. As already noted, the votes for the Left Party were higher in the east of the country than in the west. The only exception was the small state of Saarland, on the border with France, which was governed for a long period by Left Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine (then a member of the SPD). The Left Party received 18.5 percent of the vote here, far above that in other western states.

One can also establish the same trend on the opposite side. The richer the region, the more rural the area and the lower the level of unemployment, the greater the vote for the CDU/CSU and FDP. The vote distribution here also reflected historical traditions.

The FDP won more votes among the better-paid in the cities and among the self-employed, while the Union parties won votes above all in rural areas. The CDU/CSU was also more successful with older voters than with younger ones. 45 percent of all voters over 60 voted for the Union parties, which received only 31 percent of votes from those under 30.

The SPD won most votes from first-time voters, with 39 percent, according to a survey conducted by Infratest-Dimap.

This research group also looked at the occupation of voters. It revealed that although the SPD received a relatively high number of votes from workers (36 percent) and the unemployed (33 percent), it was in these groups that they lost the greatest number compared to the last federal election (7 and 8 percentage points respectively). The Left Party made particularly heavy inroads here.

In total, around every fourth unemployed person nationwide voted for the Left Party, accounting for 9 percent of the party's total vote. A similar pattern is seen in relation to voters' purchasing power. Every fifth voter with low purchasing power cast his ballot for the party of Lafontaine and Gysi.

This tendency was also present in North Rhine-Westphalia, which encompasses the greatest industrial region in Germany, the Ruhr area. Although the SPD lost votes here compared to the last federal election in 2002, it received more than at the last state election in May this year. Then, the SPD was voted out of office after 39 years in power. This election defeat, the eleventh in succession, was the immediate cause of the federal election, which was brought forward by one year.

The SPD slightly increased its vote from May, recording an increase from 37.1 to 40 percent. The CDU, in comparison, lost over 10 percent in the last four months, slipping from 44.8 percent to 34.4 percent. The participation rate in North Rhine-Westphalia, at 78.3 percent, was the lowest ever in the state for a federal election.

The lowest participation rate in North Rhine-Westphalia was in the seat of Duisburg II, with 71.2 percent. This seat encompasses Duisburg North, which has an unemployment rate of more than 20 percent and an even higher poverty rate. The SPD candidate, Johannes Pflug, received the best primary vote result of any SPD candidate in the country. The SPD also won more than 55 percent of the secondary vote. The Left Party received almost 8 percent in this seat. It received a similar result in Gelsenkirchen (over 20 percent unemployment) and in Bochum-Herne.

The results for the Left Party in Rheinland-Pfalz are also of note. In Kaiserslautern, where Opel has a car factory, and in Pirmasens, one of the most socially polarised cities in Germany with over 17 percent unemployment and the highest concentration of millionaires in the

country, the Left Party received almost 9 percent of the vote. In the northern city of Bremen the Left Party won 8.3 percent; in the electorate of Bremen-II-Bremerhaven, with around 20 percent unemployment, 8.6 percent of the vote.

The immigrant vote played an insignificant role in the result. Here too, social position played a major role. Workers, the unemployed and the poor tended to vote for the SPD and the Left Party, independent of religion or country of origin. The Center for Turkish Studies estimates that most immigrants who were eligible to vote—the largest part being the 550,000 Germans of Turkish origin—voted mostly for the SPD, but many also voted for the Left Party.

The extreme right wing was also able to make significant electoral gains, the direct result of the dismantling of the welfare state by the SPD-Green government, as well as its anti-immigrant policies. While the Republican Party received 266,317 votes (0.6 percent), much the same as in 2002, the neo-fascist National Party of Germany (NPD) was able to more than triple its votes. It received 746,903 votes, or 1.6 percent. This may be explained by the fact that three years ago the extreme right-wing Schill Party of the former Hamburg judge, Ronald Schill, stood in the elections, but not in the latest vote. In 2002 the Schill Party picked up more than 400,000 votes.

The more than one million votes for neo-Nazi parties were spread very unevenly across the electorate. The right-wing demagogues were able to find fertile ground in the east German states and structurally weak regions with high unemployment and poverty. With the exception of Saxony Anhalt, the NPD received over 3 percent of all votes in the east German states.

In Saxony, where the NPD also sits in the state parliament, it received 4.9 percent, its best result to date, putting it ahead of the Greens (4.6 percent). It received less than five percent in Saxony's biggest cities—Leipzig, Dresden, Chemnitz and Zwickau—and picked up most of its votes in the rural areas of Saxony Switzerland (7.1 percent), Kamenz-Hoyerswerda (6.5 percent), Bautzen-Weißwasser (6.3 percent) and Annaberg (6.3 percent), and in some electorates exceeded 10 percent.

In western Germany, the NPD, like the Left Party, was able to achieve its best result in Saarland. Although it received around 1 percent of the votes in all western German states, the NPD was able to increase its votes significantly. It won many voters in some city electorates with high unemployment. For example, in Homburg (Saarland) it gained 2.1 percent; in Bremen-Bremerhaven, 1.9 percent; and in Duisburg II, 1.6 percent.



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