

Despite vote declines for CDU and SPD

German coalition parties hail state elections as mandate for anti-social “reforms”

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Leading Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politicians have announced they will speed up “reforms” following the first state elections since the Grand Coalition of the CDU and Social Democratic Party (SPD) assumed office in Berlin last autumn.

The polling stations had barely closed on Sunday when CDU Secretary General Ronald Pofalla declared, “Now we will come to grips with all the tasks we face at the federal level.”

On Monday, Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) assessed the election result as a “confirmation of the past work of the Grand Coalition.” The results, she said, were an “encouragement to take the further steps we have to take ... the second stage of government work has begun.”

Merkel laid stress on “reform” of the health system and labour market.

SPD head Matthias Platzeck said the rise in his party’s share of the vote in the western state of Rhineland-Palatinate—marking the first SPD increase in a state election in five years—represented a “trend change.” He went on to assess the election result as “stabilizing” the Grand Coalition.

According to provisional official results, the SPD added scarcely 1 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate, bringing its share of the vote to 45.6 percent. This, however, was sufficient to give it an absolute majority in the state legislature.

The CDU, with 32.8 percent of the vote, suffered a small decline. The “free market” Free Democratic Party (FDP) slightly increased its share of the vote, gaining 8 percent. The Greens obtained only 4.6 percent, failing to meet the 5 percent requirement and, as a result, losing their representation in the state

legislature.

In the southern state of Baden-Württemberg, CDU Prime Minister Günther Öttinger barely retained his post, winning 44.2 percent of the vote, enough to maintain an absolute majority of state legislators. The SPD vote fell sharply from 33.3 percent to 25.2 percent. The Greens gained 4 points to finish with 11.7 percent, outpolling the FDP (10.7 percent).

In the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, the CDU under Prime Minister Wolfgang Böhmer won the largest share of the vote, with 36.2 percent. The SPD polled only 21.4 percent. The Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism improved its vote by 4.1 points, coming in second with 24.1 percent. The FDP’s 6.7 percent was only about half of its vote four years ago, and, as a result, it will no longer be part of the state government. The SPD will likely enter the government in its place, as junior partner to the CDU.

The most significant statistic from this “super election day” was the high rate of abstention. The 44.4 percent turnout in Saxony-Anhalt was the lowest in postwar Germany.

Some 15 years ago, one of the main arguments for German reunification was the desire within East Germany for free elections. Today, the majority of the population in the former East Germany has grown disillusioned with all the establishment parties, feeling that none of them express their interests. If they stay away from the polls in droves, it is because they feel they have no one to vote for.

On Sunday, however, the turnout fell to a record low not only in the east, but also in the west. In Baden-Württemberg, only 53.4 percent voted, nearly 9 percent less than five years ago, and even in Rhineland-

Palatinate, which traditionally has a high turnout, participation slumped to 58.2 percent, the lowest in the state's history.

While Prime Minister Günther Öttinger and the CDU celebrated their election win in the Baden-Württemberg capital of Stuttgart, the CDU vote actually sank by some 280,000 compared to the state election five years earlier. The SPD received half a million fewer votes than in 2001.

It was a similar story in the smaller state of Rhineland-Palatinate. State Prime Minister Kurt Beck (SPD) celebrated the SPD's first victory in eleven consecutive state elections. However, in absolute terms the SPD lost 21,400 votes, while the CDU vote fell by almost 73,000.

In Saxony-Anhalt the absolute figures present an even clearer picture. With the ouster of the FDP from the governing coalition, the state will probably be ruled by a grand coalition of the CDU and SPD, mirroring the coalition at the federal level. However, both future coalition partners suffered clear losses.

The CDU and SPD together lost nearly 150,000 votes compared to the state elections in 2002. In a state which, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, was one of the biggest industrial centres in East Germany, barely 25 percent of voters supported the two parties. It was not substantially different in the other states.

Notwithstanding the media campaign to present the election result as a sign of popular support for the Grand Coalition, the low election turnout is an expression of widespread opposition to the policies of the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. The federal government has reacted to the increasing resistance from below by curtailing democratic rights and resorting to increasingly undemocratic forms of rule.

The election campaign in all three states reflected this development. While the government has already prepared its plans for drastic austerity measures, the topic went virtually unmentioned in the election campaign. An agreement had obviously been made to avoid any mention of the planned social cuts, with the issue to be broached only after the elections.

A government that came to power last autumn by means of an unconstitutional parliamentary manoeuvre continues to operate in a conspiratorial fashion. The absence of any real political debate in the election

campaign is a measure of the ruling elite's contempt both for democracy and the electorate.

The Left Party has no answer to this development. Its leadership in Berlin is trying to obscure the significance of the party's failure to clear the 5 percent hurdle in the two western German state legislatures by pointing to its increased vote in Saxony-Anhalt. But this is just an evasion. The Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism lost 10,000 votes in Saxony-Anhalt compared to the state election four years ago. Its share of the vote increased only because of the low election turnout.

The Left Party sits in state governments in Berlin and Mecklenburg Pomerania, where it supports all the political attacks against the working class. This has disillusioned and alienated many of those who voted for it in the past. The Left Party pretends to be left-wing while it is in opposition; once it accepts government responsibility, it unreservedly defends the interests of big business.

In the local elections in Hesse, which took place on the same day, the social and political tensions were evident. Election turnout dropped to under 50 percent.

In the city of Frankfurt am Main only 40 percent of voters went to the polls. In some of the industrial cities it was even less—in Kassel, 37 percent; in Hanau, 35 percent; in Offenbach, 31 percent.

The SPD suffered devastating defeats in former strongholds. Although the CDU increased its vote statewide by only 0.6 percent, for the first time in 25 years it became the strongest party at the municipal level.

In Frankfurt, the SPD lost 7 percent compared to the local elections five years ago, and gained only 23 percent of the vote. As soon as the first returns were in, showing the Greens winning 15.8 percent in Frankfurt, they offered to join as junior partners in a coalition with the CDU, which polled 37.6 percent.

Green Party speaker Olaf Cunitz announced a party congress would be held in order to switch party policy in favour of collaborating with the CDU in Frankfurt.



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