State elections in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania

Vote of no confidence in Germany's governing parties

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20 September 2006

In state elections held in Germany September 17 all those parties involved in government on a national and state level—the Left Party/PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—suffered drastic losses in their support among voters.

In Berlin, the Left Party/PDS, which has governed the city for the last five years in a coalition with the SPD, lost half its vote. In Sunday's election the Left Party/PDS received 185,000 votes—a loss of 181,000 votes compared to the last comparable elections in 2001. The losses were particularly dramatic in those centres in the east of the city where the former PDS (the successor to the East German ruling Stalinist party) once enjoyed broad support. The Left/PDS's loss of votes topped 20 percent in some eastern constituencies.

The Left Party/PDS became the target for broad layers of voters who were enraged by the cuts implemented by the Berlin SPD-Left Party coalition. While it sought to present itself in its election propaganda as a left-wing party defending social gains, the Left Party/PDS has in fact supported every attack on education, culture, as well as on jobs and salaries in the public service carried out by the Berlin Senate. According to the party's leading candidate in Berlin, Harald Wolf, the party had taken "difficult decisions," which were "not met with outpourings of enthusiasm on the part of our supporters."

Voters had evidently had enough of such hypocrisy and delivered their own verdict on the Left Party/PDS.

The Berlin SPD also received a rebuff and lost approximately 60,000 votes. The party was able to slightly increase its proportion of the vote only due to the low election turnout. It emerged as the strongest party with just 30.8 percent. The SPD will be able to select its next coalition partner from between the Left Party/PDS and the Greens, which both received around 13 percent respectively.

Either alliance, i.e., SPD and Left Party/PDS or the SPD and the Greens, would only have a one-seat majority over the combined opposition. With an electoral turnout in Berlin of just 58 percent, both coalitions would have the support of just a fourth of the electorate.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, which along with Berlin is the only German state to be governed by a coalition of the SPD and Left Party/PDS, the SPD suffered at the hands of voters angry over government policies. It lost 160,000 votes compared to its total of 400,000 in 2002. That corresponds 10 percent of the total vote. The Left Party/PDS also lost 22,000 votes but could slightly increase its total percentage due to the reduced turnout.

The result means that the outgoing government in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania will be able to maintain power (with just a single seat majority) unless the SPD chooses to enter into a "grand coalition" with the right-wing CDU—the alternative favoured by the national leadership of the SPD.

Although the CDU is in opposition in both states it was unable to profit from the hostility to the governing parties and also lost substantial support, obtaining its worst ever result in Berlin (21.3 percent). This represents a loss of 90,000 voters compared to the state elections of 2001, when the CDU also suffered heavily following its participation in the Berlin banking scandal.

The CDU also lost out in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the constituency of its own leading member, German chancellor Angela Merkel. The CDU recorded 28.8 percent of the vote, slightly behind the SPD (30.2 percent), and the vote makes clear that voters reacted negatively to the very public meeting in the summer between the chancellor and US president George Bush, who visited Merkel's constituency.

The free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) was able to profit from the loss in support for other parties in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Until this election the party had no seats in the state parliament, but was able to double its vote to 9.6 percent this time round. The main party to profit, however, from the election was the extreme right German National Party (NPD), which won 7.3 percent of the vote and now sits in two German state parliaments. The NPD won seats in the Saxony state parliament two years ago.

Although the NPD in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has just 200 members, it was able to increase its organizational influence by incorporating or working together with militant groups of neo-Nazis active in the region. In rural areas with

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especially high unemployment the NPD was the most active political party.

Social demoralisation on the one hand and a deliberate campaign of agitation against Muslims and immigrants in Germany, encouraged by the main political parties, has created the climate in which such right-wing scum can gain a foothold. The NPD recorded especially high levels of support (15 percent) from young people between the ages of 18 to 24 and the unemployed. The WSWS will deal with the NPD election result in more detail in a separate article.

In Berlin the NPD won seats in four district parliaments, where the prevailing 5 percent minimum is not necessary for representation. Another right-wing outfit, the Republicans, was able to win a seat in a fifth district. In the state of Berlin as a whole, however, both extreme right parties failed to exceed the five percent hurdle (NPD 2.6 percent, and the Republicans 0.9 percent). On the other hand a range of parties, which took up specific social issues, was able to mark up large numbers of votes.

The relatively inconspicuous pensioner party, the Greys, picked up 3.8 percent and recorded the best result of all of those parties unable to take up seats in the Senate. The Greys emerged from another organisation—the Grey Panthers, which was founded in 1975. Other social protest parties, such as the Parents Party, the Education Party and the Unemployed Persons Party, were all able to win several thousand votes. When the right-wing extremists are excluded, some 140,000 voters cast their ballots for smaller protest parties, none of which individually managed to exceed the five-percent hurdle. This represents about 10 percent of the total vote.

The Berlin wing of Labour and Social Justice—The Electoral Alternative (WASG)—failed to win its hoped for result, despite an extensive election campaign and broad coverage of its activities in the media. The national WASG leadership had vehemently opposed the election campaign by the Berlin WASG. Nevertheless the WASG won just 2.9 percent in Berlin and was unable to enter the state parliament. It was clear that voters looked sceptically upon an organisation that opposes the Left Party/PDS at a local level but is seeking to unite with it on a federal basis.

The largest single constituency in both elections consisted of non-voters. Election turnout was less than 60 percent in each case—a drop of 10 percent compared to previous elections. In Berlin the percentage of non-voters was nearly twice as high as the number who voted for the governing coalition parties—SPD and Left Party/PDS.

This extremely low election turnout—In Berlin 80 percent participation was commonplace up until the 1990's, and about 70 percent since then—is an expression of increasing opposition to and alienation with the country's official bourgeois parties. Germany's grand coalition of the SPD and conservative parties has carried out one social attack after the other, leading to a situation where large sections of the population are convinced that the ballot box is an inadequate means of affecting political change. This conviction has only been reinforced by the cynicism with which the Left Party/PDS has supported such attacks on social gains in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

A number of comments in German newspapers took up this theme. The *Berliner Zeitung* titled its comment, "The people are fleeing from the People's parties," and added, "Political experts are warning of the loss of significance of the SPD and CDU." *Der Spiegel* writes that the "system of people's parties" is "long past," and expresses its concerns over the "melt down of social consensus."

This latest crisis has only served to intensify the debate in Germany over the future of the grand coalition government. Along with *Der Spiegel*, a number of other commentaries point the finger at the Merkel government and conclude that the grand coalition is creating more problems than solutions.

In addition both the Greens and the FDP are itching to return to power following increased votes for the FDP in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and the Greens in Berlin. To this end they are prepared to go to any lengths—including the creation of a conservative-FDP-Green coalition. Any change of government, such as that conducted last year behind the backs of the population by former chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) would inevitably be bound up with a further political shift to the right.

The German Social Equality Party (PSG) participated in the Berlin Senate elections, in order to provide a socialist, revolutionary orientation to the broad popular opposition, and received 573 votes. In view of the multiplicity of parties, which took part in the election, and articulated social protest in one form or another, the votes for the PSG must be regarded as conscious decisions in favour of an international, socialist orientation.

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