

# The extreme-right NPD wins seats in German election

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In Germany's recent state election the extreme right-wing German National Party (NPD) was able to profit from the right-wing policies of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). The NPD, which openly acknowledges its allegiance to the legacy of National Socialism, was able to pick up six seats in the parliament of the east German state of Mecklenburg Vorpommern, following elections Sunday, September 17. In Berlin, the NPD was able to win seats in 4 of the city's 12 district councils.

The NPD received nearly 60,000 votes in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. With a low election turnout of 58 percent, this total corresponded to 7.3 percent of the total vote. In the Berlin Senate elections, the NPD recorded 2.6 percent—4 percent in the east of the city and 1.6 percent in the west. This result meant that the neo-fascists could not enter the Berlin state parliament, which demands that parties win at least 5 percent of the vote, but could take up seats in several district councils where a 3 percent minimum is sufficient.

The NPD was able to record relatively high levels of support in particularly hard-hit regions of Vorpommern, where mass unemployment is rife. In the constituencies of East Vorpommern I and II, the NPD won 12.2 and 11.5 percent of the vote (two NPD members have sat in the local parliament for two years), and in Uecker Randow I and II, the party notched up 15 and 13 percent. On the other hand, its vote was lower in the urban constituencies of Rostock (3.8 percent) and Schwerin (6.7 percent).

The state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania has the highest levels of unemployment in all of Germany (18.2 percent), and in the district Uecker Randow, an unemployment rate of 26.6 percent. The state is mainly rural and devoted to agricultural production. It also lies on the border with Poland.

There are areas in East Vorpommern and Uecker Randow where nearly half the workforce is without employment. In the village of Postlow in East Vorpommern, comprising 500 inhabitants, 38 percent of the village voted for the NPD on Sunday. Another constituency in the region, Stettiner Haff, which is dominated by a gloomy concrete housing project, recorded 35.2 percent.

An initial analysis conducted by the polling institute Infratest dimap shows that the NPD was able to win support primarily with young voters. Fifteen percent of young people between the ages of 18 to 24 voted for the neo-fascists, and 12 percent of those between 25 and 34. In terms of social category, the NPD won its largest support from unemployed persons—15 percent.

In Berlin, the NPD stood candidates in five districts with high unemployment and high levels of poverty and won seats in four district councils—Neukölln (3.9 percent), Treptow- Köpenick (5.3 percent), Lichtenberg (6.0 percent) and Marzahn Hellersdorf (6.4 percent). The party failed to reach the 3 percent limit in Tempelhof-Schöneberg (2.1 percent), but recorded its best result in the city (5.4 percent) in the huge housing project of Marzahn Hellersdorf.

The NPD had arranged a division of the constituencies in Berlin with

another extreme-right organisation—the Republicans, which stood candidates in seven districts, winning a seat in one.

Two factors are primarily responsible for the growth in support for the NPD.

The first is social despair, combined with widespread indignation over the arrogant attitude and hypocrisy that characterises Germany's established parties—in particular, those seeking to portray themselves as defenders of the interests of the disadvantaged.

The state governments in both Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Berlin are made up of coalitions of the SPD and Left Party/PDS. Both parties suffered heavy losses in Sunday's election. In Berlin, the Left Party/PDS lost half its voters; in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the SPD lost 10 percent of its vote (based on the last comparable state election). While both parties declare they are prepared to defend the interests of the socially disadvantaged, their practice has been very different.

In the state capital of Schwerin, Labour Minister Helmut Holter (Left Party/PDS) has implemented the national government's anti-welfare Hartz laws, although his own party has publicly objected to the measures. In Berlin, his party colleague and economics minister, Harald Wolf (also Left Party/PDS), has played a prominent role in social cuts and dismantling jobs in public service.

The slogan used by Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania Prime Minister Harald Ringstorff (SPD) for his election campaign was "Continue the Success," but the 160,000 unemployed in the state have seen no such success. In Berlin, those in the population hit by social and welfare cuts could witness how a small layer in the city was able to profit and celebrate its newly acquired wealth—a layer that included the city's mayor, Klaus Wowereit (SPD).

The arrogance and dismissive attitude assumed by the ruling parties were summed up in an election campaign booklet produced in Berlin by the Left Party/PDF in which the party explains why it "has supported the savings policies in Berlin...at the expense of the weak and poor in the city." One passage in the brochure reads: "On the streets the Left Party/PDF protested against Hartz IV, in the senate we implemented it. Isn't that a contradiction?" The booklet then bluntly declares, "No, it is reasonable."

Such cynicism with regard to its own policies provides the ideal breeding grounds for the growth of the extreme right. The SPD and Left Party/PDF share direct responsibility for the prevailing social disaster as well as the political confusion resulting from their policies. They declare even the most socially destructive of measures to be "left-wing policy" and create a climate that the NPD has been able to exploit by feeding on the despair, feelings of inferiority, rage and hatred of declassed social layers.

In Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the NPD picked up about a quarter of its votes from former SPD and Left Party/PDF voters. An additional quarter came from former CDU (Christian Democratic Union), and

another quarter from former non-voters. The remainder came from those who had previously voted for other smaller parties.

The second factor utilised by the extreme right is the sanctioning of xenophobia by Germany's main political parties. The witch-hunt against Muslims—from the speech by the Pope in Regensburg to calls by German state interior ministers for the registration of religion in anti-terror files—is grist for the mills of the neo-Nazis. Other measures, such as the discrimination against asylum-seekers and immigrants by both the conservative union parties and the SPD, as well as the propagation of a so-called “German guiding culture” are additional factors assisting the NPD.

The lack of any defining line between the CDU and the extreme right is reflected in the political campaign being waged by both the NPD and CDU against the building of a mosque in the East Berlin district of Pankow. Leading the CDU in its opposition to a mosque was the party's leading candidate in the Berlin elections, Friedbert Pflüger. The local head of the CDU, Karl Henning, who supports the building of such a mosque, went so far as to quit the CDU in protest at Pflüger's stance. Only after another leading member of the CDU in the district, Bernhard Lasinski, marched alongside neo-Nazis and skinheads in a march over the issue did Pflüger feel obliged to intervene and call for Lasinski's resignation.

In the past, the extreme-right forces were able to win support mainly from protest voters, but this latest vote demonstrates that they are increasing their presence in the country as a whole, particularly in rural areas.

In 1988, the German People's Union (DVU), run by the Munich publisher and multimillionaire Gerhard Frey, was able to notch up a surprise success in the state of Saxonia-Anhalt with 13 percent of the vote, although the party had no regional organisation. At the next election, however, the DVU disappeared without a trace. While the NPD has only 200 members in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, these members live in the region and have social contacts.

Media reports concur that the NPD has penetrated “into the centre of society”—i.e., live in their communities as respected citizens. The leading local candidate of the NPD, Udo Pastörs, has his own clock and jewellery shop in Lübbtheen, and other NPD members run their own taxi firms.

The NPD takes part in local debates and citizens' initiatives, it organises coffee get-togethers, and its members present themselves as supporters of order and the family. In so doing, it deliberately takes up aspects of the nationalist (völkish) ideology of the Nazis. This was made clear by Pastör's speech on the evening of the election. He expressed his thanks to his wife, “who had cooked for me so excellently, washed my laundry and helped me find the strength I needed for the election campaign.”

In some regions, the main political parties were not to be seen, and so the way was left clear for the NPD to be able to dominate with its propaganda.

The NPD placed the social question at the centre of its election campaign and—entirely in the manner of the Strasser wing of the NSDAP—posed as an anti-capitalist movement. It presented itself as a party that takes up the day-to-day worries and needs of the population.

The “basis for a socially fair order” had been eliminated, the NPD declared in its programme. “Those responsible are the establishment parties and the media cartel that function as props of high finance.” On the basis of an “excessive drive for profits,” they seek to destroy the existing order and thereby question the political and economic system of the Federal Republic and European Union.

The pamphlet combines social protest with xenophobia. “Indebtedness, unemployment, industrial decline, social uprootedness, excessive immigration, violence and educational decline are only some of the key words describing the situation of our city.” The NPD then raises as a central demand the revision of the German-Polish border and the reestablishment of Germany within the borders of 1937.

On paper, the NPD poses as citizen- and family-friendly, but at the same

time, the party is intent on intimidating its opponents through the use of gangs of thugs. The NPD, whose functionaries originate mainly from west Germany, has over the past few years established links with local groups of neo-Nazis, known as “Freiern Kameradschaften,” whose ranks include many prosecuted thugs and criminals. Such elements were mobilised by the NPD in its election campaign to violently intimidate other parties.

Members of the SPD, the Left Party/PDS and even the CDU were threatened, and on occasion attacked by NPD supporters at election information venues in both Berlin and Mecklenburg Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

One week before the election, neo-fascists pulled away the ladder being used by a member of the Left Party/PDF to hang posters. The young man fell to the ground and hurt his spine. One night previously, right-wing extremists attacked two SPD election helpers, one of whom required hospital treatment.

Taking a page from the book of the Hitlerite SA, gangs of NPD thugs disrupted the meetings of other parties and even threatened journalists and demonstrators with violence on the eve of the election.

Germany's main bourgeois parties have reacted to the activities of the NPD with the call for a stronger state.

Volker Beck, speaker on domestic affairs for the Green Party, said the NPD had to be actively countered “by consistent action from the police and state attorneys.” Beck demanded: “This has to be accompanied with intensified observation of the NPD and the extreme right-wing milieu.” This requires, according to Beck, that the state intelligence agencies improve their exchange of information with the National Bureau of Intelligence.

The former parliamentary president Wolfgang Thierse (SPD) demanded tougher action by the police and a renewed attempt at banning the NPD. The last attempt made in 2002 failed after the Federal Constitutional Court ruled out such a ban because the leadership level of the NPD had been so heavily infiltrated with German intelligence agents. So “deep” was the infiltration that the three Constitutional Court judges concluded that any meeting of the NPD leadership constituted a “meeting of the state.”

During the election campaign, the authorities had already reacted to the activities of the NPD by curbing the democratic rights of all parties. After the NPD had carried out election meetings in public buildings throughout Berlin, other parties were denied such access to state buildings to carry out their election campaigns. The argument used by state authorities was that a blanket ban on the use of public building for all parties was the only way to restrict the activities of the NPD. The first local authority to adopt this strategy was the council in the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg headed by the Left Party/PDS.

The reaction of the political establishment to NPD provocations is to call for the “unity of all democrats.” In practice, this means intensified collaboration between the various bourgeois parties and a capitulation to the right wing in the name of such “unity.” This was the case in France four years ago when, during presidential elections, all parties, including left radical groups, used precisely the same argument to justify support for the Gaullist Jacques Chirac against his challenger, the fascist Jean Marie Le Pen. The policies carried out by Chirac since then have only served to strengthen Le Pen.

In the long run, the strengthening of the state apparatus and the closing of ranks between the established parties only serve to create conditions under which ultra-right demagogues can increase their influence. Only an independent movement of the working class, which undertakes the defence of democratic and social rights on the basis of an international, socialist programme, can put an end to the neo-Nazi menace.



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