

German state elections reveal pronounced shift to the left by electorate

Ulrich Rippert
30 January 2008

Elections held in the two German states of Hesse and Lower Saxony last Sunday revealed a pronounced shift to the left by the electorate.

In both states, the recently formed Left Party was able to overcome the 5 percent hurdle necessary for participation in a state parliament. In Hesse, where the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was also able to improve its vote compared to the last election, the Left Party obtained just over 5 percent. In Lower Saxony, where both the SPD and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost votes, the Left Party obtained 7.1 percent—although its candidates and personnel were largely unknown to the electorate.

The Left Party emerged from the unification of the east German Party of Democratic Socialism (formerly the Stalinist ruling party, SED) and the west German WASG, which mainly comprised long-time union bureaucrats and disgruntled former members of the SPD. The election results in Hesse and Lower Saxony represent the first significant gains by the organisation in west German states, although the party has already been involved in government in a number of east German states. It is the first time that such a new organisation has risen to such national prominence since the emergence of the Green Party at the end of the 1970s.

If this development continues, it means that in future up to five parties could contest for parliamentary seats instead of three or four at present, and, as some commentators have pointed out, this could increasingly destabilise the entire political system.

In Hesse, the nine-year-old government led by the right-wing Prime Minister Roland Koch (Christian Democratic Union) suffered a debacle. Koch came to power in 1999 with a pernicious racist campaign centred on hostility to proposals for dual nationality. Once again, he sought to play the racist card this year in order to counter his slump in opinion polls. It is characteristic of the current popular mood that Koch's campaign backfired totally and only led to increasing opposition to his re-election.

Broad layers of the population, in particular young people at universities, technical schools and training centres, reacted angrily against Koch's racism. The CDU, which had notched up a record result of 48.8 percent in the 2003 election, lost 12 percent, while the SPD gained 7.6 percent. Voter turnout sank in Lower Saxony by 10 percent to just 57 percent, but remained relatively high in Hesse with 64 percent.

It is notable that the increased votes for the SPD in Hesse were won by candidate Andrea Ypsilanti, who is regarded as a "left" in the party. The party leadership had formerly written off any chances that she could pick up votes, and a leading member of the SPD executive, former economics minister Wolfgang Clement, even advised the electorate to vote against her.

As the final result was made known, it emerged that the CDU had a wafer-thin advantage over the SPD—0.1 percent or 3,595 votes. But the result also meant that Koch is unable to strike a coalition with his favoured political partner, the free-market Free Democratic Party. Although the FDP slightly increased its share of the vote to 9.4 percent, the FDP and CDU together shared just 46 percent of the vote, less than the

total picked up by the CDU alone four years ago.

In the state where they first emerged as a political force, the Greens came in fourth with just 7.5 percent (a drop of 2.6 percent), meaning that an SPD-Green coalition would also fail to have the necessary number of seats to form a government in Hesse. It is the Left Party that in many respects holds the balance of power.

The leading bodies of all the political parties involved met on Monday morning, and since then, there has been enormous speculation over the formation of a new state government in Hesse. The German chancellor and head of the CDU, Angela Merkel, moved to back Koch despite the huge losses inflicted on his organisation in the election. "The CDU has emerged as the strongest party," Merkel said in Berlin, and declared that the task of forming a new government was clearly a job for Roland Koch.

However, the CDU and FDP do not have sufficient seats to form a government, and so far the Social Democrats have rejected a "grand coalition" with the CDU—similar to that which governs on a federal basis. The FDP leadership have also ruled out any collaboration with an SPD-Green coalition but indicated possible support for a so-called "Jamaica coalition"—i.e., a coalition of the CDU, FDP and the Greens.

For their part, the Greens have not directly commented on the latter variation and have made clear they favour an alliance with the SPD. If the FDP continues to reject any alliance with the SPD and Greens, then the only possibility of establishing a SPD-Green coalition would be on the basis of support from the Left Party—which in turn has been strictly ruled out (at present) by the SPD.

There is considerable speculation that Koch could simply resign his post in Hesse and take over a minister post in Berlin. This would open the way for a grand coalition in Hesse with another leading member of the CDU taking over as prime minister. One possible candidate for such a transfer is the current defence secretary, Franz Josef Jung. Such a move would then make it easier for the SPD or the Greens to justify their inclusion in a coalition with the CDU.

Paradoxically, the clear vote against Koch and the CDU in Hesse could well result in a grand coalition.

The Greens have also indicated they could work together with the CDU should Koch resign. In the course of their election campaign, the Greens had stressed their principal aim was to replace Koch. At the same time, leading Greens indicated that cooperation with other layers inside the CDU "made quite a lot of sense."

This point was made by Green Party leader Joschka Fischer in an election rally last week in Hesse. Fischer deliberately made a distinction between Roland Koch and the rest of the CDU. He had been "hopeful" of striking a deal with the CDU over the issue of immigration until "Roland Koch decided to reach for the big stick." Koch, he continued, had done "a disservice to a modern CDU."

The Greens are already cooperating closely with the CDU and FDP in the local administration in the Hesse state capital of Wiesbaden, and the Greens form a so-called "coalition of realism" with the CDU in the

banking centre of Frankfurt. Elections are due in Hamburg in four weeks, and here also, the Greens have made no secret of their readiness to work together with the CDU.

In Lower Saxony, both the CDU and the SPD lost large numbers of votes—a result that represents a clear rejection of the grand coalition in Berlin. While the FDP and the Greens were able to slightly increase their vote, the Left Party made the biggest gains.

Despite losing 5.8 percent of his support, CDU Prime Minister Christian Wulff still won enough votes (42.5 percent) to continue his coalition in the state with the FDP (8.2 percent). The SPD registered an historical low point in the state formerly governed by former SPD chancellor Gerhard Schröder, picking up just 30.3 percent.

In his own election campaign, Wulff clearly distanced himself from the racist overtones of fellow party member Koch. Instead, he posed as a candidate of stability who refused to polarise the election campaign.

The election results in Hesse and Lower Saxony express a shift to the left by the population as a whole, a process that has been under way for some time.

Before Christmas, the German media had been dominated by reports on the rapid increase in social inequality in Germany. In December, the magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that the incomes of the poorest layers had dropped by 13 percent since 1992, while top earners had increased their incomes over the same period by nearly a third. “It is a frightening development,” the magazine concluded.

Sections of the German ruling elite are fearful that the increasing economic and social crisis could lead to sharpened social conflicts. Their anxieties have only been reinforced by the slump in share prices and the intensified financial crisis of the past few weeks.

Against this background, the polarised election campaign conducted by Roland Koch also met with considerable opposition in the German media. The editorial boards of leading papers such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Die Zeit* all registered their alarm. They feared that Koch’s aggressive campaign could encourage uncontrollable social conflicts.

Three days prior to the poll, *Die Zeit* wrote: “Koch is a capable prime minister. But he must not win this election.” His election victory would be a “disaster” for Germany, because he had unnecessarily sharpened the situation and poisoned the country’s “political culture.”

The increased votes for the SPD in Hesse did not come from those layers of the working class hit hardest by the welfare cuts carried out in the past few years. According to a study of voter shifts, the SPD only won a certain percent of its vote from workers, the unemployed and pensioners. It was able to increase its support above all amongst clerical and self-employed workers—by 13 and 12 percent, respectively. These layers voted for the SPD in the hope that the party would return to reformist-type policies and thus prevent the eruption of large-scale class struggles.

Such hopes were most clearly articulated by the journalist Heribert Prantl writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He celebrated the revival of fortunes for the SPD and compared it to the biblical reawakening of Lazarus.

The voters in Hesse have rediscovered their party, which they “had already given up for dead,” Prantl wrote. Like the Biblical figure, social democracy was “no longer red, but pale.” It had had a “fear of its tradition and its members,” but now the “proud SPD” is once again there...“at least in part.” The party in Lower Saxony “is still dead” (because no political polarisation aroused it). In Hesse, however, “it is leaping about.”

Prantl’s Lazarus theory with regard to the SPD is not only a grotesque example of self-deception from someone who has been a firm supporter of SPD-Green politics for many years. It is an attempt to assist the SPD leadership to regain some control over the working class.

Any conception that the SPD would react to globalisation and the international financial crisis by returning to policies based on some sort of

social consensus is quite frankly absurd. Those who seek to maintain such illusions are in for a very rude shock. All the experiences of recent years have proved the exact opposite. Whether in Germany, England, France or Italy, social democracy has used its shrinking influence to repeatedly suppress any popular opposition, stabilise the bourgeois order and impose policies entirely in the interests of big business.

The same criteria apply to the Left Party. This party sees its major role in providing support to the SPD. Even one day after the election, leading members of the Left Party were indicating their willingness to lever the SPD back into power in Hesse. Where the Left Party shares government responsibility—e.g., in the east German state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and in Berlin—it rapidly drops its left-wing rhetoric and is in the forefront of attacks on the working population.

Herein lies the significance of the participation by the *Partei für Soziale Gleichheit* (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) in the Hesse election.

The PSG resisted any subordination to the SPD and the Left Party on the basis of the slogan “Koch has to go.” The PSG warned of the role played by a so-called “left government” of the SPD and the Greens supported by the Left Party. As was the case in France under the government of Lionel Jospin (Socialist Party) or the coalition led by Romano Prodi in Italy, such a “left government” in Hesse would only function to encourage the taking of power by right-wing parties.

The PSG did not restrict its election campaign merely to immediate issues—it looked to the future and the social struggles that will inevitably emerge from the social polarisation. It was the only party to put forward an international socialist programme and pursue the goal of organising the working class as an independent social force.

The state list of the PSG obtained more than a thousand votes in Hesse. This is a small, but important number. In view of the immense polarisation that characterised the election and led many voters to seek the best possibility of voting out Koch, the votes for the PSG represent an important achievement. They represented a conscious decision to oppose the SPD and Left Party, which both conducted a more extensive and expensive campaign based on their almost unlimited access to the media.

The PSG voters made their choice for a socialist programme, which opposes the logic of the capitalist system and puts the interests of the working population above the profit interests of big business and the banks.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact