

Germany: CDU woos the Greens in Hamburg state election

Ulrich Rippert
28 February 2008

With the announcement of the results of the election held in Hamburg last Sunday, an intensive campaign has begun aimed at securing the participation of the Greens in a state government coalition to be headed by the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The CDU, which has governed this city-state for the past seven years, now needs the Greens to secure a majority to continue in power. Previously the CDU had a big enough majority to govern alone. However, following the failure of the free-market Free Democratic Party to win enough votes, the CDU is now dependent on the Greens, which won 9.6 percent of the vote in Hamburg. The CDU gained 42.6 percent of the vote. According to German electoral law, parties require at 5 percent of the vote to take up seats in parliaments. The FDP gained slightly less than the necessary 5 percent.

Leading figures in the Green Party on both a national and state level are arguing for a government coalition with the CDU. It would be the first such coalition at a state level and an important precedent for future coalitions at a federal level. Those arguing for such a coalition, however, have expressed themselves cautiously, aware of the fact that there is considerable resistance to such a move on the part of the Green Party's rank and file.

Another possible partner for the CDU in Hamburg is the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which was able to slightly improve its vote compared to the previous state election four years ago. However the SPD's 34.1 percent still represents its second-worst result ever in what was formerly one of the party's strongholds—the SPD had governed the city-state continually from 1946 to 2001.

There are fears, however, that the creation of a so-called “grand coalition” of the SPD and CDU (paralleling the ruling federal coalition) could strengthen the Left Party, which won 6.5 percent of the vote and entered the state parliament in Hamburg in its first attempt. Ten percent of working class voters and nearly 20 percent of unemployed cast their ballots for the Left Party. A coalition of the Left Party, the SPD and the Greens could theoretically form a government in Hamburg, but such an option has been vehemently ruled out by both the SPD and the Greens, who both prefer a coalition with the CDU.

It is against this background that even conservative newspapers, which 15 years ago regarded the Greens as a threat to democracy, are now urging a CDU-Green coalition.

Even before the closing of the polling stations on Sunday, the local *Hamburg Morgenpost* wrote of a “clear signal” in the election for a pact between the CDU and the Greens. Under conditions where the FDP lacked sufficient support, a coalition between the CDU and the Greens “is still better than another grand coalition, which does

everything to the letter.”

The right-wing *Die Welt* was even more explicit, writing that Hamburg is a citizen's (bourgeois) city and “voted bourgeois.” It is wrong to assume that there is a structural majority for the left, they argue. “One can only hope that the CDU and GAL (Greens) in Hamburg finally dare to create the first such coalition on a regional level. When, if not now?” *Die Welt* asks.

The liberal *Frankfurt Rundschau* assessed the election as follows: “It is the chance for black-green [black is the colour traditionally associated with the CDU] and thus for new coalition options far beyond this Hanseatic city.” The Berlin-based *Tagespiegel* urges the Greens in both Hamburg and the state of Hesse to make up their minds and concludes: “In both parliaments they could assist in determining policy. In Wiesbaden (Hesse) they could bring about the fall of Roland Koch (Hesse state prime minister—CDU) and form a coalition with the SPD and FDP and in Hamburg the neo-liberal Ole von Beust (CDU prime minister) is certainly not a *persona non grata*.”

The election in Hamburg confirms a development visible across the country: the established political parties react to a clear shift to the left by the population with their own emphatic lurch to the right.

The Hamburg election has a great deal in common with the recent election in the state of Hesse four weeks ago. In both states the CDU lost its absolute majority and was unable to form a coalition with its desired partner—the FDP—because of the lack of votes for the latter. At the same time, the Left Party was able to enter both state parliaments for the first time and now has representation in a total of 10 of Germany's 16 states—six in the east of the country and four in the west.

Both Hesse and Hamburg are former strongholds of the SPD. As the SPD increasingly lost support due to its right-wing policies, the Greens were first able to profit, but used their increased influence in turn to assure the SPD stayed in power.

The rise of the CDU in both Hesse and Hamburg was linked to the takeover of power at a federal level by the SPD and Greens in 1998. The CDU in both states was able to divert increasing disenchantment with the policies of the SPD-Green coalition into support for right-wing populist campaigns.

In Hesse Roland Koch (CDU) won the election in 1999 with a xenophobic campaign against dual nationality. In Hamburg this role was played by the right-wing populist “Party for a Constitutional Offensive” (PRO) led by the judge Roland Barnabas Schill. The PRO won nearly a fifth of the vote on its first showing. At that time Ole von Beust (CDU), who is today often presented as a sort of socially liberal figure, set up a coalition with the Schill party and the FDP.

Four years later Koch and Beust were once again able to profit from discontent with the SPD-Green coalition and secure themselves absolute majorities. In the meantime, the Schill party has dissolved in a sea of squabbles and scandal.

It is notable that such right-wing extremists and their campaigns played no significant role in the recent elections. Koch's own attempt to repeat his xenophobic campaign of 1999 backfired badly and cost him victory, and in Hamburg right-wing extremist parties failed to win over 1 percent. The German People's Union (DVU) obtained 0.8 percent and the party led by the former Hamburg justice senator, Roger Kusch, gained just 0.5 percent.

Social polarization has reached new heights in the Hanseatic city. Hamburg is not only home to one of Europe's largest ports, it is also the seat of major industries and businesses, as well as some of the biggest publishing houses and media concerns in Germany. Some of Europe's wealthiest individuals reside in the city. While there are more than 5,000 millionaires in Hamburg, poverty is growing rapidly, with above average levels of unemployment and homelessness. At the end of the 1990s it was estimated that a total of 60,000 children in Hamburg were condemned to poverty.

Under these conditions the readiness of the Greens and SPD to secure a majority for the CDU is indicative of a clear shift to the right, directed against the increasing popular radicalisation expressed in the election result.

Less than a decade ago, the Greens took power at a federal level alongside the SPD for the first time. At the time the party posed as diehard pacifists opposed to all forms of militarism. But shortly after assuming power, the party swept aside its pacifist pretensions and played a leading role in ensuring the participation of the German army in the NATO war against Yugoslavia.

This was followed by a string of policies that broke previous Green Party taboos. Within a short period of time the Greens constituted the right wing of the Schröder government, ensuring that the SPD continued its anti-social policies in the face of large-scale popular opposition.

However, the opportunism displayed by the party has reached a new peak with its current overtures to work together with the CDU. The head of the Green parliamentary fraction, Renate Künast, declared she was "in principle open for new coalitions." "What is clear is that SPD-Green is not our only option, and the country should not be forced to accept grand coalitions everywhere," Künast told the media. The door was now wide open for other parties and the Greens had to exploit this opportunity.

While Künast encourages the Greens to work with the CDU in Hamburg, she rejects a coalition with the CDU in Hesse led by Prime Minister Koch. The CDU in Hesse is not to be compared with the party in Hamburg, she stressed, indicating that should Koch step down the Greens could also change their mind in Hesse.

For her part, the Green European Union deputy Angelika Beer told the press that a CDU-Green coalition in Hamburg could have "positive effects throughout Germany."

One of the main protagonists for cooperation with the CDU is the leading candidate of the Green Party in Hamburg, Christa Goetsch. Goetsch is a teacher of chemistry and biology who joined the Greens in 1995 and then rose quickly in the local political hierarchy to become spokeswoman for the Green parliamentary fraction in 2002.

From the start of her career, Goetsch opposed the left wing that was quite pronounced within the Hamburg Greens. The Green organisation in Hamburg (GAL) had been formed 30 years earlier by a merger of

two groups with a Maoist and Stalinist background. In 1999 a group of Greens resigned from the parliamentary group in protest at German involvement in the war against Yugoslavia—a step greeted by Goetsch who also stepped up her efforts to close ranks with the CDU.

In fact, the CDU and Greens have already been cooperating together in two Hamburg districts—Altona and Harburg—and according to media reports cooperation with the CDU takes place "pragmatically, in a spirit of mutual confidence, and as equal partners." In both districts the Left Party was able to gain above-average support in the latest election.

The Greens in Hamburg and the local SPD led by Klaus Naumann strictly reject any kind of cooperation with the Left Party, although this rejection is not directed against the party as such. After all, the SPD has worked closely with the Left Party in Berlin for years.

This became clear during a recent television talk show. Klaus von Dohnanyi (SPD), a former mayor of Hamburg and a representative of the right wing of the SPD, argued vehemently against any cooperation with the Left Party, while at the same time admitting it had been a big mistake for the SPD not to accept the middle and lower cadres of the Stalinist SED (Stalinist state party of former East Germany and forerunner to the PDS and Left Party) following German reunification in 1990.

The German ruling elite is well aware of the utterly reliable role played by the Left Party in those regions of the country where it shares power. The aim of the current campaign to ostracise the Left Party, however, is to ensure that issues raised by the party in its recent campaigns in the west—growing social inequality and other social issues—will be excluded from the public domain.

The issue of how to react to the Left Party has already led to violent conflicts inside the SPD. While right-wing elements inside the party are strictly opposed to any collaboration, a wing led by party Chairman Kurt Beck is intent on integrating the Left Party into mainstream politics at a federal level—in a similar manner to the way in which the Greens were integrated into the political establishment 25 years ago. In return, the Left Party has declared its own willingness to cooperate and, for example, offered the Hesse SPD unconditional support in forming a state coalition government.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact