

Bavarian election reveals deep divisions within German right

The decline of the SPD

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The election being held for the state parliament in Bavaria Sunday could have serious national political repercussions in Germany.

The Christian Social Union (CSU), which has governed Bavaria like a feudal fiefdom for the past half-century, faces a huge loss of electoral support. For the past 46 years, the CSU has always obtained more than half the votes in the state, which geographically is Germany's largest. Now, it confronts the likelihood of falling under the 50 percent mark and even losing a majority of seats in the state parliament.

The latter scenario is possible if the Left Party, which according to polls has the support of between 4 and 5 percent of the electorate, is able to clear the 5 percent hurdle necessary for representation in the state parliament. The entry of other parties—the Social Democratic Party, Free Democratic Party, the Greens and the organisation Free Voter Bavaria—into the Bavarian parliament is regarded as certain. This would result in no fewer than six parties with official representation in the state parliament.

The decline of the Bavaria-based CSU, which enjoys close links with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of federal chancellor Angela Merkel, says much about the problems confronting the conservative camp in Germany. More than for Germany's right-wing politicians in any other state, it was possible for the Bavarian CSU to cultivate its image as a “people's party”—uniting the most varied social layers and interests under a single political roof.

The majority support for CSU was based on its influence among Catholic conservative, rural-based layers in the state. At the end of the 1950s, the CSU was able to incapacitate its biggest rival, the Bavarian Party, with a series of intrigues. Since then, the CSU has continuously filled the post of prime minister.

The SPD, which had led a coalition government between 1954 and 1957, was never able to recover ground in Bavaria. As the auto and electrical industry began to grow in the regions around the cities of Nuremberg and Munich, the heavy industry in the west and the north of Bavaria—where the SPD had most of its support—was already in decline. The SPD had little to offer, while the CSU was able to combine a right-wing domestic policy with relatively generous social and educational concessions.

However, the process of globalisation also affected Bavaria. In the 1990s, social conflicts intensified, and it became increasingly difficult to balance the conflicting interests of divergent social layers by means of tactical adaptations.

German reunification also served to undermine Bavaria's and the CSU's relative weight in federal politics. The extension of the European Union to the east diverted funds that had previously flowed to the structurally weak areas of Bavaria. At the same time, numerous companies that had established themselves in Bavaria suffered

increasingly from the pressure of global competition.

The efforts by CSU leader Edmund Stoiber (prime minister between 1994 and 2007) to turn Bavaria into a high-tech center on the basis of funds raised from privatisation measures was only partially effective. In recent years, thousands of jobs have been lost in the state capital of Munich in both traditional industries and in the high-tech sector.

The dismantling of the transnational corporation Siemens, which has its headquarters in Munich and its main factory in the Bavarian city of Erlangen, also had a shattering effect on the state with the loss of 3,000 jobs. Last year, the collapse of the Siemens subsidy BenQ led to the loss of another 1,400 jobs in Munich.

The situation is particularly precarious in some regions of Franconia. The closure of the AEG factory, with its long history in Nuremberg, following the takeover of the company by the Swedish concern Electrolux, led to a loss of 1,700 jobs. The region currently has one of the highest levels of unemployment in Bavaria. In 1989, a total of 89,000 workers were employed in industrial companies in the region. Today, this figure stands at just 52,000. Prestigious companies with a long history in Germany, such as Grundig, Phillips or Triumph-Adler, have shut down, and thousands of jobs have disappeared.

At the same time, in a period in which many were losing their jobs, the Bavarian state government implemented a radical austerity policy. Under the slogan, “Socially acceptable is he who makes no debts,” cuts were made in various social programmes. Although the budget has been balanced for the last three years, the state government insists on the continuation of these antisocial policies.

Additional cuts in education, healthcare and other public services have led to a dramatic increase in poverty. According to a trade union study published earlier this year, more than 700,000 workers in Bavaria earn less than 400 euros per month and another 350,000 must work a second job to make ends meet.

At the same time, the state government has freed up huge sums to cover the losses of the Bavarian State Bank (Bavaria LB), which in April announced losses of 4.7 billion euros due to speculation in the American sub-prime market. Last week, it became clear that the Bavaria LB had lost an additional 300 million euros in connection with the collapse of the US bank Lehman Brothers. The state government has undertaken to secure these losses by making a total of 6 billion euros available—thereby passing on the burden of the failed speculation directly to the taxpayers.

In the last state election (2003), the CSU won 60.7 percent of the vote and a two-thirds majority in the state parliament—its best-ever result. It owed this success primarily to the unpopularity of the social-democratic-led federal government, which had provoked massive social opposition following its implementation of the anti-social Hartz laws. Just two years later, the CSU slipped to 49.3 percent in the federal election of 2005.

Last year, the CSU ditched its longstanding chairman and Bavarian prime minister, Edmund Stoiber—blaming him for the party’s loss in popularity and declining influence at the federal level. But his successors, Prime Minister Günter Beckstein and CSU boss Erwin Huber, have also proven to have no answers to the state’s deepening problems. Their mixture of provincial backwardness and right-wing populism appeals at most to the traditional right-wing base of the party.

The decline of the CSU continued with the Bavarian local elections in February of this year, when the party suffered the biggest losses in its history, losing regions it had dominated for years.

In despairing manner, Beckstein and Huber have now led an election campaign that is partly directed against the federal government coalition in which the CSU holds two ministerial posts—Michael Glos (Economy) and Horst Seehofer (Agriculture). One of their core demands was the re-implementation of tax relief for commuters—a measure that had in fact been abolished by the CDU-led grand coalition at the beginning of 2007.

If the CSU falls under the 50 percent limit on Sunday or loses its majority in the state parliament, this will inevitably lead to a bitter struggle inside the party, which would spread beyond the CSU. It would also open old wounds in the CDU that party chair Angela Merkel has sought to suppress.

In particular, a revolt can be expected by the party’s right wing, which has looked to the CSU to defend its interests and sees Merkel as too “left.” This in turn would lead to increasing pressure on the conservative parties to quit their coalition with the SPD and call early elections. Conservative circles are already considering using the possible setting up of an SPD-Green coalition supported by the Left Party in the state of Hesse as a pretext for quitting the grand coalition.

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It is first and foremost the smaller parties that have been able to profit from the decline of the CSU. For the first time, the Free Voters Bavaria (FVB) is hoping it can enter parliament alongside the FDP and the Greens. The organisation has been able to pick up a number of CSU members, who felt ignored when it came to handing out sinecures or who had left the party on the basis of personal disputes.

Originally, the FVB wanted to concentrate its work at a local level. It took part in state elections for the first time in 1998. In 2003, it won 4 percent of the vote and was able to enter seven local councils. The alliance has a number of mayors and councilors throughout the state.

Politically, there is little to separate the FVB from the CSU. At the local level, the FVB carries out the same drastic austerity policy as the CSU does at the state level, and on immigration and asylum issues they are just as right-wing as the CSU. The best example is the former CSU state councilor Gabriele Pauli, who quit the CSU last year to switch to the FVB. Now, she is denouncing precisely those policies carried out by the CSU that she actively supported for years. The FVB has no identifiable election programme and has already made clear it is prepared to form a coalition with the CSU if the latter fails to win an absolute majority.

The SPD won less than 20 percent of the vote in the 2003 election—an all-time low. According to opinion polls, the party has been unable to benefit from the decline of the CSU. For some time, the strength of the CSU has been due to the weakness of the SPD.

This is bound up with the fact that SPD policy in the large cities, where it has influence and holds a number of mayoral positions, hardly differs from the policy of the state government. The party is also deeply discredited by the policies pursued by the SPD at a federal level. Between the federal election in 2002 and the state election of 2003, the SPD in

Bavaria lost more than 700,000 voters.

Although he played a leading role in the catastrophic defeat for the SPD in the last elections and embodies the right-wing turn of the party, Franz Maget is once again the SPD’s leading candidate in the state. Maget, who joined the SPD in 1971, climbed his way up the ladder in both the party and the trade union bureaucracy before being appointed chair of the state SPD in the year 2000. He replaced Renate Schmidt, who had played a leading role in the government of Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and had supported his anti-social policies (Agenda 2010).

Maget also unreservedly supports the Agenda 2010 as well as the military deployments by the German army in former Yugoslavia. He also welcomed the recent putsch against the SPD leader Kurt Beck by the party’s right wing. At a recent demonstration, Maget declared that right-winger Frank Walter Steinmeier would make a “supercandidate as chancellor.” He has invited the new SPD chairman Franz Müntefering to take part in election rallies.

It is only in this context that the role of the Left Party in the state election can be understood. In 2003, the party’s predecessor—the Party of Democratic Socialism—did not even bother to put up candidates in the Bavaria election. Now it is possible that the Left Party will clear the 5 percent hurdle.

The more aggressive the social attacks on living standards, the more the German elite requires the services of a political force that is capable of diverting opposition into harmless channels. The Left Party has made absolutely clear through its practice that it poses no alternative to the SPD—despite its occasional declarations of adherence to socialism.

The intimate ties between the Left Party and the SPD become clear through a brief look at the Left Party candidates in Bavaria. Its leading candidate, Fritz Schmalzbauer, was a member of the SPD until 1987. He was a youth secretary in the German Trade Union Federation (DGB), worked with various “left” groups and is today a member of the service trade union, Verdi. Together with many low-level trade union and former SPD cadres, he was a founding member of the Election Alternative group (WASG), which a few years ago fused with the post-Stalinist Party of Democratic Socialism to form the Left Party.

Bavarian Left Party leader, Anny Heike was also a founding member of the WASG. Since 1990, she has been secretary in the IG Metall trade union and deputy IGM chair since 1992. The leading Swabian candidate, Xaver Merk, was a member of the SPD for 29 years and made a political career for himself on the local level. As for candidate George Liebl, he can look back at a 35-year membership in the SPD.



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