

Electoral debacle for conservatives in Bavaria

Consequences for the federal government

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The ruling Christian Social Union (CSU) had reckoned with severe losses in last weekend's state election in Bavaria. The result declared on Sunday evening exceeded the party's worst expectations and those of election pollsters. While in the last state election five years ago the CSU polled 60.7 percent of the vote, this time round it managed to receive only 43.4 percent. Based on the low level of voter participation in the election this means that the party that has ruled Bavaria for the past 46 years was only able to count on the support of a quarter of the electorate.

It is necessary to go far back into German history to find a comparable loss of support in a state election. In 1950 the CSU suffered even worse losses, but only because the conservative Bavaria Party had been able to mop up many of its supporters that year. The sister party of the CSU--the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)--suffered a comparably humiliating defeat in the Berlin state election in 2001, when it lost 17 percent of its vote in the wake of the city's bank scandal. The most frequent terms used by commentators to describe the latest Bavarian election are "debacle," "disaster," "earthquake," and "heap of rubble."

A further remarkable result of the election is the inability of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to profit from the decline of the CSU. The party won just 18.6 percent of the vote--less than its total in 2003, which was the party's worst ever result. Any hopes that the recent elevation of Frank Walter Steinmeier and Franz Müntefering to the top of the SPD national leadership would help stem the tide for the SPD were dashed in Bavaria.

The winners in the election are the Free Voters, who entered the state parliament for the first time with 10.2 percent of the vote, the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP), which re-enters the parliament with 8 percent after a 14-year absence, and the Greens, who slightly increased their previous tally and won 9.4 percent. The Left Party, which put up candidates in the state for the first time, obtained 4.3 percent--less than the 5 percent necessary for representation in the state parliament.

The CSU, which had governed the state since 2003 with a two-thirds majority, has now lost its overall majority in the state parliament and is dependent on a coalition partner. A coalition government by the four other represented parties would also be possible, but the FDP has already indicated its readiness to form a coalition with the CSU. The Free Voters are also prepared to join a coalition with the CSU.

Until now the Free Voters had been active mainly at a local level.

They stood candidates at the last state election but received just 4 percent. The organisation has around 40,000 members and is often described as a "conservative protest movement." Many of its leaders are former CSU members, who have come into conflict with the CSU party machine traditionally dominating local politics. In the last local election of spring 2008 the Free Voters won nearly 20 percent of the vote. Since then, the party in Bavaria has provided 15 out of 71 state councillors and 800 mayors.

More an electoral alliance than a party, the Free Voters lack any clearly defined program. On many issues, however, they are close to the CSU. The organisation's chairman, Hubert Aiwanger, is a small farmer who regards himself as a spokesman for "ordinary people" and farmers.

The FDP in Bavaria is led by Martin Zeil, a devotee of the federal FDP leader and right-winger Guido Westerwelle. In 1980 Zeil worked together Westerwelle on a federal level to form the FDP's youth wing.

It is therefore mainly right-wing and conservative parties that have been able to profit from the decline of the CSU. A number of other smaller conservative parties as well as ultra-right groups were also able to pick up some votes--together about 6 percent. At the same time the Left Party was able to obtain 3 percent more points than the total lost by the SPD.

Many voters--3.9 million out of a total of 9.3 million--simply did not turn out to the polls because they felt that none of the candidates represented their interests. This figure is similar to the low turnout of 2003.

Most analyses of the CSU electoral debacle are thoroughly superficial. Frequently cited causes for the CSU's decline are the hesitation on the part of the former state prime minister and CSU chairman, Edmund Stoiber, to join the German cabinet in 2005; Stoiber's failed attempt to build an expensive hover-rail track connecting Munich with its airport; the provincial character of Stoiber's successors, Günther Beckstein and Erwin Huber; the shortening of school times together with staff and financial cuts; or the complex social composition of modern Bavarian society, which must reflect itself in a diversity of parties.

While many of these factors may play a role, they are not the principal cause for the demise of the CSU. What is above all evident in the Bavarian election result is the deep gap between the mass of the population and the entire political superstructure. None of the parties

has any answers to the questions and concerns that affect millions.

The election took place against the background of the biggest international financial crisis since 1929. A world recession enveloping Europe and Germany seems increasingly inevitable. The state-owned BayernLB bank has sustained billions in losses through its investments in the US sub-prime mortgage market for which the state treasury has assumed responsibility. Bavaria still ranks among the economically strongest regions of Germany, with relatively low unemployment, but the assault on jobs, wages and social gains has started long ago and will no doubt intensify as the recession bites.

None of the parties taking part in the election has any answers to these problems and they were not even discussed in the course of the election campaign. The CSU rested on its long-since withered laurels and stressed the alleged strength of Bavaria. As the author of the despised anti-welfare Agenda 2010 policy and member of the current federal grand coalition government (SPD-CDU-CSU), the SPD bears the main responsibility for growing social misery.

For its part, the Left Party dreams of a return to the reform policies of the 1970s and can inspire little confidence. Broad layers of the population are aware that the situation calls for much more radical measures. The Left Party is oriented towards disillusioned trade union and SPD functionaries who are fearful of social unrest and seek to avoid open class struggle.

Under these circumstances a large minority of voters remain at home as Germany's so-called "people's parties" disintegrate, while right-wing forces seek to exploit the discontent of middle class layers.

This development could be seen even more clearly in neighbouring Austria, where federal elections took place at the same time as the Bavarian poll. In Austria, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and People's Party (ÖVP) also suffered an electoral debacle and could only win a combined total of 55 percent. Two extreme-right parties--the Freedom Party and Jörg Haider's BZÖ--were able to gain a combined total of nearly 30 percent.

Consequences for the federal government

The defeat at the polls in Bavaria shook not only the CSU, but also its federal sister party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Traditionally electoral support for the CSU has contributed considerably to the election fortunes of the conservative camp as a whole--the CDU and CSU. In the 2005 federal election the CSU won 49 percent of the vote in Bavaria, Germany's most populous state. In the rest of the Germany Angela Merkel's CDU was only able to notch up 28 percent of the vote. If the latest defeat for the CSU were repeated in the 2009 federal election the CDU/CSU would have little chance of winning the 40 percent necessary for it to form its desired ruling coalition with the FDP.

The CSU electoral debacle has publicly exposed the crisis of the CDU/CSU, which until now has been hidden beneath the relatively

high popularity ratings for the chancellor and CDU chair, Angela Merkel.

As was formerly the case with the SPD led by chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), the CDU/CSU has suffered a string of losses in state elections since Merkel took over as head of government. The Bavaria election is the tenth state poll in a row in which the union has lost votes. At first such losses amounted to just 2 or 3 percent, but the losses have grown appreciably since 2007: 4 percent in Bremen, 12 percent in Hesse, 6 percent in Lower Saxony, 5 percent in Hamburg and now 17 percent in Bavaria. Similarly high losses are predicted for the imminent elections in the states of Saarland and in Thuringia. If the SPD led by Andrea Ypsilanti is able to ensure a change of government in Hesse, then the grand coalition would even lose its majority in the upper house of parliament.

Up until now Merkel's critics in the union have held back from any frontal attack, but now the chancellor is coming under heavy fire. In particular, the right wing, neo-liberal wing of the union, which has formed the focal point so far of the CSU's policies, has gone on the offensive.

Hans Michelbach, the chairman of the CSU union for small businesses, held the policies of the grand coalition in Berlin responsible for his party's defeat in Bavaria. "The progressive social democratisation of the CDU has undermined the credibility of the union," he complained. "Its policy of high taxes and its inheritance tax are driving the middle class away from the union." Michelbach called for a "clear change of direction" and called upon "the chancellor to stop the sweet-talking with the SPD and return to a clear course for more growth and employment."

In the meantime there is even consideration being given to the possibility of a right-wing split from the union--e.g., led by former CDU economics spokesman Friedrich Merz. These right-wingers are weakened by the CSU's debacle. But the servile support of the grand coalition by the SPD and the absence of a serious, left alternative give such forces the necessary room to manoeuvre and regroup. The examples of Italy and Austria should serve as a warning. In both countries a centre-left government (Italy) and a grand coalition (Austria) were the means for allowing extreme rightist forces to regroup and return to power with increased support.



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