

# Germany: Big losses for the conservative CDU in state elections

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The results of the three state elections held in Germany last Sunday provide a glimpse into the real state of social relations in the country.

In both Saarland and Thuringia, where a change of state government and politics seemed possible, considerably more voters turned out than five years ago. In both states the ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) suffered dramatic losses, which the free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) could only exploit to a small degree. In the two states where the CDU previously had an absolute majority, the collapse of support for the conservatives was so pronounced that it now lacks the means to form a coalition with the FDP.

In Thuringia, the Left Party and Social Democratic Party (SPD) together won enough votes to form a state government. In Saarland, the SPD and Left Party will form a government with the support of the Greens.

In Saxony, however, where opinion polls ruled out a change in government, voter turnout sunk to an all-time low. The CDU remained the strongest party despite its worst ever result since 1990, and can choose a coalition partner from the FDP, the SPD or the Greens.

The election results in Saarland and Thuringia reflect levels of social opposition that goes far deeper than suggested by the media. According to a poll by the German ARD television station the most important concern for voters was their desire for greater social equality. The intervention by the German army in Afghanistan was another major issue in the station's barometer of voter's concerns.

The Left Party was able to profit on both counts. In its election campaign it had called for the abolition of Hartz IV, the miserable welfare allowance paid to the unemployed after one year instead of unemployment benefits, and opposed the raising of the retirement age to 67. It also called for the withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan.

In Saarland, where the former SPD state prime minister and today's Left Party chairman Oskar Lafontaine stood as its candidate, the Left Party was able to record a remarkable success. With 21.3 percent of the vote it emerged as the third-

strongest party in the state and was able to exceed the result of its predecessor—the Party of Democratic Socialism—in 2004 by 19 percent. The Left Party gained votes from the supporters of other parties—including 26,000 from the SPD—but the biggest core of its support (43,000 from its total vote of 114,000) were from layers who had not voted previously. The election turnout of 68 percent was 12 percent higher than five years earlier.

The biggest loser in the state election was the CDU of Prime Minister Peter Müller, which lost 13 percent. The FDP nearly doubled its vote to 9.2 percent, but was only able to obtain a small portion of former CDU votes. The FDP was mainly able to win support from the pro-business, right wing of the CDU, which accuses chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) of being too conciliatory to the SPD. The SPD also lost 6 percent and, with 24.5 percent of the vote, only narrowly out-voted the Left Party.

The balance of power in the Saarland state parliament is held by the CDU and FDP on the one side and the SPD and Left Party on the other. The future composition of the state administration lies in the hands of the three Green Party deputies who have still to commit themselves to a coalition. The Greens are holding out the possibility of a coalition with the CDU and FDP. Another potential variant in the state is a “grand coalition” of the CDU and SPD.

The electoral turnout also increased in Thuringia, although the increase was smaller than in the Saar. Fifty-six percent of the electorate turned out to vote. In 2004 it had been scarcely 54 percent. The Left Party and the SPD were both able to slightly increase their vote while the CDU led by state Prime Minister Dieter Althaus lost 12 percent and won just 31.2 percent. The Greens and the FDP were able to reenter the state parliament, while the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD) narrowly failed to gain the 5 percent necessary for representation in the state parliament. The NPD received 4.3 percent and improved its tally compared to 2004 by 3 percent.

In the Thuringia state parliament the Left Party and SPD have a two-seat majority. It is questionable, however,

whether the SPD will agree to a coalition with the Left Party. Until now the SPD has stressed it is only prepared to enter a coalition with the Left Party if the SPD is allowed to hold the leading post of prime minister. Given that the Left Party with 27.4 percent of the vote far outstripped the SPD (18.5 per cent), it is unlikely the Left Party would be prepared to agree to this condition.

In Saxony, the CDU, the SPD and the Left Party lost votes, while the FDP and the Greens gained. Electoral turnout dropped by 7.4 percent compared to 2004 and only half of the electorate turned out. In the 1990's the CDU was able to record nearly 60 percent support. This time its support fell to around 40 percent. The SPD, which recorded its first ever single digit result in Saxony in 2004, was able to scrape past the 10 percent mark this time but still lost votes due to the low turnout. The Left Party, which is notorious in Saxony for its right-wing pragmatic politics, lost 3 points recording 20.6 percent of the vote.

The extreme right NPD, for the first time in post-war German history, was able to maintain its presence in a state parliament. It lost votes compared to 2004, when it had received nearly as many votes as the SPD, but was able to cross the five-percent barrier.

The result of the state elections last Sunday reflects the huge gulf that has opened up between the political establishment and the sentiments of broad masses of working people. Just the scant hope for a change for the better was sufficient to mobilize thousands in Saarland and Thuringia—reversing a trend of increasing voter abstinence and thoroughly disrupting existing political relations. The prospect of a coalition of the CDU and the FDP on the federal level that has been predicted by many pollsters and is the desired goal of the conservative camp has received a serious blow four weeks before the federal election.

However those hopes, which led to a political swing to the left in Saarland and Thuringia are bound to be frustrated by the SPD and the Left Party. The SPD is already contemplating grand coalitions with the CDU in Thuringia and Saarland, while the SPD leadership has ruled out a coalition with the Left Party at a federal level following the Bundestag election at the end of this month.

Following this latest debacle for the CDU, the SPD now hopes that its candidate Frank-Walter Steinmeier can become chancellor at the end of September with the support of the Greens and the pro-business FDP—should the CDU, the Bavaria-based CSU and the FDP fail to win a majority. “Black-Yellow (the party colors of the CDU/CSU and the FDP) is not wanted in this country,” roared out a relieved Steinmeier on election night to his celebrating party supporters. At the same time Steinmeier has also not ruled out a continuation of the existing grand coalition following

the federal election.

However, even if coalitions of the Left Party and SPD were formed in Saarland or Thuringia, there would be no substantial change in the conditions for the overwhelming majority of the population. Any such administration would essentially continue where the CDU left off. In Berlin, where the Left Party, and its predecessor, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), has governed for eight years in a coalition with the SPD, and in numerous East German municipalities where it holds power, the party has subordinated its policies to the interests of the banks and big business. Wherever it enters a government, the Left Party—which was formed in 2007 through a merger of the East German Stalinist PDS and a section of disgruntled SPD supporters, including former party chairman Lafontaine—subordinates its policies to the practical constraints of a budget that has been drained by financial and big business interests.

The Left Party seeks to employ leftist rhetoric in order to head off growing social discontent and steer it into harmless channels. It has neither the intention nor the capability of carrying out its promises of social reform. Under the conditions of the global economic crisis not a single social problem can be solved without challenging the power of the financial elite, which lords over economic and social life. The Left Party recoils from any such undertaking. Instead it seeks to encourage illusions over the possibility of a return to the type of social reformist politics of the 1960s and 70s, which have long been abandoned by bourgeois governments around the world.

The frustration and disappointment that inevitably flow from the cynical politics of the Left Party plays into the hands of the extreme right. In this respect the renewed entry of the NPD into the Saxony state parliament must be taken as a warning.

The Socialist Equality Party in Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) is running in the parliamentary elections to fight for the building of a new mass political party of the working class in order to advance a socialist and internationalist answer to the threat to democratic rights, the growth of social inequality and militarism.



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