

Germany: Federal Grand Coalition parties lose support in North Rhine-Westphalia local elections

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Germany's two largest parties—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—suffered considerable losses in local elections held last Sunday in the country's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The election turnout was an all-time low.

The CDU and the SPD are the major parties in the grand coalition federal government, which is headed by CDU Chancellor Angela Merkel. Their electoral setbacks in NRW take place less than a month before national parliamentary elections that will determine the makeup of the next federal government.

North Rhine-Westphalia is the westernmost federal state in Germany and is the most industrialised and economically powerful state. Its largest city is Cologne.

Only 52.3 percent of the 14.4 million-strong electorate turned out to vote. In the last comparable election five years previously, 54.4 percent took part, a record low turnout at the time. In this year's local elections, 937,000 young people from the age of 16 were allowed to vote for the first time. Very few youth cast ballots, however.

The best overall result—36.8 percent—was recorded by the CDU, but this represented a loss of 4.8 percent compared to 2004. In the local election of 1999, the conservative party had obtained 50.3 per cent.

The SPD lost 2.3 percent on Sunday. Its total of 29.4 percent was the party's worst vote in the state since the Second World War.

In the last NRW local elections, the CDU was able to profit from anger over the anti-welfare policies of the SPD-Green Party federal government that was in power at the time. That government was led by SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

In this election, in some large cities, the Social Democrats, despite losses in absolute numbers, benefited from popular disillusionment with the policies of the CDU. The SPD was able to hold most of its posts as mayor and town councilor, while winning back a number of these positions from the CDU. The SPD took over mayoral posts in 13 major cities, the CDU in 9. Of 36 district (rural) administrations, all but 4 were won by the CDU.

Despite their losses, both the CDU and SPD declared victory. The CDU boasted that it had won the most votes in absolute terms, while the SPD noted it had won the most mayoral posts in important cities.

The SPD made the most of its mayoral victories in the big cities of Cologne, Essen and Dortmund. In Essen, the SPD was able to win back the mayoralty, which it had lost to the CDU in 1999. In Cologne, where the CDU mayor had been discredited by a disaster in the city center that destroyed part of the city archives, Social Democrat Jürgen Roters won power with the support of the Greens.

In the Ruhr district, the SPD was able to win back mayoral posts and town councillorships from the CDU. It obtained between 34 and 45 percent of the vote, and in Gelsenkirchen it gained 50.5 percent. The SPD also defended its control of the town hall in Oberhausen, although the party's vote fell by 6 percent from the previous election.

The Greens increased their total across the state from 10.3 to 12 per cent, while the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) increased its share from 6.8 to 9.3 percent.

The Left Party was barely able to profit from the losses recorded by the SPD and CDU. Across the state,

the Left Party received 4.4 percent of the vote, and only around 5 percent in those cities of the Ruhr district that were formerly bastions of industry but are now plagued by factory closures and poverty.

The Left Party recorded its best result in Oberhausen, with 8.5 percent, and its second best in Duisburg (7.7 percent). In rural areas, it remained well below 4 percent. The party had hoped for better results and had sought to at least exceed the 5 percent requirement for representation in the federal parliament. In Cologne, the Greens had counted on 7 percent, but in fact received only 4.8 percent—less than the vote for the right-wing Citizen’s Movement for Cologne, which received 5.4 percent.

Notably, a host of small parties and electoral initiatives were able to pick up votes. No fewer than 10 parties and electoral groups will be represented in the local council in Duisburg. Numerous parties, whose main distinction is the fact that they are not part of the established political system, were able to win mandates.

While young people feel estranged from the established parties and largely abstained from voting, a number of parties that took up issues relevant to the young generation met with relative success. The Pirate Party, which campaigns on the basis of Internet freedom, won council seats in Münster and Aachen. In one constituency in Aachen, it won 9.7 percent.

In the town of Monheim (45,000 inhabitants), the 27-year-old candidate of the PETO party, which was originally founded by school pupils, won the local election. PETO gained 30.4 percent of the vote—more than any of its six competitors. Founded 10 years ago, PETO has agitated for improved facilities for young people, including cultural and educational provision, kindergartens, cinema projects, and studios for pop bands.

The political scientist Karl Rudolf Korte from the University of Duisburg-Essen assessed the result of the local elections as follows: “The erosion of support for the people’s parties [the traditional designation for the CDU and SPD] is obviously increasing and more and more they are turning into just medium-sized parties.”

The various more-established parties have reacted to the result by closing ranks at a local level. Coalitions of parties in all directions are on the cards. The SPD, CDU, FDP, the Greens and the Left Party are all conducting negotiations over a broad band of alliances.

The Greens in the Ruhr city of Essen are aiming to form a coalition with the SPD, after having governed the city for the past five years with the CDU. A host of other cities and communities will be confronted with new ruling coalitions.

Both the SPD and the CDU are dependant on the cooperation of smaller parties, which have made clear—including the Left Party—that they are open to all offers. Just prior to the election, the state leader of the Left Party, Wolfgang Zimmermann, declared his readiness to cooperate with the CDU.

In the course of the coalition negotiations, the various parties will inevitably develop programmes based on austerity measures, including increased prices for public services and the closing of public facilities. Such policies will serve to shift the burden of the financial crisis in the municipalities onto the working population. None of the parties assuming power in North Rhine-Westphalia are prepared to challenge the capitalist profit system and the domination of the banks and corporate elite.

The municipalities will continue their practice of seeking to outbid one another in offering the most favorable terms for companies to set up shop in their localities based on huge tax breaks. In the process, the working population, the poor, the sick, the elderly and the growing ranks of children and young people who live in poverty will be left to their fate.

Characteristic in this respect is the city of Dortmund. One day after the election, the current SPD mayor and SPD councilor announced a budget freeze. The councilor, Christiane Uthemann, demanded huge cuts in services, particularly in the spheres of youth provision, culture and sport. All of the council departments are being called upon to draw up a list of areas where cuts can be made.



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