

German election: The collapse of the Social Democratic Party

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The most important feature of Germany's Bundestag (federal parliament) elections last Sunday was the dramatic loss of votes by the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Never before has a party in the Bundestag lost so many votes in a single parliamentary term.

In the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, the vote for the SPD plunged 11.2 percent, falling to 23 percent from 35.2 percent in 2005. This is by far the worst result in the party's history.

The 28.8 percent polled by the SPD under Erich Ollenhauer in the 1953 election, which was won by Konrad Adenauer of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had been regarded as the party's historical low point. Under the current SPD chairman, Franz Müntefering, and the party's lead candidate, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the party has now surpassed this negative record by almost 6 percent.

The cause of the collapse in the Social Democrats' vote is no secret. Millions of workers and traditional SPD voters are no longer prepared to cast their ballot for this party. This is the price paid for 11 years in power at the federal level—first under SPD Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, when the party was in coalition with the Greens and implemented harsher social attacks than all previous conservative governments, then as junior partner in the grand coalition with the CDU, in which the SPD intensified the anti-social attacks of Agenda 2010.

The following numbers make clear the scale of the turn away from the SPD: In 1998, when the SPD entered government in a coalition with the Greens, the party received the votes of 20 million people. Last Sunday, it did not even win the support of 10 million voters. Within a decade—and under conditions of a worsening of the worldwide economic crisis—the SPD lost more than half its voters.

At least two million voters who had cast their ballot for the SPD in 2005 remained at home on Sunday. Election turnout fell from 77.7 percent in 2005 to 71.2 percent. According to

the broadcast network *ARD*, on election day the overwhelming majority of those abstaining were former SPD voters.

The plunge of the SPD vote was particularly acute in the party's former strongholds. In the poorer districts of the northern Ruhr area—inhabited by former steel workers and coal miners who voted overwhelmingly for the SPD in the 1970s—the party's vote completely collapsed.

In north Dortmund, the SPD lost 15.2 percentage points. Nearly 28,000 people who voted for the SPD in the 2005 Bundestag election failed to do so on Sunday. On working class housing estates in Bochum, the SPD lost nearly a third of its voters. Election turnout there was a record low of 68.1 percent.

In north Duisburg, the SPD lost nearly 40 percent of its voters, with turnout falling even more steeply to 60.1 percent. In some very poor districts, such as Duisburg Marxloh, where one in three people are on welfare, only 44.5 percent went to the polls.

But the SPD also lost dramatically in other areas. In Baden-Württemberg, the Social Democrats slipped from 30.1 to 19.3 percent. Of 38 constituencies in the southwest, the SPD lost votes in 37. Only in the university town of Freiburg was it able to win a directly elected seat. All the other constituencies went to the CDU.

Voters refused to support the SPD because they recognized it for what it is—the party of the Hartz IV and Agenda 2010 welfare and labour “reforms,” the party that has raised the retirement age to 67. In view of the spectre of a government coalition of the Christian Democrats and the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP), from which harsh attacks are expected, it is remarkable that the SPD was no longer regarded as an alternative. Rather, the Social Democrats are seen as the champions of welfare cuts.

At every opportunity in the election campaign, Steinmeier, the SPD's candidate for chancellor, stressed that he upholds the Agenda 2010 policies. Despite the incontestable social hardships they have produced, he regards the “labour market reforms”—such as cuts in unemployment and welfare

benefits—as necessary and unavoidable. Party Chairman Müntefering defended the rise in the retirement age to 67 and the associated pension cutbacks, which he had implemented as employment minister in the grand coalition. At election meetings, both were often confronted by angry workers and pensioners.

One year ago, when timid criticisms of the government's anti-social policies grew louder inside the SPD and the party chair at that time, Kurt Beck, called for slight adjustments, Müntefering and Steinmeier organized a political coup. Beck was replaced and Müntefering took over the political command, which he had previously exercised in the first years of the SPD-Green coalition. He declared the Agenda 2010 policies to be sacrosanct, strengthened the dictatorship of the party apparatus and consolidated the transformation of the SPD into a bureaucratic instrument for implementing welfare cuts.

The aim of the SPD right wing was to conduct the election campaign in a manner that would lead to a renewed grand coalition with the Christian Democrats, which would continue the social attacks. This right-wing policy strengthened those in the political elite who considered that more far-reaching attacks were required in light of the economic crisis and who gathered behind the Free Democrats. Thus, former prominent Social Democrats such as Wolfgang Clement, who functioned in the Schröder government as a sort of “super-minister” for economics and labour, attacked the SPD from the right and called for a vote for the FDP. According to an analysis of swing votes, the FDP received 540,000 votes from former SPD voters last Sunday.

The Left Party was able to win only a small proportion of the votes lost by the SPD. While the SPD lost 11.2 percent, the Left Party gained 3.2 percent, obtaining a total of 11.9 percent. Left Party leader Oskar Lafontaine reacted angrily on election night, declaring, “The SPD losses are disturbing for everyone.” His fellow party leader Gregor Gysi said he hoped that in opposition the SPD would “social-democratize” itself. Both announced that the Left Party would seek to get closer to the SPD.

But while the Left Party is moving closer to the SPD, the Social Democrats are continuing their move to the right. Even on election night, in a debate between lead candidates, Steinmeier defended Agenda 2010, saying it was not up for negotiation and would, in the future, form the basis of the policy of the SPD.

Without any discussion in the party's committees, he announced that he would be taking over the leadership of the SPD Bundestag faction in order to guarantee political continuity. As a party of government over the past eleven years, the SPD had always demanded that the opposition

parties behave in a businesslike and responsible fashion, he stressed. Now he would ensure that the SPD, in opposition, acted in a similar manner.

Former finance minister and deputy SPD leader Peer Steinbrück warned against using the election debacle to reorient the party. “Revolutionary tribunals” and a swing to the left should be prevented under all circumstances, he said.

Former environment secretary Sigmar Gabriel said the defeat at the polls meant conclusions had to be drawn about the party's profile. “The SPD must align its politics more socially and more ecologically,” he told the *Braunschweiger Zeitung*. At the same time, however, he welcomed the announcement that Steinmeier would stand as candidate for the leadership of the SPD Bundestag faction, saying Steinmeier enjoyed much support in the party and the parliamentary group. He thereby made clear what could be expected from this supposed critic of the party leadership.

It is no different when it comes to the mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, who presents himself as a representative of the SPD's left wing and for eight years has ruled in coalition with the Left Party in the Berlin city government.

The SPD's policies were repudiated particularly sharply by the electorate in the German capital, with the party's vote slipping from 34.3 to 20.2 percent. In East Berlin, the SPD lost 18.1 percent. In the districts of Lichtenberg and Mahrzahn Hellerdorf, the SPD vote was halved to 16 and 17 percent, respectively. In not one urban district did the SPD emerge as the strongest party. In the 2005 Bundestag elections the party had won nine of twelve constituencies. On Sunday it came out empty handed, falling behind the Left Party and only scarcely beating out the Greens.

The collapse of the SPD opens the way for the building of a new socialist party. In this regard, the increase in the number of Berliners who voted for the Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit—PSG) is significant. Within three months of the European elections, the PSG was able to double its vote from 714 to 1,423.



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