

Germany: The significance of the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections

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On May 9, elections will take place in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The elections will not only decide the composition of the state parliament in Düsseldorf, but will also have decisive implications for the German federal government.

With a population of 18 million—more than the combined population of the five former East German states—and an electorate of over 13 million people, NRW is by a large margin the most highly populated federal state in Germany. It also contains Germany's biggest industrial area, the Ruhr region. Even though many of the mines and steelworks were closed down a long time ago, the Ruhr region is still the greatest industrial complex in Germany.

For good reason, the NRW elections have always been regarded as resembling “mini national elections.” In 1966, the SPD (Social Democratic Party)-FDP (Free Democratic Party) coalition led by Prime Minister Heinz Kühn (SPD) was the forerunner of the national social democrat-liberal coalition established in 1969 by Chancellor Willy Brandt. In May 1995, Johannes Rau (SPD) formed a state administration with the Green Party that was the pilot for the SPD-Green federal government created three years later by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (Greens).

The importance of the NRW elections for federal politics was especially evident five years ago. In reaction to dramatic losses for the SPD over a prolonged period, Chancellor Schröder, together with then SPD chairman Franz Müntefering, used the eve of the NRW elections to make a speech announcing the decision to dissolve the SPD-Green parliament and hold early national elections.

This tradition of using the NRW elections as a means of setting a trend for national politics is also characteristic of the current NRW election.

At a federal level the country is being run by a coalition of Christian Democrats and the FDP, while in North Rhine-Westphalia a coalition of the same forces has already governed for five years, during which time it has encountered increasing popular opposition. In the local elections last September, the CDU vote declined by 4.8 percent over the previous election; compared to the local election of 1999 when it lost 13.5 percent.

According to recent opinion polls by Forsa and Infra, the CDU und FDP are predicted to lose their majority in May. The FDP encountered particularly widespread rejection in the opinion polls. Although they got 14.6 percent of the vote in the 2009 elections, two months before the NRW elections they have only 6 percent support in the polls and could very likely fail to meet the 5 percent minimum necessary for representation in the state parliament.

If the Christian Democrat-FDP coalition loses its majority in Düsseldorf, the coalition majority also loses its majority in Germany's second house, the Bundesrat. This prospect has set off considerable speculation about what alternative types of coalition would then be possible for the federal government.

Even those leading representatives of business and industry, who normally give the FDP their unfailing support, have been criticizing the government for weeks. They accuse the government partners of wasting their energies in internal factional conflicts instead of getting on with the “reforms” demanded by business interests. They view the verbal onslaughts by FDP boss Guido Westerwelle on the welfare state as less than helpful.

The president of the Federation of German Industry (BDI), Hans-Peter Keitel, told the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* last week that the national government—“even though it is just five months since the national elections”—had lost its bearings. The national government realizes itself “that it is not operating well in many spheres, and is even operating recklessly, because with serious attention it could do a much better job.” Without naming FDP boss and vice chancellor Westerwelle by name, Keitel warned, “One should not allow opinion polls to panic one into running away into a populist corner.”

In face of the huge impact of the international financial crisis, a planned austerity program to save “at least €10 billion a year” (Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble), and growing resistance from the population, the representatives of big business and industry are putting pressure on the government to stabilize itself and act with more authority, instead of wasting time on unnecessary provocative actions à la Westerwelle that only stir up resistance before the main battle has even started.

They see the NRW elections as a useful tool to forge a newly

realigned national government. At the moment they are brainstorming all imaginable combinations for a new coalition.

Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) favours working with the Greens in the event that the weaknesses of the Christian Democrats and FDP are confirmed in the May elections. Just over a week ago she held a conference with her CDU colleague and the prime minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, Jürgen Rüttgers, in a secret location in the city of Essen. They discussed the so-called Plan B, which is essentially about working toward a coalition with the Greens. The preemptive announcement made at the start of February by CDU Environment Minister Norbert Röttgen, calling for an early winding down of nuclear energy, was deliberately intended as an opening offer to the Green Party.

The Greens have since unmistakably signalled their interest. Their top candidate, Sylvia Löhrmann, already counts among the founders of the so-called “governmental left” faction in the Greens which, in a fierce battle with “fundamentalists,” sought to open up the party for coalition with right-wing conservative parties. But Bärbel Höhn, who calls herself a “left Green,” had already met with CDU state boss Rüttgers in 2004, when she was secretary of agriculture in the SPD-Green coalition at the time in North-Rhine/Westphalia. When Rüttgers won the state election one year later, the Greens courted his favour and sought to outflank the FDP.

Even prior to the conclusion of a CDU-Green coalition in the city-state of Hamburg two years ago the Greens had demonstrated they were prepared to dump all their pre-election promises in order to take power. As coalition partner in the Schröder-Fischer government (1998-2005) the former pacifists played a key role in permitting the German army to intervene in the NATO war against Serbia together with other international missions. They were and remain vehement defenders of Schröder’s anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and saw their major role in the SPD-Green coalition as strengthening the hand of the SPD in the face of mounting popular opposition.

However, a conservative-Green coalition is also subject to controversy. While no doubts remain about the boundless political opportunism of its party leadership, there are worries as to whether a program based on dismantling social and democratic rights would find sufficient acceptance in the party’s membership and electorate.

This explains the renewed efforts to revive the fortunes of the SPD. Media commentators and business representatives have pointed out that the most far-reaching attacks on the social state—embodied in the Hartz laws—were carried out by a Social Democratic federal government. At the same time, there is much critical reporting in the media regarding the financial practices of the CDU, i.e., the dubious sponsoring methods employed by NRW’s Prime Minister Rüttger, coupled with praise for the SPD. When SPD Chairman Sigmar Gabriel recently criticized the FDP and accused Westerwelle of kindling fires for the German state and municipalities in the

“manner of Emperor Nero” his speech was greeted as a rhetorical masterpiece.

Such attempts to revive the SPD in the polls are led by sections of the media and have little to do with the real mood of the electorate. In the North Rhine-Westphalia local election half a year ago, the SPD was unable to profit in the slightest from the losses of the CDU, which lost nearly 5 percentage points. For its part the SPD also lost 2.3 percent of electoral support.

It is against this background that the Left party intervenes to prop up the SPD. According to recent polls the Left party has good chances of surpassing the 5 percent hurdle in NRW. At its recent state delegate conference in Duisburg leading members of the Left party re-warmed the party’s well-known election campaign clichés: a minimum wage, a wealth tax and the nationalization of big energy concerns. The real content of the conference discussion, however, was summed up by the fact that the regional chair of the Left party, Katharina Schwabedissen, met and held a confidential discussion with the deputy SPD state chairman, Jochen Ott, on the evening prior to the delegate conference.

For her part, Schwabedissen declared that the pair had only met for an “informal coffee,” while the SPD state executive committee declared that Ott had not been authorized to conduct such a discussion. At the same time it was stressed that the SPD is open to all political offers.

Two months before the election in North Rhine-Westphalia two things are clear: first of all, the election on May 9 has considerable importance for national politics and, secondly, there exists a broad consensus between all of the parties on basic questions. The only issue at stake is to find the constellation that is best suited to shift the entire burden of the economic crisis onto the population.



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