

Germany: SPD expects victory in Hamburg state election

Peter Schwarz
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Sunday, February 20, sees an election in Hamburg, the first of seven state elections this year that could totally alter the political landscape in Germany. In March, elections are being held for the state parliaments of Saxony Anhalt, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. Elections take place in May in Bremen; in September, elections are set for Mecklenburg-Pomerania and Berlin.

After 10 years of rule by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), polls are forecasting that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) will enjoy a clear election victory in Hamburg. The SPD is expected to receive 45 percent of the vote, 10 percent more than in 2008. The CDU, however, is anticipating a debacle. It currently stands below 25 percent in the polls, after winning the 2008 election with 43 percent. The Greens are at 15 percent and the Left Party at 6 percent. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) fears it may not clear the 5 percent hurdle required to enter the state legislature, which it also failed to reach in the 2008 election.

It is regarded as certain that the SPD's leading candidate, Olaf Scholz, will head the city-state legislature as mayor in Hamburg. What is unclear is if this will require the support of the Greens as coalition partners. If the FDP again fails to clear the 5 percent hurdle, the SPD could achieve an absolute majority of parliamentary seats.

The chances of success in Hamburg for the SPD, which in Germany as a whole is still running low in the opinion polls, have their roots in both local and federal politics.

In 2008, the first coalition between the CDU and the Green Party was formed at the state level. The CDU under Mayor Ole von Beust, who from 2001 to 2004 was in coalition with the right-wing Schill Party and then ruled alone, formed a coalition with the Greens in 2008. They gave up most of their demands in order to be accepted as a partner by the conservatives.

At a federal level, where the grand coalition of the CDU and the SPD was facing paralysis, this triggered euphoria among the Christian Democrats and Greens. According to Joschka Fischer, the former Green foreign minister, "Obviously, the Hamburg coalition—despite all denials—is the ultimate role model for the federal government."

But the outbreak of the international financial crisis cut across these plans. The grand coalition made available €500 billion in

public funds to the banks. As a result, the SPD and the Christian Democrats lost support on a mass scale. The FDP then profited in the general election in autumn 2009. But the newly formed Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union-FDP coalition has proven unable to meet the expectations of big business.

The arrogance with which the FDP has served the interests of its wealthy clientele has angered large sections of the population and seen the FDP's poll numbers fall. The Christian Democrats have been paralyzed by infighting. Several state premiers, federal President Horst Köhler and, most recently, Bundesbank President Axel Weber, have turned their backs on Chancellor Angela Merkel because they believe she is not advocating strict enough austerity measures.

In summer 2010, Hamburg Mayor von Beust also threw in the towel after an education reform advocated jointly with the Greens was rejected in a referendum. This threw the CDU-Green coalition in Hamburg into a major crisis. At first, the coalition with the Greens continued under von Beust's successor, the right-wing hardliner Christoph Ahlhaus.

In the meantime, the political tide has turned. Given the fragmentation of Merkel's coalition in Berlin, many representatives of the ruling elite are looking for a return of an SPD-Green coalition. The Schröder-Fischer SPD-Green government (1998-2005) had been able to push through the most comprehensive welfare cuts in post-war Germany, creating a huge low-wage sector, and successfully suppressing resistance to this with the help of the trade unions.

In a surprise move in November 2010, the Greens quit the coalition in Hamburg, forcing the calling of new elections. They hope that an SPD-Green victory in Hamburg will have a similar effect on the other six state elections this year.

Above all a victory for the SPD and Greens in Baden-Württemberg, governed by the CDU since 1953, would seriously shake the Christian Democrats and potentially trigger a rebellion by the conservative wing of the party against Chancellor Merkel, the party chair. The wave of protests against the "Stuttgart 21" project to build a new railway station had already hit the Baden-Württemberg CDU hard last year, giving the Greens and the SPD a big lead in the polls for a time. In the meantime, the Baden-Württemberg election result is

again regarded as open.

In Hamburg, the SPD has benefited from the crisis of the local CDU and the unpopularity of their lead candidate, Christoph Ahlhaus. At the same time, there is a nationwide mood favouring a change to an SPD-Green coalition. Above all, liberal bourgeois media like *Stern*, *Focus*, and *Zeit* have published paeans to the SPD's lead candidate, Olaf Scholz.

For his part, Scholz has left no doubt that he will continue the course of his conservative predecessor. His election campaign is focused on the better-off middle classes who had previously voted for the CDU and the Greens. His motto is "pragmatism, reliability and integrity". Terms such as "justice" and "solidarity", with which the SPD had previously decorated their election programmes, are entirely absent from Scholz's manifesto.

The first point in his programme is "sound finances". Literally, it reads: "An SPD-led Senate [state legislature] will bring order to the shattered finances. We want to achieve a structurally balanced budget by 2019 and then take on no new debts."

This goal can only be achieved through drastic cuts in all areas of expenditure, given that Hamburg, after Bremen and Berlin, has the third highest per capita debt of all German states, and last year alone took on €2 billion in new debt (against a total expenditure of €10 billion).

This exposes the false character of the SPD's promises of a few social concessions in its programme—more teachers, smaller classes and the abolition of tuition fees. The SPD manifesto also states, "We will only decide on new projects if it is also clear how they will be funded ('pay as you go')."

The second item in its programme, "a strong economy"—promises big business generous support. The SPD pledges, "to push through the necessary adaptations of the fairway above and below the river Elbe" and to "promote a new culture of self-employment".

The manifesto also contains the promise: "We will provide for more police presence on the streets of the city".

Scholz has the confidence of the ruling elite because he has repeatedly demonstrated his ability to implement a right-wing programme.

During the 2001 state election campaign, as Hamburg's interior minister, he had introduced the compulsory administration of emetics (induced vomiting) for drug dealers, even though many in the legal profession regard this as a serious invasion of physical integrity and the Medical Council of Hamburg has spoken against it because of the health risks. The measure eventually caused one fatality; in December 2001, 19-year-old Cameroonian Nwabuisi Michael died following administration of emetics ordered by the police.

From 2002 to 2004, as SPD general secretary, Scholz defended the Agenda 2010 labour and welfare "reforms" of Gerhard Schröder against inner-party opposition. Because of the coolness with which he repelled any criticism he was given

the nickname "Scholzomat".

In the grand coalition, Scholz rose to become minister of labour, responsible for managing the implementation of the labour and welfare "reforms". He established close friendships with top figures in the CDU like Norbert Röttgen, Volker Kauder and Thomas de Maizière.

The Greens have left no doubt that they are ready to form a coalition with Scholz's SPD under all circumstances. Previously, they had made specific demands in the election campaign—such as rejecting the dredging of the river Elbe and the building of the Moorburg coal-powered electricity plant—which they sacrificed in order to join the coalition with the CDU. This time they have largely dispensed with making any concrete demands, limiting themselves to general calls for environmental protection and for a "green city". They agree explicitly with Scholz's cuts targets.

The FDP has also indicated its willingness to form a coalition with the SPD, in the hope this will help them clear the 5 percent hurdle. However, Scholz has ruled out a coalition with the FDP.

The problems of the 70,000 unemployed, 60,000 recipients of welfare, and 250,000 immigrants among Hamburg's 1.8 million inhabitants found no expression in the campaign, nor did the plight of the many workers in precarious jobs. The working class has no voice in this election.

The Left Party is trying to deflect the widespread social discontent with calls such as "fight poverty", "create jobs" and "welfare reforms must go". But as Joachim Bischoff writes on the party web site, the Left Party also believes that "without turning around the public finances over the medium term there can be no fundamental change in policy in Hamburg".

The experience with the SPD-Left Party government coalition in the Berlin city legislature, the SPD-Green government in Brandenburg supported by the Left Party, and the SPD-Green coalition in North Rhine-Westphalia have provided enough evidence showing that the Left Party is willing to collaborate in every social cut, and to provide the SPD with a majority at any time. Their social slogans are used purely to prevent the development of a mass opposition movement.



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