

# SPD wins Hamburg state election in Germany

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The Social Democratic Party (SPD) will now rule alone in the city-state of Hamburg for the first time in 18 years. With 48.3 percent of the votes cast, the social democrats won the election on Sunday taking 62 of the 121 seats in the state assembly, giving them enough deputies to govern without a coalition partner.

The SPD's election victory had been widely expected, but the 14.2 percent increase in its share of the vote surpassed all predictions. The main losers were the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), whose vote halved. Since the last election three years ago they lost 20.6 points, winning only a 21.9 percent share, their worst result ever in Hamburg.

The Greens, who since 2008 had ruled the Hanseatic city in a coalition with the CDU, slightly increased their vote to 11.2 percent, but remained far short of their expectations. Polling before the election had forecast their share at 15 to 20 percent.

Five parties will be represented in the new state assembly. The Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Left Party, with 6.6 and 6.4 percent respectively, secured sufficient votes to clear the 5 percent hurdle for representation.

Turnout stood at 57 percent, well below the 63.4 percent turnout in the last state election. Although the number of eligible voters increased by 18,000 to 1.25 million, around 70,000 fewer voters went to the polls than in 2008.

The defeat for the CDU in Hamburg is a major blow to Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is also chair of the party at federal level. Politically, she is unlikely to survive similar losses in the other six state elections due this year. Her social democratic predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, resigned prematurely in 2005 after the SPD suffered heavy losses in several consecutive state elections.

Considerable effort is being undertaken in the chancellery to ascribe the Hamburg election result to

local causes. For example, Minister of State Eckart von Klaeden (CDU) stressed the election debacle was primarily due to factors in Hamburg; it was "80 percent Hamburg issues" that had influenced the voters, he claimed.

In fact, national and international developments played a far greater role in Hamburg than Merkel and the CDU would like to admit. This is shown by the magnitude of the shift in votes, unique in recent German history. While a loss of 5 percent is usually regarded as a political debacle, in Hamburg half the CDU voters turned their backs on their party, leading many observers to speak of an "earthquake".

As in geology, political earthquakes are unleashed by tectonic stresses that are not always readily visible on the surface. The Hamburg election result is the consequence of massive social contradictions in a city, which has, on the one hand, the highest number of millionaires in Germany and, on the other hand, has 70,000 unemployed, 60,000 on welfare and 250,000 immigrants. It expresses the widespread dissatisfaction with a party that in Hamburg and at the federal level is characterized by handouts to the banks and attacks on the vulnerable. This dissatisfaction is not limited to Hamburg.

The SPD, however, has no answer to the problems that have helped bring it to power in Hamburg. On the contrary, their electoral success is due to the fact that significant sections of the better off voted for the SPD because they trust the social democrats to suppress social conflicts, rather than the deeply divided CDU.

Election analysis shows that the SPD increased its vote among all sections of the population. According to one report, the SPD did win considerable support among blue-collar workers (59 percent, up 19 percentage points), white-collar employees (52 percent, up 19 points) and civil servants (52 percent, up 18 points), but also gained votes among owners of small

and medium sized businesses and the self-employed.

A look at the electoral map shows that the SPD not only led the CDU by 27 percent in poor constituencies like Harburg, but also by 20 percent in the affluent constituency Blankenese.

Some 52,000 voters switched directly from the CDU to the SPD. The SPD won only about half as many votes from all the other parties and from the camp of non-voters. The highest increase (20 percent) was achieved among those over 60, while it only added 4 percent among 18- to 24-year-olds.

The SPD's election campaign was directed in its entirety toward the interests of big business. The first point in its programme is consolidation of the highly indebted budget; the second is economic development. Crowning the programme was the issue of internal security and the promise of a greater police presence on city streets. The few social commitments in schools and university education were all made subject to funding being available.

The SPD's lead candidate Olaf Scholz had already announced in the election campaign that he would appoint Frank Horch as his economics minister. Horch is a leading representative of business in Hamburg, a former head of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce and CEO of the Blohm & Voss shipyard.

As a commentary on the Hamburg election result by *Spiegel Online* states, in Hamburg "It was not the party with the better programme that won, there was no programme. Scholz's SPD promised its voters almost word for word the same as the CDU had promised in the previous election: harbour redevelopment, budget consolidation, improved schools, fighting violent crime."

In Hamburg, the political parties have changed places, but not the politics. The tectonic stresses in society's foundations have unleashed a political earthquake, but the earthquake has not resolved these tensions. On the contrary, the right-wing policies of the SPD will continue to deepen them. More earthquakes will follow and will be expressed not only in election results.

Olaf Scholz, who as SPD secretary general under Gerhard Schröder defended the Hartz welfare "reforms" and pushed them through against popular resistance, will continue where Schröder left off—and not only in Hamburg. At a federal level, he is already

considered a rising star. The party has responded to Scholz's electoral success with a further rightward shift. At SPD headquarters in Willy-Brandt-Haus his success is regarded as evidence that the party should in future concentrate on the "political centre", a synonym for the better off.



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