

# German ruling coalition suffers massive loss in state elections

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Germany's ruling coalition under Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday suffered a massive loss of votes in state elections held in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate. In its conservative heartland of Baden-Württemberg, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost 5.2 percent, slumping to 39 percent, down from 44.2 percent in the elections held five years ago.

Merkel's coalition partner, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), lost more than half of its vote, only just clearing the 5 percent hurdle for representation in the state parliament. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the CDU was able to increase its vote slightly, but this cost the FDP almost half of its votes. Slipping from 8 to 4.2 percent, the FDP has failed to re-enter the state legislature.

The second strongest party in Baden-Württemberg was not the SPD but the Greens, who won a share of 24.2 percent, the highest result ever achieved by the Greens in a state election. Compared to December 2006, they increased their vote by 12.5 percent. Together with the SPD, who lost 2 percent, securing just 23.1 percent of the vote, the Greens have won the election and for the first time will be proposing the state prime minister.

The switch from the ultra-conservative former state premier Stefan Mappus (CDU) to the Green Winfried Kretschmann is being called a "sensation" in the press, which is describing it as a change of political direction. On the eve of the election, Kretschmann announced a new political beginning, but this was mainly limited to energy policy. Unlike Mappus, one of the most aggressive representatives of the nuclear lobby within the CDU, the Greens favour renewable energy.

In all other regards, Kretschmann embodies the conservative bourgeois character of the Greens like no other politician. He is a vehement proponent of

austerity measures in the interest of the corporations and banks. As a member of the Federalism Commission II, he was directly involved in drawing up the so-called "debt brake", now being used to ram through austerity measures.

In an interview, the 62-year-old former schoolteacher described his party as "the only conservative party in the true sense." He praised it as a better party of big business, because the Greens have shown how Green ideas can be used to turn a profit. Only with Green ideas could Germany "hold its position on the world markets."

For many years, Kretschmann called for a coalition of the CDU and the Greens. He claims that the CDU and Greens are the only parties to "address the problems of the present" and that support for a CDU-Green coalition was growing in "better-off circles".

He very much embodies the rightward development of some former radicals in the Greens. In the 1970s, he was a member of the Maoist Communist League of West Germany (KBW). In the 1980s, he was principal policy officer for environmental questions for the Hesse state government, when Joschka Fischer was state environment minister. Today, he enjoys the closest relationship with leading companies and big business. He is also a member of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and stresses his religious beliefs at every opportunity.

The CDU's loss of power in Baden-Württemberg has deepened the crisis of the federal government. On election night, the big business wing of the CDU spoke out and stressed that several policy areas should now be subject to a meticulous analysis. For some time, the CDU business lobby has been critical that Merkel was not pruning social spending radically enough and that she was not cutting taxes as promised.

The virtual abolition of military conscription and the euro rescue fund, to which Germany must make the largest contribution, meets with rejection in sections of the party. Several prominent party members, including federal President Horst Köhler and Bundesbank President Axel Weber, have turned their backs on Merkel over these questions. The dispute over the resignation of Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg has also split the party.

The election result could tear apart the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and accelerate the formation of a new right-wing party.

A striking feature of the election result is that the SPD was unable to profit from the crisis of the Merkel government. The SPD posed as the winner on election night, celebrating the overthrow of the ruling CDU in Baden-Württemberg after nearly six decades as a political success. The SPD also claims it as a success that Kurt Beck remains as state premier in Rhineland-Palatinate, even though he has lost his absolute majority and must now form a coalition with the Greens, according to officials at SPD headquarters.

In truth, the SPD has lost in both federal states. Even if the SPD's losses in Baden-Württemberg, at 2 percent, were not as high as expected, it was the worst election result for the SPD in the state. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the SPD lost almost 10 percent of the vote, slipping from 45.6 to 35.7 percent.

The Left Party did not make any significant electoral gains and remained far below the 5 percent hurdle in both states. In Baden-Württemberg, its vote fell from 3.1 to 2.8 percent, while in Rhineland-Palatinate it increased slightly from 2.6 to 3.0 percent.

Under conditions in which no party represents the interests of the population, the opposition vote went to the Greens. The increase in their votes came mainly from affluent social layers of the urban petty-bourgeoisie from the ranks of former CDU and SPD voters and many young voters. The Greens gained 265,000 votes from previous non-voters in Baden-Württemberg. The main reason for this was the nuclear disaster in Fukushima and opposition to nuclear energy. The day before the election, hundreds of thousands took part in large demonstrations in many cities and demanded the immediate halting of the nuclear energy programme.

Although the nuclear disaster in Fukushima and the

demand for an end to nuclear power played an important role in the campaign, voters turned against the entire anti-social policies of the federal government, which has pushed through drastic social cuts.

When Merkel responded to the catastrophe in Fukushima with a three-month moratorium, reversing the recent decision to extend the lifetime of nuclear power plants and temporarily shutting down seven of the oldest German nuclear reactors, it was seen as a cheap campaign manoeuvre. The Christian Democrat-Free Democrat government is regarded as the lackey of the corporations and banks, and is widely hated.

While the election result is an expression of growing opposition to the anti-social policies of the government, there are many indications that the establishment parties are responding to this election with a further shift to the right.



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