

Political earthquake in German state elections

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The coalition government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel suffered massive losses in the state elections held in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate on Sunday. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost 5.2 percent of its vote, with 39 percent of the ballots, compared to 44.2 percent in elections five years ago. The state of Baden-Württemberg has been a traditional stronghold of the conservatives for over five decades.

Merkel's coalition partner, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), lost more than half its vote in Baden-Württemberg, which is also regarded as a longstanding political base for the FDP. It only just managed to stay in the state parliament with a total of 5.3 percent. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the CDU increased its vote slightly, while the vote for the FDP was cut in half, from 8.0 to 4.2 percent. This meant the party failed to win the minimum 5 percent required for representation in the state parliament.

In Baden-Württemberg, it was the Greens, with 24.2 percent, that took second place, ahead of the SPD. Recent opinion polls had indicated that the Greens would do well, but the size of its share of the vote came as a surprise. The Greens achieved its highest result ever in a state election. Compared with 2006, its share of the vote more than doubled, from 11.7 to 24.2 percent.

Compared to 2006, the SPD lost 2 percent in Baden-Württemberg, gaining just 23.1 percent of the vote—its worst-ever result in the southwest of the country. The high total for the Greens means that, for the first time in history, it could nominate the state premier in what is likely to be a Green-SPD coalition.

On election night, many CDU politicians and some media commentators registered their surprise and shock at the result. The CDU regarded Baden-Württemberg as its own backyard. It has exercised political power in the state for 58 years and arrogantly described itself as the "Baden-Württemberg-party".

CDU Premier Stefan Mappus had taken office in the autumn of 2009, following the appointment of his predecessor, Günther Oettinger, to the post of EU commissioner in Brussels. Since then, Mappus governed the state autocratically in close consultation with local business associations and without ever putting his policies to a popular vote.

He declared that he felt deeply offended by his rejection at the ballot box and defeat at the hands of the Greens. On election night, he resigned from all of his official posts.

Since the election, there has been a great deal of speculation about the behaviour of voters. The federal government is seeking to divert attention from the deep conflicts within the CDU and the coalition government itself. It stressed that the vote was influenced by the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima, which had created a completely unusual situation whereby the call for an end to nuclear

energy dominated the election.

The dramatic events in Japan and the demand for a quick exodus from nuclear energy did indeed play an important role, but the possibility of a Green-SPD election victory in Baden-Württemberg had been in the cards for some time before the disaster in Japan.

The Greens say its electoral success is the result of decades of patient work for an "ecological revolution". On election night, the Greens' leading candidate and future premier Winfried Kretschmann declared that his party "had bored and bored" and had finally come through.

In reality, the election result must be analysed in a broader political context. The federal government has been under pressure from two sides for many months

The CDU-business lobby criticised the fact that Merkel is not cutting social spending radically enough, and that business had been promised lower taxes. Sections of the party also objected to the abolition of military conscription and the euro rescue fund, which requires Germany to put up large sums of money. Several prominent party members, including federal President Horst Köhler and Bundesbank President Axel Weber, resigned their posts over these issues. More recently, the controversy surrounding the resignation of Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg gave rise to more bad blood in the party.

On the other hand, the pro-business policies of the federal government have been largely rejected by the general population, including those layers who in the past were prepared to vote for the government parties. Support for the FDP plummeted when the party insisted on tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy, while at the same time it stubbornly persisted in pressing for massive cuts in social spending. The reform of the Hartz-IV unemployment payments, which resulted in just a few euros more for the poorest layers of society, increased opposition to the government—as did the government's refusal to set a statutory minimum wage.

Then, last summer, mass protests broke out in the Baden-Württemberg capital city of Stuttgart in opposition to the building of a new railway station costing billions. The protests reflected widespread outrage against the arrogance of those in power, the wheeling and dealing between political and business circles and the waste of public money, while cuts were being made in education, social spending and other vital areas. The protest also mobilised sections of the prosperous middle class and many CDU members. The Greens and the SPD were already ahead in the polls at that time.

Chancellor Angela Merkel tried to keep the interparty tensions under control, but the conflicts merely increased and were refuelled by her about-turn on nuclear policy. She responded to the

Fukushima disaster with a three-month moratorium suspending the recently adopted extension on the life spans of nuclear reactors and calling for the temporary closure of the seven oldest German nuclear plants. Nuclear power supporters in the conservative camp rejected her stance, while those opposed to nuclear power dismissed Merkel's sudden change of mind as a cheap electoral manoeuvre.

Under conditions of deep fissures in the coalition and its constituent parties, the government then abstained on the UN Security Council vote authorising military intervention against Libya. Afterwards, leading representatives of the CDU publicly accused the chancellor of ditching long-standing principles of German foreign policy by siding with Russia and China against its postwar allies France, Britain and the US.

Given the crisis of the Merkel government, influential sections of the ruling elite are turning to the alternative of an SPD-Green government, which they believe would be more capable of dealing with the impact of the economic crisis and imposing massive social attacks. To this end, an intensive media campaign in support of the Greens was organised in Baden-Württemberg. The result was that the final vote reflected a switch of votes between the established political camps as well as a protest vote against the government and local CDU.

This is made clear by a look at where the shift in votes took place. The Greens received votes from all camps, receiving 87,000 votes from former CDU voters, 61 000 from FDP voters and 140,000 from SPD supporters. Its main source of votes (266,000), according to an ARD-election poll, came from former non-voters.

The social composition of the Green vote is also revealing. Only 17 percent of Green votes came from workers, while 28 percent of civil servants and 27 percent of the self-employed voted for the party. The party had the highest proportion of support from those between the ages of 30 and 50 and the highest proportion of academics (36 percent).

The Green Party itself and many commentators have heralded a new era of the Greens in collaboration with the SPD. In fact, the Green candidate Kretschmann embodies the conservative bourgeois character of the party. He is an ardent advocate of austerity to further the interests of big business and the banks. He is one of the godfathers of the country's credit cap and was directly involved in drafting the reactionary law as a member of the Federalism Commission.

In an interview, the 62-year-old former schoolteacher described his party as "the only conservative party in the true sense." He praised the Greens as the best party for business, because the Greens have shown it is possible to make profits with Green ideas. Only with Green ideas could "one hold one's own in world markets."

For many years, Kretschmann has been an advocate of a coalition between the Greens and the CDU. He claimed that the CDU and the Greens are the only parties to "deal with current problems", and said he was of the opinion that the desire for an alliance of the Greens and conservatives was growing "in upper middle-class circles".

He epitomises the rightward development of a layer of former radicals in the Greens. In the seventies, he was a member of the

Maoist Communist League West Germany (KBW). In the eighties, he headed the environment department in the Hesse state government under Environment Minister Joschka Fischer. Today, he maintains close relationships with leading companies and business associations. He is also a member of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK) and stresses his religious beliefs at every opportunity.

It should be kept in mind that it was the Greens that most sharply attacked the Merkel government for its abstention in the vote on the Libya resolution in the UN Security Council. The former Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer accused the incumbent Westerwelle of cowardice at the crucial moment in the Security Council. If the Greens were currently in the federal government, then the German army would probably be involved in the vicious bombing campaign currently being conducted against Libya.

A striking feature of the election results last Sunday is the complete failure of the SPD to profit from the crisis of the Merkel government. On election night, the SPD sought to pose as winners and celebrated the overthrow of the ruling CDU in Baden-Württemberg after nearly six decades. It was also a success, the party argued, that Kurt Beck could remain premier in Rhineland-Palatinate, even though he had lost his absolute majority and must now form a coalition with the Greens.

In fact, the SPD lost out in both states. Even if its losses in Baden-Württemberg were just 2 percent, the result was still the worst ever for the party in the state. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the SPD lost almost 10 percent of its vote, slipping from 45.6 to 35.7 percent.

The Left Party was unable to make any significant progress in either state, failing to cross the 5 percent hurdle. In Baden-Württemberg, the party's share of the vote fell from 3.1 to 2.8 percent, while it increased in Rhineland-Palatinate from 2.6 to 3.0 percent. In the federal elections in autumn 2009, the Left Party gained 9.4 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate and 7.2 percent in Baden-Württemberg on the basis of the second vote system. The decline of the Left Party since then is the payback for its role as nothing more than a helper's helper for the SPD and the Greens.

The impact of the elections will gradually become more evident. On Monday, the CDU-business wing ferociously attacked the chancellor and chair of the CDU. Her feckless government policy had "led to a massive loss of confidence in the bourgeois parties", according to the chair of the CDU-Business Association. There is also a growing call inside the FDP for heads to roll following the party's electoral disaster.

While the voter turnout was an expression of growing opposition to the anti-social policies of the government, there is every indication that all of the parties will respond to this election with a further turn to the right.



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