

# Governing parties suffer losses in German state election

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Two of the parties in the German coalition government, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), received a clear rebuff in the election held on Sunday in the East German state of Saxony-Anhalt. Compared to the previous state election in 2006, the CDU lost just under 4 percent, receiving 32.5 percent of the vote. The FDP lost almost 3 percent, receiving just 3.8 percent of the vote, failing to clear the 5 percent hurdle necessary for representation in the state parliament.

Both the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party were unable to benefit from these losses. The SPD won 21.5 percent of the vote, almost exactly the same as its result in 2006. The Left Party suffered slight losses, but with 23.7 percent remained in second place behind the CDU. The Greens and the extreme-right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) were both able to increase their share of the vote.

The Greens doubled their 2006 total and with 7.1 percent entered the state parliament for the first time in 13 years. The Greens, with a membership of just 600 members in a state with a population of 2.3 million, were evidently able to benefit from the consequences of the nuclear disaster in Japan.

The NPD had concentrated a great deal of its national resources to its campaign in Saxony-Anhalt, standing there for the first time. Nevertheless, the party failed to achieve its goal of entering the state parliament following its success in entering state parliaments in the eastern states of Saxony and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. With a total of 4.6 percent, however, the party came in clearly ahead of the free-market FDP. The NPD also topped the total of 3 percent gained by the extreme-right German People's Union (DVU) in

the 2006 election. Since then the DVU has dissolved itself into the NPD.

The election result is unlikely to change the composition of the state administration. Following the 2006 vote, Saxony-Anhalt has been governed by a coalition of the CDU and SPD. Theoretically a coalition of the SPD and Left Party is possible, but prior to the election the SPD had declared that it would only consider a coalition with the Left Party if it won more votes than the Left Party and could therefore demand the post of state premier.

In the election itself there was little to choose between the parties. The CDU, the Left Party, the SPD, the Greens and the FDP all put forward pro-business programs. They all want to attract investors and businesses by offering low wage levels and minimal social standards, while dealing with the prevailing social decline in the region at the least possible expense. Saxony-Anhalt has the third highest level of unemployment of all German states, and its average wage levels are lower than anywhere else. Subsequently thousands of young people and skilled workers have moved away.

The different parties also enjoy close personal ties. The leading candidates of the CDU and SPD, Reiner Haseloff and Jens Bullerjahn, are ministerial colleagues in the outgoing administration, with Haseloff responsible for the economic department and Bullerjahn responsible for finance.

The leading candidate of the Left Party, Wulf Gallert, is a close friend of the social democrat Bullerjahn. As leaders of their respective parliamentary factions they ensured the smooth functioning of the so-called Magdeburg model (1994-2002), an SPD minority administration led by premier Reinhard Höppner,

which was supported by the PDS (the predecessor of the Left Party).

Since the reunification of Germany in 1990, Saxony-Anhalt has been governed by a succession of different coalitions that have done nothing to alter the pattern of social decline in the region. The FDP and the Greens were also involved in previous coalition governments. The result is a growing disillusionment by broad layers of the population with all political parties. In 2006, the electoral turnout hit 44 percent—a nationwide low—and on Sunday only 51 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, far fewer than is usual in state elections.

It has been increasingly possible for parties of the extreme right to exploit the political vacuum. In 1998 the DVU gained almost 13 percent of the vote following four years of an SPD-Green administration supported by the PDS. The parliamentary faction of the DVU, however, soon disintegrated. The party, which is largely the creature of Munich millionaire Gerhard Frey, has no independent resources in the region.

The NPD has also sought to exploit the despair of those suffering in the current social crisis. During its latest campaign the party promised jobs and security spiced with rabid xenophobic slogans. This is despite the fact that there are virtually no foreign workers living in Saxony-Anhalt, with their share of the total population less than 2 percent. In particular the NPD was able to win the support of younger voters affected by the state's high level of unemployment. Among the under-30s, 12 percent voted for the party, although support for the NPD was minimal in large cities such as Magdeburg and Halle. The party won its best results in rural areas.

The state election in Saxony-Anhalt has intensified the crisis of the federal government. After the renewed losses for the CDU and FDP, it becomes increasingly unlikely that these parties will be able to defend their majority in the state of Baden-Württemberg, where an election will take place this coming Sunday. According to recent polls the SPD and Greens are in the lead, with greatly increased levels of support for the Greens. The party has been able to exploit the nuclear disaster in Japan and may win enough votes to take over the leading post of state premier.

A defeat for the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, where

the party has ruled since 1953, would make it even harder for Chancellor Angela Merkel to control the large number of her opponents inside the party. For some time a section of the CDU has been urging a more aggressive line in social, foreign and European policy. More recently sharp differences emerged on the party's about-turn on nuclear policy and its attitude to the war in Libya.

The future of Guido Westerwelle, the FDP chairman and vice-chancellor, is also under threat after the party's defeat in Magdeburg. Saxony-Anhalt is the home state of former Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher and the only eastern state where the FDP had some influence. Another defeat in Baden-Württemberg, also considered a stronghold of the FDP, would almost certainly have fatal consequences for Westerwelle.

The SPD and the Greens are standing by, ready to replace the Merkel government when called upon. Politically, they have hardly any differences with the chancellor. They are also determined to reduce budget deficits at the expense of the working class together with continuing the war in Afghanistan and even provide support for the current war against Libya. Such an SPD-Green government at a federal level would provide the conservative camp the necessary breathing space to reorganise its ranks and prepare a new right-wing offensive.



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