

Germany: Record abstention in state elections in Mecklenburg-Pomerania

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The election held in the Eastern German state of Mecklenburg-Pomerania on Sunday has exposed the deep divide between working people and Germany's established parties.

Nearly 1.4 million of the 1.6 million residents of this north-eastern province were eligible to vote. But twenty years after the collapse of the former East Germany and the failed promises of blossoming landscapes, prosperity and democracy, nearly half of all voters saw no reason to go to the polls. The turnout of 51.4 percent was a new historic low. In many constituencies, less than 40 percent of the electorate went to the polls.

No one from the ranks of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party, Greens and Free Democratic Party (FDP), or of the press, felt it necessary to comment on this mass abstention. Instead, the SPD, Greens and Left Party celebrated as the more or less biggest election winners, while the CDU and the FDP, which both suffered high losses at the polls, licked their wounds.

Preliminary results give the SPD 35.7 percent of the votes cast, an increase of 5.5 points over the last state elections in 2006. The CDU won 23.1 percent of the vote (down 5.7 points), followed by the Left Party with 18.4 percent (plus 1.6); the Greens with 8.4 percent (up 5) will enter the state parliament for the first time. They are now represented in all 16 German state parliaments.

The FDP, which in 2006 won 9.6 percent, received just 2.7 percent. It failed to win even half as many votes as the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD), with 6 percent (down 1.3 points) and failed for the second time to clear the five-percent hurdle required to enter the state parliament.

The low turnout means all parties except the Greens lost votes compared to 2006. At that time, nearly 60 percent went to the polls.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU lost 80,000 votes on Sunday, receiving only 155,000 votes.

The FDP experienced a debacle. It fell from 78,000 to 18,000 votes. The Left Party lost about 14,000, and the NPD about 19,000 votes. The SPD, which politicians and the media described as a "magnificent" election winner, lost over 8,000 votes compared to 2006. With 239,000 votes, less than one sixth of eligible voters cast their ballot in favour of the "election winner".

SPD chief Sigmar Gabriel put down the "success" of his party to the SPD's lead candidate, State Premier Erwin Sellering. He said his party had won by using an old recipe, a combination of "economic success and social responsibility." The reality is quite

different.

Mecklenburg-Pomerania is Germany's poorhouse. A quarter of the population lives in poverty.

Unemployment has declined significantly since 2006, down from almost 20 to 11.5 percent currently. But this is essentially a result of demographics. In 1990, some 2 million people lived in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, now there are 1.6 million inhabitants. Forecasts predict that the population will shrink over the next decades to 1.2 million. The population density is the lowest in Germany, in some areas it is less than 30 inhabitants per square kilometre—the same level as Zimbabwe.

Those who can are leaving the state. Thousands of young people, particularly better-educated women, move away every year in search of work. Those remaining have little chance in the labour market. About 14 percent leave school without any qualifications or with minimal qualifications.

Social decline has also led to a falling birth rate. About 60 percent of the population decline is due to so-called "excess mortality," (i.e. more people die than are born). And while more people retire than young people leave school, the number of those of working age decreases every year by 14,000.

Nevertheless, the state employment agency recorded nearly 100,000 unemployed in August. Of these, about three quarters were in receipt of welfare benefits, meaning that they had been unemployed for more than a year.

If they do find work, then it is usually low-wage jobs. Mecklenburg-Pomerania is the state with the widest distribution of low-wage work. The closure of the old shipyards and other industries means manufacturing contributes just one tenth of the gross value added, so most jobs are to be found in the service sector, mainly in tourism, but also in agriculture and forestry.

But those working in these sectors are usually low-paid, especially when they are young. On the Baltic island of Rügen, a tourist magnet, 90 percent of young people are low-wage earners. This is not a result of an absence of union-agreed contracts, as the unions like to make out. A trained chef in their first year following qualification earns €1,164 gross per month—a low wage agreed by the union.

One third of all workers in Mecklenburg-Pomerania are employed in the low-wage sector. Three out of four young people work in a full-time job for around €1,000 gross.

At the end of 2009, about one in seven residents depended on financial assistance from the state, according to the state statistical

office. Of those working and paying social insurance contributions, more than 5 percent (about 30,000) were also dependent on welfare, and of these, two-thirds were working full-time.

The NPD has taken up this social misery to style itself as “the representative of the little people,” seeking to exploit the social disaster for its racist politics. The NPD’s top candidate Udo Pastörs spoke on election night of the “anti-social policies of the established parties.” While there are relatively few immigrants in Mecklenburg-Pomerania (just 1.8 percent of the population), the NPD mobilised racist sentiments and desperation over social conditions to enter the state parliament once again. Election researchers report that a large part of their constituents come from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular young men.

The re-entry of the NPD into the state parliament is the responsibility of those who have caused this social misery. From 1998 to 2006, the state legislature in Schwerin was controlled by a coalition of the SPD and PDS, the predecessor of the Left Party; from 2006 the SPD ruled in a grand coalition with the CDU. On election night, both the CDU and the Left Party offered themselves as coalition partner to the SPD. State Premier Selling has announced that he wants to talk to both parties.

The Greens too are willing to form a coalition with the SPD. However, they lack one or two seats to form a majority with the SPD in the 71-member parliament.

The willingness of the CDU, Greens and Left Party to form a cabinet with the SPD indicates that there are few political differences between these parties. They are all agreed to continue the budget cuts of recent years.

Selling is proud that impoverished Mecklenburg-Pomerania has raised no new debts since 2006. But the old debts—built up in the 1990s, in 1990, the state was virtually free of debt—amount to 10.5 billion euros. The website of the state’s Finance Ministry puts it as follows: “Expenditure on interest repayments of almost € 450 million [a total expenditure of €7 billion this year] is very painful. Those who have debts must pay the interest.”

The election in Mecklenburg-Pomerania was seen as a test run for the House of Representatives elections in Berlin on September 18, and as a barometer for politics at federal level.

In Berlin, polls are forecasting that the SPD will also achieve a significant victory with about a third of the votes. They could then form a coalition with the Greens or with the CDU, which are both running at just over 20 percent. Whether it is enough for a continuation of the previous coalition with the Left Party is questionable, since the latter has, after ten years in government, lost much of its support.

As in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, the FDP has only a slight chance of clearing the five-percent hurdle. In some polls, it is even running behind the Pirate Party.

The election result in Mecklenburg-Pomerania is a debacle for the national CDU-FDP coalition government, which if repeated in Berlin could lead to its premature end. In Chancellor Merkel’s home state—she is from Mecklenburg-Pomerania—the CDU and FDP received just over a quarter of the votes cast. The FDP is fighting for its existence.

The SPD, Greens and Left Party owe their electoral success to

the decline of the Christian Democrat-Free Democrat coalition, and not to any growing support among voters, as the result shows in absolute numbers.

Leading businesses are now backing the SPD and the Greens again. They still benefit from low wages, which were introduced by the previous SPD-Green coalition in the context of its Agenda 2010 “reforms.”

Above all the export sector is deeply concerned about the political course of the federal government in Europe. It argues that the Merkel government is basing itself on narrow national interests which can too easily jeopardize the euro, posing serious dangers to Germany’s export-dependent industry. In the final analysis, over 60 percent of all German exports go to EU countries.

In an interview with the *Berliner Zeitung*, Hans-Peter Keitel, chair of the Federation of German Industry (BDI), was critical of putting the monetary union at risk, even if it cost more money. The BDI was a “strong advocate of European integration,” he said.

After its election defeat in Mecklenburg-Pomerania, the tendency is growing in the FDP to make up ground through a populist campaign against the introduction of Euro-bonds and a “transfer union,” where better off countries like Germany underwrite the debts of the peripheral states like Greece and Portugal.

Influential circles regard Germany’s abstention in the Libya war as a serious error on the part of the federal government. They fear Germany was isolating itself from its traditional Western allies and is losing its economic influence in North Africa. In particular, the SPD and the Greens have attacked Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) because of it.

In this situation, the SPD, Greens and the Left Party are offering to defend the international interests of the ruling elite and to impose the necessary costs on the backs of working people.

The incumbent and incoming state premier of Mecklenburg-Pomerania, Erwin Selling is a prime example in this respect. Born in Sprockhövel near Bochum, he joined the SPD in 1994, having previously been employed as a judge in Gelsenkirchen, then moving to Greifswald in Mecklenburg-Pomerania. Two years later he was elected to the party’s state executive committee, becoming chair in 2007. For nearly three years, he continued the grand coalition with the CDU established by his predecessor Harald Ringstorff (SPD).

He is particularly committed to fiscal consolidation, enforcing strict austerity at the expense of the general population. To this end, he can work together with the CDU and the Greens, and the Left Party. He is a typical SPD technocrat, who implements the economic policies demanded by big business against the population while claiming there is no alternative.



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