

Early elections in Saarland, Germany: CDU, SPD to form grand coalition

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The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) are agreed: early state elections look set in the Saarland for March 25, 2012.

Both parties are seeking a grand coalition (i.e., between the CDU and SPD) after the elections. Although the two parties together already have a majority in the state legislature, the CDU and SPD want to ensure that the new government will enjoy a full five-year term and does not have to seek re-election in two and a half years. The reason is the unpopular budget cuts that are required to comply with Germany's constitutionally mandated "debt ceiling."

Earlier this year, state premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) dissolved the existing coalition with the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens, which had been in power for two and a half years. The reason given for prematurely ending the coalition was the parlous state of the FDP. "The tasks of the future demand of government and political parties courage, ability to act and cohesion," she said.

The FDP, which has plummeted to 2 to 3 percent support in nationwide polls, is hopelessly divided in the Saarland. FDP state parliamentary faction leader Christian Schmitt resigned at the end of the year, joining the CDU. A successor for Schmitt has not been found.

Kramp-Karrenbauer offered to form a coalition government with the SPD, the second-largest faction in the state parliament. The SPD agreed, and there have been several talks between the two factions. Last Thursday, the state premier and the SPD state and parliamentary leader Heiko Maas met alone, where they decided on new elections.

Justifying the decision, Kramp-Karrenbauer said a grand coalition government without new elections would have had merely a "transitional character," because the next scheduled state elections are due in 2014. They "extensively explored" whether, against the backdrop of

the need for restructuring in the Saarland, there was a solid basis for a coalition with the SPD, and had discovered many things in common in the talks.

Heiko Maas agreed with her, adding that in the short time until 2014, it would not have been possible to "seriously address the structural problems of the state in the medium and long term." That is why he and Kramp-Karrenbauer came to the conclusion that "the necessary legitimacy for all the difficult measures ahead meant new elections were unavoidable."

Representatives of big business in the Saarland have also pushed for a long-term grand coalition. Joachim Malter, chief executive of the Association of Saarland Business Organisations (VSU), called for "a consensus that survives the next election and the next years." Stability was the most urgent thing that the Saarland needs. This is the condition for pushing through austerity measures that meet the requirements of the debt ceiling.

The president of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) in Saarland, Richard Weber, made a similar argument. "We hope that the desired grand coalition will come about quickly", and that it "will last till the end of the decade", he said.

By "structural problems" and "tough measures", Kramp-Karrenbauer and Maas mean the massive cuts that are necessary to fulfil the criteria of the debt ceiling agreed to by the last grand coalition at federal level.

Saarland, which borders France and has 1 million inhabitants, carries a debt of €12 billion. This is more than three times the 2011 budget of €3.6 billion. Of this expenditure, more than 13 percent, around €485 million, is handed over to the banks as interest and principal payments. Over the next four years, the cost of servicing the state's debt will rise to €613 million.

In order to secure millions for the banks, the outgoing CDU-FPD-Green state coalition had already pushed through swingeing cuts. Civil servants have had to accept

a pay freeze, real estate transfer tax was increased, and cultural spending has been cut by €16 million annually. Retiring public servants have not been replaced, starting salaries cut, and state aid spending limited.

But compliance with the debt ceiling requires even deeper austerity measures. A “Budget Structure Commission” appointed by the state government has determined further “potential for consolidation amounting to €226 million” is necessary each year, including €32 million in the universities, especially the medical faculties, €39 million in the schools, €35 million in regional development, and €29 million in the state administration.

“Compliance with the debt ceiling is vital for the Saarland,” Kramp-Karrenbauer said last week. The state premier is not only under pressure from big business, but also from her party. At the end of September 2011, when she questioned the debt ceiling, the federal party crashed down on her.

The CDU federal parliamentary group vice chair, Michael Meister, threatened to halt federal aid to the Saarland. He reminded the state premier that the anchoring of the debt ceiling in the constitution had been linked with the payment of federal consolidation support to the Saarland amounting to €260 million a year. These would fall away if the debt ceiling was not preserved.

CDU general secretary Hermann Gröhe warned that Chancellor Angela Merkel was about to order the euro zone countries to also adopt a debt ceiling. “We want to make it into an export hit for Europe, and it should not stand in question in our own country,” he said.

Gröhe praised his party colleague’s decision to use fresh elections to ensure a five-year legislative period for a grand coalition, although the current federal government would lose votes in the *Bundesrat* (upper chamber of the federal parliament), and Heiko Maas might become state premier in the Saarland if the result goes that way. A transitional government would not have been able to take painful decisions on budgetary matters, said Gröhe.

A grand coalition in the Saarland could also serve as a model for the federal government, which is also weakened by the crisis of the FDP. The way Kramp-Karrenbauer jilted the FDP suggests that her actions were agreed to with German chancellor Angela Merkel and CDU headquarters. She announced the end of the coalition at a press conference, without informing the FDP beforehand, and the news broke in the middle of the speech given by the FDP federal party chair Philipp Rösler, who was using the party’s traditional Epiphany conference to help the

FDP find “new strength”.

In the past, grand coalitions were formed only as a last resort in times of great crisis, out of fear that voters would turn to more radical parties or an extra-parliamentary opposition movement. It is also highly unusual that the CDU and SPD announce they want to govern together before the election.

In this situation, the Left Party regards its main task as preserving democratic appearances. The chair of the Saarland parliamentary faction, Oskar Lafontaine, immediately offered the Left Party as coalition partners to the SPD. Now there is “a chance for a change of politics in the Saar region,” he said.

Lafontaine held fast to his offer even after Maas and Kramp-Karrenbauer had spoken out for a grand coalition. “The question of whether we form a government after the state election is far from decided,” he said.

Meanwhile, Lafontaine has somewhat distanced himself from the SPD. However, the leader of the Left Party in the Saarland, Linsler Rolf, told *Neues Deutschland* on Monday, “In any case, the door for talks remains open on our side.”

Just like the SPD, the Left Party is prepared to enforce the debt ceiling against the population. It has demonstrated this during its 10 years in the Berlin state government. Lafontaine himself had already pointed to the “disastrous budget situation” in the Saarland in exploratory talks between the SPD and Left Party after the state elections in 2009.

As Saarland state premier, and when still an SPD member, Oskar Lafontaine organised massive job losses in the mining industry from 1985 to 1998. SPD state leader Heiko Maas is his former political protégé. In 2009, Maas said after the exploratory talks with Lafontaine: “We are mostly in agreement in the substantive issues that we discussed”. That has not changed since.



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