State elections in Germany: Massive losses for governing parties

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The election in Schleswig-Holstein last Sunday amounted to a political vote of no confidence in the federal governing parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which also formed the government in the northern German state. The party led by Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) lost nearly 100,000 voters in Schleswig-Holstein, while its coalition partner, the FDP, lost some 130,000 votes.

The election result is an expression of the rejection by the electorate of official politics. Turnout was lower than ever with only about 60 percent of the 2.2 million eligible voters casting their vote. That is well below the previous record low of 66.5 percent recorded at the last state election in 2005.

The CDU scored 30.8 percent, its worst election result in the state since 1950, but remained the strongest party. The SPD and the Greens were only able to indirectly benefit from the losses of the government parties. They also lost votes in comparison to the last election—the SPD lost 3,860 votes and the Greens 24,600.

The debate on election night was absurd in many respects. The FDP, which lost by far the most votes, was presented as the "surprise winner" of the election because its pre-poll ratings were so low it was expected the party would not gain the 5 percent necessary to re-enter the state parliament. The FDP leading candidate, Wolfgang Kubicki, had conducted his campaign against the party leadership in Berlin in order to decouple himself from the nationwide decline of the FDP.

A similar ploy is being made by the North Rhine-Westphalian (NRW) FDP candidate, Christian Lindner. He is standing for the FDP in the NRW election next Sunday and has sought to distance himself from the party leader and federal minister, Phillip Rösler. A success for Lindner in the NRW election would almost certainly mean the end of Rösler's leadership of the FDP and thereby exacerbate the crisis of Merkel's government.

On its first showing in the state, the Pirate Party was able to collect as many votes as the FDP and also enter the state parliament. Representing the Danish minority in the state, the Southern Schleswig Voters' Association (SSW) takes up three seats in parliament. The party won just 4.6 percent of the vote, but due to a special agreement is still able to enter the parliament.

The Left Party suffered a disaster and lost more than two thirds of its votes. In 2009, 95,700 voters had opted for the Left Party. Last Sunday, this figure had dropped to just 29,900. The Left Party share of the vote fell from 6.0 to 2.2 percent and means it will no longer take up seats in the parliament, which it entered for the first time in 2009.

Left Party leader Klaus Ernst described the performance of his party as "thoroughly disappointing" and presumed that the reason for the party's collapse in support was due to the switch of protest votes to the Pirate Party.

The research institute Infratest dimap, however, came to a different conclusion. In a poll, it found that only 6,000 voters of the Left Party had switched to the Pirates—i.e., less than a tenth of the party's losses. The Pirate Party won votes from all camps—14,000 from the CDU and FDP, respectively, 13,000 from the Green Party, 11,000 from non-voters and 10,000 from the SPD.

The real reason for the turn away from the Left Party is its right-wing policies, which stand in stark contrast to its social demagogy. Wherever the Left Party assumes office, it supports the anti-social austerity policies of the other ruling parties. This was most evident during its 10 years of government involvement in the Berlin Senate.

The top candidate of the Left Party in Schleswig-Holstein was the party's fraction head, Antje Jansen. The 62-year-old teacher was state spokesperson for the Greens before she left the party in 2001. Less than five years later, she joined the Left Party. Jansen calls herself a pragmatic politician. She concentrated her campaign on hopes of working together with the SPD and the Greens and emphasised at every opportunity that the Left Party regarded itself as a "corrective" to the SPD and the Greens. In the town of Lübeck, where she is also fraction head, she ruled in a coalition with the SPD and Greens.

The vote for the Pirate Party, which attracted votes mainly from the CDU, the FDP and Greens, says a great deal about the social composition of the organisation. Certainly among these layers there are protest voters, but there is not the slightest whiff of

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protest—not to mention a political alternative—in the programme of the party in Schleswig-Holstein.

Its leading candidate, 23-year-old Torge Schmidt, is a qualified businessman who studied business computer science and stood out in the election campaign by being unable to respond to many concrete issues affecting the region—e.g., its construction and export of U-boats. The party's second candidate, Wolfgang Dudda, is a 54-year-old customs officer and is active in the police trade union (GdP).

Former Green Party leader Angelika Beer, who joined the Pirate Party in 2009, also enters the state parliament on behalf of the Pirates. Beer is married to a German army lieutenant colonel and was instrumental in winning support in the Greens for a policy based on militarism. She vehemently defends the new UN doctrine of "Responsibility to Protect", which has been used to justify, for example, the war against Libya.

Leading candidate Schmidt has said that his party did not aim to participate in government and needed more time to build up its apparatus. Nevertheless, the party has made clear where it stands on one vital issue: it has conducted its election campaign on the premise that it will agree to all of the spending cuts agreed on by the incoming state parliament.

Although all parties agree that tough austerity measures must be enforced, the formation of a new state administration will be a difficult task. The CDU is the strongest party but cannot continue with its existing coalition because of the weakness of the FDP. The top candidate of the CDU, de Jager, adopted a moderate approach in his election campaign and made clear he was quite prepared to form an alternative coalition with the SPD and the Greens.

A coalition between the CDU and the Greens is regarded as entirely possible, and last December, the executives of both parties held joint talks. However, both parties together do not have enough votes to form a coalition. De Jager can only take over as premier when he forms a so-called grand coalition with the SPD. A coalition of CDU, FDP and Greens would be mathematically possible but is opposed by the Greens.

The SPD's leading candidate, Torsten Albig, had spoken out before the election in favour of a coalition with the Greens and the SSW. Such a coalition, however, would only have a slim one-vote majority. In 2005, the SPD's top candidate for premier, Heide Simonis, failed to be elected on the basis of one dissenting vote from within her own party. Six weeks later, the CDU candidate, Peter Harry Carstensen, was installed as premier.

Albig has not completely ruled out a new grand coalition. In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he said that he would talk to all parties—"anything else would be silly."

The fact is that the differences between the parties are minimal, and all forms of coalition are possible. On the Friday before the election, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote that Albig, who is also mayor of Kiel, "has become increasingly unrecognisable and nebulous during the campaign, so that no one can now say how the 48-year-old would do things differently."

Like all the other party representatives, Albig wants to reduce debt through drastic cuts to infrastructure, personnel, and social services. In May 2010, the governing parties, the CDU and FDP, together with the then opposition parties, the SPD, Greens and SSW, jointly agreed to a debt brake in the state constitution, which commits every incoming government to scale back the budget deficit to zero by 2020. This means reductions of between €1.3 and €1.8 billion.

Albig's own career makes clear that he is determined to make cuts at the expense of working people. In 1992, he commenced work for the tax administration office in Schleswig-Holstein, then became the state representative in Bonn, and then went into the operational staff of the former SPD party leader, Oskar Lafontaine. Following the election of the SPD and Greens at a federal level in 1998, Albig became spokesman for Finance Minister Oskar Lafontaine. When Lafontaine quit the SPD shortly afterwards, Albig took over the same post for Lafontaine's successor as finance minister, Hans Eichel (SPD).

For a short time, he served as group chairman of the Dresdner Bank and city treasurer in Kiel, before returning to federal politics in 2006 as secretary to former finance minister Peer Steinbrück (SPD). Peer Steinbrück, notorious for his right-wing austerity policies at the expense of working people, supported Albig's campaign.

The Greens also back austerity. In the election campaign, the Green group chairman, leading candidate Robert Habeck, committed the party to forming a coalition with the SPD. The writer, who only joined the Greens 10 years ago, climbed the party ladder fast. He now advocates a "left-wing patriotism" and is quite prepared to enter a coalition with the CDU. Habeck also advocates strict cuts. "I do not understand how the election promises of the SPD will be financed," he declared during the campaign.

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