

Voters in German state election reject government austerity policy

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Chancellor Angela Merkel suffered a massive defeat in the election in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) on Sunday. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) lost 8.3 percent and recorded its worst-ever result, 26.3 percent, in Germany's most populous state.

At the last state election two years ago, the CDU landed just in front of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In Sunday's election, the SPD won 39.1 percent of the vote—an increase of 4.7 percent compared to two years ago—and once again enters the state parliament as the first-place party. Following the election in 2010, the SPD formed a minority government with the Greens. Now, the two parties have a clear majority. The Greens suffered a slight loss of votes on Sunday and polled at 11.3 percent.

The free market Free Democratic Party (FDP) increased its share of the vote from 6.7 percent to 8.6 percent. The result has been treated as a sensation by the media because just a few months ago, the FDP was polling at 2 percent. The increase in support for the FDP is partly explained by the fact that 160,000 who voted for the CDU in 2010 chose to vote for the FDP this time round, accounting for one quarter of all the votes for the FDP.

The FDP also picked up ground because its leading candidate, 33-year-old Christian Lindner, clearly distanced himself from the national party in his campaign and is an avowed opponent of the FDP chairman, Philipp Rösler. Lindner had resigned as general secretary of the FDP just six months ago due to differences with Rösler.

The total loss of votes for the CDU and FDP, the two

main parties that constitute the federal government in Berlin, was 6.4 percent. Only one third of the electorate voted for the two parties. The state elections in NRW are regarded as indicative for trends at the federal level, and the vote Sunday is seen as pointing towards a change of government in 2013 when the next federal elections are due.

The second party to pick up significant votes in the NRW election was the Pirate Party. Its vote total of 7.8 percent means that the party now enters its fourth state parliament, following those in Berlin, Saarland and Schleswig-Holstein. The party won votes from all camps—90,000 from the SPD, 80,000 from both the Greens and the Left Party, 70,000 from non-voters, 60,000 from former CDU voters and 40,000 from the FDP.

This cross-section of support is reflected in the programme of the party. Although the Pirate Party has benefited from the broad dissatisfaction with established parties, the Pirates differ little from their rivals in terms of content. The party's common programmatic denominator is a commitment to greater transparency. In every other respect, the Pirate programme consists of a conglomeration of demands to be found in the programmes of the Greens, the FDP, the CDU, the SPD and the Left Party. The Pirates have already announced their readiness to cooperate with the re-elected premier, Hannelore Kraft (SPD). The party has made clear it is prepared to vote for the government in parliament on an issue-by-issue basis.

The other party to lose massively in NRW is the Left Party, which lost more than half its vote (see "Collapse for Left Party in North Rhine-Westphalia vote"). The

losses for the Left Party are mainly a consequence of its right-wing policies and its opportunist orientation towards the SPD. On Sunday, one fifth of former Left Party voters switched to the SPD, another fifth supported the Pirates and a smaller portion migrated to the Greens.

Overall, the results of the NRW election represent an unequivocal repudiation of the austerity policies of Merkel and clearly follow the trend visible in the elections in Greece and France held just over a week ago.

The CDU's leading candidate, Norbert Röttgen, environment minister in Merkel's cabinet, had focused his campaign on attacking the SPD-Green minority government's alleged lack of willingness to cut public spending and demanded deeper cuts.

"They are running up new debts," was Röttgen's mantra in his campaign. Shortly before the election, he even declared that the NRW vote represented a referendum on Merkel's austerity policies. With his defeat in the cards, a terrified CDU headquarters in Berlin quickly forced him to withdraw his statement.

Röttgen's insistence on tougher austerity measures met with massive opposition in a state characterised by high unemployment and chronic financial problems. Voters in NRW had not failed to notice the devastating consequences of the austerity measures dictated by Berlin and Brussels for Greece, Spain and other European countries.

In the absence of a party that fundamentally rejected Merkel's austerity plan and criticised the stance of the SPD from the left, the SPD was able to profit from the opposition to the federal government's austerity measures. Premier Kraft could pose as the better alternative even though her own policies are virtually indistinguishable from those of Röttgen. Like the latter, Kraft has committed herself to complying with the debt brake. She promised, however, to introduce the cuts at a slower pace and exclude cuts affecting children and education.

The preference on the part of the electorate for the

SPD in this regard was reflected in a survey on the competence of the respective parties. According to the poll, the CDU and SPD received comparable ratings when it came to "solving debt problems" and "the economy", but with regard to "social justice" the SPD polled at 55 percent compared to just 16 percent for the CDU.

The increase in votes for the SPD, however, had nothing to do with a mobilisation of new layers of the electorate. The turnout was nearly identical to that of 2010—i.e., just under 60 percent—the lowest level since the founding of the state. Of the total 3 million votes for the SPD, just 110,000 came from former non-voters. In essence, there was a redistribution of votes between the established parties and the Pirates on the part of 60 percent of the electorate. Forty percent abstained from voting.

Despite the SPD's electoral success in NRW, workers have not forgotten that the party is responsible for the anti-welfare Agenda 2010 and Hartz laws. The coming months will quickly reveal that Kraft's very modest promises were simply hot air. The intensification of the European debt crisis leaves no room for social concessions. Kraft will rely first and foremost on the SPD's close links to the unions to impose new attacks against working people. Fierce social conflicts are inevitable.



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