

Germany: Lower Saxony vote a litmus test for upcoming general election

Lena Sokoll
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The state election in Lower Saxony on Sunday is widely regarded as an important litmus test for the general election due in September 2013. Germany's second largest state is currently governed by a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union and the Free Democratic Party led by premier David McAllister (CDU), whose re-election is far from certain. Most polls show the CDU leading with nearly 40 percent of the vote, but it is questionable whether the neo-liberal FDP will secure the minimum 5 percent of the vote necessary to enter the new parliament.

This situation closely mirrors the state of affairs at a federal level, where the CDU also governs in a coalition with the FDP. Once again, the CDU is clearly ahead in the polls at a national level, but risks losing its coalition partner, the FDP, in the upcoming federal election.

According to the polls released in recent weeks, just three parties are certain to enter into the new Lower Saxony parliament: the CDU with 40 percent, the SPD with 33, and the Greens with an estimated 13 percent. The FDP is hovering around 5 percent, with the Left Party and the Pirate Party polling at 3 percent respectively.

Should the FDP fail to cross the 5 percent hurdle, the CDU, which has ruled the state since 2003, could be forced into opposition by a SPD-Green party coalition. The SPD and the Greens hope that such a change of government would also influence the result of the general election in September. In addition an SPD-Green coalition in Lower Saxony would tip the majority in Germany's second parliamentary chamber, the Bundesrat, and enable the SPD and Greens to block legislation proposed by the federal government.

Should the FDP re-enter the state parliament then it is expected that the coalition variants, either CDU-FDP or

SPD-Greens, will have very similar levels of support. If the Left Party or the Pirates gain more than 5 percent of the vote and enter the parliament they could tip the scales in favour of one or another coalition. Other conceivable outcomes are the formation of a so-called grand coalition of CDU and SPD, or a coalition of the CDU and the Greens.

There has been discussion inside the ranks of the Greens on such a variation for some time, although officially the party has spoken out in favour of a coalition with the SPD. The Green Party recently selected Katrin Göring-Eckardt to lead its general election campaign. Göring-Eckardt is regarding as a prime candidate for collaboration with the CDU. Green Party co-leader Jürgen Trittin has also made clear he does not rule out such an option: "We want red-green. Only when this option is excluded will we decide what to next."

The Left Party is using the Lower Saxony campaign to offer its services as the guarantor of a majority or coalition partner for the SPD and the Greens. In the closing stages of the election campaign, the party mobilised its deputy leader, Sahra Wagenknecht, to support its campaign. Wagenknecht has also said she is prepared to take part in possible coalition negotiations. (See "Germany's Left Party supports unconditional cooperation with the SPD and Greens") While the return of the Left Party to the Lower Saxony state parliament remains uncertain it is anticipated that the party will be re-elected to the Bundestag in September.

The result of the Lower Saxony election and the administration the emerges are important indicators for the upcoming federal election. The parties will invariably draw conclusions about how to conduct their campaigns for the federal election.

Should the FDP fail to win the necessary 5 percent in

Lower Saxony then the replacement of its chairman, Philipp Rösler, is regarded as certain. Rösler comes out of the state and has been in office for less than two years. His most likely (temporary) replacement is the head of the party's parliamentary group, Rainer Brüderle. Brüderle could lead the FDP into a coalition with the SPD and the Greens. He governed in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate for 11 years in a coalition with the SPD.

The SPD recently elected the right-winger Peer Steinbrück as its leading candidate for the federal election. Behind the scenes, however, discussions are taking place about a replacement. The SPD is keen to establish itself as a party with an ear for social needs, but finds it increasingly difficult to make an image change with Steinbrück at its head. Steinbrück is an ally of the banks who has earned over a million euros in recent years through the private lecture circuit and was a former finance minister under Angela Merkel. National polls show the SPD with a record low of 23 percent and the party fears that Steinbrück could also cost them what they have regarded as a safe victory in Lower Saxony.

One possible replacement for Steinbrück is SPD party chairman Sigmar Gabriel. He is regarded as more willing than Steinbrück to form a government with the support or the involvement of the Left Party.

While there is a vigorous horse-trading in Lower Saxony and at a federal level for votes, influence and coalition variants, there is little substantive difference between the parties. All of them are prepared to form coalitions with one another. They all support strict fiscal policy and the debt brake, which demands the wiping out of public services and social concessions in order to finance bailouts for the banks. Also with regard to foreign policy there is widespread agreement between the parties, particularly regarding military operations in Afghanistan, Syria and now Mali.

In fact a striking aspect of the election campaign in Lower Saxony is the absence of debate on substantive issues—despite the fact that most parties have sent their most prominent figures to intervene there. This was most evident in the television debate between the existing premier McAllister with the SPD's top candidate Stephan Weil, where the opponents debated “without passion, without enthusiasm, and for long periods with barely a change in facial expression,” as

the NTV news station noted on its web site. On a host of issues such as child care, education and immigration policy it was clear that both candidates defended the same line.

In the election in Lower Saxony, as in the next federal election, the issue is to find the most stable combination of parties to enforce the dictates of the banks and international financial markets against growing popular opposition. The interests of workers and the vast majority of the population find no political outlet in the election campaign.



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