

Germany: Christian Social Union wins absolute majority in Bavarian state elections

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A week before the federal elections, the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) has recovered its absolute majority in the Bavarian state assembly. With 47.7 percent of the votes, the party of state premier Horst Seehofer has a clear majority again.

In 2008, the CSU, the sister party of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Party (CDU) that has governed Bavaria for 56 consecutive years, recorded the worst result in its history. At that time, many CSU voters stayed away from the polls or voted for the Free Democratic Party (FDP) or the independent Free Voters. The FDP had returned to the state parliament after a long absence, where it formed a coalition government with the CSU.

This time, many voters have returned to the CSU, with turnout rising from 58 in 2008 to 64 percent in 2013. This has especially benefited the CSU, which added over half a million voters to its tally. In contrast, the free-market FDP experienced a catastrophic collapse. Its vote fell from 8 percent to 3.3 percent, and it is no longer represented in the new state parliament. With 9 percent, the Free Voters experienced a small loss of 1.2 percent.

The CSU can primarily thank the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens and the Left Party for its election victory; these parties were completely incapable of benefiting from voter discontent with the growing social crisis.

The SPD made only a minimal improvement in its vote compared to 2008. It won 20.6 percent, just 2 points more than five years ago, when it scored its worst result of the post-war period in Bavaria. The SPD slate was headed by the long-standing mayor of Munich, Christian Ude, who had to give up his existing office in the state capital for age reasons.

Ude and Seehofer expressed their close similarities on all political questions at every opportunity. In a televised debate on Bavarian television, both boasted of having

"restructured" the budget of the state and state capital through cuts. As in the federal elections, important political issues such as the euro crisis or the threat of war in Syria were not discussed in the campaign.

The Greens also suffered a debacle. When the party won the elections in neighbouring Baden-Württemberg two years ago, for the first time returning a state premier, the Greens dreamed they could repeat this success in Bavaria. But their poll numbers have fallen steadily ever since, and on Sunday they won 8.4 percent, one point less than in 2008.

Apart from their traditional clientele in the urban upper middle class, the Greens have little support. And here too their support has ebbed away after they called for tax increases for high earners.

Most commentators ascribe the result of the Bavarian election to the state's relatively good economic situation. In fact, the opposite is the case. Bavaria, in which some large industrial companies such as BMW, Audi and Siemens are located, has a better economic performance than other states, and a relatively low unemployment rate. However, the consequences of the economic crisis can also be felt here in southern Germany.

One in seven Bavarians is at risk of poverty, and at 13.8 percent, the risk of poverty is only slightly below the national average of 14.5 percent. Among single parents and pensioners the poverty rate is particularly high, at 39 and 22 percent respectively. Many working people are affected by poverty, and more than a third of Bavarians are now working in a precarious job.

The inability of the SPD and the Greens to win support among these layers shows that they do not differ politically from the CSU and the Free Voters, and that the electorate is also aware of this.

In this respect, the election results of the Left Party are particularly revealing. Next to the FDP, the Left Party is the second big loser in the Bavarian elections. In 2008,

the 4.4 percent of votes it won was almost enough to secure the party entry into the state parliament; this time it was only 2.1 percent.

In 2008, in the Left Party's previous strongholds of Schweinfurt, Hof and Nuremberg, it had achieved some double-digit results. But now its vote has collapsed in these traditional urban working class areas. In Schweinfurt, the constituency of former Left Party chair Klaus Ernst, it lost more than half its votes. The Left Party, which combines left-wing rhetoric with right-wing politics, is hardly perceived as an alternative to the other bourgeois parties.

As in the federal elections, there was also a large degree of political agreement on all essential matters. This was particularly evident during the referendum on the so-called debt ceiling, which was held along with four other referendums in parallel with the state elections, and was adopted by a large majority.

This means Bavaria cannot take on any new debt from 2020. The inclusion of the debt ceiling in the state constitution is synonymous with massive cuts in social services. Concretely, it means that social benefits, funding for cultural institutions, education or similar services will only be provided if the money is available.

The CSU, SPD, FDP and Greens largely agree on this issue. Although the Left Party officially called for a "no" vote on the debt ceiling, it is well known that the party is committed to a policy of fiscal consolidation, and wherever it takes government responsibility it imposes drastic cuts.

Just a week before the federal elections, the poll in Bavaria has provided an important measure of voting sentiments, and the parties in Berlin have responded accordingly to the outcome.

At FDP headquarters in Thomas Dehler House, naked panic prevailed on Sunday evening. The liberals fear that for the first time in their history they may fail to clear the 5 percent hurdle and will not be represented in the next Bundestag (federal parliament). Health Minister Daniel Bahr (FDP) said the Bundestag election could seal the party's fate. For the FDP it was "crunch time, it's also about the existence of a liberal party," he told *Tagesspiegel*.

Party chair Philipp Rösler and lead candidate Rainer Brüderle called for a targeted campaign, asking voters to award their second vote to the FDP. CDU voters should give their second vote to the FDP, so that they can continue to act as a coalition partner to the CDU, they said.

The CDU leadership, including chair Angela Merkel, has clearly rejected such a campaign. One reason is the experience in Lower Saxony, where the CDU lost many seats to the FDP due to a second vote campaign, with the SPD and Greens then narrowly winning the state elections.

By rejecting a second vote campaign for the FDP, Merkel has signalled her willingness to recreate a grand coalition with the SPD. Given the euro crisis and the war developments in the Middle East, such a coalition would proceed far more aggressively against working people than its predecessor in the years 2005 to 2009. This is why sections of the ruling class view it as the best option for the coming period.

In light of the result in Bavaria and the current poll numbers, however, there appears little chance of an outright victory for the SPD and the Greens in Sunday's general election. But a majority for the CDU and the FDP is also not certain. If the FDP fails to enter the Bundestag, the CDU would definitely have to depend on the SPD or the Greens as coalition partners.

The Left Party is taking advantage of the poor performance of the SPD and the Greens to offer its collaboration at the federal level. With reference to an SPD-Green Party coalition, Party chair Bernd Riexinger told the *Neues Deutschland*, "Red-Green is finally out.... We are ready for a change in policy, if the content is right."

The SPD has categorically excluded such cooperation—at least for the time immediately after the elections. Following the Bavarian vote, SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel emphasized again: "We will not form a government with the Left Party; we stand for Red-Green."

However, that could change in the course of the next legislative period, if an SPD chancellor acting against the working class just as rabidly as Gerhard Schröder needed a left fig leaf.



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