

# Germany: Voters reject establishment parties in state elections

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The large-scale rejection of all established parties was the common factor in the state elections held in Thuringia and Brandenburg last Sunday. Twenty-five years after the demonstrations for free elections which ushered in the end of the Stalinist German Democratic Republic, only half of those entitled to vote did so in the two eastern German states. The turnout in both states—48 percent in Brandenburg and 53 percent in Thuringia—was an historic low.

In both states the newly founded Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to enter parliament with double-digit figures. The party was formed one and a half years ago. At the centre of its program is rejection of the joint European currency, the euro, and the demand for the return to the Deutschmark. Although this issue was not up for debate in the regional elections, the AfD was able to win 12.2 percent of the vote in Brandenburg and 10.6 percent in Thuringia on the basis of its right-wing populist slogans. Following its recent success in Saxony the AfD is now represented in three East German state parliaments.

During the election campaign the AfD addressed the electorate's fears of further cuts and social decline to justify its reactionary policies, including harsher immigration controls, strengthening the police and a return to "family values".

The free market Free Democratic Party, which for decades played the role of kingmaker in the federal government and many states, suffered a humiliating defeat and lost its representation in both parliaments. In Brandenburg the party picked up just 1.5 percent.

Although the voting figures are similar in both states there are substantial differences in the election results. In Brandenburg the Social Democratic Party suffered a relatively small loss in support and with 31.9 percent remains the party with the highest vote total in the state.

This figure, however, is far below its peak vote of 54 percent in 1994. In the same state, support for the Left Party slumped. It lost 8.6 percent of its vote (compared to four years ago) and received just 18.6 percent. In Thuringia, however, the Left Party increased its vote slightly, and with 28.2 percent obtained its best result to date. The SPD lost 6.1 points and, with 12.4 percent, recorded its worst ever result in the state.

One glance at the election campaign makes clear that there were no real differences between the various parties, whose policies and programs were virtually identical. All of the parties pledged to recruit more police and revise the state budget (i.e. more social cuts), while making all of their election promises dependent on the required finances being available.

In Brandenburg state finance minister Christian Görke (Left Party) accused the CDU of making promises which were not financially viable. In Thuringia the leading candidate of the Left Party, Bodo Ramelow, compared his party to the right wing Bavarian CSU, because both parties concentrated on "regional politics". Ramelow also dropped his former demand for the dissolution of the Thuringian secret services, which had spied on him for years and played a central role in building up the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground terror gang.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote in ironical fashion that the differences between the parties with regard to their call for more teachers—following years of educational cuts—could be overcome with a bit of "creative book keeping ...The SPD wants to recruit 500 teachers per year, the CDU 1,000 in two years, and the Left Party 5,000 in ten years."

Although the CDU has filled the post of state premier in Brandenburg and the SPD has held that of state premier in Thuringia for the past 24 years, the result

has been the same. In both states longstanding industries were broken up in the 1990s and replaced with low-paying service sector jobs. Spending on social welfare, education and culture has been slashed dramatically in both states and nothing will change in this respect after the election.

In Brandenburg Dietmar Woidke (SPD) remains state premier. He has the choice of continuing the current state coalition with the Left Party, or forming a coalition with the CDU, as did his long time predecessor. In Thuringia, however, the previous coalition of the CDU and SPD has a majority of just one vote. The same applies to a possible coalition of the Left Party, the SPD and Greens, favoured by Bodo Ramelow, who is seeking to become the Left Party's first ever state premier.

The leadership of the Left party is also pushing for an alliance with the SPD and the Greens, which it sees as a first step towards a similar coalition in the future at federal level. This prospect was openly raised by the chair of the Left Party, Katja Kipping, in an interview with the *Thüringer Allgemeine*.

In the course of the election campaign the SPD and Greens made clear they were not averse to such a coalition. For the Greens, it would offer access to considerable state funding as a party of government, while the SPD refrained from making any statement about its coalition intentions in order to keep open a possible alliance with the Left Party. The SPD, Left Party and Greens are already involved in a city coalition in Erfurt, the main city in Thuringia.

In the coming days exploratory talks will be conducted to determine whether the SPD continues its previous coalition with the CDU, possibly expanded to include the Greens, or whether it forms a coalition with the Left Party with Bodo Ramelow as premier. The final decision is then due to be confirmed by a vote of SPD members.

The growing hostility of the electorate to all the established parties is reflected in increasing political instability. A two- or three-party coalition with a mere one vote advantage will prove to be extremely unstable. The parties respond to this prospect by closing ranks.

In this respect, the election in Thuringia has nationwide ramifications. Widespread hostility to the established parties and the rise of the AfD makes it increasingly difficult for the main German parties to

strike stable majorities. The CDU has already commenced a discussion about co-operating in future with the new right-wing party.

The Left Party has its sights on a role in federal government, although the current coalition is whipping up conflict with Russia in Ukraine, sending arms to the Middle East, and preparing for direct military intervention in both regions. If Ramelow become premier in Erfurt, with the support of the SPD and the Greens, this would not be a "left turn", as his supporters claim, but rather another step towards militarism and social repression.



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