

# SPD victory in German state election conceals growing gulf between political establishment and population

Dietmar Henning  
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At first glance, the results from Hamburg's state election on Sunday appear contradictory.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), which is languishing in polls at 25 percent nationwide, emerged from the election victorious, with 45.7 percent of the vote. The party only missed its 2011 election result high point by 2.7 percent, when the vote took place in the wake of the failure of a Christian Democratic Union-Green Party coalition.

The CDU, whose leader Angela Merkel regularly receives high poll ratings, achieved the worst result in its history with 15.6 percent. Eleven years ago, the party garnered 47.2 percent of the vote.

The contradiction is reconciled, however, by the recognition that the politics of the SPD and CDU are virtually identical. Leading SPD candidate Olaf Scholz, who remains the city's mayor, has played a similar role in Hamburg as Merkel has at the federal level. He is supported by bourgeois and petty bourgeois forces, who in the face of deepening social tensions and international crises, view him as a conservative force for stability. *Spiegel Online* commented, "In Hamburg, a masculine Merkel was victorious."

Behind the relatively high result for the SPD, there are signs of a growing gulf between official politics and the population in Hamburg, as has been seen in several other elections in recent years.

Voter participation reached a new low. By far, the largest party was the party of non-voters. Only 56.6 percent of the 1.3 million electorate went to the polls, in an election in which young people from the age of 16 could vote for the first time. In 2001, election turnout was 71 percent.

At the same time, the new Hamburg senate is more deeply divided than ever. Along with the SPD and CDU,

the Greens, at 12.2 percent, the Left Party, at 8.5 percent, the Free Democrats (FDP), at 7.4 percent and the rightward-leaning Alternative for Germany (AfD), at 6.1 percent, will all be in the new senate.

For the first time in several years, the FDP managed to surpass the five percent hurdle and celebrated the result as their rebirth. Along with representatives in three state parliaments in eastern Germany and the European parliament, the AfD is now entering a state parliament in western Germany for the first time. The party received a large number of protest votes. According to a survey, 71 percent of AfD voters voted for the party out of disappointment with the other parties, while only 26 percent did so out of conviction.

The SPD, which previously formed the government on its own, is now dependent on a coalition partner. The party lost four seats in the 121-seat senate, only controlling 58 seats. Scholz announced, prior to the elections, that he would first speak to the Greens. The FDP has also offered its services to the SPD as a coalition partner.

The AfD addressed conservative business circles during the election campaign, as well as anti-immigrant sentiments. Until December 2013, their leading candidate, Jürgen Kruse, was a professor of political economy at Hamburg's Helmut Schmidt University. Together with the deputy chairman of the federal party, the Hamburg-born former head of the German confederation of industry, Hans-Olaf Henkel, he supported measures to benefit the Hanseatic aristocrats.

At the same time, the AfD appealed to the right with its complaints over immigration, Islam and the threats to internal security. Kruse described veiled women as "black monsters." Bernd Baumann, number two on the party's candidate list, agitated against immigrants from Syria and

Ebola victims, according to *Spiegel Online*. Third-placed Dirk Nockemann maintains contacts with the extreme right. He was a member of the Constitutional Offensive Party (PRO) of jurist Ronald Schill, who was a former interior senator for Hamburg.

Hamburg has previously served as a testing ground for a diverse range of coalitions. For years, the SPD ruled alone or in a coalition with the FDP, then later with the Greens or occasionally with the STATT Party, a split-off from the CDU. The CDU governed alone and in coalitions with the FDP and Schill's party. In 2008, the CDU and Greens formed their first coalition at the state level.

When Scholz subsequently won the election, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, "In Hamburg, the political parties are changing, but not the politics."

In this year's election, the parties' programmes were also interchangeable. In one way or another, they all called for the consolidation of the budget and the strengthening of the police. They were thereby speaking to the wealthiest elements who want to be left in peace to enjoy their yachts, polo and golf clubs—and there are plenty of those in the city. Nowhere in Germany is the concentration of millionaires as high as in Hamburg. Some 42,000 millionaires and 18 billionaires reside there.

The SPD has maintained close ties for decades with these business owners, bankers and managers. "The Hanseatic Social Democrats have a pragmatic understanding with the most important businessmen in their realm," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote.

The head of the powerful Hamburg industrial association (IVH), Michael Westhagemann, said in an interview with the *Hamburger Abendblatt*, "We would like the current responsible policies of the SPD senate to be continued. That's why as an industry we are absolutely in favour of a majority for Olaf Scholz rather than the unstable coalitions after the February 2015 election."

Along with "reliable," the press always uses such adjectives in conjunction with Scholz's as "aloof," "pragmatic," "inconspicuous" and "dispassionate." As SPD General Secretary, he earned the nickname "Scholz-o-mat," as someone who was a technocrat and unerringly stuck to a right-wing course.

Several media outlets published pre-written commentaries shortly after the first projections on Sunday, praising Scholz and presenting him as a future SPD candidate for Chancellor. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* asked, "Election winner Scholz: could he be Chancellor?" And answered yes. *Die Zeit* wrote, "The right-wing Hamburg SPD, as they were often called

in Berlin, could emerge as the model. And if so, why not with the originator at its head?"

The SPD's proximity, to the Hamburg rich, the so-called moneybags, has been connected with massive social attacks. Poverty in Hamburg has risen rapidly over recent years. The wealthy districts, like the area of Nienstedten, with an average annual income of €170,000, are only a few kilometres away from the poor districts.

On the island in the Elbe, Weddel, residents earn an average of just €15,000 per year. Here, or in the high-rise-dominated districts like Mümmelmannsberg and Osdorfer Born, there are 180,000 claimants of Hartz IV welfare. Almost one-quarter of Hamburg's 1.7 million population is considered poor, including 46,000 children. Those mainly affected by poverty, some 114,000 people, are immigrants.

While Scholz sought to win favour with the rich, the poor, migrants and demonstrators got a sense of his understanding of internal security. Under his leadership, the already right-wing state SPD has been transformed into a law-and-order party. Scholz persecuted immigrants just as harshly as demonstrators. Constitutional hindrances to his policies were brushed aside with arguments previously associated with dictatorial regimes.

It is no surprise that voter participation was at its lowest in the areas with the greatest social tensions—where the poor and unemployed live. In electoral wards like Hamburg Central, Harburg or Süderelbe, turnout was mostly under 50 percent. In the ward Billstedt-Wilhelmsburg-Finkenwerder, it was even lower, at 42 percent. In the electoral district of Billbrook, a formerly densely populated working class district and today an industrial area with a few dilapidated social housing blocks, only one-in-five voted. In the rich electoral wards, such as Rotherbaum-Harvestehude or Eppendorf-Winterhude, electoral turnout reached 68 percent. The poorer the electoral district, the lower the voter turnout.



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