German state elections: The repackaging of right-wing politics

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It is widely believed that three state elections taking place Sunday will indicate the future course of political developments in Germany. These will be the first major elections since the beginning of the refugee crisis. In 2015, only the city states of Hamburg and Bremen elected new parliaments. Now, with the elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt, more than a fifth of the German population will be involved.

There had been speculation in some quarters that a poor result for the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) could result in the end of the federal grand coalition led by Chancellor Angela Merkel. Such was the case in 2005, when the Social Democratic Party's loss in the North Rhine-Westphalia election led to the early collapse of Gerhard Schröder's SPD-Green coalition. But this is now considered unlikely. First, despite significant internal differences over refugee policy, nobody in the CDU seems able at present to seriously challenge Merkel. Second, the sealing of the Balkan route means far fewer refugees are reaching Germany.

However, it seems certain that the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) will enter parliament in all three states, at least in some cases obtaining double-digit vote percentages. Since in the two western German states the Free Democratic Party (FDP) is likely to be represented, and the Left Party in the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, it is expected that there will be five parties in all three parliaments, making it difficult to form new governments.

Voters are above all turning their backs on the CDU and SPD, which form the federal government in Berlin. If pre-election polls are confirmed, the so-called "people's parties," which in the past were able to secure between 70 and 90 percent of the vote, will not even gain sufficient support to form a grand coalition in Baden-Württemberg or Saxony-Anhalt.

In Baden-Württemberg, long a CDU stronghold, the conservatives lost power five years ago to a Green-SPD government led by the Green state premier, Winfried Kretschmann. The CDU is now threatened with losing its position as the strongest party in the state to the Greens. The SPD is currently polling 14 percent of the vote, 10 percent lower than in the last election.

In Saxony-Anhalt, where, according to the opinion polls, the AfD has 18 percent support, the CDU-SPD government is at risk of losing its governing majority. Since all parties have ruled out collaboration with the AfD, the composition of the next administration remains completely unclear.

In Rheinland-Palatinate, SPD Premier Malu Dreyer and CDU challenger Julia Klöckner are in a neck-and-neck contest. The Greens, who have been governing with the SPD, are facing major losses, and a coalition between the SPD and CDU could now emerge.

The greater the number of parties and more varied the possible coalitions, the smaller the political differences between the parties. Although all of the more established parties claim they are not prepared to collaborate with the AfD, they have largely adopted its programme. The AfD is growing due to the support for its right-wing policies by all of the other parties.

Notwithstanding the electioneering bluster, the real differences are not between the parties, but between all of the parties and the vast majority of the population, whose interests and concerns find no expression in the campaigns.

The deeper this gulf becomes, the closer the parties move together. Assessing the reasons for the success of the Greens in Baden-Württemberg, *Der Spiegel* wrote that it was "not because they are the best Greens of all time, but because they sold themselves as the better

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CDU." The magazine continued, "Kretschmann copied the CDU's successful recipe, and portrays his party as the party of Baden-Württemberg."

The adoption of a right-wing course by all parties is clearest in relation to the refugee issue, which has been at the centre of the election campaign. Kretschmann of the Greens and the SPD's Dreyer have both highly praised Chancellor Merkel's refugee policy, which aims to seal the external borders of the European Union.

The Left Party has joined the praise of the chancellor. Wulf Gallert, the lead Left Party candidate in Saxony-Anhalt, who is hoping to secure the position of state premier by striking a coalition deal with the SPD and Greens, declared last autumn, "I am deeply thankful to Mrs. Merkel that she made clear that she does not intend to build an electric fence around Germany on the 25th anniversary of German reunification. It is also really interesting for me that for the first time in her political career, the chancellor has really shown character."

In a round-table discussion in Rheinland-Palatinate broadcast by SWR television on Thursday, the leading candidates argued mainly over who could most effectively put a halt to the flow of refugees and who would hire the most police officers.

The rightward lurch of all the political parties has its roots in the insoluble crisis of the capitalist system. Just as the ruling elites in the 1930s reacted to the Depression by turning to nationalism, social reaction and war, so today they respond to the financial crisis, the global downturn, the possible break-up of the European Union and mounting social tensions "by stirring up nationalism and xenophobia, building up the state apparatus and pursuing their international economic and political interests through the means of war," as we wrote in an earlier article .

In these state elections, there is no party for which workers and young people can vote: none of the parties represents their interests.

A particularly repugnant role is being played by the Left Party, which has made some critical noises in Saxony-Anhalt and Baden-Württemberg, where it is not expected to surpass the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation. But where it has participated in government—as in Thuringia, Brandenburg and Berlin—the Left Party has been just as ruthless in its attacks on social and democratic rights and on refugees as the other parties.

The central role of the Left Party is to prevent the development of an independent working class movement in opposition to capitalism. The struggle for an internationalist and socialist programme, however, is the only way to counter the shift of the entire political establishment to the right, the dangerous implications of which can be seen in the rise of the AfD.

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