

German state elections: Far-right Alternative for Germany gains double-digit support

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It was widely anticipated that the right-wing nationalist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party would have a successful result in Sunday's German state elections, but not on the scale that occurred. The party emerged as the second-strongest in the elections in Saxony-Anhalt, winning 24 percent of the vote in the eastern German state. Nothing similar had previously taken place in the history of the Federal Republic.

In addition to its large vote in the east, the AfD secured sufficient votes to enter parliament in the West German states of Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Palatinate, obtaining double-digit results. The party, founded three years ago, is now represented in eight of Germany's 16 state parliaments.

The rise of a party promoting right-wing nationalist conceptions combined with populist and racist positions requires careful analysis.

In the most immediate sense, the AfD's success is a result of the German government's refugee policy. Two pieces of legislation to restrict the right to asylum, along with the debate over whether refugees can best be stopped by sealing off Europe's external borders or closing Germany's national borders, have shifted official political discourse far to the right and divided the conservative camp.

While Chancellor Angela Merkel, along with a section of her Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens, are in favour of a "European solution," the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and the right wing of the CDU are calling for the closure of Germany's borders.

The AfD has benefited from this rightward shift in the official debate. It placed opposition to Merkel's refugee policy at the heart of its election campaign and connected this with anti-immigrant and racist slogans. But this alone does not explain its success. It also sought to exploit widespread anger, insecurity and fear of social decline.

"Whoever believes that the hatred, bordering on contempt, for the political system emerged only with the rising refugee numbers is deceiving himself," wrote the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. "The feeling of many people that 'those at the top' who are governing are in over their heads predates the migration issue of recent months."

The *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* described the "typical AfD voter" as "a man, aged around 50," who "belongs to the lower-middle class, has a basic school education, earns an average income, is independent—and is frightened."

The polling agency Mentefaktum said the fears of the "precarariat" accounted for the large vote for the AfD. It singled out "fear of social decline, an inadequate pension, struggles with the refugees for access to things such as affordable housing."

The Forsa Institute came to the conclusion that many AfD voters were not doing badly. "But they subjectively feel disadvantaged," it said, and fear falling into the under-class.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* cited a veteran autoworker from Mainz who was a traditional SPD voter but supported the AfD in this election because he felt it was the only party "listening to my concerns."

Although on economic and social questions, the AfD adopts a neoliberal standpoint, insisting on budget discipline and low taxes, it obtained a high percentage of support among workers and the unemployed. A poll by Infratest Dimap showed that it was the strongest party in this segment of the population, with 38 percent support in Saxony-Anhalt and 31 percent in Baden-Württemberg. According to the same survey, 64 percent voted AfD out of "disappointment with other parties," indicating a protest vote. Only 27 percent declared they voted AfD "out of conviction."

The largest segment of AfD votes, between 30 and 40 percent, came from those who normally do not vote—another indication that the party was able to mobilise voters who had turned their backs on the established parties some time ago. Voter participation was around 10 percent higher in all three states than five years ago. In Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Palatinate turnout was above 70 percent. In Saxony-Anhalt it surpassed 60 percent.

In the western German states, numerous former CDU voters who rejected Merkel's refugee policy backed the AfD. In Baden-Württemberg, one in four, and in Rheinland-Palatinate, one in five AfD voters had supported the CDU in 2011. In Saxony-Anhalt, where right-wing extremist parties such as the German People's Union and the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party (NPD) had achieved significant results in previous elections, their supporters backed the AfD. Analyses of the previous party affiliation of voters in that state placed one in five AfD voters under the category of "other parties."

Since its founding in February 2013, the AfD has undergone a rapid change, which is not yet complete. Originally established as an anti-euro party, in which conservative economics professors, representatives of the CDU right wing, and business representatives such as the former president of the German employers' association, Hans-Olaf Henkel, determined its line, its

nationalist course drew in more extreme right-wing elements with connections to Pegida and other anti-immigrant movements in the former states of East Germany.

In July 2014, the state deputy in the Saxony parliament, Frauke Petry, displaced economics professor Bernd Lucke in the position of party chair. Lucke and some of his supporters then withdrew from the AfD, denounced it as right-wing extremist and founded another party. In the meantime, Petry has come under pressure from an even more radical wing led by Björn Höcke, the AfD's faction leader in the Thuringia state parliament. Höcke has come to prominence with his racist and volkish-nationalist conceptions, and ties to the National Democratic Party.

Höcke was heavily involved in the campaign in Saxony-Anhalt. The AfD lead candidate in the state, André Poggenburg, is seen as Höcke's political protégé. The spectacular election result in Saxony-Anhalt will likely accelerate the AfD's rightward trajectory.

The results of Sunday's elections pose the question of why a right-wing, neo-liberal and anti-immigrant party such as the AfD was able to mobilise social anger and dissatisfaction with the established parties for its own ends. The election results themselves provide insight into the reasons.

Along with the AfD's success, the second major feature of the elections was the collapse of the SPD and decline of the Left Party. Although the AfD emerged largely from the CDU, the losses of the Christian Democrats were limited to around 3 percent in Saxony-Anhalt and Rheinland-Palatinate. Only in its former stronghold of Baden-Württemberg, where the AfD obtained 15 percent of the vote and a section of CDU voters shifted to the Greens, did the CDU suffer a disastrous result, finishing with 27 percent of the vote—a drop of 12 percent.

By contrast, the SPD was utterly decimated. In Baden-Württemberg, the SPD had previously recorded, with 23 percent, the worst result in its history. This time around, its support was almost halved to 12.7 percent. As a result, in Baden-Württemberg as in Saxony-Anhalt the SPD trailed behind the AfD.

This decline is not altered by the SPD's success in Rheinland-Palatinate, where, under state premier Malu Dreyer, it unexpectedly emerged as the strongest party, obtaining 36.2 percent of the vote. Support for Dreyer's SPD-Green coalition dropped by around 10 percent because the Greens lost approximately two-thirds of their previous vote, barely making it into parliament with a total of 5.3 percent. Many former Green voters apparently voted for the SPD to prevent the CDU from becoming the largest party, which would have resulted in the CDU's leading candidate, Julia Klöckner, replacing Dreyer as state premier.

In neighbouring Baden-Württemberg, a similar process took place in reverse. The Greens, under Winfried Kretschmann, secured a record vote, winning 30.3 percent, while the Green-SPD coalition lost its majority.

The SPD, which imposed the most sweeping social attacks in the history of the Federal Republic under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and has participated in every federal government since 1998, apart from a four-year gap, has long been viewed with open hostility by the majority of the working population. It is a party of

political careerists, trade union functionaries, privileged petty-bourgeois elements and sections of the bourgeoisie.

Even more significant is the decline of the Left Party. The party fell well short of the 5 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation in Rheinland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg in spite of a sustained election campaign, and it lost 7.4 percent of its previous vote in Saxony-Anhalt, achieving, at 16.3 percent, its worst result since 1990.

In the eastern German states, the Left Party long ago assumed the role of corralling and neutralising social protest. With the support of the pseudo-left forces active in its ranks, it spouted left-wing phrases while assuming government responsibility in several states and implementing the same right-wing policies as the other bourgeois parties.

Serving as a safety valve, the Left Party ensured that social dissatisfaction could find no independent, anti-capitalist outlet. This is the main reason why the AfD is in a position to direct protest votes in a right-wing, anti-immigrant direction.

Several leading Left Party officials are increasingly adopting the AfD's nationalism. On a prime time TV talk show, Deputy AfD Chair Alexander Gauland recently praised Left Party parliamentary fraction leader Sahra Wagenknecht in the warmest manner when she spoke of "capacity limits" with regard to refugees and adopted a stance on the euro that "fit well with the AfD."

The political dangers raised by the success of the AfD must not be underestimated. For the first time in the history of the post-war Federal Republic, a party representing right-wing extremist positions has become the second-largest and third-largest party in a state parliament.

The established parties will respond by moving closer together and shifting further to the right. The CSU and leading CDU representatives are pushing for a further turn to the right on refugee policy. And since the previous coalitions have lost their majorities, new alliances will be negotiated: a coalition of the CDU, SPD and Greens in Magdeburg (Saxony-Anhalt); of the Greens and CDU in Stuttgart (Baden-Württemberg); and between the SPD, Greens and Free Democrats in Mainz (Rheinland-Palatinate). The parties are becoming interchangeable.

There is only one way to combat the political dangers arising from this political drift to the right: the building of an independent political party of the working class based on an internationalist and socialist programme directed against the source of social decline, anti-immigrant chauvinism and militarism—that is, against the capitalist system.



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