

Saarland state election serves as test run for the next German government

Marianne Arens, Ulrich Rippert
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On Sunday, state elections are being held in Saarland. Although this small state on the border with France, with just under 1 million inhabitants, does not usually make headlines, the upcoming election has generated considerable nationwide interest.

It is regarded as a test run for a possible Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Left Party or SPD-Left Party-Green Party federal coalition government in Berlin. After the SPD chose former president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz as its leading candidate, whom the media depicts as an “SPD modernizer,” the campaign for a change of government in Berlin has been stepped up a gear.

In May, two further state elections follow—on May 7 in Schleswig-Holstein and on May 14 in North Rhine-Westphalia—before Bundestag (federal parliament) elections in September.

In particular, the former Left Party chairman Oskar Lafontaine is drumming up support for a change of government in Saarland, where he was previously state premier. The 73-year-old heads the Left Party group in the Saarland state legislature. Lafontaine, who was SPD national chairman up to 1999, maintains close contact with that party. Lafontaine is also a friend of Martin Schulz.

Until recently, however, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has enjoyed a clear lead in the polls in Saarland. But the media hype about Schulz in the past weeks has also led to an upswing for the Social Democrats. As recently as January, voter surveys were predicting a CDU result of 38 percent, while the SPD, with 26 percent, lagged by 12 points. This has now changed significantly. The so-called “Schulz effect” means that the SPD is now almost on a par with the CDU. According to polling agency Infratest dimap, the SPD would now finish with 34 percent, close behind the CDU, which has fallen back to 35 percent. In other polls, both parties are running even.

In the polls, the Left Party is in third place, behind the CDU and SPD. Eight years ago, it polled more than 20 percent, mainly due to Lafontaine’s high profile in Saarland. Today, it polls around 12 or 13 percent.

With 5 percent, the Greens only just managed to get into the state legislature last time. At present, the party is polling around 4 percent—as is the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party

(FDP)—and could fail to enter the state legislature. Should the recent polls prove correct, the SPD would be able to govern in alliance with the Left Party, but without the Greens.

The incumbent CDU state premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer is showing clear signs of nervousness. This is behind her recent threats against appearances by Turkish politicians in Saarland. In a cheap attempt to win votes on the far right, Kramp-Karrenbauer last week imposed a ban on any appearances by Turkish ministers at a public meeting—even though there had been no announcement that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was sending anyone.

The CDU prime minister takes every opportunity to emphasize that the current collaboration with the SPD has been very close and successful, and that she would like to continue the grand coalition. However, the SPD’s lead candidate, Anke Rehlinger, has declined this option. Although she too speaks of the close and successful cooperation over the past years, she avoids making any statement that could be interpreted as favouring a continuation of a grand coalition, and instead speaks about a possible “left alliance.”

Along with Lafontaine, the second figurehead of the Left Party, Gregor Gysi, is also drumming up support for a state government with the SPD in Saarland. “Red-Red in Saarland would be an important signal,” he said on Wednesday to the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*. “Saarland could definitely be the first west German federal state in which the SPD and the Left Party govern together. It is the state where we get as many votes as anywhere else in the West.”

Martin Schulz has also praised Lafontaine. Almost as soon as he was elected as the new head of the SPD, he said, “I can remember when Oskar Lafontaine governed Saarland from 1985-1998 relatively successfully as state premier.” He added, Lafontaine certainly enjoys “a lot of experience” as a Saarland state politician.

Many in the media are now actively discussing the “new power option” (*Handelsblatt*) and give it a realistic chance in Saarland. While the headline in the tabloid *Bild* asked, “First change of power in election year?” the pro-Left Party newspaper *Neues Deutschland* ran with the headline “It looks like red-red in Saarland.”

Handelsblatt even devoted a double-page spread to the so-

called “left coalition,” and wrote, “Approval for the SPD, Left Party and Greens is growing as a result of the Schulz-effect. According to recent opinion polls, a left coalition is increasingly becoming a serious option. Saarland could serve as a blueprint.” Unlike a few weeks ago, a change of power now seems possible.

Last month, news weekly *Der Spiegel* had published an interview with Left Party leader Sahra Wagenknecht, who is married to Lafontaine, and is currently campaigning at his side in the Saarland election. If the SPD wanted to seriously pursue a more social policy, cooperation “would not fail due to us,” Wagenknecht said and then raved about a “centre-left coalition.”

In reality, the campaign of the Left Party, the SPD and the media is not part of a “left” project, quite the opposite. Even a cursory glance at the Left Party’s policies where it has been in government makes this very clear. Wherever it has taken on government responsibility, it has long supported cuts in the budget, social spending and the workforce. For example, the Berlin Senate (state legislature) under Klaus Wowereit (SPD), in which the Left Party participated for 10 years, was a nationwide trendsetter for ruthless austerity measures.

Particularly in Saarland, Lafontaine was known as a ruthless and cynical politician who imposed drastic cuts in welfare and social spending behind a screen of social demagoguery. During his 13 years as state premier (1985-1998), he organised the dismantlement of the coal and steel industry in close cooperation with the trade unions. The coalmines, where once 60,000 miners worked, are no more; in the steel industry, all that remains is around 6,000 workers employed mainly at the Dillinger smelter.

He combines these anti-social policies with nationalist tirades and trade war measures. For example, in the election campaign, he demanded the Saarland steel industry must be protected by tariffs “similar to those of the United States.”

At the same time, he rails against refugees and calls for faster and more consistent deportations. He told *Die Welt*, “Those who have come illegally over the border should receive an offer to return voluntarily. If they don’t accept this offer, deportation is the only option remaining. This is how the state governments in which the Left Party is involved see it.”

Lafontaine’s right-wing, xenophobic slogans are not surprising. They arise directly from the bourgeois character of the Left Party, which defends capitalism and German imperialism. The former SPD chairman and former German finance minister is one of the pioneers of an anti-refugee policy.

Already in the early 1990s, at that time still as state premier in Saarland, Lafontaine passed “emergency measures,” including the introduction of collection centres, communal catering and payments in kind, as part of a nationwide campaign against refugees. In summer 1992, Lafontaine, together with the then SPD chairman Björn Engholm, imposed the so-called “Petersburg turn”—the repositioning of the SPD on

asylum and foreign policy matters, which resulted in the de facto abolition of the right of asylum through the “asylum compromise.”

Following his resignation as SPD chair and resignation from the SPD, Lafontaine was one of the few who supported the controversial plans of Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) in 2004 to set up detention centres for refugees in Africa. A year later, he then deliberately whipped up sentiments against “foreign workers.” The state had an obligation “to prevent family men and women being unemployed because low paid foreign workers take their jobs away,” Lafontaine said in a now infamous speech in Chemnitz.

It is no coincidence that Lafontaine maintains a close friendship with Christian Social Union (CSU) right-winger Peter Gauweiler, and has published a joint column with him in the right-wing tabloid *Bild* for years. During his tenure as a minister in the Bavarian legislature in the 1980s, Gauweiler—nicknamed “Black Peter”—imposed forced testing for HIV-infected people and their segregation in special facilities. In the late 1990s, when the exhibition about the war crimes of the Wehrmacht (Hitler’s army) came to Munich, the state capital of Bavaria, Gauweiler organized a massive protest campaign. He described the exhibition as a malicious defamation of German soldiers and tried to have it banned by the courts.

A few days ago, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* drew attention to the fact that Lafontaine and Gauweiler are still friends, and quoted the CSU right-winger with the words, “Lafontaine would certainly have been a good chancellor.”

The Saarland election has a direct bearing on federal politics. It is to bring about a change of government which favours the SPD and Left Party. This will not be a “left alliance,” as is being claimed in the media. Rather, broad sections of the ruling elite regard the Merkel government as too weak and exhausted and the CDU-CSU as too divided to meet the challenge of the Trump administration, the growing transatlantic antagonisms and the break-up of the EU with a strong offensive towards German power politics.

Twenty years ago the conservative Kohl government was replaced by a “Red-Green” coalition that took over the federal government for the first time. The same government agreed the first ever post-war Bundeswehr (armed forces) missions abroad and passed the Agenda 2010 anti-welfare program. In similar manner today a red-red or red-red-green federal government in Berlin would herald a new right-wing bourgeois government.



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