

# German state election: Setback for a red-red-green coalition

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Sunday's state election in Saarland was expected to be a political litmus test following the recent takeover of the leadership of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) by Martin Schulz and a systematic campaign for cooperation with the Left Party and the Greens.

Many media outlets wrote of a political sea change in the Saar in recent weeks. The "Schulz effect" had enabled the SPD to recover ground in the state after trailing in polls 12 points behind the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) at the beginning of the year. The SPD and the CDU, which had previously led the state government in a grand coalition, were said to be on equal footing.

The result of the election, however, told a very different tale. Electoral participation rose significantly by 8 percent, from 62 to almost 70 percent, but the increased number of votes did not benefit the SPD, the Left Party or the Greens, but rather the CDU.

"The Martin Schulz effect did not manifest itself," was the comment in SpiegelOnline. The CDU gained over 5 percentage points and won over 40 percent of the vote. The SPD lost nearly 1 percent and fell below 30 percent. The Greens also lost 1 percent and failed to reach the necessary 5 percent to remain in the state parliament.

The most striking loss was suffered by the Left Party and its leading candidate in the state, Oskar Lafontaine. The Left Party, which had firmly committed itself to a government alliance with the SPD, lost over 3 percent compared to the last state election and received only 13 percent. In the summer of 2009, when it ran for the first time as the Left Party in the state, it won 21.3 percent.

The Left Party was also unable to profit from the complete collapse of the Pirate Party. The Pirate protest party had won a surprising 7.4 percent of the votes four years ago, mainly by appealing to young voters on the

basis of opposing political corruption, while promoting greater transparency and civil rights. On Sunday the party won less than 1 percent of the vote.

For its part, the xenophobic Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to enter the state parliament with over six percent. However, this figure was far behind its predicted result of 10 percent or more. The far-right party is now represented in 11 out of 16 state parliaments.

Most of the media accredited the vote for the CDU as a vote of confidence in the party's leading candidate and state premier, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. However, such a conclusion is entirely superficial. There was nothing progressive in Saar government policy that could explain such result.

The small state with its population of just under 1 million is highly indebted and has been implementing drastic austerity measures for years.

The vote was less a signal of support for the CDU administration and much more a clear rejection of the SPD, Left Party and Greens. All of the parliamentary parties maintain close links and agree on all important political issues. They work together in various coalitions at a state and local level and impose the same reactionary, anti-social policies up and down the country.

The Left Party and Oskar Lafontaine are well known for their policies in the Saarland. During his 13 years as state premier (1985-1998), he worked closely with the trade unions to ensure the rundown of the state's coal and steel industry. In the coalmines, where 60,000 miners once worked, none remain. Lafontaine combines his anti-social policies with nationalist tirades and appeals for trade warfare. In the election campaign, for example, he demanded that the steel industry in the Saarland be protected by tariffs "comparable to those of

the US.” At the same time, he agitates against refugees and calls for a faster and more consistent deportation policy.

The electorate in Saarland have made clear they do not expect any improvement in their situation from a government alliance of the SPD, Left Party and Greens. The election result confirms the warning of the WSWS: The broadly propagated “renewal of the SPD” following the change of party leadership from Sigmar Gabriel to Martin Schulz does not reflect growing popular support for the SPD. The electorate recognises the SPD for what it is: the party of Hartz IV and Agenda 2010, which has dramatically worsened working and living conditions.

The media hype surrounding Schulz is a deliberate campaign launched by influential circles of the ruling class. They are of the opinion that the Merkel government is too weak and discredited and the conservative union parties too divided to respond to the challenges of the Trump government in the US, growing transatlantic conflicts and the break-up of the EU.

The Saarland election was aimed at shifting the balance of power towards a red-red, or red-red-green coalition at a state and federal level. The plan has failed. On Sunday evening, a visibly surprised and perplexed SPD leader Schulz stood in front of cameras and announced that he would continue his campaign in the state elections in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia in May as preparation for this autumn’s federal election.



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