

German election: Where the far-right AfD won—and why

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The entry of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) into Germany's parliament last Sunday was cause for great concern, fear and anger for many people, both in Germany and beyond. While there were spontaneous protests against the AfD in numerous cities, the establishment parties and leading media outlets are trying to wash their hands of their own responsibility, placing the blame for the rise of the right on those who voted for them.

The feigned consternation of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Green Party, Free Democrats and the Left Party, and the dismissive media commentaries, however, cannot conceal who bears the real responsibility for the success of the AfD. It is significant that the AfD found important support, especially in those parts of the country and cities in which the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party had previously been, or are currently, responsible for implementing massive social cuts.

A closer look at the election results of the AfD reveals two things: on the one hand, the AfD gained votes, above all where the SPD and the Left Party also suffered massive losses. On the other hand, the vote for the AfD was, in many respects, an expression of a protest against the anti-social policy of the supposed "left-wing" parties. Under conditions of the political bankruptcy of the SPD and the Left Party, and the lack of a truly progressive alternative, this could only take a right-wing form.

Where did the AfD win?

Just a glance at the AfD's national stronghold in Saxony confirms this assessment. Twenty-seven years after the reintroduction of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, a right-wing extremist party has garnered the most votes in the most populous east German state. The AfD received 27 percent of the vote there on

Sunday, putting it just in front of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) with 26.9 percent. It is the result of a quarter-century of social cutbacks, de-industrialisation, unemployment and poverty organised and enforced by all the bourgeois parties.

In Saxony, the AfD also won three directly elected constituency seats with Frauke Petry, Tino Chrupalla and Karsten Hilse. At the same time, the SPD, largely hated for introducing the Hartz IV labour and welfare "reforms", lost almost a quarter of its support, winning just 10.5 percent of the vote. The Left Party, which is often responsible for implementing the SPD's social cuts at municipal level, lost one-fifth of its voters, winning 16.1 percent. During the last Bundestag (federal parliament) election in 2013 it had won 20 percent.

The result in neighbouring Thuringia was similar. The federal state with the first Left Party premier, Bodo Ramelow, Thuringia has the second-highest deportation rate for rejected asylum seekers in Germany. It saw both a slump in the vote for the Left Party and a massive increase in that of the AfD. The Left Party lost almost a third of its voters, winning 16.9 percent, while the AfD quadrupled its previous result. It now stands at 22.7 percent in Thuringia and has replaced the Left Party as the second-strongest force in the state. The SPD lost nearly 3 points, winning just 13.2 percent and is only the fourth-strongest party.

But the rise of the AfD is not limited to east Germany. In the west, too, it won more than 20 percent in individual electoral districts. This was particularly the case in the Ruhr area, where one in five are now regarded as poor. The SPD, responsible for organising the social decline in recent decades with the help of the trade unions, has collapsed completely in its former stronghold.

This is especially evident in Gelsenkirchen, a city in which about 40 percent of all children now live in households dependent on Hartz IV welfare handouts. Here, the AfD won 17 percent on Sunday, the party's highest result in a constituency in the former West Germany. Four years ago, just 4.7 percent had voted for the AfD. At the same time, the SPD's vote dropped sharply. It lost more than 10 points, finishing with 33.5 percent of the vote.

At 68.2 percent, turnout in Gelsenkirchen was relatively low for a German general election. Almost a third of the city's voters felt unable to support any of the parties. In some of the city's working-class neighbourhoods, turnout was much lower. For example, in the Schalke-Ost electoral district, only a little more than half bothered to vote (55.4 percent). Here, the SPD lost 13.4 points and came in at only 34.3 percent. Under these conditions, the AfD won 18.8 percent of the vote.

Similar developments can be found in most other cities in the Ruhr area. Especially in Duisburg, the AfD was able to take advantage of the plight faced by many people as a result of the policies imposed by the SPD. In the Obermarxloh electoral district, the AfD won more than 30 percent of the votes.

Who voted for the AfD—and why?

For the most part, the majority of AfD voters do not feel they have been represented by any of the major parties for years and now see the AfD as the only way to express their resentment. Thus, about 1.2 million AfD voters in 2013 did not even go to the polls. According to a survey by Infratest Dimap, about half of AfD voters (51 percent) already knew they would vote for this party before the start of the election.

The AfD also benefited from a large number of former Christian Democrat voters, about 980,000 of whom now voted for the AfD. The SPD lost 470,000 former voters to the AfD, and 400,000 former Left Party voters voted for the right-wing extremists in the recent poll. SPD and Left Party votes were lost to the AfD rather than to any other party.

As the Infratest Dimap survey shows, there are reasons for this electoral behaviour. Asked about their motives for casting a ballot for the AfD, 60 percent of its voters said that they had cast a ballot for the party out of “disappointment with the other parties.” Thus, the AfD is the only party now represented in the Bundestag that owes most its support to protest voters.

A total of 85 percent even said that the AfD was “the only party with which I can express my protest.” On the other hand, only 31 percent of AfD voters said that they had voted out of “conviction for the party.”

Many also took the decision to vote AfD just before the election. Almost one in four AfD voters (24 percent) said they had decided to vote for the party only in election week, or even on election day. And remarkably, more than half of AfD voters (51 percent) said that more must be done for the integration of refugees!

These figures show that the AfD's electorate is not simply a uniformly right-wing extremist one, despite the danger the party's entry into the Bundestag represents. On the contrary, the party is benefiting from the fact that all the other parties, including the SPD and the Left Party, are part of a united bourgeois political setup characterised by completely anti-working-class policies.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the AfD was able to achieve especially high results among workers and the unemployed. With a total share of 12.6 percent of the vote, the AfD won 22 percent among the unemployed and 21 percent among workers. It is also significant that 26 percent of AfD voters described their economic situation as “bad.” Such a high response was not found in any other parliamentary party.

The extent of the awareness of the right-wing policies of the last federal government is shown by a different figure, which resulted from a question put to all voters. When asked: “Has the federal government made a serious effort to distribute prosperity in Germany more fairly?”, 88 percent said: “No, it did not.”



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