

# State elections in Hesse mark further defeat for Germany's grand coalition

Ulrich Rippert  
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In the second state election since the formation of the Grand Coalition government in Berlin, the ruling parties in Germany once again received a severe defeat at the ballot box. As with the election two weeks ago in Bavaria, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD) lost more than 22 percentage points between them in Hesse.

The CDU, which has ruled the state of Hesse in coalition with the Greens for the last five years, lost 11.3 percent, dropping to 27 percent. This is the worst result for the Hesse CDU in over fifty years. The SPD lost 10.9 percent and slipped below the 20 percent mark.

The election result is an expression of the growing hostility towards the Grand Coalition and its right-wing policies of militarism, state repression and social austerity. After the loss of votes in Bavaria and the large-scale demonstration against their xenophobic refugee policy in Berlin, the CDU and SPD party leaders pledged they would reverse the trend in Hesse and sent top personnel into the election campaign. But the more representatives of the grand coalition there were, the more hostile the voters' reaction was.

The rejection of the grand coalition was particularly massive among young people, first-time voters and in working class areas.

This hostility towards the Berlin government finds no progressive expression in the existing party system. As a result, the votes have simply shifted around the different parliamentary parties, all of which agree on all the main political issues and work together in various federal or state government coalitions. About one hundred thousand SPD voters and 95,000 CDU voters migrated to the Greens, who have worked smoothly with the CDU over the past five years.

The Greens received 19.8 percent of the vote, an

increase of 8.7 percent, and were celebrated as the election winners. Their policies hardly differ from those of the CDU and the SPD, however. During the election campaign, they criticized the grand coalition's aggressive refugee policy and the establishment of anchor centres for accelerated deportation. That was only window dressing, however.

Wherever the Greens participate in government, the security forces are rearmed, and refugees are brutally deported. The Green mayor of Tübingen, Boris Palmer, advocated for some of the most aggressive anti-refugee policies in Greece.

The same applies to Hesse. According to media reports, almost 600 men and women were deported in the first four months of this year alone. This is 50 percent more than in the same period in 2017. Frankfurt airport is a hub for refugee deportations. The former speaker for asylum and migration policy, Mürvet Öztürk, resigned from the Green parliamentary group three years ago because the party had recognised Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo as safe countries of origin for refugees, contrary to its election promises.

In addition, the CDU and Greens in Hesse passed one of the toughest police laws in Germany. Among other things, it allows the police to penetrate smartphones and computers by means of the so-called "Hesse-Trojans", although the police are actually forbidden by law from using secret service methods.

Critical social problems received little or no attention during the election campaign, although protest rallies and demonstrations took place in many cities. In Frankfurt alone, thousands have participated in the past two months in a series of demonstrations against the grand coalition's promotion of the extreme right.

The Left Party plays a key role in blocking growing opposition to social cuts, high rents and right-wing

extremism. They focus on providing the SPD and the Greens with a left-wing cover for their right-wing policies. In Hesse, their entire election campaign was aimed at coming to power themselves in alliance with the SPD and the Greens.

While top Left Party candidate Janine Wissler emerged as a darling of the media—the right-wing *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) dedicated an article “The Charming Communist” to her—and appeared in numerous talk shows, the Left Party was punished at the ballot box. Despite the massive losses incurred by the SPD, the Left Party’s vote total of 6.3 percent was only slightly higher than five years ago. Compared to last year’s Bundestag elections, it lost 1.8 percent.

Under these conditions, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) was able to enter the state parliament of Hesse with 13.1 percent. For the first time, it is now represented in all state parliaments. In spite of the CDU’s dramatic losses, the former Prime Minister Volker Bouffier will continue to govern. The CDU and the Greens have a narrow majority of one vote; no three-party coalition excluding the CDU has a majority.

The federal government is reacting to growing popular opposition by tightening its right-wing policy. The head of the Chancellor’s Office, Helge Braun (CDU), stated that the Grand Coalition would now “focus on the subject” and “move closer together”. SPD leader Andrea Nahles announced a “binding timetable”, and SPD Secretary General Lars Klingbeil explained: “Something must change here in Berlin. I don’t think there will be any new elections.”

On Monday, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she would surrender the CDU chairmanship at the upcoming party congress in December but continue to serve as chancellor. Previously, she had insisted that the same person should occupy both offices. This is widely seen as the beginning of the end of her political career. Merkel has chaired the CDU for 18 years and led the government for 13 years.

Already on election night, media commentators were calling for Merkel’s withdrawal. “Chancellor Angela Merkel will have to bear the consequences,” wrote *Spiegel Online*.

“The Merkel brand has worn itself out, that’s one of the messages from Hesse,” commented the FAZ: “It would be a mistake for Angela Merkel to run again for

CDU party chair. But does the Chancellor hear the signals?”

Behind the scenes, there is obviously also a discussion about integrating the AfD into future governments. One day before the election, *Der Spiegel* had portrayed Björn Höcke, who is on the far right of the AfD, as a kind, sensitive politician in a six-page report in its print edition that quoted extensively from his new book.

The election results in Hesse once again make clear the significance of the fight to build the Socialist Equality Party (SGP). It is the only party fighting for a socialist program directed against capitalism and based on an independent movement of the working class. Without expropriating the large banks, corporations and assets, and without orienting economic life towards the needs of society rather than the profit interests of capital, not a single social problem can be solved.



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