

German right-wing and far-right parties suffer defeat in Hamburg state election

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The Hamburg state election on Sunday gave a distorted expression to the widespread opposition to right-wing extremism in Germany. Four days after a right-wing terrorist attack claimed nine lives in Hanau, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Free Democrats (FDP), the parties that formed an alliance with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to elect the minister president in Thuringia, lost large numbers of votes.

The Christian Democratic Union was hit hardest, recording its second worst state election result in history, with just 11.2 percent of the vote. The only time the party received a lower percentage of the vote was in Bremen in 1951, when it secured 9.1 percent of the ballots. Compared to its 2016 result of 15.9 percent, which was its worst ever in Hamburg until Sunday, the CDU lost another 4.7 percentage points. The CDU's best result ever came in 2004, when the party won 47.2 percent.

The CDU federal leadership responded to the electoral debacle Monday by calling an extraordinary party congress for 25 April to choose a successor to outgoing federal party leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer. The new CDU leader is likely to become the candidate to replace Angela Merkel as chancellor in 2021 at the latest.

The Free Democrats lost 2.4 percentage points, meaning the party narrowly missed out on being represented in the new state senate. With 5.3 percent of the vote, the AfD just made it over the 5 percent hurdle for representation in the senate. In 2015, the AfD took 6.1 percent.

The Social Democrats (SPD) emerged as the strongest party, with 39 percent of the vote. But with a 6.6 percentage point decline in its vote, the SPD suffered the biggest drop of any party. Nonetheless, it celebrated the result as a victory. Polls several months ago had projected much larger losses, and the SPD at the federal level is currently polling at just 14 percent.

The biggest winners were the Greens, who increased their vote from 12.3 percent to 24.2 percent. The Left

Party also recorded a slight increase of 0.6 percentage points, finishing with 9.1 percent of the vote. Voter turnout was relatively low at 63.3 percent, but this was still a significant increase from 2015, when just 56.5 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

The Greens were able to benefit from being perceived as opponents of the AfD, even though they implement a similarly right-wing policy. Among first-time voters, aged 16 to 21, the Greens were by far the strongest party, finishing with 35 percent, compared to the SPD's 24 percent and the Left Party's 12 percent. Among this group, the AfD received just 3 percent.

The Greens also benefited from the urgency of the climate change issue. Two days prior to the election, Fridays for Future organised a large demonstration attended by Greta Thunberg from Sweden. The police estimated the crowd at 20,000, while the organizers said 60,000 attended.

By contrast, the SPD is largely a party of retirees. It obtained its best result, 59 percent, among voters over the age of 70.

Hamburg has long been considered an SPD stronghold. Since the end of World War II, the SPD has always held the position of mayor, apart from 1953-1957 and 2001-2011. The Hamburg SPD was typically more right-wing than the federal party and enjoyed the backing of the city's bourgeoisie.

The party's dominant figure for many years was Helmut Schmidt, who as German chancellor in 1975 initiated the turn towards gutting public spending and social services that has continued until today, and enforced NATO's decision to station nuclear-capable intercontinental missiles in Germany in the face of widespread opposition in 1979.

Peter Tschentscher, the outgoing and incoming mayor, took over the post two years ago from Olaf Scholz, who joined the federal grand coalition government as finance

minister and vice chancellor and has implemented the same strict austerity agenda as that imposed by his predecessor Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU) ever since.

Scholz ordered a ruthless police crackdown against anti-G20 protesters in July 2017 and initiated a European-wide campaign against alleged “left-wing extremists,” which put several young people behind bars for acts of petty crime.

The Greens, who have governed in a coalition with the SPD over the past five years, supported all of this. Deputy Mayor Katharina Fegebank, who led the Green Party’s campaign, explicitly endorsed the police intervention to impose the return of AfD founder Berndt Lucke to Hamburg University in the face of student resistance. She condemned the student protests against Lucke as “injustice in its purest form.”

The Greens are a party of the privileged middle class. The party gained most in well-off inner city neighbourhoods, as well as some districts associated with alternative lifestyle milieus. In some wealthy areas they beat the SPD to become the strongest party. However, they won little support among workers and poorer sections of the population.

The Greens’ reputation as an environmentally friendly, democratic party is a myth. In the state of Hesse, where the terrorist attack in Hanau and the murder of Kassel District President Walter Lübcke took place, and where neo-Nazi groups are closely intertwined with the intelligence service, the Greens have governed in a coalition with the CDU for five years and helped conceal the right-wing conspiracy within the state.

The defeat for the CDU, the FDP and the AfD in Hamburg will not change the course of their politics. The SPD and Greens plan to continue their alliance, which has carried out law-and-order initiatives that have strengthened the right-wing conspiracy in the state apparatus and given succour to the AfD.



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