Germany’s conservative CDU wins state election in Schleswig-Holstein

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Just six weeks after the Social Democratic Party (SPD) scored an electoral victory in the German state of Saarland, the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) took first place by a wide margin in last weekend’s state election in Schleswig-Holstein. The CDU gained 11.4 percent compared to the last state election and, with a total of 43.4 percent of votes cast, missed a majority in the state parliament by just one seat.

The big election loser in the state was the SPD, which lost 11.3 percentage points and came in third with 16.0 percent behind the Greens (18.3 percent). It is the worst ever election result for the Social Democrats in Germany’s most northern state. The Greens, who previously governed the state with the CDU and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in a so-called “Jamaica coalition,” gained 5.4 percentage points, equivalent to about the percentage lost by the FDP, which slumped to just 6.4 percent of votes cast.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), which had entered the state parliament with 5.9 percent in the last election, received just 4.4 percent, i.e., less than the 5 percent necessary for representation, and lost a place in a state parliament for the first time in the party’s history. The Left Party halved its result, from 3.8 to 1.7 percent, and also failed to clear the 5 percent hurdle. The SSW, the party of the Danish minority in the state, for which this barrier does not apply, gained votes and obtained 5.7 percent for the first time.

In the past, state election results were often indicators of longer term national political trends, but the rapid turnaround of electoral fortunes within just six weeks demonstrates that they are increasingly determined by random and secondary factors.

The issues that concern the vast majority of the electorate in Germany—the consequences of the pandemic, skyrocketing prices and rents, job insecurity and the threat of world war—were not up to be voted upon. All of the parties on the ballot advocate the same anti-working class policies on these issues. The Greens and the FDP, who governed in Schleswig-Holstein in an alliance with the CDU for the last five years, do the same on the national level in an alliance with the SPD. In all other federal states, the same four parties—plus the Left Party—govern in a multitude of political combinations.

On Sunday evening, the outgoing and future State Premier Daniel Günther (CDU) never tired of emphasising the contribution of the Greens and the FDP to the success of his government. He expressed disappointment that he now has to choose between his party’s former coalition partners. He even left open the possibility of continuing the former three-party coalition, although this would not be necessary to ensure a parliamentary majority and would be a political first.

Most media commentaries accredit Günther personally, who enjoys the highest popularity ratings of all state premiers in opinion polls, for the CDU’s electoral success.

In fact, Günther is not the most popular but rather the least unpopular prime minister. In his five years in office he has managed to cause as little offence as possible. “Imperturbable,” “predictable,” “balanced,” “unambitious” are the most frequent adjectives used to describe him. In fact, the apparent stability surrounding his electoral success resembles the calm before a storm.

Even the election results themselves are by no means as clear-cut as they first appeared. Of the 2.3 million eligible voters in the state, almost 920,000 did not go to the polls, i.e., significantly more than the 856,000 who voted for the two strongest parties, the CDU and the

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Greens. At 60.4 percent, voter turnout was 4 percentage points lower than five years ago.

The CDU and SPD both scored heavily with older voters, who make up a high proportion due to demographic trends. About a quarter of the state's inhabitants are over 65 years old, and the trend is rising. Among the over-70s, the CDU won 55 percent and the SPD 20 percent. Among 16- to 24-year-olds (the voting age in Schleswig-Holstein is 16), the Greens picked up the most with 26 percent. The party also won 27 percent of the voters with a "higher level education."

With 2.9 million inhabitants, Schleswig-Holstein is one of Germany's smaller federal states. In common with all of the country's states, it is plagued by deep social divisions. During the pandemic, the state played a leading role in pushing through the official "profits before lives" policy. The Schleswig-Holstein Education Minister Karin Prien (CDU) was president of the Standing Conference of State Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs. She was committed to enforcing a policy of mass contamination of schools and accused critics of her policy of fueling a "culture of fear."

At 5 percent, the unemployment rate in Schleswig-Holstein is in line with the national average. However, since the state has little industry and is heavily dependent on tourism, many workers are employed in low paid jobs. In 2018 (the most recent year listed in the government's social report), 24.1 percent of all full-time employees—32.7 percent of women and 19.9 percent of men—were active in low-wage jobs. In the rest of West Germany, the average is much lower at 18.6 percent.

At the end of 2019, 262,000 people, or 9 percent of the state's population, received minimum income benefits. For children and young people under the age of 18, the proportion was 15.6 percent, and for people without German nationality 38.4 percent. The poverty rate was 15.9 percent in 2018.

Rising rents and an inflation rate approaching 10 percent are exacerbating these social divisions. Rents in the state are extremely high, especially in the university cities of Kiel and Lübeck, and in the region around the separate city-state of Hamburg. Many commuters from Hamburg, where newly rented apartments now exceed 14 euros per square metre, have been forced to move to neighbouring Schleswig-Holstein.

A social explosion is brewing in the region that will inevitably bring broad sections of the population into conflict with all of the established parties. The latter are correspondingly nervous. The next state election will be held in North Rhine-Westphalia this coming Sunday, with the CDU and the SPD currently in a neck-and-neck race in Germany's most populous federal state. The Greens are expected to tip the balance in forming a government.

Robert Habeck, who was deputy premier in Kiel before moving to Berlin and becoming vice-chancellor in Olaf Scholz's "traffic-light" coalition, congratulated his former coalition partner "Daniel" on Sunday evening and offered his party, the Greens, as a coalition partner. The "Jamaica coalition" in Schleswig-Holstein had proven that "conservative and modernising forces" work well together and are "conservative when it comes to values and progressive at the same time," Habeck said.

The FDP made clear it would be available for a two-party alliance with the CDU as well. The SPD also congratulated Günther for "a clear mandate for another term in office."

In order to suppress growing popular resistance to war and social cuts, Germany's political parties are closing ranks and working ever more closely together.

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