

Success for the SPD in Lower Saxony

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The CDU (36% of the vote against 42.5% in the previous election) won the local election in Lower Saxony on 20 January. Together with the FDP (9.9%, previously 8.2%) it gained a total of 68 seats. However, this will not allow the present coalition to continue its rule. The new cabinet will be formed by the SPD (32.6%, previously 30.3%) and the Green Party (13.7%, previously 8%). These parties won a total of 69 seats. Stephan Weil (SPD) will be the prime minister of this federal state.

Lower Saxony is one of only four federal states to have as many as six votes in the Bundesrat, the upper house of the German parliament. Local elections are essential from the point of view of federal politics and often have an impact on the outcome of federal elections. The new coalition in Lower Saxony will see a change in the balance of power in the Bundesrat to the benefit of the Social Democrats and the Greens who, along with the Left Party, will have a majority of the seats there.

Commentary

- For the SPD, the formation of a local government coalition with the Greens (whose position has strengthened owing to them focusing their campaign on issues of environmental protection and the energy transformation) is a chance for a new beginning in the election campaign to the Bundestag, which has so far been unsuccessful. In the past few weeks, support levels for the Social Democrats in public opinion polls were at their lowest (23%) since July 2011. This was partly a consequence of unfortunate statements made by the SPD's candidate for chancellor, Peer Steinbrück, concerning Chancellor Merkel's low wage and gender, as well as controversies over Steinbrück's high charges for lectures given to financial institutions. The SPD will use its majority in the Bundesrat to move part of the political debate to the upper house of the German parliament and to block and delay governmental initiatives. However, the present government coalition will be able to overcome the Bundesrat's resistance, because it still holds a majority of the seats in the Bundestag.
- The change of government in Lower Saxony means another defeat for the Christian Democrats in regional elections, where the CDU has been regularly losing support. The popularity of the CDU's main candidate in local elections (pre-election forecasts promised David McAllister a 39% level of support) did not transfer into the overall result

achieved by this party, which is not a good sign for the Christian Democrats. In its campaign preceding the federal elections in September this year the CDU is mainly pinning its hopes on the great popularity of Angela Merkel allowing it to attract new voters.

- The good result which the FDP achieved against all expectations was partly an effect of support from a section of the CDU's electorate (voters have two votes, and indicated individual candidates from the CDU and the party list of the FDP). It has enabled its leader, Philipp Rosler, to make an attempt to settle the staffing crisis which has been seen inside the FDP over the past few months. Rosler, who had been receiving continuous criticism, stepped out of the limelight during the election campaign to the Bundestag and indicated the leader of the FDP's parliamentary faction, Rainer Bruderle (one of his major rivals inside the party), was the key figure in the election campaign. These changes are to be adopted at the party conference, which has been brought forward to March. The end of the staffing debate is expected to help the Liberals regain support at the federal level (at present it stands at 4%), which would create the opportunity for the CDU/CSU and FDP coalition to be continued after the elections in Germany.