

State elections in Germany – the CDU is weakened and Merkel is strengthened

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On 13th March elections were held for the state parliaments in Baden-Wurttemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt. In all three states the elections were won by the incumbent ministers-president; however, changes in coalitions will be necessary. Voting patterns were impacted, above all, by local conditions and the strong position of regional party leaders. The results of the elections also reflect the reaction to federal politics and are one of the more important tests for the party ahead of the Bundestag elections in 2017. They have laid bare the relative weakness of traditional parties confronted with protest parties which are channelling social discontent. The anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD) succeeded in securing a good result in all three federal states due to its criticism of Angela Merkel's migration policy. Paradoxically, the elections also revealed Angela Merkel's strength and the fact that nobody is able to challenge her leadership in the party. Therefore, the election results, although unsatisfactory for the CDU, will not prompt a change in the policy the chancellor has been pursuing so far. The local elections are also another alarm bell for the SPD which succeeded in maintaining power in one state but witnessed a large loss of its electorate in the other two.

The CDU's shattered hopes

The election results (see Appendix) across the country are disappointing for Angela Merkel's party. In September 2015 opinion polls conducted by the public opinion research centre Infratest dimap predicted a clear victory for the CDU (40% in Baden-Wurttemberg, 41% in Rhineland-Palatinate and 34% in Saxony-Anhalt). The CDU were particularly keen on regaining power in Baden-Wurttemberg which they consider to be their bastion (the CDU governed the state uninterruptedly between 1953 and 2011). Two factors led to the CDU's clearly poorer results. Above all, it was the loss of voters to the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD) in protests against Chancellor Angela Merkel's migration policy. Secondly, the losses might have been smaller if Julia Klöckner and Guido Wolf (chairpersons of the CDU respectively in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wurttemberg) had not decided to visibly distance themselves from Merkel in the final weeks of the campaign. This move did not lead to a return of those voters who had already found their representation in the AfD and it discouraged those who were nevertheless in favour of the chancellor's policies. This was particularly visible in Baden-Wurttemberg where the leader of the Green Party and the state's minister-president Winfried Kretschmann made a declaration of unconditional support for Merkel which brought him more voters. Interestingly, according

to opinion polls regarding the federal elections, the CDU enjoy larger support in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate (respectively 40% and 39%) than they garnered in the state elections. This proves that the results of the local elections do not fully reflect support for the party at the federal level. The good results of the CDU are also a manifestation of sympathy for Angela Merkel. Therefore, despite the disappointment with the results of the elections, the chancellor's position remains unthreatened. Furthermore, the defeat of Julia Klöckner in Rhineland-Palatinate has eliminated her as a potential leader of the conservative opposition against Merkel within the CDU and shatters (at least for now) her ambitions to play an important role in the party at the federal level. Nor should it be expected that the results of the election will provide the impetus for a change in the government's migration policy.

The sinking of the SPD

Germany's vice-chancellor and the leader of the SPD Sigmar Gabriel will be faced with a much more difficult situation within his party. As opinion polls showed, the SPD's victory in Rhineland-Palatinate, where the SPD has been winning for 25 years, was possible due to the fact that on 21st February Julia Klöckner distanced herself from Angela Merkel's migration policy. The state's minister-president, Malu Dreyer (SPD), on the other hand defended the chancellor's measures, which led to a fall in support for the CDU and increase in support for the SPD. However, at the federal level it can be clearly seen that Social Democrats are undergoing a deep crisis. They are not able to cross the 25% threshold of support despite the fact that they continue delivering on the promises they made in the electoral campaign in 2013 (including the minimum wage, gender parity in businesses, a liberalisation of regulations regarding dual citizenship). However, the SPD has not yet regained the confidence of left-leaning voters following painful welfare and labour market reforms (Agenda 2010), which were carried out by Gerhard Schröder (SPD) from 2003. On the other hand, Sigmar Gabriel's contradictory measures and statements with regard to the migration crisis indicate that the present SPD leader sees the only chance for his party as lying in attempts to weaken Angela Merkel's position. This tactic has been failing for several years and the chancellor's popularity remains at a high level (54% according to an opinion poll conducted on 29th February for the TV station ARD). The fact that the SPD is a minor coalition party in already the second grand coalition with Chancellor Angela Merkel at the helm does not have a positive impact on the party's approval ratings.

AfD – a temporary resurgence?

The anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) has emerged as the largest winner in the elections. The party already has representation in the parliaments of eight of the 16 German federal states. This may herald the party's success in the Bundestag elections in 2017, however, on the condition that the migration crisis (or another crisis of this scale) continues and stirs the emotions of public opinion. The AfD, which was established in 2013 as an anti-establishment party contesting the principles of the eurozone, later evolved towards an anti-immigration party. In September 2015 opinion polls gave the AfD a level of support ranging from 3% to 5% in the three states; at the federal level the party was doomed to vanish from the political scene (following a split in July 2015 and its co-founder, Bernd Lucke, leaving the

party). The same features of the AfD which have led to the party's revival largely threaten its existence. The AfD is a typical protest party which effectively channels voters' vehement discontent with the measures undertaken by the government (either regarding the eurozone or the migration crisis) by drawing attention to the issues that other parties overlook. The fluctuation in support for the AfD reveals, however, that it does not have a solid electorate which identifies itself with it.

The AfD's victory or defeat in the elections depends to a large extent on external factors, not the party's official platform. The party's position on specific issues is rather developed ad hoc and is often a sum of the declarations of its leaders. Permanent slogans used by AfD politicians include opposition to the establishment, demands for citizens to have an increased impact on decision making in politics and a stronger role of nation states in the EU (hence the AfD's position on the migration crisis and its pro-Russian attitude).

Angela Merkel treats the AfD's success as a consequence of volatile voters who mobilise under specific conditions and, according to opinion polls, may constitute up to 17% of the electorate. The German chancellor deliberately avoids perceiving AfD voters as her final electorate and she is not making any gestures to persuade them to vote for the CDU. Instead, she is focused on winning over centre-leaning voters (also those close to the Green Party). For these reasons the CDU is deliberately ignoring the AfD and refusing to appear with representatives of the party in political TV programmes; they reproach the AfD for its radicalism and unequivocally distance themselves from the opinions and proposals offered by them. So far the elections with the participation of Angela Merkel have shown that this strategy is politically much more efficient. However, the strategy is underpinned by the assumption that all shifts to the right in voters' sympathies are temporary as are the crises which provoke them. The continued migration crisis may, however, challenge this assumption.

Appendix

- In **Baden-Württemberg** the Green Party, led by Winfried Kretschmann, won the elections with 30.3% of the vote (6.1% more than in 2011). The CDU came in second with 27% of the vote (losing 12 percentage points). The anti-immigration and conservative Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained 15.1%, against the SPD poor result of 12.7% (a fall of 10.4 percentage points). Also the FPD succeeded in entering parliament in Stuttgart, securing 8.3% of the vote (3 percentage points up from than five years ago). Turnout stood at 70.4% (in 2011 it was 66.2%). Despite a landslide victory for the Green Party the present coalition with the SPD does not have a sufficient majority. In terms of numbers of seats the following coalitions are therefore possible: Greens-CDU, Greens-SPD-FDP (Ampel-Koalition) and CDU-SPD-FDP (Deutschland-Koalition). Judging by the initial post-election declarations, the green-black coalition (Greens-CDU) seems the most likely. Another state (following Hesse) governing in this configuration would also provide an argument for similar co-operation at the federal level after the elections in 2017.

- In **Rhineland-Palatinate** the SPD won the election with 36.2% of the vote (0.5 percentage points more than in 2011). The CDU, who several weeks ago seemed certain to win according to opinion polls, garnered 31.8% of the vote (3.4 percentage points fewer than in

the previous election). 12.6% of voters supported the AfD, 6.2% voted for the FDP (2 percentage points more), 5.3% for the Green Party (10.1 percentage points fewer). Turnout was 70.4% (in 2011 it was 61.8%). Also in this state the present SPD-Greens coalition lost their majority. The head of the SPD in Rhineland-Palatinate, Malu Dreyer, will have to choose one of two possible options: an SPD-CDU coalition or an SPD-FDP-Greens coalition.

- In **Saxony-Anhalt** the CDU led by the state's minister-president, Reiner Haseloff won the elections with 29.8% (losing 2.7 percentage points). The AfD came in second with 24.2% of the vote. The Left Party had 16.3% (losing 7.4 percentage points), the SPD – 10.6% (losing 10.9 percentage points), the Greens – 5.2% (losing 1.9 percentage points). Turnout stood at 61.1% (in 2011 it was 51.2%). In this configuration Reiner Haseloff is forced to co-opt the Green Party to the present grand coalition.