

Election in Hesse and Merkel's abdication as head of the CDU

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An election to the parliament of the federal state of Hesse was held on 28 October in Germany. The CDU – which has governed this federal state uninterruptedly since 1999 – maintained first position. The Christian Democrats led by Minister President Volker Bouffier garnered 27% of the votes, however, sustaining major losses when compared to the preceding election in 2013 (-11.3 percentage points). The Green Party and the SPD each had support of 19.8%. For the Green Party, which has co-governed Hesse for five years, this means a significant increase in support (+8.7 p.p.), and for the Social Democrats a clear decrease (-10.9 p.p.). The national conservative Alternative for Germany, which was supported by 13.1% of residents of Hesse (+9 p.p.), will also enter the Landtag. This party will thus have representatives in all sixteen federal state parliaments of Germany. The support for the Liberals from the FDP reached 7.5% (+2.5 p.p.), and for the Left Party 6.3% (+1.1 p.p.). Voter turnout was lower than five years earlier and reached 67.3% (-5.9 p.p.).

The CDU-Green Party coalition, which governed the federal state before the election, managed to achieve a majority that will enable it to form the government. In the local parliament in Wiesbaden both groupings will have a total of 69 of the 137 seats. This does not offer a stable majority but the previous cabinet had a good reputation. According to polls, the largest group of this federal state's residents who took part in the poll (45%) would like the CDU-Green Party coalition to continue governing the state.

In response to the poor result achieved by the Christian Democrats in Hesse, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she would not seek re-election as the CDU's head at the party congress on 7–8 December this year. However, she pointed out that she would like to continue leading the federal government until the end of the term in 2021 and, after it ends, she would not seek any political position.

Commentary

- The election result is not a reflection of the evaluation of the local government's work but is rather an expression of dissatisfaction with the federal government's work – scandals (e.g. diesel emissions) and personal conflicts between the CDU, the CSU and the SPD. The local parliamentary election in Hesse was treated as a referendum – according to public opinion polls, half of the respondents wanted to 'give a lesson' to the government in Berlin. This means that the CDU and the SPD will have to make prompt changes and call some of its members to account. Both parties want to prevent a further decline in support, especially ahead of the election to the European Parliament and local

parliaments in four federal states (Bremen, Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia) scheduled for 2019 in Germany.

- The pressure on Chancellor Merkel to assume responsibility for the continuing decline in support for the CDU caused her to unexpectedly withdraw from seeking re-election as party leader. However, Merkel intends to remain the head of government, even though she clearly emphasised so far that the party leader must also take responsibility for governing the country. Those who currently stand the greatest chance of becoming the CDU head are: the incumbent secretary general of the party Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the minister of healthcare Jens Spahn (who is also the leader of the internal opposition against Merkel, and the minister president of North Rhine-Westphalia, (Germany's most populous federal state) Armin Laschet. Friedrich Merz, the former leader of the CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag, who has long been in conflict with Angela Merkel, is also considering the option of putting forward his candidacy.
- There are serious doubts as to whether Merkel will survive as chancellor until the end of the term. The situation inside the SPD is an essential factor adding to the instability. The result achieved by this party in Hesse during this election was the worst since 1946. It is still trying to distance itself from the government it co-forms in Berlin but at the same time does not want to leave it and has ruled out any reshuffles inside the party. At present, it appears that only what will happen next to the minister of Internal Affairs Horst Seehofer is known; he will most likely lose his position of president of the Bavarian CSU.
- The Green Party is the biggest winner of the election in Hesse. Regardless of the final makeup of the coalition, this party will have a stronger say as regards the government's agenda during the coming term. The Green Party, even though it started as a protest movement, at present represents the liberal big city electorate. This grouping has been successfully taking over the electorate of both the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats. Hesse has for years been viewed as a federal state where political experiments are tested which are later successfully implemented at the federal level. It is in this federal state that the first SPD-Green Party coalition was formed as well as the first CDU-Green Party coalition which survived for an entire term and enjoys high support. It cannot be ruled out that these parties will also form a coalition on the federal level after the next election to the Bundestag (including if it is a snap election).