

Bremen: SPD fails in a bastion of the left

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On 26 May, together with the elections to the European Parliament, elections were held to the regional parliament in Bremen, the smallest German state. These were the first of four elections to regional parliaments in Germany which are scheduled this year. From the exit polls it appears that – for the first time since 1946 – the CDU has won Bremen with 26.3% (3.9 percentage points up on 2015). Second place went to the SPD, which had ruled since 1946, with 25.3% (down 7.5 pp). The Greens, their coalition partners in the state, gained 17.5% (up 2.4 pp); the Left (*die Linke*) were supported by 10.8% of voters (up 1.3 pp), and the AfD got 6.3% (up 0.8 pp). The liberal FDP also made it into the regional parliament, gaining 6% (down 0.6 pp). Voter turnout was 68.3% (compared to 50.2% in 2015; people over the age of sixteen have the right to vote). The election result will not change the balance of power in the *Bundesrat*, in which none of the grand coalition's parties has a majority.

Commentary

- The exit polls (the official results will only be announced on 29 May) mean the end of the SPD's coalition with the Greens. The new government will probably be formed by the SPD and the Greens together with the Left party, which would guarantee a stable coalition of 47 deputies in the 84-seat parliament. This solution is made more likely by the Greens' strong leftist profile in Bremen, their opposition to cooperation with the Liberals, and the Left's pragmatic approach, including with regard to budget policy. If the Left does join the government, it would be the first coalition in which they have participated in a western *Bundesland*. A less likely scenario is the creation of a government led by a Christian Democratic Prime Minister, which would be the first of its kind since 1946. A so-called 'Jamaica coalition' of the CDU, the FDP and the Greens could count on 46 seats. The SPD has ruled out forming a grand coalition with the CDU.
- The SPD's poor results in traditionally left-wing Bremen reflect the decline in support for the Social Democrats at the federal level; they are paying the price for forming another grand coalition with the Christian Democrats in the *Bundestag* elections in 2017. The SPD's failure was also rooted in the passive attitude of Carsten Sieling, the previous mayor of Bremen; this encouraged some of the SPD's voters to switch their votes to the CDU (around 10,000) and the Greens (around 5000). The SPD's result, its worst since 1946, will raise the pressure from the leadership (or the presidency of the parliamentary faction, at least), on Andrea Nahles, the national president of the Social Democrats, to resign – especially in the context of the upcoming autumn elections to the regional

parliaments in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia.

- The CDU owes its historic victory in Bremen not only to the SPD's weakness, but above all to the effective campaign led by their new leader, Carsten Meyer-Heder. He has only been a member of the CDU since 2018, having previously run an IT company. The CDU's campaign was targeted at the younger generation and emphasised the non-political professional experience of its main candidate. As a result, the Christian Democrats were able to attract people who had not voted before.
- Despite the internal divisions within the AfD in Bremen, and the main candidate Frank Magnitz's known sympathy for the radical wing of the *Flügel* party (which the state's counter-intelligence has been monitoring), the party did slightly strengthen its position. The EP elections have shown that outside Brandenburg the group is also the strongest political force in Saxony; it won 25.3%, coming ahead of the CDU (23%) which had hitherto run the region. In Thuringia, which is governed by the Left, the AfD won 22.5%, falling slightly behind the CDU (24.7%).