

SPD wins in Lower Saxony

Kamil Frymark

On 9 October, the SPD won the Lower Saxony (population of 8 million) parliamentary election. The party has the federal state's incumbent Minister-President Stephan Weil, and won 33.4% of the vote (3.5 points down on the previous election in 2017), which will translate into 57 of the 146 seats in the state parliament. Second place went to the previously co-ruling CDU with 28.1% of the vote (-5.5 points), securing 47 seats. The Greens received 14.5% of the vote (+5.8 points), gaining them 24 seats. The AfD will also enter the parliament (10.9%, +4.7 points, 18 seats). The parties that failed to make the five per cent election threshold included the FDP (4.7%, -2.8 points) and the Left (2.7%, 1.9 points). Turnout was 2.8 points lower than in 2017, at 60.3%.

Commentary

- The victory of the Social Democrats and the good result of the Greens make the formation of a stable coalition possible – this coalition already governed Lower Saxony from 2013 to 2017. Such an arrangement is preferred by both the SPD and the Greens, as well as by the largest portion of voters (42%, a poll by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen centre for ZDF TV on 9 October). Weil's third consecutive term as minister-president will be made possible by his high popularity and an effective election campaign tailored for him. He was far more recognisable and rated higher (in terms of competence and credibility, among other things) than his CDU challenger. In a direct election, Weil would be chosen by 55% of respondents, while a Christian Democratic politician would be elected by 26%. The prime minister's performance was viewed positively by 71% of respondents, including 87% of Green supporters, 88% of FDP supporters and 65% of potential CDU voters. Weil also presented himself as a proven leader of the state in times of crisis (37% of respondents indicated that he would perform this function better than the CDU leader). Federal issues dominated the campaign themes, including primarily issues of access to energy, as well as its high prices and rising inflation. Respondents credited the SPD with being most competent in addressing the state's key problems.
- The election in Lower Saxony was seen in Germany as the most serious test of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's policies. The next state elections will not be held until next year – in Bavaria and Hesse. The SPD's success will strengthen the chancellor, who actively supported Weil in the campaign. Had the SPD lost here, it would have been the third in the state elections this year – after Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) – and would have increased pressure on Scholz. 62% of those surveyed are dissatisfied with his performance (5 October poll conducted by the Infratest dimap centre for ARD television). The victory will reassure the Social Democrats and the Greens that

the steps taken in anti-inflation policy and the energy crisis at the federal level are effective. Most supporters of these parties (60% of the SPD's supporters and 67% of the Greens', respectively) have a positive view of the federal government's performance.

- The immediate consequences of the CDU's weakest result in Lower Saxony since 1955 will be borne by the chairman of the party's regional structures, Bernd Althusmann. He has already announced his resignation from the post, which will most likely lead to a generational change in the party's leadership. The CDU's defeat will not fundamentally affect their work in the Bundestag, but will weaken their influence and representation in the Bundesrat. The party will only co-govern in 7 of the 16 Landtags, and the grand coalition in power in Lower Saxony was the last such alliance at the Bundesland level.
- Despite the very good result and likely cooperation in another state government (the 12th out of 16), the Greens have not hidden their disappointment with the election results. In the summer, regional support for them stood at 22%. The weaker-than-expected result was influenced by the party's declining popularity at the federal level (currently about 20% of Germans intend to vote for them). Moreover, unlike in North Rhine-Westphalia, where it was recently successful, in the current election campaign it did not expand its profile to other groups of the electorate, but focused on left-wing voters. Lower Saxony is the motherland of the Greens – it is where they have successfully built their identity on the basis of the anti-nuclear power movement since the 1970s. Current considerations by Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck about the possible extension of two of Germany's three nuclear units still in operation have negatively affected the party's popularity. As in other states, the Greens also enjoy high support in Lower Saxony among voters aged 18-29 (20%, just behind the SPD's 22%) and those with higher education (27%, second only to the SPD's 28%).
- The FDP's poor result will increase tensions in the coalition at the federal level. Its weak result dovetails with the declining trend in nationwide German support for the FDP (currently at around 7%, compared to 11.5% in the Bundestag elections). Unlike the SPD and Greens, most FDP supporters are dissatisfied with the work of the federal government (68%), and the party's chairman Christian Lindner is the least popular of the coalition leaders. Another defeat (after this year's elections in [Saarland](#), [Schleswig-Holstein](#) and [North Rhine-Westphalia](#)) and low poll results will force the FDP to take on a more confrontational course in fiscal and energy policy. In order to escape accusations of sectoral incompetence, FDP leaders will continue to blame the Greens, especially Vice Chancellor and Economy Minister Habeck, for irregularities in the preparation of successive shield packages that insufficiently take into account potential FDP voters.
- The AfD's success has halted this party's downward trend in popularity (the first improvement in results in more than two years) and will strengthen its leaders at the federal level. The triumph is all the more significant because it involves a major federal state in the west of Germany, where support for the party is traditionally lower than in the east. The extreme right party's very good result is primarily due to winning over the protest electorate. Most of its supporters (52%) voted for it due to their disappointment with the attitudes of other political options regarding, among other things, rising prices (97% of AfD voters are concerned about loss of income), the energy crisis (81%) and the influx of immigrants (94%). The party won over 80,000 existing CDU supporters and

60,000 SPD supporters, among others. The regular demonstrations it has organised since the beginning of September, gathering several thousand participants in the eastern states, including Berlin, have a mobilising effect on its electorate. The quelling of personnel disputes and conflicts over its future course has also contributed to their success (for more details see [‘Nowe władze AfD: w kierunku regionalnej partii protestu’](#)). In the face of the Left Party’s failures, the AfD’s consolidation allows it to present itself as the only effective protest party. In Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, the AfD is leading in the polls, and in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern it is in second place.