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Election Special

A series of elections over the past months has underlined the complexity of German politics today. State elections in Saarland, Brandenburg, and Saxony as well as a regional election of county and city parliaments in Germany's largest state, Northrhine-Westphalia, brought no significant change in political leadership but amounted to a major wave of protest against the policies of the Social Democratic and the Christian Democratic parties. Strategists and "spindoctors" are still trying to make sense of the results, but a trend is identifiable: **Chancellor Schroeder's** troubled SPD is consolidating on a (very) low level while **Angela Merkel's** CDU experienced a fall from grace—or at least from the high poll numbers it enjoyed during the summer. This "election special" will provide the detailed numbers of the four elections, including immediate reactions and analyses of the results. A concluding paragraph will summarize the effects of the elections on national politics in Berlin.

**I. Saarland**

On September 5, CDU *Ministerpraesident* (governor) **Peter Mueller** defended his absolute majority in the small south-western state of Saarland. The SPD reached its worst result in forty years, Green Party and Liberals managed to return to the parliament after failing to do so five years ago. The results: CDU 47.5% (+2.0%), SPD 30.8 (-13.6), Greens 5.6 (+2.4), FDP 5.2% (+2.6), Others 10.9% (+6.7). Voter turnout: 55.5% (-13.2). Among the others, the right-wing radicals of the National Party of Germany (NPD) stand out with 4.0% of the vote, foreshadowing their success in the Brandenburg and Saxony elections.

**Mr. Mueller** said his victory was the result of the good work of his administration, but most analysts attributed the outcome to the low voter turnout and the fact that the SPD in Saarland was waging a conflicted campaign. SPD top candidate **Heiko Maas** was simultaneously

battling **Chancellor Schroeder's** Berlin government, which he criticized for the harshness of the social reforms, and the former *Ministerpraesident* of Saarland **Oskar Lafontaine**. Mr. Lafontaine, after leaving his posts as SPD chairman and finance minister in the Schroeder cabinet in 1999, has constantly been capturing media attention by populist interventions, calling for a return to "classic" leftist Social Democratic policies. Like a ghost from the past, Mr. Lafontaine was very visible during the Saarland campaign, making it hard for the young chairman Maas to develop a profile of his own.

## II. Brandenburg

On September 19, SPD *Ministerpraesident* (governor) **Matthias Platzeck** surprisingly defended his party's majority in the eastern state of Brandenburg. He will continue his coalition with the CDU, which is now only the third strongest party in the state behind the Communists-turned-Socialists of the PDS. Both SPD and CDU lost heavily to the radicals on the left and right, leading many commentators to speak of an erosion of the political middle. PDS and the right-wing extremists of the German People's Union (DVU) hold 35 of 88 parliamentary seats in Brandenburg, Greens and FDP failed to cross the 5%-hurdle. The results: SPD 31.9% (-7.4%), PDS 28.0 (+4.7), CDU 19.4 (-7.1), DVU 6.1 (+0.8), Greens 3.6 (+1.7), FDP 3.3 (+1.4), Others 7.7 (+6.7). Voter turnout: 56.6% (+2.3).

It is a worrisome and unprecedented development in the Federal Republic that major losses of an established party benefit radical instead of other mainstream parties. The divisive issue propelling this development are the social reforms of **Chancellor Schroeder's** "Agenda 2010" such as the recent "Hartz IV" package (please see the August edition of this newsletter for details.) The CDU under leadership of **Joerg Schoehnbohm** could not make gains for two reasons. For one, they were part of the state administration for the last five years, making thorough political opposition during the campaign difficult. Second, the national CDU/CSU appeared split and indecisive on the issue of reform for the last months, thus making it even harder for the state parties to take a clear, unified stand. The popular **Mr. Platzeck** on the other hand invested much of his political capital in waging a courageous campaign, aggressively defending the necessary reforms. Accordingly, many in the SPD see the Brandenburg outcome as a sea-change, proving that the SPD can win elections not just in spite but because of the reform programs. However, the massive gains of populist opponents of reform such as PDS and NPD seem to belie this notion.

### III. Saxony

Also on September 19, *Ministerpraesident* (governor) **Georg Milbradt** and his CDU remained the strongest contender in the eastern state of Saxony, but they lost their absolute majority and more than 15 percentage points. The SPD fell to an abysmal 9.8 percent, increasingly marginalized by the strong PDS. Most upsetting, however, was the huge success of the nationalist NPD, which gained 9.2%. Mr. Milbradt is still negotiating, but since a CDU/FDP coalition would not have a majority, a future CDU/SPD administration seems likely. The results: CDU 41.1% (-15.8%), PDS 23.6 (+1.4), SPD 9.8 (-0.9), NPD 9.2 (+7.8), FDP 5.9 (+4.8), Greens 5.1 (+2.5), Others 5.3 (+1.7). Voter turnout: 59.6% (-1.5).

As in Brandenburg, two parties of dubious democratic credentials, PDS and NPD, hold over a third of the parliamentary seats—and this only a few months after the federal administration failed to bring the Supreme Court to outlaw the NPD. Quite possibly, this political move backfired now, unifying and invigorating the extreme German Right. The erratic course of **Mr. Milbradt** on the issue of social reforms did not help strengthening the democratic mainstream either. After voting for the "Hartz IV" Act, he declared that he would consider joining one of the "Monday Demonstrations" against this piece of legislation. Also, it was Mr. Milbradt's first election on his own after taking over from the beloved *Ministerpraesident* **Kurt Biedenkopf**.

### IV. Northrhine-Westphalia

Elections of county and city parliaments follow their own rules and are shaped by specific regional circumstances. Nevertheless, the elections of September 26 were widely seen as a first test for the state elections next spring, where the SPD/Green coalition under *Ministerpraesident* (governor) **Peer Steinbrueck** fears to lose its last stronghold. Seen in this light, the evidence of the regional elections remains inconclusive. While the CDU came out on top again, they lost much more heavily than the SPD, which received their worst result in NRW ever. At the same time, the Green Party could make substantial gains, crossing the ten-percent-mark, and the SPD found a glimmer of hope in several big cities in the heart of the state, which is also the heart of German Social Democracy, where the CDU could hold sway five years ago. The results: CDU 43.4% (-6.9%), SPD 31.7 (-2.2), Greens 10.3 (+3.0), FDP 6.8 (+2.5), Others (mostly regional citizen groups) 7.8 (+3.6). Voter turnout: 54.5% (-1.1%).

## V. Conclusion

In analyzing the elections, the parties in the *Bundestag* (German parliament) could agree on only one thing: the success of the right-wing radicals is a shameful disaster. Apart from that, they draw different conclusions and face different problems. The SPD, jaded and hardened by a year-long series of defeats, is sticking with the social reform program as it is. In the words of **Chancellor Schroeder**: "This is the only policy I can do." Dissent within the party is almost inaudible by now, especially after the lost election of young left-leaning renegade **Heiko Maas** in Saarland. Also, the Green coalition partner, is keeping quiet and supportive, dizzy with tremendous electoral success. In turn, results such as the tainted success of **Mr. Platzeck** in Brandenburg or the relatively small losses in NRW are portrayed as sea-changes. "After a long and rocky road, the SPD has climbed out of the valley of darkness. The SPD is on the way forward, while the CDU numbers are starting to go down", said SPD chairman **Franz Muentefering** after the Brandenburg election.

Indeed, despite the fact that they have won the Saarland, Saxony, and NRW elections, all is not quite rosy for the CDU. The significant losses in numbers in the last three elections foster anxiety and a renewed cacophony of opinions within the CDU/CSU. At the heart of a strategic and political debate that CDU chairman **Angela Merkel** seems to have an increasingly harder time to control is the question how the conservatives want to handle the issue of social reform. Some, such as CDU finance expert **Friedrich Merz**, call for even further, more radical steps, while others, such as CSU chairman **Edmund Stoiber** and the chairman of the CDU in NRW, **Juergen Ruetters**, generally support the Schroeder reforms but argue for a more careful implementation that avoids social hardship. Analysts predict that the CDU/CSU will continue to drop in the polls, because many of the detailed issues on health care, tax reform, etc. are still to be developed and debated within the party. This is a painful process that the SPD already underwent. As a consequence, the outcome of the national elections in 2006 seems in doubt again—for the first time in almost two years.

*Text & Research:*

*Patrick Keller*

**For comments, please contact:**

**Karl-Heinz Kamp**  
**Security Policy Coordinator**  
**karl-heinz.kamp@kas.de**