German state election: Main parties in Saarland form grand coalition

By Sven Heymann
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Following the election held in the western German state of Saarland last Sunday, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) stated their intention of forming a grand coalition. The CDU won 35.2 percent of the vote and will therefore nominate the state premier. The SPD trailed behind in second place with 30.6 percent.

Both parties had already agreed in January that they would form a coalition and their respective campaigns in the state election were directed towards this goal. This was the first time in German history that the two major parties have openly campaigned in an election on the basis of forming a coalition government. Previously, a CDU-SPD coalition was regarded as a political last resort, because it provided an administration a large majority in parliament, served to isolate the parliamentary opposition and created conditions for extra-parliamentary opposition.

In the election in Saarland, one of Germany's smallest states, the aim of the SPD and CDU from the start was to create a "strong united government" that would be able to impose "unpopular measures"—i.e., cuts in social spending—against the will of the population. In this respect the election was somewhat absurd. The result had already been decided.

The only real choice in the election was which of the two parties would obtain the overall majority and nominate the state premier.

The undemocratic nature of the election led predictably to a further decline in voter turnout. Only 61 percent of the state's 800,000 eligible voters went to the polls, a decline of six percentage points compared to 2009. Under these conditions the Pirate Party put up candidates in the state election for the first time and was able to gain 7.4 percent. Following the party's recent success in Berlin, the party now has representation in two state parliaments.

The Left Party took third place in the election with 16 percent, while the Greens barely managed to re-enter the parliament with just over five percent. They managed to cross the five percent threshold necessary for representation by just 185 votes. The Free Democratic Party (FDP), which won 9.2 percent at the state election held three years ago, suffered a collapse in support. Polling just 1.2 percent, the party failed to re-enter the new state parliament.

Saarland has been governed since 2009 by a so-called Jamaica coalition (named after the party colours) of the CDU, FDP and the Greens. The coalition broke up in January this year—ostensibly due to internal conflicts. Premier Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (CDU) referred at the time to quarrels with the FDP. "Courage and unity of action" were needed for the tasks ahead, she declared, and co-operation with the FDP was no longer possible on this basis.

Immediately after the break-up of the previous coalition, the CDU and SPD entered into negotiations on a new, "grand coalition". After days of talks, both sides indicated that they were convinced of the need to implement deep cuts in the state budget.

In this regard, SPD state chief Heiko Maas spoke of structural problems to be resolved over the long term. By "long term" both parties meant the creation of an administration capable of surviving a full five-year term in office. They refused, therefore, to form a grand coalition immediately, which would have had to stand again in an election in two and a half years' time. New elections, both parties declared, were necessary, bearing in mind the "tough measures we confront".

The job of the grand coalition is to undertake massive spending cuts in the face of broad popular opposition to meet the limits imposed by the state's "debt brake", a measure which forces governments to balance budgets.

Both Maas and Kramp-Karrenbauer stressed several times in the weeks before the election that the choice of state premier was a secondary issue. More important was the formation of a grand coalition in the first place. Both justified the need for such a coalition by citing the international financial and economic crisis. According to figures released in 2010, Saarland, which borders France and Luxembourg, has the highest per capita level of debt of all German states. At the same time, the state is subject to the debt brake which was introduced by chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) in 2009, and is now being imposed throughout Europe.

Under these conditions the CDU and SPD quickly agreed that Saarland required a regime with a long-term approach and a clear majority to impose the type of stringent budget cuts that have already been introduced in Berlin.

On election night, March 25, representatives of both parties claimed the cooperation in Saarland between the CDU and SPD had no consequences in terms of the federal government—a coalition of the CDU, its partner, the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union (CSU), and the FDP. The federal secretary of the CDU, Peter Altmaier, stressed the differences between the small state of Saarland and the Federal Republic. CDU General Secretary Hermann Gröhe declared that the election reflected broad support for the head of government, Angela Merkel.

Despite the many protestations to the contrary, Merkel is actively seeking an alliance with the SPD at a federal level. This is confirmed by the manner in which the decision to call new state elections occurred in January and the fact that Merkel visited Saarland no less than three times during the election campaign—despite the raging euro crisis.

The German economy, with its heavy dependence on exports, is palpably being hit by the global crisis. A slump in foreign demand is already evident. The drastic social cuts involved in Agenda 2010, introduced a decade ago by a federal SPD-Green coalition, have inaugurated a policy of cheap labour jobs across Europe. Now the federal government is preparing a new Agenda 2020 cuts program. The Saarland vote and upcoming state elections in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia in May are designed to pave the way for the formation of a grand coalition at the federal level.

The Left Party provides a cover for this entire process. Although it was already clear that the SPD and CDU were determined to work together, Oskar Lafontaine, the leader of the Left Party in Saarland, repeatedly called upon the social democrats to switch horses and form a coalition with his party. Based on the election result, the SPD and the Left Party could theoretically form an administration with a one-vote majority. On election night, state Left Party leader Rolf Linsler explained that his party had fulfilled its basic goal, i.e. to create the mathematical possibility of a SPD-Left Party administration. Another party leader, Klaus Ernst, continued to hold out public hopes for an alliance and declared his party would wait to see how the SPD responded.

These statements are simply duplicitous when one considers that SPD leader Heiko Maas had ruled out a coalition with the Left Party weeks before the election.

In addition, any administration composed of the SPD and Left Party would certainly not provide the “possibility of a change in policy” that the Left Party constantly urged in its election campaign. The mainstream media called the Left Party the only party that rejected the debt brake. However, Lafontaine has personally asserted the opposite: “Our path to compliance with the debt brake is to increase state income by a different tax policy”.

This is the type of demagogy the electorate has come to expect from the Left Party. During its period in power in the city-state of Berlin, the party quickly junked its demand for “new taxes on millionaires”. Its first act in Berlin was to bail out a bankrupt bank to the tune of twenty billion euros. The resulting debt burden for Berlin was then used to impose unprecedented cuts in public service wages and social infrastructure.

This lesson has been digested by some of the party’s former voters. Alongside the FDP, the Left Party was the main loser in the Saarland election, suffering heavy losses (a drop in support of 6.5 percent, or 17,000 voters) compared to 2009.