

German SPD achieves worst result in Bremen state elections since World War II

By Dietmar Henning
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In the election in the north German city-state of Bremen, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) achieved its worst result since the Second World War. According to projections, the party obtained just 32.9 percent of the vote, down 5.9 percent from 2011.

The SPD's losses are even larger if the historically low voter participation is taken into account. Only half of those registered to vote went to the polls, which is not only the lowest figure for Bremen, but for all of the western German states since 1945. Voter participation in the city of Bremerhaven was just 40 percent on Sunday, down eight percentage points from 2011.

The Greens, which have governed the city in coalition with the SPD for eight years, recorded even greater losses. They lost 7.3 percentage points, polling 15.3 percent support.

The beneficiaries of these losses were the other major parties. Seven parties will now be represented in the Bremen senate. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) increased its share of the vote by over two percentage points to 22.6 percent, even though the party lost votes as a result of low voter participation. The Left Party obtained over nine percent of the vote, an increase of 3.6 percentage points. The Free Democrats (FDP) will be represented again in the senate and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) will be represented for the first time. The right-wing "Angry Citizens" party received over five percent of the vote in Bremerhaven and will thus hold one seat in the senate.

The result of the Bremen election is not merely a blow for the governing SPD and Greens. It is a rejection of the entire political establishment. A majority of the population literally voted with their feet, staying away from the polls. The poorer districts and residents, as a rule, had lower turnout.

The SPD lost the most votes to non-voters.

According to polls from Infratest Dimap, 46 percent of non-voters acknowledged that "I consciously did not vote in order to show my dissatisfaction with politics," 58 percent stated "currently, no party represents my interests," and more than two thirds said they had stayed away from the polls because "politicians just pursue their own interests."

In Bremen, where the SPD has headed the government without interruption since 1946, the ever expanding gulf between rich and poor across Germany is clear for all to see.

In the rich suburbs, the number of millionaires is increasing. In spite of the decline in shipbuilding, Bremen continues to be one of Germany's industrial centres. Along with the second largest port in the country, concerns like Daimler, Airbus and ArcelorMittal have factories in Bremen or Bremerhaven.

At the same time, the rate of poverty is higher in Bremen than in any other state. One in four of the 650,000 residents of the city-state live in poverty. Children are affected above all, with one in three being poor. In Bremerhaven, 38 percent of children live in families fully dependent on Hartz IV social welfare. Entire areas of the city are in a state of disrepair.

In this context, the state of emergency in Bremen, organised by SPD interior senator Ulrich Neurer two months ago due to an alleged terrorist scare, must be viewed as a trial run for civil war. It was directed against the potential for the explosion of social opposition in the impoverished districts.

The decline of the SPD, however, is not limited to Bremen, but is a nationwide phenomenon. Having adopted the Hartz welfare reforms and an increase in the pension age to 67 under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder a decade ago, the SPD is working to continue

these policies in the current grand coalition, such as in the attack on the right to strike through the collective bargaining law.

Cosmetic changes, such as the establishment of a minimum wage, do not alter the fact that the SPD stands for the interests of the banks and major concerns. In addition, with foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, they are pursuing an aggressive and militarist foreign policy. The coup they supported in Ukraine has set developments in motion which have brought NATO to the brink of war with Russia, a nuclear power.

The same applies to the Greens. In government with the SPD at the federal level until 2005, the Greens have since outdone the SPD from the right on social questions and militarist rhetoric against Russia. It is no accident that the lead candidate for the Greens in Bremen, Karoline Linnert, held the post of finance senator during the previous legislative period.

Although the Left Party was able to profit slightly from the poor results of the SPD and Greens, the party has demonstrated, over the years, that it sees its role as assisting to secure a majority for an SPD-Green government. The Left Party's fraction in the state legislature already voted in favour of the SPD-Green budget in 2009. In this election campaign, it was also their declared goal to serve as a means for the SPD and Greens to secure a majority. Their most substantial demand was the hiring of 240 additional teachers.

Just a day after the state elections, SPD mayor Jens Böhrnsen surprisingly announced that he would no longer stand for the position of head of government.

In the wake of Böhrnsen's resignation, it remains unclear which coalition will govern Bremen. Böhrnsen had stated on election day that he intended to continue the coalition with the Greens, which after their poor result would only have a slim majority of one. He announced his decision to step down after SPD state party chairman Dieter Reinke suggested a possible grand coalition with the CDU. CDU lead candidate Elisabeth Motschmann, born baroness Düsterlohe, immediately offered the SPD support in government.

However, the revived FDP (Free Democratic Party) could also play a role, and not simply because it will be led in the Bremen state parliament by a young businesswoman from a rich family, Lencke Steiner. Rather, the suggestion of a coalition between the SPD,

Greens and FDP has much more to do with political considerations at the federal level. This coalition would "probably [be] the preferred plaything of SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel," wrote the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Regardless of the coalition which eventually governs the city-state, nothing will fundamentally change. All parties in the political establishment are interchangeable and are prepared to work together. As a result, an ever larger gulf is opening up between the political parties and the broad mass of the population, whose opposition to social attacks, the destruction of democratic rights and war found no expression in the election.

This opposition will seek other channels. The building of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit, which can provide the coming struggles with a progressive, internationalist socialist leadership, is more urgent than ever.

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