

What do the electoral gains of the right-wing Alternative for Germany signify?

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Normally, local elections receive little attention. But on Sunday evening when the results of the Hesse municipal elections were announced it created headlines. The strong performance of Alternative for Germany (AfD) was regarded as a political sensation. The xenophobic party, which advocates extreme right-wing positions on many issues, had won 13.2 percent of the vote on its first outing.

The other establishment parties—the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Greens—recorded significant losses. The CDU slipped from 33.7 to 28.2 percent and the SPD from 31.5 to 28.0 percent. The loss of votes by the Greens was even more significant. In their Hesse stronghold they had won 18.3 percent five years ago. In the current vote their percentage fell to 11.6 percent, behind the AfD.

Many editorials quickly spoke of a political shift to the right by the general population. It was claimed that the election results show that many voters demand a tougher approach on refugee policy and a stronger securing of the national borders. The Hesse election was hyped as a political barometer for the upcoming regional elections, which take place in three states on Sunday.

Under these conditions a closer look at the Hesse municipal election is called for.

First of all, only a trend result was announced on Sunday that relies on just sixty percent of the ballots, and indeed on those on which a single party list had been checked. But Hesse election law allows so-called cumulating and vote-splitting. This means a voter can give a candidate more votes (cumulate) or vote for candidates from different parties (vote-splitting). Since this was the first time the AfD participated in the election, and their candidates were largely unknown, they did better than average on the party list vote and their totals will be significantly lower in the final result.

According to an election analysis by Forsa, the

proportion of right-wing voters in relation to the number of eligible voters is not above average. In the past, the German National Party (NPD), the Republicans, the German Peoples Union (DVU) and other right-wing parties have achieved a similar number of votes to those of the AfD. Forsa also ascribes the good performance of the AfD to the low turnout, which was less than 48 percent. More than 70 percent of voters went to the polls at the last general election.

Secondly, one has to address the question: Who or what is the AfD? It is often referred to as a right-wing citizens' movement or a "party of angry citizens". In truth, it is an initiative stemming from right-wing CDU and Free Democratic Party (FDP) circles, who, together with employers, economists and representatives of business organizations, want to push the political establishment in a right-wing direction. Here, its close relationship with the media plays an important role. In other words: The AfD is a party created from above within the social elite, not a movement from below.

In Hesse, it was clearly evident how much the party is connected to the extreme right-wing of the CDU, which is closely linked to the person of Alfred Dreggers, who headed the CDU in Hesse between 1967 and 1982 and because of his Nazi past was also called the "steel helmet faction of the CDU".

A typical AfD representative is Alexander Gauland, who during his 40 years' CDU membership was office manager and speechwriter for the CDU right-winger and later Hesse state premier Walter Wallmann. Three years ago, he was one of the founding members of the AfD. Today he is the deputy party leader and state chairman of the AfD in Brandenburg.

The AfD leader in Hesse is Albrecht Glaser. He too was for decades a CDU local politician and city treasurer in Frankfurt. During his studies in the early sixties he was a leading member of the right-wing Allemannia Heidelberg

fraternity and later became national spokesman of these right-wing German student fraternities. After 42 years of CDU membership, he resigned in spring 2013 and became one of the first members of the AfD.

Glaser's deputy as AfD state leader is Peter Münch, for many years a member of the right-wing Republicans, and holder of a "sizeable number of prominent positions" during this time, as the *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung* reported.

Martin Hohmann, who sat in the Bundestag (federal parliament) for the Hesse CDU since the late nineties, and delivered an anti-Semitic speech on the anniversary of German reunification in October 2003, for which he was expelled from the CDU two years later, headed the AfD slate in Fulda as a "non-party" candidate.

Although many AfD local and district associations are still being established, by their own account, and therefore presented different demands, the broad outlines of the AfD election campaign were quite clear. The party presented a repulsive mixture of economic liberalism and calls for tax reductions, cutting bureaucracy and dismantling state services along with racist slogans against "foreign infiltration" and refugees.

On one of its official posters could be seen: "Black-Red-Gold is colourful enough!" (A reference to the colours of the German flag.) The party programme contains the following: "Immigration into the welfare system" should be strictly prohibited.

While it calls generally for "social protection for those on low incomes", it explicitly states that "a legally guaranteed, all-encompassing minimum wage cannot afford this protection." Like all right-wing parties, the AfD claims to be strongly committed to the defence of the family in the traditional sense.

At municipal elections, no detailed reports on voter backgrounds are provided. Therefore, it is not easy to determine from where the votes for the AfD came. But it is striking that in large cities like Wiesbaden, which is not among the social hot-spots, but as a state capital has a large proportion of civil servants and a wide layer of administrative officials, the AfD recorded above average support and achieved its best result with 16.2 percent.

The percentage of votes for the AfD was also very high in the affluent suburbs of the big cities, where the Greens have their strongholds. For example, they scored nearly 12 percent in Frankfurt and 12.2 percent in Kassel. In Giessen, the location of Hesse's initial reception centre for refugees, the AfD received more than fifteen percent of the vote.

There are strong indications that the AfD explicitly planned to shift the mood in a right-wing conservative direction in better-off middle class layers, and has found a certain resonance there.

The media campaign presenting the events in Cologne on New Years Eve as robberies and sexual assaults in order to produce a pogrom atmosphere against foreigners was aimed in the same direction, strengthening the AfD.

All the establishment parties have moved sharply to the right on refugee policy, supporting government policies or criticizing them from the right. During the Hesse election campaign, the second asylum package was adopted by the Bundestag, largely abolishing the fundamental right to asylum. In close cooperation with Turkey and Greece, the EU's external borders are being hermetically sealed. At the same time the accelerated deportation of refugees from so-called safe countries of origin was decided, family reunification drastically reduced and support for refugees cut.

The Left Party also supports these anti-foreigner policies. Since the chair of the party's parliamentary group, Sahra Wagenknecht, joined in the incitement against refugees and the call for a strong state with the words, "Those who abuse [our] hospitality, have forfeited the right to hospitality," other leaders of the Left Party have expressed similar views.

It is precisely these politics that strengthen the AfD. It is no coincidence that of all people the deputy chairman of the right-wing party, Alexander Gauland, has supported Wagenknecht. He said, "Mrs Wagenknecht has brought the situation beautifully to the point", and repeated her call: "Those who come voluntarily to us, must behave like a guest. If they do not want to or cannot do this, behaving violently and disrespectfully towards their hosts, then they must immediately leave Germany."

This all-party coalition against refugees has strengthened the AfD. This is the secret of the Hesse election.

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