

Germany: Political fragmentation continues

Two weeks after the Bavarian elections, voters in the state of Hesse confirmed the ongoing process of political fragmentation and a transition to a post-Merkel era - making German national politics even more complicated



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More than four million people were eligible to go to the ballots in the state of Hesse. Even though this is only roughly 7% of all eligible voters in Germany, the result of the regional elections was both a reflection of the ongoing process of fragmentation of the political landscape and a step towards the gradual end of Chancellor Angela Merkel's era.

The results

Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) won 27.2% of the vote, down from 38.3% in the last election in 2013, while the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Greens came in at 19.2%, according to the latest polls at 8 pm CET. Both the CDU and the SPD lost some 10 percentage points of the votes.

While the CDU had its worst result in the state in more than 50 years, the SPD recorded its worst result since World War II. The Greens, which are the junior coalition partner of the CDU in the state

government of Hesse, gained some 9 percentage points. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) came in at 12.8%, from 4.1%, and is now represented in all 16 state parliaments. The liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Left Party also made it into Hessian parliament.

Implications for German national politics

The analysis of the votes show that these state elections were clearly affected by federal politics and the ongoing tensions in the grand coalition in Berlin. While small changes in the official results can still have a significant impact on who will govern the state of Hesse, a few broad implications for German politics are already now clear:

- **Fragmentation of political landscape continues**

Hesse continues the recent trend seen in polls and other state elections that the era of big parties in the center of the political landscape is coming to an end. At the same time, smaller parties at both ends of the political spectrum emerge and gain support. The fact that the AfD has now made it into all 16 state parliaments is to some extent the shift from protest voters from the Left Party but also a result of an anti-establishment and right-wing platform. Currently, the success of the Greens shows that – as in the case of Hesse – there is still a large center, accounting for more than 70% of the popular vote but this center is more fragmented and not only spread across two parties (CDU and SPD) but four (CDU, SPD, Greens and FDP).

- **Grand coalition in Berlin won't collapse (imminently)**

Some commentators voiced the fear of a possible end of the grand coalition in Berlin after another electorate disaster for both government parties in Hesse. While the results are disastrous, these fears were premature. The fact that the CDU is still likely to lead the next government of Hesse should hush any calls for imminent action in Berlin. The bigger risk is the continued fall of the SPD. However, comments by SPD chairwoman Angela Nahles, suggest that the SPD is preparing an ultimatum than a quick exit. The coalition had already agreed on a mid-term review next year. The SPD will put enormous pressure on this mid-term review and could use it as a trigger to end the coalition. This would be towards the end of next year. Not now.

- **The end of the Merkel-era comes closer**

This is not new. In fact, Angela Merkel has never hinted at a fifth term in office. However, the big question is how her fourth and final term will end. The results of the last two state elections could lead to a gradual power transition in her own party. One elegant way to do this could be the party convention in December. Giving up the official party chair to someone else could open the door for a managed power transition, satisfy inner-party critics of Merkel and could give her more room and flexibility for the management of the government.

Another milestone on gradual transition of German politics

If anything, the results of the Hessian elections will lead to more unrest in the SPD than in the CDU. The CDU still has the opportunity of a managed and gradual transition, while the SPD cannot easily see any other way out than to exit the grand coalition, eventually. Together with the fact that it is still unclear how the CSU will behave in the coming months, the ingredients for new government tensions and snap elections before 2021 are clearly there. Currently, the only counter-argument is that new elections would probably bring an even more complicated result.

All in all, the Hessian elections are not so much another trigger for political unrest but rather a reflection and another milestone on a gradual transition of German politics. In two ways, a transition towards a more fragmented political landscape and a transition to a post-Merkel era.

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