

Germany: Cold winds from the East

On Sunday, two regional state elections in Germany could lead to new troubles for the federal government in Berlin



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Some 3.3 million citizens in Saxony and about 2 million citizens in Brandenburg are eligible to vote in the two state elections on Sunday. While this is only some 8 percent of the total German electorate, the two elections have the potential to create new troubles and tensions for the federal government. The elections could also be a painful reminder that almost exactly 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the country is again divided, at least when it comes to political preferences.

Two regional elections with high importance for national politics

Politically, both Brandenburg and Saxony are important for the parties of the federal government, CDU and SPD. While Brandenburg has been governed by the SPD since reunification, Saxony has always had a minister-president from the CDU. This year, however, these almost natural roles as governing parties have come under severe pressure, due to the rise of the AfD. However, the results from the European elections in May suggest that the AfD could gain further votes and that both CDU and SPD could lose support.

According to recent polls, the AfD is in a neck-to-neck race with the CDU to become the biggest party in Saxony, with both parties currently at some 25%. In Brandenburg, SPD, CDU, AfD, Greens and the Left Party are all trading at around 18% of the votes. Even though the share of foreign-born residents is low in both states, the AfD receives support as an anti-immigration party. Also, and probably even more important, the electorate support for the AfD seems to be the result of a

broader feeling of being left behind, both economically and socially. To some extent, the rise of the AfD in the Eastern states of Germany can be regarded as a protest against national politics.

What to watch

Votes for the AfD. Even though up to now all parties have refused any cooperation with the AfD after the elections, strong gains by the AfD and perhaps coming in as biggest party in one or both of the two states would not only be symbolic but could also be regarded as a further split between the East and the West – thirty years after reunification – and could eventually even weaken the states' ability to attract business investments.

Votes for SPD and CDU. While the votes for the AfD will probably get most international and media attention, what matters most for national politics will be the result of both coalition partners in Berlin, the CDU and the SPD. Every coalition partner has a political stronghold to lose. A loss for the SPD in Brandenburg, possibly leading to the first state government without the SPD, would clearly lead to new tensions in the party. A party which is already very fragile due to the continuous drop in opinion polls and state and European elections as well as new leadership race. A loss for the CDU in Saxony could start a new leadership discussion in the party, in which the new leader and possible Merkel-successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer has come under significant pressure in recent months.

In any case, as so often in German politics, regional elections can have a significant impact on national politics. Remember that the current government has lost significant support in opinion polls and the last European elections. In particular, the SPD's free fall, its long hesitance to actually join the government last year and the announced mid-term review of the government's work for October has put the government on a weaker footing. With a slowing economy and inner-party tensions in both governing parties, the elections in Saxony and Brandenburg could be the famous flashpoint of political turbulence in Berlin.

Author

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

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