

The Hessian and Bavarian state
elections: implications for German
political development

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German state elections in Bavaria and Hessen held on the 8 of October have attracted much attention. Not because of the importance of local issues, but because of many prognoses regarding national politics. They do not serve as a radical turning point, but rather they point to the growing and destabilizing trends in German politics since 2000. Compared to the decades after the Second World War, when the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats formed the political poles addressing the most important issues in German politics, we can see a decisive shift in the 2000s. In the period after the Second World War, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats occupied the political space where alternatives were articulated in terms of the democratic evolution of German politics. Today, the party system is more heterogeneous in terms of ideology. After the years of grand coalition, new parties were able to mobilize public opinion around exclusive single issues. From a historical perspective, the extremely low vote share of the mainstream political parties in state elections is a phenomenon that should be interpreted as part of a 20-30-year process.

Results in Hessian and Bavarian state elections

German political life in the post-war era

Grand coalition and its limits

Historical overview

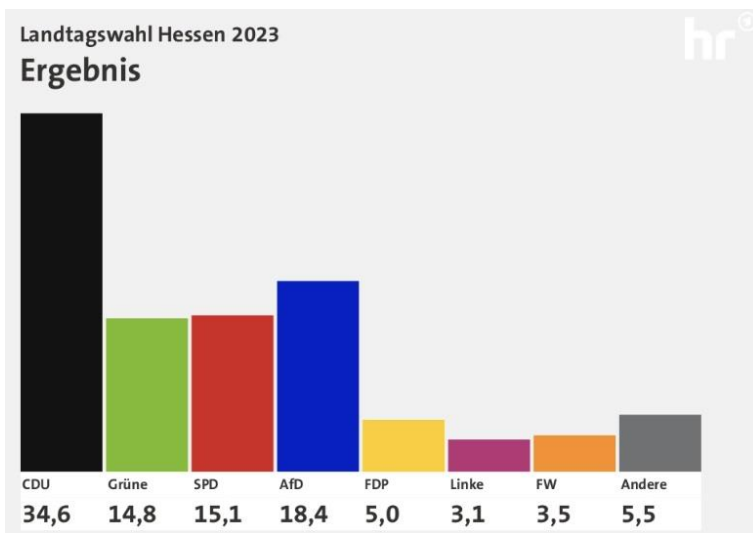
Conclusion

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German political development after the Hessian and Bavarian elections

Although the next federal parliamentary elections in Germany will take place in the fall of 2025, the German state elections held on 8 of October in Bavaria and Hessen have attracted much attention. In addition to their importance to state politics in a federal constitution, regional elections are a litmus test, as politicians and analysts draw conclusions about national politics based on the results. This is the case after the inhabitants of Germany's most populous federal states went to the polls in October.



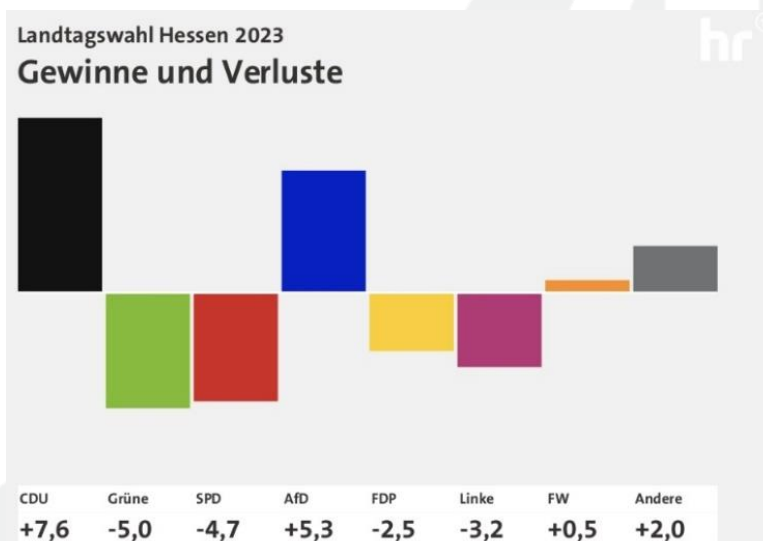
Results in Hessen, Source: *hessenschau.de*

Almost all German media outlets described the results of the elections as a protest vote against the Berlin government.¹ Both, Hessen with the capital Frankfurt in central-western Germany, and the largest regional state, Bavaria elected right-wing parties to the government in their state parliaments. The victory of the mainstream state government

parties was not a surprise.

However, the increase in the vote for extreme right parties is a remarkable development that deserves deeper analysis.

Although the CDU in Hessen succeeded in achieving 7 percent better results compared to 2018, it was significant that the AfD was able to capture 18.4 percent of the votes cast.² This is quite a notable increase compared to the 13 percent it achieved in 2018, while all other opposition parties lost voter share compared to their previous results.³

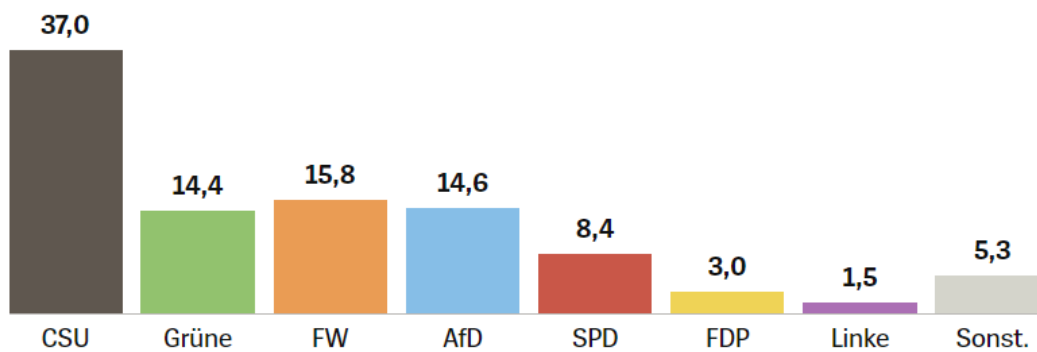


Results compared to the previous election, Source: *hessenschau.de*

The FDP in Hessen almost fell below the 5 percent threshold necessary to achieve representation in the state parliament.⁴ All parties of the Social Democrat -Green-Liberal federal government coalition saw heavy losses not just in Hessen, but also in Bavaria.

Wahlstimmen

Anteile in Prozent

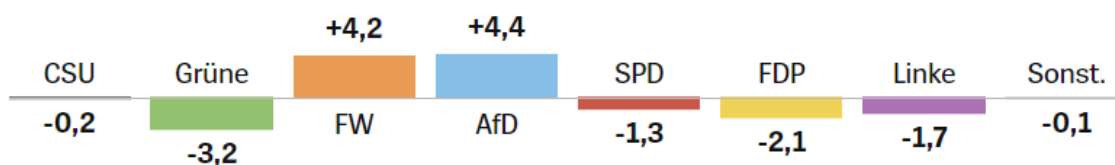


Results in Bayern, Source: *spiegel.de*

In Bavaria, the ruling CSU achieved the same result as five years before. However, the strengthening of the far right here is again undeniable. Both the AfD and the conservative *Freie Wähler* were able to significantly improve their vote share compared to the result five years before.⁵ Thus, both parties will now send ten more representatives to the next state parliament.⁶ It was a bad weekend for the parties of the federal government coalition. The liberal FDP – unlike in Hessen – failed even to reach the parliamentary threshold, achieving a mere 3 percent vote share, and they no longer have any representation in the state parliament.⁷ With its 8.4 percent vote share the SPD achieved one of its worst results since the Second World War, the SPD-Grüne-FDP coalition lost a total of 22 representatives compared to the previous parliament.⁸

Gewinne und Verluste

Stimmenanteile in Prozent, ± Prozentpunkte zu 2018



Results compared to the previous election, Source: *spiegel.de*

After these devastating results for the ruling federal coalition, commentators are describing the state elections as a protest vote against the federal government parties. The *Frankfurter Grundschau* in fact stated that local politics did not play a role in Sunday's elections.⁹ The *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* also highlights the criticism of the policy of the federal government coalition. In their summary, they underline, that the AfD was able to leave behind its role as an East German protest party and achieve national political significance.¹⁰ Meanwhile, *Deutschlandfunk* considered the defeat of the traffic light coalition (referring to the official colours of the federal government parties), reflected the fact that each coalition party has faced a popular backlash. It also pointed out that the SPD had historically its worst result in the polls.¹¹ In fact, the Bavarian election result was particularly poor. In the past, the SPD consistently achieved a popular vote share of between 20 and 30 percent.¹² Its vote share has now dropped precipitously. Significantly if we examine the state elections over recent years, it is important to recognize an emerging trend at the state level. The SPD achieved a similarly low share in terms of the votes cast in a number of state polls over the last four years. In Sachsen, they received 7.7 percent of the vote in 2019, in Thuringia 8.2 in the same year, while in Sachsen-Anhalt they received only 8.4 percent of the vote in 2021. Though they managed to achieve 43.5 percent of the votes cast in the SPD heartland of Saarland – recent results suggest that the negative trend could continue.¹³

At this point, it is also worth considering the election performance of the mainstream conservative CSU. Although its vote share of 37 percent is the same as four years ago, considering the CSU's dominance in Bavaria, the results pointed to a diminishing appeal. Examining Bavarian elections from the Second World War, the CSU has been politically dominant over the whole period. (With the exception of the 1950 elections, when they achieved 27.4 percent.) In this period, they have gained a vote share above 40 percent 5 times, above 50 percent 8 times, and over 60 percent 2 times over 19 state elections.¹⁴ Although the CDU in Hessen was never considered as successful a political party as the CSU in Bavaria, it formed a stable political force from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 2000s, often with a vote share of over 40 percent, sometimes even approaching 50 percent.¹⁵

All of this suggests a crisis in the party system that emerged after the Second World War. The importance of the elections in Hessen and Bavaria is not that they serve as a radical turning point, but rather that they point out the growing and destabilizing trends of German politics since 2000. After all, the collapse of the SPD's vote share to fifteen and

eight percent in Hessen and Bavaria together with the relative failure of the CSU is part of a remarkable transformation of the German party system compared to the decades-long status quo of the second half of the 20th century. Now there is no question whether the Greens or the AfD have a place in the German party system. After the debates of the millennium, whether the emergence of new political parties would prove to be an episodic or permanent presence, no one can now question that they have become an increasingly significant factor in German public life.

German political development in the post-war era

What did German political life look like after WWII? In general, it was characterized by the dominance of mainstream parties of the left and right, the CDU/CSU and the SPD in post-war West Germany. Looking at federal elections, this meant that the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats received at least three-quarters of the votes cast for almost 5 decades and even more than 85 percent of the votes cast for about 20 years. In the 1970s the party system seemed to consolidate into a two-party structure.¹⁶ At that time, the two major parties gained more than 90 percent of the votes cast.¹⁷

Changes in party preference began to appear as a long-term trend, only at the millennium. Although signs were already visible that the two-party system structure was losing electoral appeal, and the German party system might transform into a more volatile multiparty one. These concerns appeared particularly after the 2005 elections. In 2005 early elections were held and Angela Merkel was appointed as Chancellor, which marked the beginning of her 16-year dominance of German politics¹⁸ At that time Stephan Eisel, a research fellow of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, who worked in the Chancellor's office under the Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and from 1990 to 2010 represented the CDU in the Bundestag and Landtag, presciently remarked on the downward trend in the support of the major parties. The 2005 election was the first case since 1949 where the combined Christian Democrat and SPD parties gained less than 70 percent of the votes cast. Their support has, in fact, been steadily decreasing since the 1980s. In Eisel's view, the grand coalition was an inevitable reaction, a natural response to changes based on political mathematics.¹⁹ Even in 2005, he wrote that the two-party system would inevitably transform into a multiparty one. Speaking about the CDU, he noted that although the CDU became the strongest conservative faction, it failed to achieve any wider electoral appeal. Although the red-green coalition lost power in 2005, the Christian Democrats' result of 35.2 percent was not only below expectations, but also 3.3 percent below the results of 2002, when the Christian Democratic Union lost the elections for the second time (the

second social democrat coalition government led by Gerhard Schröder was formed in 2002 when the SPD entered into a coalition with the Greens).²⁰ Examining the past 15 years, Eisel was undoubtedly correct. Germany's political culture after World War II was defined by two major parties, they played a dominant role for decades, but after the turn of the millennium, their mass support declined significantly. The smaller parties inevitably become part of the party system and acquired a growing role as key to coalition building. The SPD got the chance to lead the federal government with only 25.7 percent of votes cast in 2021. This has never been seen in the history of post-World War Germany.

Grand Coalitions and their limits

After this historical overview, it is worth referring briefly to the institution of the grand coalition. In the post-war political culture of Germany, coalitions have always played a prominent role. Due to the peculiarities of the electoral system, coalition contracts have become part of the democratic culture based on the system of checks and balances. Although it happened in the fifty years after the World War Christian Democrats or the Social Democrats won the election by a large margin but entered into coalition with smaller 'balancer' parties like the FDP. In that development, the political significance of coalitional behaviour was less evident.

By contrast, we can basically consider the emergence of a grand coalition as a kind of policy-making tool.²¹ According to Zoltán Szenté's definition, the grand coalition means "the joint governance of the two strongest parliamentary parties", in which the two major parties nominally on opposite sides of the political spectrum come together.²² In the post-war history of Germany, a grand coalition has been formed a total of four times. First between 1966 and 1969, which was preceded by the collapse of the CDU/CSU and FDP coalition due to budget and tax disputes.²³ In the 2000s, it happened for the first time that the grand coalition was not created as a result of political crisis, but in the middle of post-election negotiations and government formation attempts. The Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats governed jointly in the 2013-2017 and 2017-2021 election cycles. As Franczel Richárd points out – examining several European examples – the grand coalition governance method is ambivalent. While some see it as a form of maintaining in power a technocratic political class, others see it as an ideal example of consensus politics.²⁴ If we examine the phenomenon not so much from the point of view of governance and power-sharing, but of the parties themselves, there is a question: whether the grand coalition proved to be a successful strategy for either the CDU or the SPD.

Historical overview

The question is, therefore, whether there is a connection between the unfavorable election results of the large parties and the experience of grand coalitions. Without going over all its limitations, it is worth referring to some characteristic features of German political democracy since World War II. These shed light on some of the peculiarities of German political life, and point out the differences between the political environment of immediate post-war and 21st-century German political life and culture. It should not be forgotten that during most of these decades, Germany was divided territorially and politically. According to the Potsdam Conference of 1945, Germany was demilitarized, and the country's administration was determined by the victorious powers. On the basis of the occupation charter dated 1949, the German authorities carried out executive, legislative, and administrative tasks. However, the Allies had the right to take direct action in areas such as foreign affairs and foreign trade, currency exchange, or even the judicial construction of the Basic Law.²⁵ Under international law, Germany wasn't a sovereign state when its first post-war elections took place in 1949, and it remained so until 1955.²⁶ All of these should be highlighted because the post-war political and social situation shaped West German and subsequently a united German politics after 1989, and the sphere of opportunity in which German state and public activity took place. It determined the range of aspirations and ambitions. At the same time, it is important to mention that the parties themselves played a significant role in transforming aspirations and goals into concrete political demands and programs. The main focus of post-war German politics were issues such as German reunification, the country's accession to the Western Allied system, European integration, and, of course, recovery from the difficult economic legacy left after 1945. The parties' impact on what specific solutions became generally accepted was also huge. The dominant catch-all parties became the holders of political demands society recognized as the only alternatives for the restoration of German democratic stability. On these crucial issues, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats succeeded in outlining two political alternatives that could be separated from each other. In the second half of the 20th century, Christian democrats and social democrats formed political opposites around which different opinions and programmes were articulated. In the following, we highlight one area in order to present the major differences between Christian Democratic and Social Democratic politics.

Regarding the economic reconstruction of Germany, various concepts remained on the agenda for a long time. The theory of the social market economy is the product of a period

when state-based economic activity and centralized bureaucracy were being built in the eastern half of Germany. To deal with the post-war crisis economic situation, many advocated more state involvement in West Germany as well. Although it was crucial for the SPD to develop an authentic social democratic policy that firmly separated from the GDR's socialist system, the socialization of individual sectors was part of political debates until the 1960s. Even in the second half of the 1950s, the idea of democratic socialism and strengthening state control on commercial sectors were key elements of political debates.

The program of the German Christian Democrats was conceptually different from that of the Social Democrats, which meant the revival of the German liberal tradition, but with the addition of the concept of the social market economy. By emphasizing the liberal tradition, they sharply distinguished their policy from social democrats, who therefore considered some form of socialization acceptable even in a democratic political system. However, with the idea of the social market economy, social demands emerged programmatically in conservative politics. Konrad Adenauer's 1946 election speech in Pullheim points out what the revival of the liberal tradition meant for the Christian Democrats. As the future chancellor puts it: *"We want to decrease the bureaucracy as much as possible (...), because the worst of all employers is the state"*.²⁷ In 1958, at the congress of the CSU, he responded to the statement of the president of the Metalworker's Trade Union. The case is a good example of how different economic policy concepts coexisted in German public life almost fifteen years after World War II. We know from Adenauer's speech that even then, ideas appeared in public debates that not only emphasized the need to nationalize basic industries but also other areas that reflect private economic monopolies. According to Adenauer, this kind of attitude is an enemy of small and medium-sized companies and all kinds of economic monopolies, by his political creed were *"an enemy of freedom"*.²⁸ This principle can be summarized as a liberal market economy but goes beyond its economic significance since it becomes the cornerstone of individual and social freedom. And after the Nazi era, it became one of the main political values of Christian democracy. Without this philosophical perspective, it is incomprehensible why the Christian Democrats were so vehemently opposed to social democracy's insistence on increased state intervention. The debate between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats at that time sheds light on two opposing philosophical viewpoints.

Conclusion

The grand coalition experiment may be examined in the context of the unique German political experience after the Second World War which may explain the functioning of mass parties. Compared to the decades after the Second World War, when the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats formed the ideological poles addressing the most important issues of German politics, we can see a decisive shift in the 2000s. Today, the party system is more heterogeneous in terms of ideology, and this undermines the predictability that appears in the two-party system. From a historical perspective, the extremely low vote share of the people's parties in state elections is a phenomenon that should be interpreted as part of a 15-20-30-year process. In the period after the Second World War, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats occupied the political space where various alternatives were articulated in terms of the democratic evolution of German politics. During the grand coalition period, consensus politics was seen by some as a necessity for German public life. This opened the way for those new parties that were able to mobilize public opinion around very different and exclusive single issues. Of course, countless other factors could be mentioned in connection with the above phenomena. This historical overview sheds an interesting light on the German experience of grand coalition governance and the functioning of both mainstream and minority parties in its aftermath, which have specifically put non -non-negotiable single issue politics rather than consensus-building pragmatism at the forefront of contemporary politics.

Endnotes

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- ³ ibid
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¹⁹ Stephan Eisel: Reale Regierungsoption gegen gefühlte Oppositionsregierung, Die Politische Meinung, Berlin, 2005/435. <https://www.kas.de/de/web/die-politische-meinung/artikel/detail/-/content/reale-regierungsoption-gegen-gefuehlte-opposition-regierung>

²⁰ Stephan Eisel: Reale Regierungsoption gegen gefühlte Oppositionsregierung

²¹ The most extreme example is the 1957 election, which led to the election of the third Adenauer government. At that time, the CDU formed a coalition with the smallest faction, the Deutsche Partei, which had only 17 parliamentary seats.

²² Zoltán Szenté: Európai alkotmány- és parlamentarizmustörténet, Osiris, Budapest, 2006. p. 628.

At the same time, it is important to distinguish the concept of a grand coalition from a national unity government, in which case all major parties are members of the government.

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