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German Christian Democrats back on the track?

Ádám Darabos

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Abstract: *This article interprets the outcome of the 2023 Hessian and Bavarian local elections in the context of German Christian democracy. The paper focuses on two critical questions based on the reports of media commentary. First, it examines whether the success can be interpreted as a breakthrough for the Union parties (CDU/CSU). Second, it aims to formulate an argument about whether the flow of events brought an ideological shift towards traditional Christian democratic values.*

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Introduction

On October 8th, 2023, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Party (CSU) won the local elections in Hesse and Bavaria. The CDU received 34,6% of the votes in Hesse. In contrast, the three government coalition parties received around the same amount of votes *together*: the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) 15,1%, the Greens (Grüne) 14,8%, and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) 5%. Surprisingly, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) managed to achieve second place with 18,4%.

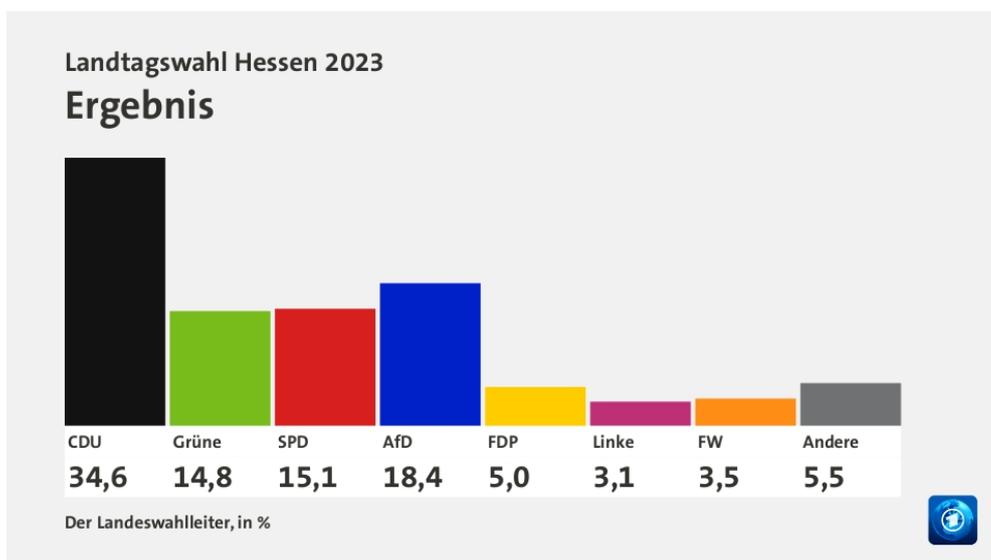


Figure 1 Election results in Hesse¹

Considering the differences compared to the previous elections, it can also be claimed that in contrast to the heavy losses in the government parties, the conservatives and the populist right substantially increased their vote share in recent years.

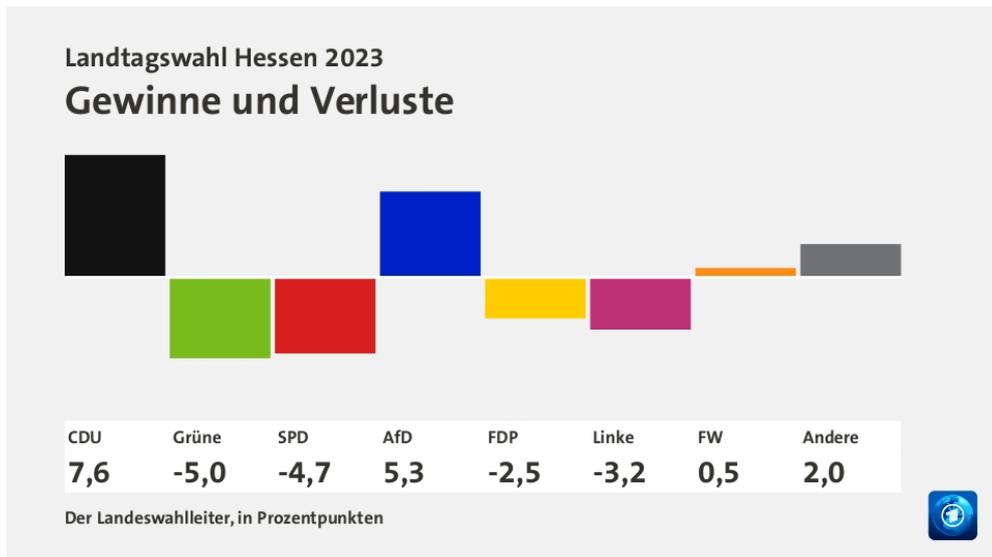


Figure 2 Election results in Hesse compared to the previous election²

The political landscape of Bavaria is obviously different due to the long dominance of CSU. Again, none could approach Markus Söder’s party with its 37% of votes cast. The 0,2% loss seems insignificant, even if it is the worst result since 1950 for the party that has ruled uninterruptedly since 1957. Not as much as in Hessen, but all coalition parties recorded a significant loss in their vote share (Grüne -3,2%, SPD -1,3%, FDP -2,1%). Furthermore, the local Free Voters (FW) and the AfD increased their ratio of votes to the level of the Greens by around 15%.

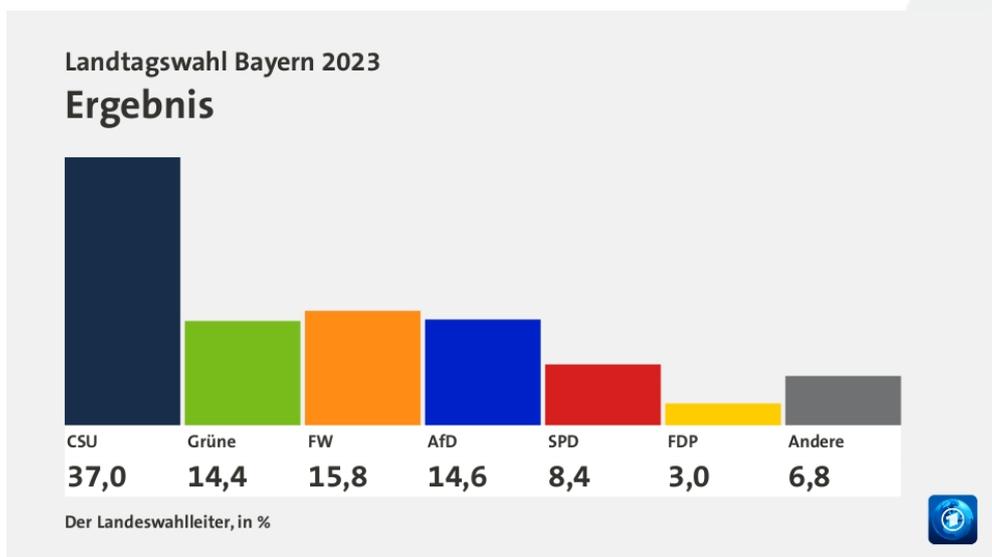


Figure 3 Election results in Bayern³



Figure 4 Election results in Bayern compared to the previous election⁴

A number of conclusions could be drawn from the election results. Beyond shedding light on the historical changes in the party system (analysed by Hanna Zoé Dósa in her [article](#) on the implications of the Hessian and Bavarian state election for German political development), it is also possible to focus on short-term consequences. In this respect, although several journals – rightly – focus on the weakening of the coalition parties and strengthening the AfD (notably achieving its best result in a West German state) and framing it as a threat to democracy, the intention of this report is to interpret and contextualise the victory of the CDU and CSU. Does it mean that after the devastating election results of the federal elections in 2021, Christian democracy is back on track? May we interpret the results as a breakthrough for CDU? And was it achieved due to definitive Christian democratic shift away from being a moderate party?

CDU breakthrough or Coalition failure?

The obvious question is whether the two elections can be interpreted as a breakthrough after the conservative loss of the federal elections in 2021. The *Deutsche Welt* takes a clear-cut position on the question, suggesting that “[t]he elections in the two wealthy states were seen as a barometer for the entire country’s mood.”⁵ *The Economist* agrees stating, “[t]ogether, the central state of Hesse and the southern state of Bavaria—Germany’s biggest by area and its second-biggest by population—account for almost a quarter of the country’s inhabitants. Not

surprisingly, their simultaneous elections are being seen as harbingers of broader political trends.”⁶

But what is implied by these elections on a national level? Several media outlets frame the results (or the possible results before the election) more as a failure of the Ampel (or traffic light) coalition and the success of the AfD than a CDU breakthrough.⁷ *The Guardian* stressed the relevance of economy and migration as definitive issues in the elections and came out with the headline: “German state elections: voters turn to the right in rebuke to Scholz’s coalition.”⁸ *The Economist* echoed this view: “the German public seems less interested in the Ampel’s stop-and-go signals than in turning sharply to the right.”⁹ Last but not least, the analysis of the *Polish Centre for Eastern Studies* (OSW) explains that

“[t]he victory of the Christian Democrats in both federal states mainly results from voters’ opposition to the rule of Chancellor Olaf Scholz. The Christian Democratic parties openly encouraged the public to treat the recent elections as a referendum on the federal government, and the most important topics discussed during the campaign included migration and Germany’s declining economic situation.”¹⁰

The conclusions are similar if only the Hessian results are considered; the success of the current Minister-President of Hesse, Boris Rhein (CDU), is as much stressed as the defeat of Nancy Faeser (SPD), who is the Federal Minister of the Interior and Community in Scholz’s government, thus mainly responsible for migration policies. As the election campaign focused on migration as one of the top issues, the results might be understood as discontent towards Faeser and Scholz’s migration policies.

Obviously, politicians frame the results to underpin their narrative. CDU party leader Friedrich Merz – in relation to the “sensational result” in Hesse – stated that “[a]bove all, it shows one thing: Unity and clear positions pay off. If we can continue to walk this path together, the [national coalition] chaos will come to a close by the 2025 federal elections at the latest.”¹¹ Certain analyses highlight that the CDU benefited from the fact that Merz kept his distance from the local campaign.¹²

To summarise, based on these sources, the failure of the coalition parties dominates the discourse in the media (as the significance of the protest vote is similarly emphasised), which overshadows the CDU's success. To put this into a federal perspective, it might intensify the conflicts between the government parties. Still, it will probably not cause any crisis in the current coalition until the next federal election.

Ideological shift or stagnation?

The second question the state elections raises is the ideological stance of the Union parties, referring to a dilemma that – due to the longevity and ever-presence of the debate – has a long-standing tradition. Is the CDU/CSU (especially CDU federally) a conservative, Christian democratic right-wing party with ideological foundations or a moderate centralist party? In politics, it can be both, but the balance does matter. The question is whether we perceive any shift towards traditional Christian democratic values in the elections.

Interestingly, Angela Merkel announced her intention to resign from CDU leadership after the negative election results in Hesse and Bavaria in 2018. The saga of choosing an able party leader for the CDU after Merkel began with Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer in December 2018 succeeding to the leadership instead of Friedrich Merz. Several researchers, like Jörg Michael Dostal, have already posed the question of whether German Christian Democracy can reinvent itself.¹³ Nevertheless, due to the series of political mistakes and devastating electoral results (e.g., European Parliament elections in 2019), Kramp-Karrenbauer announced her resignation in February 2020. The subsequent election for the party leader brought an ideological division between the main contestants, as the insightful article published by Uwe Jun and Marius Minas on the CDU leadership struggle indicated:

[i]deologically, the contest was between the continuation of chancellor Merkel's path of programmatic modernization toward the political center (Kronenberg, 2020; Wiliarty, 2021), represented by Laschet, and the re-emergence of more traditional values together with the prioritization of a more market-liberal economic policy, represented by Merz."¹⁴

We do agree that Laschet was the successor of Merkel's moderate politics (which is confirmed by other summaries as well¹⁵), but, as our previous analyses show, based on the government programs of CDU/CSU in [2017](#) and [2021](#), it can be argued that the Union parties tried to turn towards Christian democratic values (even if it was not substantially visible).

In the subsequent contest between Laschet and Söder for the shadow chancellor, a gap emerged between the voters who favoured Söder and the party elites who voted for Laschet. The latter won but could not keep his position after the devastating federal election result of 2021, which resulted in the CDU loss of government. Friedrich Merz – who had been defeated twice before – framed himself as a candidate who would break with Merkel's moderate politics and finally took the leadership of CDU in January 2022.

The question is whether this ideological shift affected the state election outcome in 2023. A few observations can be gleaned from the post-election analysis of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (the party foundation connected to CDU) on the Hesse result. It maintains that CDU gained votes as a people's party of the centre (Volkspartei der Mitte) on both the leadership of its minister-president as well as with competencies in critical issue areas.¹⁶ Thus, the two key components were the leader and the dominance of its top policy priorities.

Boris Rhein only assumed his role 18 months previously; thus, the effect of incumbency is limited compared to longer-serving leaders (such as Söder). Still, the KAS report suggests that the CDU candidate was preferred to both Faeser and Tarek Al-Wazir (Green's candidate). Rhein was considered the most acceptable leader in opinion polls with 46% of voters polled compared with around 13-14% for the Green and SPD candidates.¹⁷ Rhein's appeal is also seen in other polls.¹⁸ Despite minor swings in his reputation, Söder still retains popular appeal in Bavaria, as 57% of the voters preferred him as the head of the state government (14% supported the candidate of the Greens, Ludwig Hartmann).¹⁹

It is not a surprise that – partly due to the personalisation of politics – political leaders considerably impact the elections' outcomes. If anything proves this statement's truth, it is the CDU's recent past with Laschet being a “burden” in the 2021 election.²⁰

The analysis made by Konstantin Kumpfüller and Wenke Börnsen supports the view; they emphasise that Rhein managed to stay clean and avoid scandals, which was enough as the challengers delivered a worse performance (the analyses of the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* strengthens this interpretation²¹). They also maintain that Söder's results were relatively poor but could be spun as a success.²² Nevertheless, in the end, both in Hesse and Bavaria, the Union candidates matched the voter's expectations.

Considering the policy areas, the CDU was ahead of all parties regarding the three most significant policies in Hesse (e.g., it is viewed as possessing the best problem-solving skills among the parties regarding refugees and asylum seeking). A survey found that 33% believe the CDU is the party best able to solve future problems, while the other parties do not receive above 12% support. It is highly indicative that compared to the previous elections, the Greens suffered a severe loss of how competent they are viewed in addressing core issues, like the environment and climate (from 2018's 75% to today's 39% approval).²³

A few words about the success of CSU in Bavaria: the analysis of the *Forschungsgruppe* concludes that the CSU's election victory is again based on structural advantages, expertise and the desire for political continuity. Meanwhile, the traffic light parties – in addition to their traditional weakness in Bavaria – face fierce criticism for the federal government's actions (and inactions).²⁴ Like in Hesse, refugees and asylum are main questions beyond energy and climate, and even if AfD increased their appeal on these issues, the majority of respondents support CSU's policies on these topics.²⁵

Obviously, it was a vital determinant of the success that the issues in which the CDU/CSU was seen as competent, or more accurately, in which the government parties seemed incompetent, were emphasised. One of them – as previously expressed – was the migration crisis. The *Los Angeles Times* argues the following:

“The votes followed a campaign marked by discontent with persistent squabbling in the national government and by pressure to reduce the number of migrants arriving in Germany. The national interior minister, who leads the

federal response on migration, suffered a heavy defeat in a difficult bid to become governor of her home state.”²⁶

To sum it up, international and domestic media emphasised the role of the leaders and the policy issues (and the competence on those issues) without any reference to an ideological shift towards Christian democracy. Markus Söder explained the results by pledging the voters to “stability in difficult times.”²⁷

Conclusion

Based on our analysis, it can be concluded that the CDU breakthrough, both in federal political results and ideologically, is yet to come (if it comes at all). To put the results in perspective; it is essential to emphasise that CDU/CSU *incumbents* won in both states. It means that both Söder and Rhein *remained* leaders, and no change in position occurred in this respect. This may confirm our doubts about the extent to which the breakthrough has been achieved. On the other hand, ultimately, CDU/CSU won, coalition governments lost, and AfD – despite its growth - is not ready to take a leading position. It means that even if political scientist Michael Bröning asked *Why the German Far Right Is Beginning to Win*²⁸, it is still the mainstream Union parties who won in the Hessian and Bavarian elections.

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