



392  
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## REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN GERMANY: Increasing pressure on Merkel and fragmentation of the political landscape

**Eckart Woertz**, Senior Research Fellow CIDOB

Three German regional elections in Rhineland-Palatine, Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt last Sunday were widely regarded as a test for Chancellor Merkel's policy on refugees, which dominated debates ahead of the elections. As expected, the right wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved impressive results and entered the respective regional parliaments for the first time. Founded only three years ago, the party veered to the right last summer when it ousted its founding chairman Bernd Lucke who had run on a ticket of fiscal conservatism and opposition to euro bailouts, but had comparably liberal views on migration provided migrants had the right qualification. With the onset of the refugee crisis AfD has increasingly developed into a single-issue party that has tried to capitalize on fears about the influx of over one million migrants in 2015.

German society has grown increasingly polarized over the refugee issue. On the one hand there continues to be an outpour of solidarity by some who try to help arriving refugees, on the other hand arson attacks on housing facilities for refugees have spiked. Among the general population apprehensiveness about the migration influx has grown. The incidents at the Cologne railway station on New Year's Eve when a group of about 1000 youth of Arab and North African origin molested women and pick-pocketed passing pedestrians, reinforced concerns about integration challenges.

Merkel has also found herself increasingly isolated in Europe. The planned burden sharing via a redistribution of 160.000 refugees within the EU does not work. Eastern European countries have not taken a single refugee, Spain an appalling 18 by the end of 2015. Sweden has reinstated border controls and Austria has pressed ahead with a closure of the Balkan route in coordination with Eastern European countries. Merkel's alternative approach has been to push through an EU deal with an increasingly autocratic Turkey that would use the country as Europe's gatekeeper: Reduced refugee flows and reacceptance of refused refugees from Greece in exchange for money, renewed negotiations over EU accession and scrapping of visa requirements for Turks. Yet it is unclear whether the deal will be implemented given widespread opposition within Europe and European mistrust of Ankara.

Against this backdrop, the AfD landed a roaring success, especially in Saxony-Anhalt, where it got 24.2 percent. It became the second strongest party after the ruling CDU, Merkel's conservative party, hinting once more to greater prevalence of xenophobic dispositions in the East of Germany, where Dresden is home to the infamous Pegida marches. In Baden-Württemberg it got 15.1 percent, overtaking the social democrats (SPD) whose share of the vote almost halved to 12.7 percent. In Rhineland-Palatinate its success was slightly more subdued with 12.6 percent. It was particularly successful among males, workers and the unemployed, receiving votes from former conservatives and leftist voters alike and attracting a lot of former nonvoters.

As the AfD is shunned by all other parties, forming coalitions will be more difficult. The Greens-SPD ruling coalition in Baden-Württemberg does not have a majority of seats anymore, so has the CDU-SPD coalition in Saxony-Anhalt and the SPD-Greens coalition in Rhineland-Palatinate. Apart from the AfD, the results for individual parties were very uneven over different regions: the Greens won in Baden-Württemberg, but collapsed in Rhineland-Palatinate and barely made it through the 5 percent hurdle in Saxony-Anhalt. The SPD collapsed in Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, but achieved slight gains in Rhineland Palatinate where it remained the strongest party. The CDU had massive losses in Baden-Württemberg and slight ones in the two other regions.

The most painful loss for the CDU was in Baden-Württemberg, an economically powerful region where it used to govern without interruption from 1953 to 2011, longer than the reign of Fidel Castro on Cuba. Between 1972 and 1992 it even ruled with absolute majority. When it lost power to a coalition of the Greens and the SPD in 2011 it was a shock, but was regarded as temporary. Yet the opposite has happened; with 27 percent of the vote the CDU fell behind the Greens, which are now the strongest party with 30.3 percent, very unusual for a former fringe party.

All this points to an increased fragmentation of the party landscape in Germany, where large "people's parties" (Volksparteien) have lost their power to attract cohesive voting blocks. Elections are increasingly volatile and about mood swings and personalities rather than programs. For many decades of its post war history Germany had a bipartisan political landscape that consisted of the two Volksparteien CDU and SPD on the center-right and center-left with the liberal FDP as kingmaker in-between. With the advent of the Greens in the 1980s and the Left (Die Linke) in the 1990s this changed and led to a dispersion of the support base of the SPD, which now is only a shadow of its former self. While the CDU was better able to maintain its status as a Volkspartei, it is now subject to similar erosion processes as the SPD, losing votes to the AfD on the right and to the Greens on the left.

The party landscape in Germany is bound to become more fragmented and the building of coalitions more difficult. The AfD is poised to establish itself more firmly in the German party landscape. It is now present in the regional parliaments of eight of the 16 Länder. It can increase this share further in regional elections in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Lower Saxony and Berlin in September 2016 and in spring 2017 in Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein and North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany's most populous Land. The real litmus test will come in September 2017 during the federal elections. Should the AfD be able to enter the Bundestag, this would be a first since World War II: Other right wing parties such as the Republikaner, the NPD or the DVU have come and gone and have occasionally managed to enter regional parliaments, but never the Bundestag.

The substantial losses of the CDU will likely cause considerable uproar within the CDU and Merkel will face increasing domestic pressure. Her positions in the refugee crisis are more popular among supporters of the Greens and the SPD than within her own party. An outright upheaval is less likely. Apart from the Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen no credible alternative candidate is in sight and von der Leyen is known for her loyalty to Merkel and for toeing the party line.