

Down but not out: The CSU's faltering performance in the Bavarian state elections



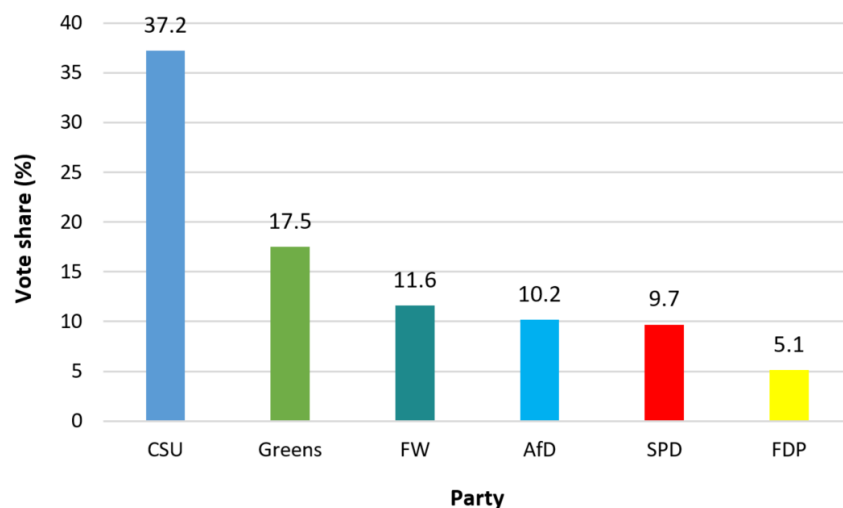
The Christian Social Union (CSU) has dominated politics in Bavaria for decades, but the result in the Bavarian state elections on 14 October represented the party's worst electoral performance since 1954. Ross Campbell writes that in focusing its appeal on immigration, the CSU badly misread the priorities of the Bavarian electorate, but the party is nevertheless capable of rebuilding its credibility with voters as it heads back into government.

Few areas of Germany are as stunning as Bavaria. From the diversity of its mountain ranges to its idyllic lakes and villages, the state is an unforgettable treasure trove of scenic beauty. It is also the quintessential heartlands of traditional Germany, anchored in conservative and rural values. These give its elections a degree of predictability. They are known for one simple outcome – victory for the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), the staunchly independent sister party to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The CSU is more conservative than the CDU, especially on religion and law enforcement, but it has also taken a more interventionist approach on social welfare issues. These twin pillars have been crucial to the electoral support from which it has secured long-standing success. Indeed, between 1966 and 2008, the CSU won an absolute majority in every election to the Bavarian Landtag. The CSU not only wins in Bavaria, but wins by a sufficient margin to govern on its own and dominate its politics.

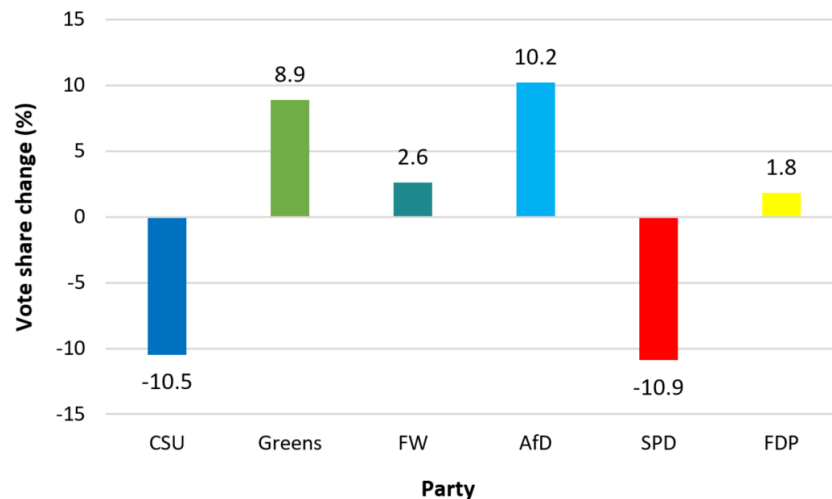
And yet this history would have provided little comfort as it began the gruelling exercise of conducting an electoral post-mortem in Munich on Sunday night. The party received its worst result in unified Germany and its worst electoral performance since 1954. By any criteria, its results were a disaster – a disaster, indeed, predicted by many of the opinion polls in the run up to the election and which have raised searching questions about the party strategy and campaign, the future of its alliance with the CDU and the broader health of the Union.

Figure 1: Party vote shares in the 2018 Bavarian state elections (%)



Note: Compiled by the author.

Figure 2: Percentage point change from 2013 elections



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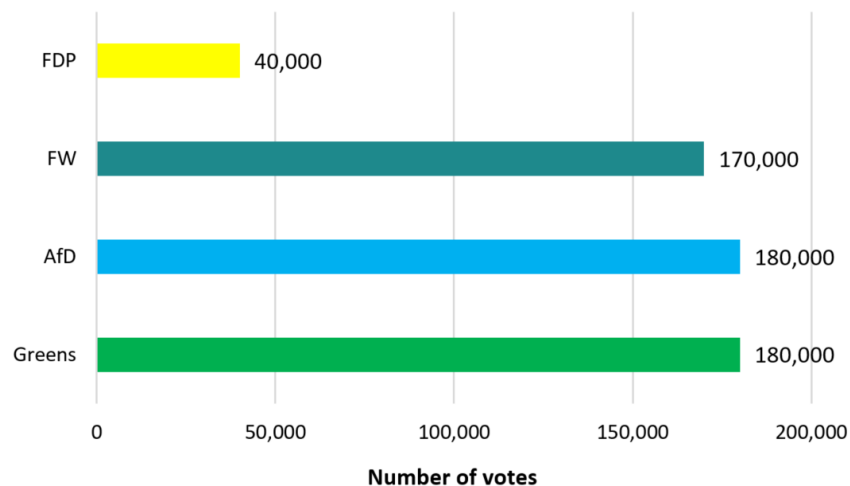
Yet the results also raise questions about the challenger parties. By polling 9.7 percent, the Social Democrats (SPD) came a distant fifth, registering its worst ever result in a state election in Bavaria. Whilst the party cannot be written off, its lack of a successful rebrand is vividly apparent and its narrative is failing to prevent it haemorrhaging further voters and fading into the margins. As SPD leader Andrea Nahles blamed the results on the unpopularity of the federal government, it sounded desperately out-of-touch. This is no minor issue. With state elections scheduled in Hessen later this month and further elections in 2019 in Bremen, Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia, the SPD's inability to reinvent itself may reshape the party landscape and influence the composition of state legislatures across Germany.

By contrast, some parties had success, albeit unevenly. The independent Freie Wähler, for example, had a good night, making inroads into the CSU with an impressive 11.6% of the vote. And the Greens had an undoubtedly impressive showing, with the party's best performance in Bavaria. It more than doubled its share of the vote from 2013 and enters the Landtag with the second largest number of mandates (38). The Alternative for Germany (AfD), meanwhile, secured 22 seats on 10.2% of the popular vote, but failed to make the decisive impact that it has elsewhere – the state elections in Baden-Württemberg in 2016 (15.1%) and last year's federal elections (12.6%) being cases in point. Its performance, whilst solid, indicates that it may not be the natural home for disaffected conservatives.

It is tempting to interpret these results as the product of recent factors, attributable to mis-steps in party strategies or as part of a short-term backlash. Some of these factors may well have been in play. Yet they form part of long-term trends in which elections have become more volatile and declines in the proportion of votes cast for the two main parties (CDU-CSU and SPD) increasingly clear.

One part of the explanation for this is the fraying of ties to political parties. Party membership in Germany has declined noticeably since 1980, and the CSU has not escaped this trend. In addition, as voters have eschewed party attachments, voting has become less habitual and more fluid – and more centred on key political issues, which vary subtly from election-to-election. This opens up political space, making elections more competitive and ensuring that the Union and SPD have to craft a more dynamic strategy to adapt to the more populous party landscape, with their message and policy solutions more carefully refined.

Figure 3: Votes transferred from the CSU to other parties



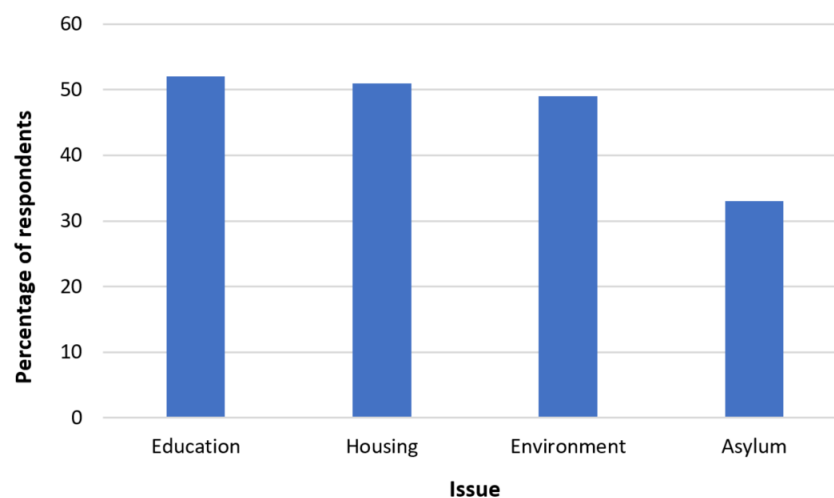
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This should have been central to the CSU's strategy in the months prior to the election. Yet it focused heavily on immigration, reinforcing its support for quicker deportations for refugees who commit crimes and opening up holding and processing centres for asylum-seekers. Further, CSU Chairman and Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer, repeatedly criticised Angela Merkel for being too moderate on migration, calculating that distancing his party from the Chancellor's more moderate policies would neutralise the threat from the AfD.

But it backfired spectacularly. Voters for whom migration was a leading concern were, in all likelihood, inclined to support the AfD in any event. By emphasising immigration, it focused too heavily on one of the pillars of its support (immigration), whilst leaving the other exposed (welfare). And there is evidence that this alienated centrist voters, compounding the party's difficulties. As shown in Figure 3, it lost support to the AfD, Greens and FW.

The clear lessons here are not just that populist right-wing parties pose a threat to conservative parties, but that this threat may be uneven across the country and is occurring in a fluid environment in which voters have choices. Aping the rhetoric of the AfD may well fail to prevent voters shifting to the populist right, whilst it estranges those cut from a more traditional political cloth. On this point, voters have options: social conservatives may relocate to the Greens, whilst fiscal conservatives opt for the FDP or FW. The net result, then, is not heightened pressure on Merkel, but on Seehofer, for his strategy has fuelled tension between the CSU and CDU and he will, in all likelihood, require Merkel to shore up the core of the party's electoral support whilst defusing justified outrage from strategists and members.

Figure 4: Main issues for voters (%)



Note: Compiled by the author.

There is, however, another lesson to be learned from these results. The CSU operated as though the state election was a re-run of the 2017 federal election, with immigration and asylum leading priorities for voters. This was an important mis-step. As shown in Figure 4, voters main concerns were: education, housing, the environment, and asylum, in that order. Voters approached the election with a different set of priorities and thus different expectations about the issues to which parties had to respond.

By repeatedly emphasising the latter of these, Seehofer attempted to cast himself as the CSU's advocate in Berlin – the principled, hard-line conservative disaffected at Merkel's liberal approach and unhappy about propping up a faltering government. Yet voters' concerns were elsewhere. The balance of them emphasised social issues, meaning that the CSU needed to fashion an image of competent stewardship in key policy areas, with a clear programme of government reflecting those concerns and communication strategy on how it would successfully work them through the legislative process.

As it returns to government, it still has the chance to do this and thus rebuild its credibility with the Bavarian electorate. It is more than skilled enough to do so, and if it forms a coalition with the Freie Wahlen, it may well outflank the inexperienced junior coalition partner and reap the electoral dividends. The CSU, then, will return to govern Bavaria. And this is one of the oddities about these state elections: although much has changed, there is a sense in which there is continuity in the outcome.

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About the author



Ross Campbell – *University of the West of Scotland*

[Ross Campbell](#) is a Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the University of the West of Scotland. He tweets [@drrosscampbell](#)