

The SPD may deal the final blow to Angela Merkel's chancellorship



In the state elections held in Hesse on 28 October, Angela Merkel's CDU and her grand coalition partner in the German government – the SPD – suffered heavy losses. Merkel later announced that she would not stand for party leader at the CDU conference in December and would not put herself forward as a candidate for chancellor at Germany's next federal elections. [John Ryan](#) notes that while Merkel is looking to orchestrate her political exit, the crisis-ridden SPD may deal the final blow by pulling out of the grand coalition and triggering a national election.

Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) suffered another poor state election result on Sunday with 27 per cent, down 11.3 percentage points from the 2013 election in Hesse. Her grand coalition partner the Social Democratic Party (SPD) slumped to 19.8 per cent of votes, down 10.9 percentage points, its worst showing since 1946.

Yet again, following on from the [Bavarian elections two weeks ago](#), the Green Party showed strong results, gaining 8.7 points to reach 19.8 per cent of votes as did the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) who enter the Hesse parliament for the first time with 13.1 per cent, up 9 points. On the left, Die Linke gained 1.1 points and finished on 6.3 per cent. The free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP) reached 7.5 per cent, up 2.5 points.

Table: Results of the 2018 state elections in Hesse

Party	Vote share (%)	Change in vote share (%)
Christian Democratic Party (CDU)	27.0	-11.3
Alliance '90/The Greens	19.8	+8.7
Social Democratic Party (SPD)	19.8	-10.9
Alternative for Germany (AfD)	13.1	+9.0
Free Democratic Party (FDP)	7.5	+2.5
Die Linke	6.3	+1.1

Source: https://statistik-hessen.de/l_2018/html/landesergebnis

The AfD is now represented in all 16 regional parliaments in Germany after entering the Hesse regional parliament for the first time. The party's staying power suggests many Germans remain deeply unsatisfied with the government's handling of migration and asylum.

The spiral downwards for the ruling CDU/CSU and the SPD was confirmed by an EMNID opinion poll on 27 October where 24 per cent said they would vote for the CDU/CSU in the next federal elections and 15 per cent for the SPD. The Greens were on 20 per cent and the AfD on 16 per cent, both ahead of the SPD.

The AfD is the party that has benefited most from the migration policy of Merkel and from her move to the centre of German politics leaving a gap on the right. The key to the party's rise in 2014-15 was the establishment status it received from its early champions, who included a former culture editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, a professor of economics at the University of Hamburg, and – most significant – a former IBM executive and president of the Federation of German Industry, Hans-Olaf Henkel, who privately financed the party's early activities.

The patronage of such figures protected the AfD from what might otherwise have been a fatal media assault at its start. The party leadership was soon taken over by a liberal, populist and nationalist group. The AfD was able to overcome its internal leadership battles and squeezed both the CDU and the small parties which helped it towards the 12.6% share of votes it received in the 2017 German federal elections. The mainstream mantra that Germans 'have never had it so good' clearly does not appeal nor apply to the almost 6 million people who voted for the AfD.

The AfD has already influenced the CDU's shift to the right on asylum and identity, reshaping the political landscape. Migration, refugees, Islam and security are set to stay on the agenda – a weaker government will face increased pressure from an opposition with a parliamentary voice and a readiness to change the culture of debate. In 2019 the AfD will have regional elections in [Bremen](#), Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia and the European parliament to contest and build their support.

The CDU and the SPD face a shrinking electoral base and as a result, both parties and their coalition will become increasingly unstable over the next few months. The result in Hesse, home to Germany's financial capital Frankfurt – may also raise the pressure on Merkel's floundering junior coalition partners, the SPD, to pull out of government. And it provides an opportunity for the Greens to capitalise further on their surge in support in recent months. The Greens' performance in Bavaria and Hesse offers more evidence that the party, which already governs in neighbouring Baden-Württemberg, is gradually supplanting the SPD as Germany's new *Volkspartei*.

The left-wing core of the Greens, known as "fundis" for their commitment to the party's fundamentals, continues to lose power. In the months after the 2017 election, the Greens [entered into coalition talks](#) with Merkel's party and the free-market Free Democratic Party. Those talks foundered, but the fact that the Greens even contemplated the idea was seen as the end of an era.

The Greens and the AfD are the only parties that have continued to improve their electoral position since the federal elections in 2017, where the Greens only came in sixth place. The Greens pose a threat to Germany's two traditional *Volkspartei*. The Social Democrats are losing young, metropolitan and pro-European supporters to the Greens. The Greens have also been able to appeal to many centrist supporters of the CDU/CSU who have become uncomfortable with their shift to the right. In the German state of Baden-Württemberg, the Greens are the senior partner in the coalition with the CDU.

The Greens are starting to eclipse the SPD as the largest left-of-centre political force. At the national level the gap between the two has narrowed markedly. According to Katharina Schulze, co-leader of the Bavarian Green Party and other Green leaders, the party has benefited from making a contrarian political bet: while rival parties on the left and right echo popular concerns about migration and national identity, the Greens remain firm advocates of open borders, help for refugees and deeper European integration.

The SPD just about survived being overtaken by the Greens in Hesse, but there will be questions regarding party leader Andrea Nahles. In Hesse the SPD recorded its worst showing since 1946 and in Bavaria they suffered their worst ever result by losing over half their support. Some national polls show the SPD trailing the Greens and the AfD.

Nahles may come under pressure to step down. In the most extreme case, such a result could shock the SPD into leaving Merkel's coalition, which would almost certainly trigger new elections. Although given current trends, there is the danger that they might face a worse election result than in 2017.

The gains by the Greens and the AfD at the expense of the CDU and SPD in Hesse finally caused Merkel to resign her position of party chair of the CDU. The CDU will hold a party congress in December and Merkel's announcement has signalled the start of the race to succeed her as chair of the party and eventually as chancellor.

Whether Merkel will be able to hang on as chancellor until 2021 is an open question. Her fate could well rest with the SPD who will have to decide whether to stay in the grand coalition government or whether to pull out and look to renew itself in opposition. If it did so, the government would fall and new elections would have to be called. Merkel has made clear she would not stand again in such an eventuality.

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