The AfD's second place in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania illustrates the challenge facing Merkel in 2017

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Angela Merkel's CDU came third behind the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the German Social Democrats (SPD) in elections in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania on 4 September. **Kai Arzheimer** *writes that while the result was not unexpected and the CDU still has a lead in national polling, the election underlines the challenge facing Merkel as she seeks reelection in the next German federal elections in 2017.*

The result of the regional election in the north-eastern state of Mecklenburg-West Pomerania could hardly be more embarrassing for Germany's Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Her Christian Democrats (CDU) finished third with just 19 per cent of the vote, behind the new-ish 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) party that won 20.8 per cent. The AfD takes its very name from Merkel's frequent claim that there was 'no alternative' to her policies, and the slogan '*Merkel muss weg*' (Merkel must go) has become something like a mantra for her detractors on the right. With one year to go until the next German federal election, the result does not bode well for Merkel and the CDU.

However, sensitivities and the symbolism of coming second or third aside, the result was no huge surprise, and its short-term impact will be limited. Support for the AfD is generally higher in the eastern states than it is in the West, and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania in particular has a long history of right-wing mobilisation both inside and outside parliament (although the state's immigrant population is tiny). Unlike on previous occasions, the polls did not underestimate support for the AfD, which was actually a bit lower than in the last East German state-level election (Saxony-Anhalt, where the party garnered 24.2 per cent in March). Nationally, the party currently polls between 11 and 14 per cent, more than 20 percentage points less than the CDU.

Table: Result in the 2016 Meckelenburg-West Pomerania election

Party	Vote share (%)	Change (%)	Seats	Change
Social Democratic Party of Germany	30.6	-4.9	26	-2
Alternative for Germany	20.8	+20.8	18	+18
Christian Democratic Union	19.0	-4.1	16	-2
Die Linke (The Left)	13.2	-5.2	11	-3
Alliance '90/The Greens	4.8	-3.9	-	-6
Free Democratic Party	3.0	+0.3	-	-
National Democratic Party of Germany	3.0	-3.0	-	-5

Note: **For more information on the parties see: Christian Democrats(CDU); Social Democrats (SPD); Alliance '90 / The Greens; Die Linke (The Left); Alternative for Germany (AfD); Free Democrats (FDP); National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD).**

While the SPD in Meckelenburg-West Pomerania could also form a coalition with the Left party, the CDU may very well be able to continue as the SPD's junior partner in the state's government, a role it has been playing for the last decade. A reprise of the SPD-CDU coalition in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania would leave the balance of power in the Federal Council unaltered, something that the SPD's national leadership might appreciate during the current "Grand Coalition's" last year in office, whereas an agreement with the Left could scare off West German voters in the upcoming state-level (Saarland, Schleswig-Holstein, and North Rhine-Westphalia) and national campaigns in

2017.

And yet, the result of this regional election in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania has some bearing on the national political situation in Germany. First and foremost, it demonstrates how strongly media coverage of national events and a mediated campaign can affect electoral behaviour. A host of polls have shown that the AfD vote is driven by perceptions of cultural and economic threats allegedly posed by immigrants, refugees and German Muslims, but these groups are virtually absent from mostly rural Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, which has only a tiny migrant population even after Germany accepted a record number of asylum seekers in 2015. Nonetheless, despite the fact the AfD's party organisation in the state is rather weak with just 500 members and their campaign was somewhat lacklustre, the AfD managed to get their anti-immigrant message across.

Second, and somewhat paradoxically, the result demonstrates the importance of regional candidates and political traditions. In all four state-level elections that have been held so far in 2016, incumbent minister presidents won an additional term for their respective parties (the SPD, CDU, and the Greens), but results varied widely: between 19 and 31.8 per cent for the CDU, 10.6 and 36.2 per cent for the SPD, and 4.8 and 30.3 per cent for the Greens.

Third, having a presence in yet another state parliament obviously strengthens the AfD and contributes to its political normalisation. More importantly, it also further shifts the balance of power within the party in favour of the east German state-level party chapters, which are often perceived as more radical than their western counter-parts, and brings in a fresh crop of mid-level party elites with no or very little political experience. The ongoing power struggles within the party are already byzantine and owe at least as much to personal animosities and ambitions as they do to ideological differences. Somewhat surprisingly, they have so far not hurt the AfD's electoral appeal. However, whether the party can fight a coherent national campaign in 2017 is an entirely different question.

Fourth, the Mecklenburg-West Pomerania election has shown that the decline in turnout that has been observed over the last two decades is reversible: Like in Saxony-Anhalt, turnout went up by ten percentage points. Much of this is due to the mobilisation of former non-voters by the AfD. Estimates by commercial pollsters indicate that about one third of the AfD's voters had abstained in the 2011 election. This invalidates the old rule-of-thumb that non-established parties thrive only in low-turnout elections.

Finally, the AfD's success in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania points to the complex issue of segmentation in the German party system, i.e. to the question of which numerically possible coalitions are actually politically feasible. For the time being, the established parties are imposing a *cordon sanitaire* around the AfD by ruling out any kind of political co-operation. Although this strategy may initially increase segmentation, the current strength of the AfD could force the established parties to enter coalitions that straddle political fault-lines and were the object of blue-sky-thinking exercises just a couple of years ago.

While Mecklenburg-West Pomerania will eventually wind up with a coalition format that has been tested before in the state (either SPD-Left or SPD-CDU), Rhineland-Palatinate is now governed by an SPD-FDP-Green coalition, and in Saxony-Anhalt, the CDU governs with the SPD and the Greens. If the AfD enters the 2017 Bundestag, which seems almost a given, and the FDP returns to the national parliament after their four-year-absence, which is at least a strong possibility, the current CDU/CSU-SPD coalition may not be able to continue, even if they wanted to. In this case, a colourful multi-party coalition that could even separate the CDU and the CSU for the first time since 1949 may well be the only way out of an otherwise intractable impasse.

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