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GERMANY

AfD wins elections in Saxony-Anhalt

The AfD won the first regional state election of the three elections this month. Whether Germany could get the first government led by an extreme right-wing party remains unclear

Ulrich Siegmund, leader of the AfD party in Saxony-Anhalt

National and international attention on today's election in Saxony-Anhalt was huge. The state is home to just 2.3 million inhabitants but found itself in the spotlight after the AfD topped opinion polls for much of the campaign. The latest polls have been relatively spot on. According to the estimated results, at 8pm CET on Sunday, the AfD received some 44% of the votes, while the CDU, led by incumbent Minister-President Sven Schulze, came in at 18%. The Left Party, SPD and Greens all received some 9% each. The BSW stands close to 5%. Comparisons with the last state election show dramatic changes, with the AfD more than doubling its votes and the CDU losing half. However, a comparison with last year's federal election may provide a more useful benchmark. In that vote, the AfD won 38.8% of the vote, compared with 23.5% for the CDU. Turnout in today's election was around 80%, up sharply from about 60% in 2021.

While the AfD's victory is clear and this is the party's best performance ever, it remains unclear whether the AfD will be able to lead the next government. Currently, the AfD falls one seat short of holding an absolute majority in parliament. This could still change in the course of the evening until we get the official preliminary results. A lot will now depend on whether the BSW will make it into parliament (remember the German 5% threshold) as all other parties have ruled out any support for the AfD. The BSW has been less clear. At the same time, if the AfD remains short of the absolute majority, two options remain: an AfD minority government or a coalition of the rest. Neither option would promise a stable government.

The AfD's agenda includes speeding up the deportation of undocumented migrants, increasing welfare benefits for native-born Germans, ending sanctions on Russia and German aid to Ukraine, and pulling the country out of the European Union. However, let's be clear: most of these ideas fall outside the remit of state governments.

Impact on economy and national politics

The next days and weeks will bring plenty of speculation about what the AfD's win will mean for the German economy. Sure, there could be a symbolic impact on foreign investors, but let's not forget that Saxony-Anhalt is not the entire German economy. Therefore, let's reserve judgement until a government has been formed. What seems to be a bit clearer is the fact that the AfD is shaking up an increasingly fragmented political landscape in Germany. Today's results also show that last moment mobilisation against the AfD, as witnessed in other states before, no longer works.

For national politics, today's results have clearly brought the feared shock effects. While the SPD seems to be happy that it made it into parliament, the CDU suffered a severe defeat (though partly due to so-called strategic voting to ensure that smaller parties make it into parliament). Don't expect any short-term changes. All parties will now wait for the elections in two weeks, in Berlin and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, before drawing more structural conclusions. However, it increasingly looks as if the state elections this autumn will give the federal government coalition a headwind, rather than a tailwind. The main question will be whether both coalition partners will move closer together to push through with reforms or whether a survival instinct leads to the coalition's self-destruction.

Today's results should not really come as a surprise. They simply represent the climax of a much longer-lasting trend. It is a trend that many other European countries have experienced already: an established right-wing party, a crumbling of the political centre and a fragmented political landscape. Forming stable coalitions will be increasingly difficult. That is not the best situation for a country and an economy still in need of substantial reform.

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