

German state elections

Hessen lesson

Jan 31st 2008 | BERLIN
From The Economist print edition

Angela Merkel ponders the right conclusion to draw from two state elections

THE Christian Democratic Union (CDU) ruled Hesse and Lower Saxony before the state elections on January 27th. It remains the largest party in both. Yet the results were a shock. In Hesse its share of the vote slumped from 48.8% in 2003 to 36.8%, barely ahead of the Social Democrats (SPD). Hesse's premier, Roland Koch, may lose his job. The Left Party, an amalgam of the former East German communist party with west German leftists, won seats in both states and threatens to complicate German politics permanently. Germany, it seems, is leaning leftwards.

AP



Only a middling result, Merkel scolds Koch and Wulff

This will rattle the balance between the CDU and the SPD in the ill-tempered "grand coalition" that governs Germany. It will also shape their plans for the 2009 federal election, when each hopes to evict the other from power. The SPD senses it is on the right track; the CDU is groping. The next test will come in Hamburg, also ruled by the CDU, on February 24th.

For the CDU, the strongest message from Hesse is that xenophobia will not work. Mr Koch, panicked by the rise of the left, thought he could rally support by blasting "young foreign criminals". He failed. Andrea Ypsilanti, the local SPD leader, did better with her calls for "social justice". Her near-victory is a boost for Kurt Beck, the SPD's national leader, who has given his party fresh heart by distancing it from the reforms enacted by the previous SPD chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and by pushing nostrums popular on the left, such as minimum wages.

But the SPD's leftward tilt has been only a partial success. In Lower Saxony its 30.3% share of the vote was the lowest since the second world war. Even in Hesse,

despite its rise from 29.1% to 36.7%, it scored its second-worst result. In neither state could it stop the Left Party from crossing the 5% threshold for seats in parliament.

In Hesse this has created an almost insoluble coalition conundrum. The SPD is the largest constituent of a left-wing majority that includes the Left Party and the Greens. But Ms Ypsilanti refuses to govern with the Left Party, which the SPD considers irresponsible, or even to rely on its support from outside. She would prefer a "traffic-light coalition" with the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens (the SPD's colour is red, the liberals' yellow). But the FDP says no. That might mean another state-level grand coalition, led by some CDU leader other than Mr Koch. Or he could limp on for a while, as head of a minority government.

Chancellor Angela Merkel, who leads both the CDU and the grand coalition in Berlin, will take more heart from the result in Lower Saxony, which suggests that the rise of the Left Party need not mean either parliamentary deadlock or a leftward lurch. Although the Left Party won 7.1% of the vote, the CDU did well enough to continue in coalition with the FDP under the state's popular premier, Christian Wulff. He did some things one might expect from the right, such as reining in spending and introducing fees for university students. But by bowing to the left on issues like minimum wages and avoiding Mr Koch's demagoguery, he got the sort of result Ms Merkel hopes for at national level in 2009.

Duplicating Lower Saxony's formula in a federal election will not be easy, though. Ms Merkel's selective surrender to the SPD's demands for minimum wages and more generous welfare benefits is drawing criticism from the conservative and business wings of the CDU. But to defy the SPD with distinctive conservative policies would risk offending public opinion and paralysing government.

Ms Merkel is still Germany's most popular politician, but the economy is slowing and she leads a coalition more inclined to squabble than act. Her bet is that German voters are clustered not on the left but in the middle, ground she hopes to occupy with an eclectic mix of policy ideas. She will score points for leadership if she can enact the few reforms that muster agreement from both main parties. For style, she is likely to put on Mr Wulff's clothing.