



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report September 2011 (Germany) – Update on recent regional and local elections

September saw elections at various levels in three different *Länder*, giving a sense of politics at the local level.

On Sunday 4th September 2011, elections for the *Land* parliament in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania took place, as well as local elections including the first elections for the newly formed six counties. At the same time, voters could choose their preferred name for the county they live in between two given choices. The results at *Land*-level were a victory for the SPD (Social Democratic Party) which gained 35.6% (up from 30.2% in 2006) – but without gaining a majority -, slight losses for the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) at 23.3% (down from 28.8%), slight wins for the Left Party at 18.4% (up from 16.8%), big wins for the Greens at 8.7% (up from 3.4%) - which will be represented in the M-V parliament for the first time, big losses for the FDP (Free Democratic Party) at 2.8% (down from 9.6%) which failed to gain any seats as it did not pass the 5% hurdle, and slight losses for the right-wing NPD (National Democratic Party) at 6% (down from 7.3%), which nevertheless holds on to some seats. The *Land* parliament of 71 seats in total will have 27 SPD members, 18 CDU, 14 Left Party, 7 Greens and 5 NPD. It looks likely that the SPD will continue its coalition with the CDU. Turn-out was 51.5%, a considerable decrease compared to 59.1% in 2006, which clearly demonstrates that many people have lost interest in elections or have become alienated from the political process.

On Sunday 11 September, local elections for around 2,200 different councils – for the municipalities, the counties, the local neighbourhood councils within municipalities, and the regional assembly for Hanover – took place in Lower Saxony. Here, it was the truly local issues that came to the fore. Aggregating the count, the CDU remained the strongest party at 37% (minus 4.3), the SPD not far behind at 34.9% (minus 1.7). The Greens gained considerably at 14.3% (plus 6.5), the Left Party slightly at 2.4% (up 1.5, while the FDP lost at 3.4% (minus 3.3). Under 'others' which gained 8% in total are to be found a variety of local parties which exist only in that particular locality. As there is no minimum threshold requirement for votes in local elections to obtain seats, the smaller parties have also gained seats in many municipalities. Additionally in 114 authorities (which includes associations of small local authorities as well as some counties) where the election cycles called for it, direct elections for mayors took place, and here the outcomes were very mixed, and no overall trend can be deduced. To pick up on some interesting results, in Hanover city the SPD came top with 37%, the CDU achieved 25.2% but both lost votes, while the Greens achieved 21.5%, their highest result in Hanover ever. Also, the Pirate Party – which originated in Sweden in January 2006, with a German version

established in the summer of the same year and which is mainly concerned with freedom of information and internet-related issues – also was able to get many candidates elected, in the neighbourhood consultative councils as well as several city councils, including Hanover city. Furthermore, the Pirate Party also succeeded in sending two members to the assembly covering the wider Hanover region. This new regional authority for Hanover is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year: it was formed by Hanover city and 21 surrounding municipalities, absorbing the existing county and the municipal association which had to date been responsible for matters concerning the whole region. It also took over some functions from the *Land*. Elections for the 85-strong regional assembly therefore took place for the third time; SPD (36.4%) and CDU (31%) both lost votes but remain the strongest party, while the biggest winner were the Greens at 19%, an increase of 8.1 points. The regional assembly will continue its SPD-Green coalition, in which the Greens will now have a stronger role.

On Sunday 18th September, the third elections of the month took place in Berlin, where elections for the *Land* (and city) parliament coincided with those for the district councils. Here, the focus was very much on the mayor – Berlin as one of the city states does not elect its head directly, but by vote among the parliament members. This is normally the leader of the strongest political party, and it means that each party will nominate its candidate for mayor who fights on that ticket. Klaus Wowereit has been the popular mayor of Berlin for a decade who coined the catchphrase of Berlin as ‘poor but sexy’, and he now was faced with a strong challenge from the Greens, who have been buoyed by strong results in previous elections across Germany. However, although the Greens did increase their share of the vote from 13.1% in 2006 to 17.6%, they did not manage to overtake either SPD (28.3%; minus 2.5) or CDU (23.4%, plus 2.4%), who remain the strongest parties, and Wowereit will remain mayor. The big surprise in Berlin – although it was foreshadowed in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Lower Saxony – were the losses of the FDP, from 7.6% in 2006 to 1.8%, which means they are not eligible for any seats, and the gains of the Pirate Party, who on their first attempt captured 8.9% of the vote. The Left Party however also lost votes (from 13.4% to 11.7%) and therefore continuing the coalition which lasted 10 years is no longer an option. A SPD-Green coalition is most likely, if some obstacles, for example surrounding a motorway extension project, can be solved, but other options such as a ‘grand coalition’ between SPD and CDU will also be explored.

These elections have shown that with the success of the Pirate Party and the failure of the FDP, the party-political landscape is changing again in Germany, and it will be interesting to see if the FDP survives at all, and if the Pirate Party is here to stay.

Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLG or CLAIR.