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## State Elections in Germany: Party Politics on Shaky Ground

by Emily Hruban

This weekend, Germans will go to the polls in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt to elect state leaders. While each of these states has its own distinct demography and political history, they have one thing in common this election cycle: The current migration crisis is throwing the political landscape into disarray and splintering political parties across the country.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's open-door policy toward refugees is perhaps least popular among voters from her own conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Some at odds with Merkel's liberal migration stance have shifted their allegiance to the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, while others have turned to more conservative Union politicians for leadership. Meanwhile, her supporters hope that she will soon be able to negotiate a coordinated European response to stem the flow of refugees entering the country. The CDU's coalition partners, the Social Democrats (SPD), face similar challenges as voters' patience over the current refugee strategy wanes. The three state races may serve as a harbinger for what the German political establishment could face in the 2017 federal elections if the refugee crisis is not effectively addressed in the coming year.

### Baden-Württemberg: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?

Baden-Württemberg's incumbent Minister President Winfried Kretschmann (Green) was able to establish a coalition government with the SPD in 2011 when he unseated the ruling CDU for the first time in 58 years. His success in the election was seen largely as a reaction against Stuttgart 21, an unpopular multibillion-dollar construction project on Stuttgart's main station (think Boston's "Big Dig"), as well as a consequence of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, which boosted support for the Green Party nationally. Over his five-year tenure, he has become an extraordinarily popular politician, with 67 percent of voters preferring him to Guido Wolf, the CDU candidate.<sup>1</sup>

Kretschmann's popularity has catapulted his party to the top of the polls in this traditionally conservative state. Voters in each of Baden-Württemberg's districts will vote for state parliamentary representatives, who will then select a minister president, so the party's success will determine if Kretschmann holds onto his position in 2016. A vote for Kretschmann's Green Party, however, will be more a sign of Kretschmann's personal appeal than of support for the Green Party's national agenda, since Kretschmann's positions do not always match those of the national party. He has aligned himself closely

with Merkel and her refugee policy. Although the two differ on a range of other issues, the refugee crisis has overshadowed typical Green agenda topics such as environmental issues and the *Energiewende*.

Wolf has also veered away from the CDU's national agenda. His campaign strategy has been to criticize Merkel's refugee policy to pander to his conservative base, while simultaneously aligning himself with the chancellor to take advantage of her celebrity. Despite his qualms about Merkel's policy in some areas, Wolf is relying on the chancellor to make eight appearances at his campaign events this year. At the CDU party convention in December, Wolf presented Merkel with a large stuffed animal wolf (a reference to his family name) as an awkward token of apology for his public attacks and a request for her support. Wolf's conflicting messages about his relationship with Merkel highlight the divisions and confusion within the party.

### **Rhineland-Palatinate: With Friends Like These...**

The refugee crisis has also dominated the debate in the Rhineland-Palatinate race. SPD and CDU are currently neck and neck, polling at 36 and 35 percent respectively. <sup>ii</sup> SPD candidate Malu Dreyer is the state's sitting minister president, but she has yet to be tested in a statewide election. She took office in 2013 after her predecessor stepped down from the post in the middle of his term. Sigmar Gabriel, vice chancellor and SPD party leader has campaigned energetically with Dreyer, holding onto hope that she will give the party a much needed win.

Julia Klöckner (CDU), like Wolf in Baden-Württemberg, has struggled to position herself during this election campaign. Political commentators frequently mention her as a possible successor to Merkel, so a win is crucial to raising her profile on the national stage. Merkel has supported Klöckner at eleven campaign events and the women have spoken publicly about one another with deep mutual admiration and affection. This sentiment, however, did not prevent Klöckner (together with Wolf) from publishing a letter criticizing Merkel's refugee policy in the popular *Bild* paper. The two candidates called on the chancellor to make drastic changes to prevent more refugees from entering the country. She has been careful with her language on the subject, calling her suggestions for handling refugees "Plan A2," not Plan B, in order to thread the needle in a way that satisfies both critics and defenders of Merkel's national policy. Although Klöckner may one day aspire to fill the chancellor's shoes, the results of this election will not be a bellwether of the chancellor's chances for 2017.

### **Saxony-Anhalt: Rise of the Fringe**

In the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt there has been a long tradition of supporting anti-establishment parties on both the right and left. The refugee crisis is exacerbating this trend on the right in the 2016 elections. The Left Party, which has a welcoming stance on

refugees, currently maintains support at 21 percent.<sup>iii</sup> They have been second only to the CDU in polls since 2002, while nationally, their polling numbers are half that.

The right-wing populist and Eurosceptic AfD party has capitalized on voters' disillusionment with establishment candidates and anxiety about ongoing refugee movements. The party has adopted xenophobic and Islamophobic platform and has drawn support from voters who believe that refugees threaten their country. The party is currently polling at 18 percent,<sup>iv</sup> higher than any other state in the country. The mainstream popularity of AfD has come as a shock to many in Germany, a country that has actively tried to limit extremism since the Second World War. Although politicians from other parties have vowed not to form a coalition with the AfD or collaborate with their candidate, André Poggenburg, the party's success is a troubling sign of increasing discontent and intolerance in the region. It is clear that the coalition that does emerge - probably some constellation of CDU, SPD and Linke - will face vocal opposition from the right wing over the next five years. This struggle could also be replicated in the Bundestag in 2017 if the party continues to gain momentum.

### **Looking Toward 2017**

As many in Merkel's own party turn against her, she may be saved in 2017 by the fact that German voters will have few viable alternatives. Bavarian Minister President Horst Seehofer has led the Union's criticism of Merkel, and he has even met with foreign heads of state like Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán to undermine her refugee policy. While Seehofer wants Merkel out, in his current role as a state official, he is not eligible to replace her. Gabriel leads a similarly fragmented SPD and has been criticized by his own party for his collaboration with the chancellor on her refugee policy. At the SPD national convention in December, he was reelected as party leader with minimal enthusiasm. Without the full support of his struggling party, it is unlikely he would pose a serious threat to the incumbent.

The elections on Sunday will not predict the results of the 2017 federal elections, but they signal the extent to which establishment parties are struggling to maintain unity under the strain of the refugee crisis. With each new arrival, divisions only deepen. Until other EU states take on responsibility and show solidarity on the issue, Merkel will continue to face a fragmented and volatile political landscape at home.

*Emily Hruban is project manager for transatlantic relations at the Washington, DC-based Bertelsmann Foundation. [Emily.Hruban@bfna.org](mailto:Emily.Hruban@bfna.org)*

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<sup>i</sup> ZDF Politibarometer March 10, 2016

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.