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Bavaria's October Surprise

Green's Gains Show What Matters to Voters

By Stephan Strothe

The political aftershocks are still reverberating far beyond Bavaria's idyllic hillsides. In the October 14 state elections, the voters of Germany's powerful southern state dealt a stinging blow to the Christian Social Union (CSU). The conservative CSU, sister party to Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), lost its absolute majority, scoring a meager 37.4 percent of the vote. It was the party's worst result since the 1950s, when the CSU rose to become the political powerhouse that has consistently dominated politics in Bavaria in a way that at times has almost resembled a one-party rule. The traditionally conservative CSU voters have now abandoned their party in droves, migrating to both the left and the right: some to the far-right Alternative for Germany (the AfD won 10.2 percent of the vote), but even more voters swung to the left-leaning Green Party whose support surged to a record 17.5 percent.

Trouble for the "Volksparteien"

Bavaria's results mirror the political mood on Germany's national stage, and that is bad news for the so-called "Volksparteien" or "People's Parties," the center-right CDU/CSU and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD), respectively. In Bavaria, the SPD ended up with only 9.7 percent – a disaster for the party's regional candidates, but also another dire warning for Angela Merkel. It was a double blow for Germany's chancellor: a more than disappointing result for the CSU, and another brutal loss for the Social Democratic partner in Merkel's grand coalition.

Green Party Gains

The discouraging results for the two traditional political heavyweights did not come unexpectedly, given the dramatic decline of Germany's big-tent parties. Bavaria's real "October Surprise," though, was the fact that the Green Party's message resonated so strongly, more precisely, that the Greens almost doubled their votes with an explicitly pro-refugee platform. The topic of migration has divided Germany like no other political or social issue. In the CSU's campaign, the party continued its in-house quarrel with Angela Merkel, continuously challenging her decision to open the country's borders for

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hundreds of thousands of refugees in 2015. But in Bavaria, one of the country's most conservative states, stoking anti-immigrant sentiment did not prevent the CSU's disappointing performance.

Slogans like "asylum tourism" failed to deliver the breakthrough success for the far-right Alternative for Germany that many voters had feared. Still, the AfD will enter Bavaria's regional parliament for the first time, continuing an ascent that has made the party a political force in 15 of Germany's 16 states. On October 28, voters in the holdout state of Hesse will probably enable the AfD to finish the job.

At the same time, the results of Bavaria's elections suggest that it was specifically the extreme right's fierce anti-immigrant platform that increased the Green Party's appeal. The Greens' platform of open EU borders, liberal social values, and fighting against climate change seems to reflect the reality of a more diversified electorate in one of Germany's most conservative regions. That trend was most obvious in the cities: In Munich, the Green Party clearly beat the CSU, getting more than 42 percent of the votes in the center district of Bavaria's capital. The Greens' surprisingly strong surge was helped by what post-election polls identified as the most important issues on voters' minds: education, the housing crisis, and climate change, with migration a distant number four.

Bavaria's regional elections fuel the hopes of many liberal and center-left voters throughout Germany that the Green Party, a onetime ridiculed environmental protest movement, could regain its clout and become the second-strongest political force in the nation. A continuation of the Green's renaissance could even help the party revise the impact it had as partner in the government coalition with the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2005.

Who Will Govern in Munich?

In the short run, not much will change in Munich or Berlin. Despite the CSU's lackluster performance, the party is still the strongest political force in Bavaria. Having lost its absolute majority, however, the party will need a coalition partner in order to keep governing. The most likely candidate is the Freie Wähler (FW) or "Free Voters" party. The Euro-sceptic FW reached 11.6 percent of the votes by focusing on rural areas, demanding stronger self-government of communities and regular referendums. When it comes to the key political issues, such as immigration and education, there is not much daylight between the two parties' platforms. In Munich's coffee houses and beer gardens, the "Spezi-Koalition," a coalition of political buddies between CSU and Free Voters, is seen as a done deal.

A Blow to Merkel?

Berlin, too, will not experience a substantial power-realignment as an immediate reaction to Bavaria's regional elections. Horst Seehofer, the CSU leader and Angela Merkel's Interior Minister, made very clear shortly after the polling stations closed that he does not intend to step down. His demise would have been an urgently needed bit of good news for the chancellor, since Seehofer is Merkel's primary rival within the current government. Even that shift, though, could not have distracted from the fact that Bavaria's elections might be the harbinger for a perfect political storm: With Angela Merkel's conservative allies weakened, her Social Democratic government partners in a tailspin, and an impressive resurgence of the left-leaning Greens, it will become increasingly difficult for her to serve out her fourth term as Germany's chancellor.