The Social Democratic Party (SPD) triumphed in the recent Hamburg state election, held last Sunday, February 23. However, this victory is no reason to celebrate for Social Democrats across Germany. While the party has won a battle, it is losing the war – and pretty severely. Although the SPD has enjoyed its best performance in recent memory, the party continues to struggle at the state and national levels. Current countrywide polling for the Social Democrats stands at an abysmally-low 15 percent.\(^1\)

The fragmentation of the German political spectrum in recent years – the electoral shift away from Germany’s big tent parties, the SPD and Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – has created challenges for the country’s political system. As seen in the recent Thuringia debacle in which the CDU and Free Democratic Party (FDP) broke political norms by cooperating with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to elect a minister president, political fragmentation has complicated coalition-building, political taboos, party unity, and traditional center-led political stability. The ostensible shining light created by the Hamburg state election is not a watershed moment for the Social Democrats, and the direction of the party moving forward remains uncertain.

The SPD down, the Greens up

Despite victory in Hamburg, the SPD has lost significant ground to the Greens, part of a recent trend observed throughout the country at all levels of government. In terms of percentage point changes, the SPD has suffered losses in 14 of the last 16 federal state elections since 2011 – in multiple states, losses have exceeded ten percent.\(^2\) On the other hand, the Greens have in some cases experienced double-digit percentage boosts. The Greens are currently polling at 22 percent nationally, ranking second among all parties and seven points above the SPD.\(^3\) As demonstrated in the 2019 European elections, the Greens have been especially effective at bringing in young voters (30 years and younger) due to its environmentally-conscious platform.\(^4\) German political commentators suggest the Greens are on track to replace the Social Democrats as the main party of the left. Additionally, the Greens will most likely be a part of the ruling coalition following federal elections next year.\(^5\)

While the SPD in Hamburg secured a meaningful victory this past Sunday, the party
still dropped six points from the last state election in 2015. Conversely, the Greens gained 12, doubling their results from the last election cycle. The Greens failed to finish first in Hamburg, but the results provided a win nonetheless. It ensures a shift in the balance of power between the Red-Green (SPD-Green) coalition that will govern Hamburg for the next five years. Katharina Fegebank, leader of the Greens in Hamburg, has stated that the SPD-Green coalition will continue, but with a clearly stronger Green presence.6 Hamburg’s Green justice minister, Till Steffen, stated that “the campaign underlines what we are seeing in polls at the national level, namely that we scored 25 percent of the vote. That will help us regardless of whether we emerge on top or whether we ‘only’ double our result from last time.”

A Local Victory, Not a National One

The Hamburg election results are not an indication that the SPD has turned a corner. The victory that Peter Tschentscher, Hamburg’s mayor, and his counterparts have delivered is related more to policies implemented at the local level than party developments at the national level. Additionally, Hamburg is simply unique. The Hanseatic city-state is very wealthy, in part due to its world-famous harbor. Also, its largely urban population provides a political landscape dissimilar to other parts of the country. Just as the near departure of the AfD from the Hamburg parliament is not an indication of the far-right party’s waning national popularity, the SPD’s performance in Hamburg is largely a local victory, not a national one.

At a party conference in November 2019, the Social Democrats elected fresh leadership in an attempt to shake up the status quo and win back its voter base following successive defeats at the European and state levels. The new co-leaders of the SPD, Norbert Walter-Borjans and Saskia Esken, belong to the left-leaning bloc of the party. While the change has ostensibly led to the SPD’s most significant electoral victory in recent years, the results in Hamburg fail to confirm the impact of the leadership switch.

Mayor Tschentscher does not belong to the left-leaning faction of the SPD. He embodies rather the values and style of Olaf Scholz, Germany’s vice chancellor and finance minister, who served as mayor of Hamburg from 2011 to 2018. The Tschentscher government is largely a validation for Scholz, whose bid for SPD leadership was declined by his fellow party members in November last year. Tschentscher, who replaced Scholz as Hamburg’s top official in 2018, has overseen a pragmatic implementation of campaign promises to expand social housing and maintain rent prices – the latter is a theme dominating German public debate today.8 In the run-up to the election last Sunday, Tschentscher requested that Borjans and Esken not appear on the campaign trail. He stated: “our course remains the same regardless of how the SPD develops nationwide,” and that “whatever happens in Berlin, we are an independent regional association.”9 The success of the SPD in Hamburg is a testament to effective governance at the local level, not a sign that the party has enhanced its position with voters nationwide.

An Uncertain Future

For years, the SPD has been hampered by questionable leadership, residual internal divisions stemming from the controversial Schröder years, and continued membership in the grand coalition (CDU-SPD government) at the national level. The grand coalition has disallowed the SPD the ability to distinguish itself from its center-right partners, and the absence of a strong, independent left-leaning party has allowed the Greens to assume this role. The introduction of Esken and Borjans as party leaders alone, will not win back voters – as displayed through current national polling. Rather, the key to an SPD comeback is opposition. The success of the Hamburg SPD last Sunday and during the past decade is – in addition to good governance – rooted in oppositional politics deployed in the late 2000s. After taking charge of the Hamburg SPD in 2009, Olaf Scholz led a strong opposition to the CDU government, ultimately resulting in a decisive victory during the next election. Years of opposition strengthened and unified the party, and during the 2015 state election in Hamburg, Scholz and his counterparts received a staggering 48.4 percent share of the vote, a near majority.

While this month’s SPD victory in Hamburg does not represent a momentous shift for the greater party, the long-term strategy implemented by the Hamburg SPD – a strong opposition while in the minority and good governance while in power – can provide lessons on how the party should operate moving forward.

Endnotes
3 Ibid.
7 Tobias Buck, “Hamburg SPD point the way for party’s national revival,” Financial Times, February 23, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/7d71ce4e-5323-11ea-88b4-482eed0033b1.
8 Ibid.