

The Far Right Isn't the Only Rising Force in Germany

What an election in one German state could reveal about immigration politics across Europe.



German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, the chairman of the CSU party, addresses a news conference in Berlin on September 19, 2018. FABRIZIO BENSCH / REUTERS

When Germany's southern state of Bavaria holds its regional election on Sunday, its ruling Christian Social Union (CSU) is expected to lose its absolute majority—by a lot. The party's projected losses appear to be part of a much broader trend of political fragmentation across Europe, in which bigger parties are shrinking while smaller parties—especially those on the far right—are growing.

Such has been the case in recent elections in Sweden, Italy, and even in Germany's general election last year. But in its own way, Bavaria is bucking this trend. Rather than the new main challenger coming from a populist party like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) on the far right, this time it's coming from a more unexpected source: the pro-immigration Green Party.

Bavaria stands out among German states for its relatively stable politics—it's been a one-party state, governed by the center-right CSU, for much of the past several decades. So it's telling about the state of political fragmentation in Germany, and in Europe more broadly, that even there voters are looking for alternatives to the establishment.

It's also telling that this doesn't necessarily favor the far right. Bavaria is the German state perhaps closest to the front lines of Germany's migration crisis; most of the asylum seekers that arrived when Chancellor Angela Merkel decided to welcome more than 1 million people from war-torn Syria and elsewhere in 2015 came through the state, with the result being that Bavaria had to process tens of thousands of people moving through its border with Austria every day. That the Greens—a former protest party now ensconced in Germany's mainstream center-left—have managed to make gains here shows that divisive immigration politics need not always lead to far-right gains.

If recent polling is any indication (and in Bavaria, it's been known to be spot on), the Greens could secure as much as 18 percent of the vote on Sunday, more than doubling its result from Bavaria's last state election, in 2013. Such an outcome would put the Greens ahead of the center-left Social Democrats (who are projected to win 11 percent of the vote, down from 20.6) and the far-right AfD (projected to win 10 percent). It would also put them second only to the CSU, which is expected to take 33 percent of the vote—a considerable drop from its nearly 48 percent finish in 2013.

Such a result would be disastrous for the ruling CSU, putting it well below the majority it needs to govern in Bavaria without a coalition partner, as it has for every term but one since 1966. Nor does it bode well for the national standing of the party, which governs alongside Merkel's Christian Democrats, its center-right sister party, and the Social Democrats in coalition. Though the results of the regional election won't affect the party's presence in the Bundestag, the German Parliament, a poor result could put pressure on the party's chairman, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, to resign and give his party the opportunity to promote someone more popular to the role instead.

So just how did the CSU get to this point? As with many issues that have vexed German politics in recent years, it goes back to 2015. Bavaria's efforts at the time earned the state worldwide praise, but it also sparked anti-immigrant sentiments

that quickly buoyed the electoral rise of the anti-immigrant AfD in the years that followed.

This left the CSU with a choice: pursue a hard-line immigration policy to siphon off AfD voters, or risk being outflanked by the far right. Leopold Traugott, a policy analyst at the London-based think tank Open Europe, told me this quandary hemmed in the CSU. “They’re bleeding out voters to the AfD on the right, but if they want to stop that movement, they end up losing voters at the center,” he said. “It’s a difficult problem for them to square.”

Ultimately, the CSU did move to the right, marked most notably by Seehofer’s call in June for Germany to begin turning away asylum seekers at its border who have already sought asylum in another European Union country—a plan Merkel flatly rejected. Though a compromise was eventually reached the following month, the government infighting over the issue proved enough to turn some CSU supporters away from the party, even prompting some 15,000 people to turn out in protest of its leaders’ “irresponsible politics of division.”

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But the CSU’s rightward shift also left a political void at the center—one the Green Party was happy to fill. Over the past year, the Greens have attracted 5,000 new supporters, surpassing 70,000 members for the first time in its history. Of the voters projected to support them on Sunday, the German pollster Forsa estimates that 25 percent of them are coming from the CSU. The largest share—42 percent—is believed to come from the Social Democrats, who are still reeling from their poor performance in the country’s general election last year.

Judith Bogner, a first-time Green Party candidate in Bavaria, told me that immigration is one of the reasons the Green Party has attracted more support. Unlike the CSU, the Green Party has maintained a pro-immigration stance, campaigning on a platform of open borders and better integration for refugees. “There is disappointment among conservative voters over the lack of compassion their leadership is showing in regards to refugees who are here for good reason and the populist language that has been adopted,” she said, adding: “They thought by shifting all the way to the right that they could recapture those votes. What happened actually is that they lost a lot of the middle ground.”

But it's not just immigration. Bogner said the Greens are also focusing on other important issues that mainstream parties have ignored, such as health care and infrastructure. "Conservatives, who for half of their lifetime voted for the CSU, are wondering why no one is talking about the lack of affordable housing [and] why no one is talking about the lack of digitalization," she said. "Refugees are not the only problem."

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Though the outcome of Sunday's vote will have as much of an impact on Berlin as it will on Munich, it would be wrong to view the CSU's performance as a referendum on Merkel's government, despite that party's close cooperation with hers. "The two people who would have to take the rap for a bad performance by the CSU would be Seehofer himself and the minister president of Bavaria, Markus Söder," Quentin Peel, an associate fellow with the Europe Program at Chatham House and the former chief correspondent for the *Financial Times* in Berlin, told me. He noted that by criticizing Merkel on her immigration policies, the CSU leaders effectively made the vote a referendum on themselves. "If it's bad for the CSU and they're very critical of Merkel, it may not be so bad for Angela Merkel."

The result may even be indicative of what's to come in Germany. With the Social Democrats still mired in crisis, the Greens could see this as an opening to make gains themselves on the national stage. A recent poll shows the gap between the two parties has narrowed markedly: The Social Democrats, which trails the AfD by one point, would win just 17 percent of the vote if a general election were held today. The Greens would be just two points behind, with 15 percent. Merkel might even like this result, Peel said. "She's always been quite tempted to form a government if she could with the Greens," he said. "She's always felt quite comfortable with them."

If the vote on Sunday goes as polls predict, the likely scenario is that the CSU will have to enter into a coalition with the Greens—a move that would mirror the government in the neighboring state of Baden-Württemberg, where both parties have ruled in coalition since 2016 (there, the Greens are the largest party). It's a responsibility Bogner said the Greens are ready to take on. "The only conversation we would exclude about a potential coalition partner is the AfD, absolutely not," she said. "Other than that, we are willing to talk with everyone who can come to the table."

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