

What Lessons for German Greens after the Bavarian Election

Article by Alexandra Huber

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On 8 October, Bavarians and Hessens went to the polls after a toxic campaign where nothing seemed off limits. The sober tones of previous election contests were swapped for scandals, death threats, and stone throwing. With this strategy, the conservatives have managed to hold on to power but also right-wing extremists now have a foothold in government. But Greens cannot despair just yet.

A stand in front of a campaign event by the Greens offers tomatoes, eggs, and stones to anyone who wants to “express themselves”. The state’s serving minister-president discovering his niche on Instagram, proceeds to post videos of him eating Bavarian food and with the tagline #soederisst (Söder is eating). An election candidate comes under fire for allegedly spreading antisemitic propaganda papers during his school years. In a dramatic plot twist, his brother steps forward and claims responsibility for the papers which had allegedly been discovered in the candidate’s school bag. Meanwhile far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) Party Leader Alice Weidl who was supposedly taken to a safehouse and had cancelled a campaign appointment for that reason turned out to be vacationing in Mallorca.

What sounds like a badly written political sitcom is how the Bavarian election campaign unfolded.

A toxic campaign

The campaigns in Bavaria and Hessen leading up to the 8 October elections were uncharacteristically toxic, reflecting polarisation in German politics.

During the campaign, topics such as rising costs of living, loss of jobs due to industries moving away from Germany, the consequences of the Ukraine war – a new wave of migrants and an energy crisis – were pushed aside. Instead, parties concentrated their attacks on opponents and sold the election as an opportunity to express discontent with the federal coalition between Social Democrats (SPD), Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and Liberals (FDP).

While green politicians have always been unpopular in Bavaria and with the CSU (the regionalist counterpart of the centre-right CDU), this year’s election campaign was unusually hostile, causing several green politicians to go under police protection. The conservatives Christlich-Soziale Union (CSU) and Freie Wähler (Free Voters) run attack campaigns against the national government and singled out the Green party. The CSU argued that Greens lacked the “Bayern-Gen” (Bavarian DNA), that they were not “real Bavarians”, and they would deprive Bavarians of the good life.

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At the entrance of a Green party event in Chieming, where Green Minister for Agriculture Cem Özdemir was in attendance, a stand offered tomatoes, eggs, and stones to anyone who wanted to express their opinion of Greens – apparently a joke. At another event in Neu-Ulm, someone threw a stone at the lead Green candidates Katharina Schulze and Ludwig Hartman. Neu-Ulm turned out to be the city where Greens experienced their highest losses in the elections.

Green party leader Ricarda Lang appealed to CSU and Freie Wähler to moderate their tones for the sake of democracy. From her perspective, defending democracy should be more important than stirring populist sentiment.

The results

The outcome of the elections were unsurprising. In both states, the conservative parties CDU and CSU won the elections with 35 per cent and 37 per cent respectively.

While the CSU's win in Bavaria is celebrated as a success, the record low voter turnout – lowest since 1950 – and it retaining about half of its election record in the early 2000s makes this performance less than impressive. The CSU will nevertheless continue as the ruling party in both Hessen and Bavaria, accompanied by the Freie Wähler who seem to have survived the antisemitism scandal involving their leader Hubert Aiwanger. In fact, Freie Wähler gained more votes than previously, bringing its share to 15.8 per cent. In toe is the right-wing AfD, which now has a stronger foot in parliament to push its extreme agenda.

The far-right AfD outperformed all parties that are currently in the national government with 18.4 per cent in Hessen – their best result in a Western German state so far – and 14.6 per cent in Bavaria. For the Greens in Hessen, the results were especially bitter as they won just 14.4 per cent of the votes despite being the second biggest party in the last elections and a coalition partner of the CDU in the state.

But compared to other parties in the national coalition, Greens can still count some blessings in Bavaria. They maintained support in their strongholds, which are predominantly big cities. In some cases, they became the strongest party – in central Munich they received 44 per cent of votes. Overall, they were the only party in the national coalition to gain more than 10 per cent of votes in Bavaria. By contrast, the Social Democrats are now the smallest party in the Bavarian government with a record-low 8.4 per cent, while the Liberals did not even manage to clear the threshold to stay in parliament.

As the biggest progressive party in a state run by right-wing conservatives, and with just 17 Social Democrats to count on, the Greens in Bavaria will be under considerable pressure. A potential ally is the Bavarian Left, which has never been in the federal government in its current history.

The results from these two states and the polls across Germany open up the possibility of having a very conservative national government in 2025.

CSU leader Markus Söder has already been named as a possible candidate of the conservatives for the federal elections. His confirmation as the leader of the joint CDU-CSU ticket is possible for two reasons. One is that the CDU's candidate lost the last election – a first after Angela Merkel. The second is that the conservatives seem to have a working agreement to nominate an CSU candidate every 10 to 15 years.

Key lessons for Greens

As for the Greens, they will need to decide if they want to ride the wave of populist campaigning and position themselves as the true Brandmauer against the far right. They can continue focusing on their thematic agenda and using this to show that the Green Party is more than an advocate for expensive climate action.

While this focus might work for their base – a majority of young, educated women living in big cities and students – it's proven insufficient to win over new voters, particularly in rural areas. Many rural voters have bought into the narrative about the Greens being a party of unreasonable prohibitions. It's a narrative stirred by the predominantly male conservative candidates framing the Greens as party wanting to spend money on “useless things” such as gendered language or cycling routes in bigger cities.

The bigger lesson progressives should draw from the toxic campaigns in Bavaria and Hesse is that they need to find new ways to speak with people outside their base and pull the debate back to substance.

To win this demographic, Greens must show themselves in upcoming election campaigns not just as a party with valuable solutions to problems that disproportionately affect rural areas – rising costs of living, loss of medical aid, school closures – but also a party for people from all backgrounds. Such a shift in the Greens' discourse will unlikely cost them their base; the number of Green voters turning to the AfD is rather low due to Green supporters often having a strong ideologic view of politics and despising right-extreme forces.

Greens will need to hurry up though, as 2024 already has a long list of elections, from local to regional and European. The prospect of conservatives applying the same tactics used in Hesse and Bavaria in states like Saxony, Brandenburg and Thüringen in Eastern Germany should already raise alarms. In the previous elections in those states, the AfD came out as the second strongest party, with at least 23 per cent of votes. All those states have a large rural voting group and not many big cities or university towns that could save the Greens from a dramatic downfall the Liberals experienced.

The bigger lesson progressives should draw from the toxic campaigns in Bavaria and Hesse is that they need to find new ways to speak with people outside their base and pull the debate back to substance. The far-right especially does not face the same constraints of implementation and accountability, but simply makes wild promises to anyone who will listen. More responsible and experienced parties like the Greens understand that election promises need to be kept and, therefore, should prioritise realistic proposals.



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