

Merkel's defeat in Hamburg – how important are local elections for National Coalitions?

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On Sunday, elections to the state parliament in Hamburg saw Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) take a resounding defeat with just 21.9% of the vote, a fall from 42.6% in 2008. As a result, the Social Democrats (SPD) won a landslide victory in the Landtag by a massive 48.3%, a dramatic swing to the centre-left party after ten long years in opposition.

Their huge majority in Hamburg means that the party will not need to join with a smaller party to form a coalition. The defeat followed a difficult period of government for the Hamburg CDU. The election was triggered by the withdrawal of the Green Party from the coalition following controversies on educational reforms and the resignation of Mayor Ole von Beust in summer 2010. While the Green Party saw its share of the vote increase, the CDU suffered enormously.

Indeed, the Hamburg election was particularly local in character, and the national CDU have attributed its losses to local issues. However, with the Hamburg election being the first of six regional elections this year, there are important messages for the federal level as well. The state election was seen as a test for the national coalition, particularly for Merkel and the CDU. For the federal government, the defeat in Hamburg comes after many turbulent months involving criticism of Merkel's handling of the Eurozone crisis, with many Germans angry with the size of bailout packages to Greece at a time of economic crisis and high unemployment. The German media has used the Hamburg election as an indication of the health of the national coalition government. The extent to which Hamburg is representative of the rest of Germany is questionable, but it is certainly embarrassing for Merkel at a time when the popularity of her party, and the coalition, is already at an all-time low.

The debate in Germany raises interesting general questions about coalitions and the relationship between the local and the national level. The UK government will undoubtedly be keeping a close eye on developments in Germany, and rightly so. Coalitions are a new phenomenon for today's politicians in Britain (we already know Nick Clegg has looked to the Continent for advice), and it has already faced some tough challenges. From the tuition fees debacle, which saw the resignation of two Liberal Democrat government ministers and a significant Liberal Democrat rebellion, to the VAT rise, reform of the NHS and heavy cuts to welfare budgets, many policies have not sat easy with the predominantly centre-left Liberal Democrats. As we approach the coalition's first anniversary, another great challenge lies ahead in May – local elections and a referendum on voting reform.

Will the country punish the coalition for what have been described by the Institute for Fiscal Studies as the worst public service cuts in Britain since the Second World War? This will be particularly interesting for Birmingham City Council, which has been run by a Conservative/Lib Dem 'progressive partnership' since 2004 and has repeatedly come under the national spotlight since last year's hung parliament. If the German election in Hamburg is anything to go by, Birmingham's local coalition will be extremely concerned that a Labour resurgence in the city will result in its defeat, and a weakening of the national one. It is clear that the results of May's local elections will be crucial for the UK coalition, and its members will surely be anxiously awaiting the results of further regional elections in Germany.

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