

Eyes on Germany: Storm Clouds in Berlin

Article by Inge Jooris

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This February, Berlin voters punished the parties at the helm of Germany's traffic coalition. In the first of a new monthly column on the German Greens in government, Inge Jooris unpicks the messy result of a messy election.

Berlin held repeat elections on 12 February 2023 which did not go as the Berlin Greens planned. With 18.4 per cent of the vote, they failed – albeit by a narrow margin – to achieve their main goal: overtake the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD).

When the Federal Constitutional Court ruled on 16 November that the Berlin elections would have to be repeated because of irregularities, it looked like good news for the Berlin Greens. They were doing well in the polls and their leader Bettina Jarasch had expressed her desire to be mayor Franziska Giffey's (SPD) successor.

The parties run a short campaign. That the elections had to be repeated was already a disgrace for the capital and a disaster for the politicians. They wanted to appear sober. Jarasch, the Green frontrunner, played the green card fiercely. Climate protection became a top priority. She backed more pavements, cycling lanes, and public transport. By 2030, only electric cars would be allowed in the city centre. She wanted to reduce the number of parking spaces drastically. She was clear that things had to change in Berlin and that she intended to continue the current Red-Red-Green majority, with the only difference being that she would lead it. When the newspaper *der Tagesspiegel* asked whether a continuation of the coalition would be a new beginning, she replied: "A Green mayor would be a new beginning. Priorities will shift dramatically. There will be a greater willingness to make the necessary changes".

Election night on 12 February was nerve-racking for the Greens. It soon became clear that the Christian Democrats (CDU) were heading for a landslide victory, while the Greens and the SPD were jostled for second place. In the end, the CDU won 28.2 per cent of the vote, a more than 50 per cent increase on the votes it won in the election a year and a half ago. The Greens and the SPD both finished with 18.4 per cent. The Socialists received just 53 more votes, remaining as the second largest party. Jarasch failed to achieve an important goal: becoming the second largest party and taking the mayor's sash for herself.

The Greens are right to insist on a greater say if the coalition is to continue. The Greens more or less managed to hold onto their voters, while the Socialists lost 3 per cent of their support. Die Linke lost 1.9 per cent of its voters and fell back to 12.2 per cent. The Greens will hold more sway in any renewed Red-Red-Green coalition.

The CDU, the biggest winner of the election, warns that excluding them from a coalition would be undemocratic. The party has entered talks with both the Social Democrats and the Greens. Both parties, as well as the Left, have already indicated that they would prefer to work together again – if they can find each other again.

Whatever majority emerges, it is clear to all that *Weiter so* – carrying on as usual – is not an option in Berlin. The capital, now nicknamed *Pannenstadt* (disaster city), is running aground. As the *Berliner Zeitung* puts it: “Election chaos, airport disaster, everyday disasters.” The people of Berlin no longer trust their government. Only 24 per cent of voters surveyed by Infratest dimap in early February were satisfied with the work of their leaders. This figure has only been lower twice in the history of the poll. The main opposition party the CDU should be cashing in, but only 31 per cent of Berliners think a CDU-led Senate would do better, while 52 per cent think it would not.

This election is giving many parties pause, especially as state elections fast approaches. Bremen’s citizens go to the polls on 14 May, Bavaria’s on 8 November and Hesse’ in the autumn (the exact date has yet to be decided).

Officially, the Greens are happy to have stabilised their best result to date in Berlin. In October 2021, the party had reached its all-time high with 18.9 per cent. But behind closed door, many express disappointment. “The ball was on the penalty spot in Berlin, we didn’t take it,” said a disappointed party leader. Nationally, the Green ministers Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck are some of the most popular politicians in the country. Yet the Berlin Greens lost to the SPD by a narrow margin and even lost some voters.

Questions are being asked about the strategy of Green leader Bettina Jarasch. *Der Tagesspiegel* speaks of Jarasch’s uncompromising “basta politics”. “Her campaign relied too much on dubious symbolism, for example by closing 500 metres of Friedrichstrasse to traffic,” argues *Die Welt*. She pressed ahead despite polls showing that 52 per cent of Berliners opposed the closure. Only the Green electorate appeared enthused with the decision. Jarasch is said to have focused too much on her core constituency, forgetting to woo other middle-class voters. In contrast, the only Green regional prime minister, Winfried Kretschmann, won a record 32.6 per cent of the vote in the 2021 election in Baden-Württemberg with his more pragmatic approach that keeps all voters on board.

The SPD is licking its wounds. Clearly, Chancellor Olaf Scholz is not giving the party a chancellor’s bonus. The result achieved by Giffey’s team is the worst since German reunification. There are calls for a change of government. Beyond Berlin, the Socialist parliamentary group can no longer be complacent.

The shock is perhaps greatest among the Liberals (FDP). It was their fifth consecutive election loss since they joined the federal “traffic light” coalition. With 4.6 per cent of the vote, they failed to reach the electoral threshold, as they did in Saarland and Lower Saxony.

On election night, their vice-president Wolfgang Kubicki called for the FDP to take a tougher line in the coalition. He said that voters were unaware of the FDP’s role in government and that the party was getting nothing from the SPD and the Greens. “If there aren’t any more roads, there will be no more power lines,” he threatened. And about economy minister Robert Habeck, Kubicki declared: “Robert can get stuffed. The time of appeasement is over.”

Liberal leader Christian Lindner took to Twitter to calm the waters. But later, during a press conference on the elections, he declared, “An anti-car policy is not in the interest of the people” and also “while the FDP wants a tolerant, cosmopolitan society and modern immigration laws, Berlin has shown that people have the impression that integration has not succeeded in everyday life.”

It is still unclear what majority Berliners will get. What is certain is that, with Berliners’ trust in their politicians at an all-time low, hard times are ahead for whoever takes the helm. With historically low votes for the SPD and the Liberals, storm clouds have also gathered for the Greens in the federal traffic

light coalition.

This article is a part of our new monthly column that keeps an eye on German Greens and their role in German government and politics. Sign up to our newsletter to get it in your inbox.



Inge Jooris is a writer and communications consultant. She was previously head of communications at KVS, one of Belgium's largest municipal theatres, and spokesperson for the Flemish Greens. He is current advising Cinquantenaire 2030, a project to transform Brussels' Cinquantenaire Park into Belgium's cultural and scientific hotspot, and follows German politics for the Belgian Green parties, Groen and Ecolo.

Because of her years of experience as spokesperson for the Flemish Greens and her now broader view, we asked Inge Jooris to write a monthly column on the work of the German Greens, drawing on her own experience where possible and looking for lessons that could be useful to all European Green parties.

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