

How the Greens took Baden-Württemberg

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Thirty-two years after Three Mile Island, an accident in a far-away nuclear facility has once again altered Germany's political landscape. **Klaus Neumann** looks at two turning points in the fortunes of the nuclear industry



Above: The day after the earthquake and tsunami that triggered the nuclear accident in Japan, 60,000 Germans formed a human chain linking Stuttgart with a nuclear power plant about forty-five kilometres away.

Photo: [Rolf Krahl](#)^[1] / Wikimedia Commons

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WEST Germany was hit hard by the first oil crisis. In November and December 1973 parliament legislated four car-free Sundays and speed limits on the autobahnen to reduce petrol consumption. Less than a month before Arab countries declared an oil embargo against the United States and other Western countries, the government of Willy Brandt had released a plan to significantly expand the fledgling nuclear industry in order to reduce West Germany's reliance on oil. When supplies of oil plummeted and its price sky-rocketed at the onset of the 1973–74 winter, the government raised the target for the construction of nuclear power plants, aiming for fifty new plants delivering 50,000 megawatts by 1985, a more than twenty-fold increase within ten years.

While the government pursued its ambitious program of building enough plants to produce more than half of Germany's electricity, the West German anti-nuclear movement grew into a force to be reckoned with. But it attracted the support of a majority of the population only in the immediate vicinity of planned nuclear facilities – at Wyhl, the designated site of a nuclear reactor in the southwest of Germany, for example, and Gorleben, in Lower Saxony, where a salt dome was earmarked for storing nuclear waste and the government wanted to build a nuclear reprocessing facility. Elsewhere in West Germany, most of those actively opposed to the construction of nuclear power stations were high school and university students.

In February 1975, the day after construction started at the planned nuclear power plant in Wyhl, local residents and students from nearby Freiburg occupied the site. When the authorities used excessive force to evict the protesters, the resolve of the locals hardened and more supporters arrived from nearby cities. A week later, more than 25,000 people reoccupied the site. The conservative state government of Baden-Württemberg capitulated and agreed to halt the construction of the plant. In 1983, the state government abandoned any remaining plans to build a nuclear power plant at Wyhl.

In Gorleben, in northern Germany, local farmers were the driving force of the anti-nuclear protests. In early 1979, they called on their supporters to attend a rally in Hannover, the seat of the state government of Lower Saxony, to coincide with a government-sponsored hearing into the feasibility of a nuclear storage and reprocessing facility. The rally was scheduled for 31 March; organisers were hoping for more than 10,000 participants.

Three days before the rally, on Wednesday 28 March, crucial pumps malfunctioned at the Three Mile Island nuclear power station near Harrisburg in Pennsylvania. Following a partial nuclear meltdown, radioactive coolant leaked from the reactor. The seriousness of the situation wasn't initially evident. On 29 March, Pennsylvania governor Dick Thornburgh [said](#) ^[2], "I believe, at this point, that there is no cause for alarm, nor any reason to disrupt your daily routine, nor any reason to feel that public health has been affected by the events on Three Mile Island." The following day, however, a dangerous gas bubble was detected inside the reactor, and the situation appeared to spiral out of control. Thornburgh ordered the partial evacuation of the area around Harrisburg.

On Saturday 31 March, tens of thousands of people from all over West Germany [descended on Hannover](#) ^[3]. Not only did the number of protesters – 120,000 according to the organisers – exceed all expectations, but it was also the first time that anti-nuclear activists were warmly received outside the rural areas that were directly affected by the construction of nuclear facilities. Banners welcoming Gorleben's farmers to Hannover hung from balconies along the route of the march.

I was a part-time journalist at the time, and went to Hannover to cover the protest. Several of the demonstrators I interviewed told me that they had been up until late at night glued to radio and television sets to keep informed about the accident at Harrisburg, and had then spontaneously decided to travel to Hannover, often driving through the night to arrive in time for the protest.

Six weeks after that demonstration, the state premier of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht, declared that building a reprocessing facility at Gorleben was not politically possible. This admission came as a surprise, because while the only opposition party represented in state parliament, the Social Democrats, were opposed to the reprocessing plant, the Social Democrats were not yet opposed to nuclear energy as such and the Social Democrat-led government in Bonn had assured the state government of its support over Gorleben. After the Baden-Württemberg government's cave-in over Wyhl four years earlier, Albrecht's retreat marked the second significant victory of Germany's anti-nuclear movement.

While the leakage of radioactive material from the Three Mile Island plant was limited, the fall-out from the accident contributed to the downscaling of West Germany's ambitious plans for a future powered by nuclear energy. It also boosted the votes of a newly formed group, the Greens, at the first [elections](#) ^[4] to the European parliament in June 1979. On account of winning 3.2 per cent of the West German vote the party secured enough funding to set up a national organisation. Later that year, the Greens won their first seats at the state level when they gained 5.1 per cent of the vote in the city state of Bremen.

At their 1994 national party congress, the Social Democrats committed themselves to phasing out nuclear energy within ten years. Their decision came at least twelve years too late. Since 1982, the Federal Republic of Germany was governed by the Christian Democrats and their minor partner, the Liberals, both of them supporters of nuclear energy. Only the Greens, who had become a permanent feature in the Bundestag, would be able to claim to have always been opposed to nuclear energy.

In 1998, the Social Democrats and the Greens won the national elections and formed a coalition government. Although they agreed to gradually shut down Germany's nuclear industry, it took two years for the government to reach an [agreement](#) ^[5] with the electricity industry, and another two years to push through legislation that gave effect to that agreement. No new reactors were to be built, and existing plants were given only a limited lease of life.

Since 2009, a government made up of Christian Democrats and Liberals has ruled Germany. In September of last year, that government agreed to revise the earlier agreement with the electricity companies and extend the life spans of Germany's seventeen ageing nuclear reactors. The seven plants built before 1980 were to remain connected to the grid until 2018 – ostensibly to allow Germany to meet ambitious CO2 emission targets while it invested heavily in renewable energy generation.

Thirty-two years after the protest in Hannover, an accident in a far-away nuclear facility has again

altered Germany's political landscape and the government's long-term economic plans. Last Sunday, the Greens became the second-largest party in the Baden-Württemberg state parliament. They scored 24.2 per cent, compared to 39 per cent for the Christian Democrats, 23.1 per cent for the Social Democrats and 5.3 per cent for the Liberals. Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Liberals each had their worst results since 1952. Together with the Social Democrats, the Greens will form the next state government. Their leader, Winfried Kretschmann, as the leader of the majority partner in a coalition with the Social Democrats, will be the first Greens premier in Germany's history.

THE accidents at Fukushima have had a huge impact in Germany. Since the damage to the Japanese reactors has been known, many German news bulletins have opened with reports about the situation at Fukushima. On 12 March, a day after the earthquake and tsunami that triggered the nuclear accident at Fukushima, 60,000 Germans formed a human chain linking Stuttgart, the capital of Baden-Württemberg, with Neckarwestheim, a nuclear power plant about forty-five kilometres away. As had happened in March 1979, a pre-planned protest happened to coincide with a crisis at a nuclear plant. A couple of days later, rallies in all major German cities demanded an immediate end to Germany's nuclear program.

Polls taken after the Fukushima disaster suggested that a clear majority of Germans suddenly favoured a speedy phasing-out of all nuclear power plants. With crucial state elections looming in Baden-Württemberg and two other states, Rheinland-Pfalz and Sachsen-Anhalt, chancellor Angela Merkel rescinded the government's decision from September 2010 and ordered that the seven oldest nuclear power plants be shut down immediately – initially for a period of three months, to conduct extensive safety tests. That was on 15 March. She was not the only one who had a sudden change of mind. The leader of the Liberals (and foreign affairs minister), Guido Westerwelle, and the premier of Baden-Württemberg, Stefan Mappus, likewise went cool on nuclear energy.

Merkel's and Mappus's changes of mind did little to shore up support for the conservative coalition. They were not helped by the federal economic affairs minister, Rainer Brüderle (Liberal Democratic Party), who last week confided to a Federation of German Industry meeting that the government's change of heart was irrational and needed to be blamed on the upcoming state elections. Even without the publication of Brüderle's candid remark (which may yet cost him his job), Merkel was widely criticised by friends and foes for being an opportunist. The election results last Sunday have only exacerbated the confusion in the ranks of the governing coalition in Berlin. Leading Liberals and Christian Democrats are now openly squabbling over the wisdom of Merkel's decision to take the older reactors temporarily off the grid. To make matters worse, that decision may yet be challenged by the utility companies, which are questioning whether the three-month moratorium would be covered by legislation passed to give effect to last year's decision to extend the life span of the reactors.

According to polls, the environment was the single most important issue for voters in the Baden-Württemberg election. But it was not the only issue that helped the Greens. The state government had tried to push through the controversial multi-billion euro [redevelopment](#) ^[6] of Stuttgart's central station. Yet support for the Greens had been declining since the end of last year – nationally, from 23 per cent in early November to 15 per cent in early March – and it wasn't until the Fukushima disaster that the party's vote recovered.

The results in Sunday's election are significant. Baden-Württemberg is the most economically successful and innovative state in Germany and, with a population of over ten million, the third-largest. Its population equals that of Hungary, Portugal or the Czech Republic, but its GDP almost equals the combined GDP of those three EU member countries.

Since 1953, the state government has been led by the Christian Democrats. Together with neighbouring Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg has always been the bedrock of the Federal Republic's conservative vote. The state is likely to remain a bastion of conservatism, even under a red-green coalition government. Winfried Kretschmann once belonged to a Maoist splinter party – but that was some thirty-five years ago. These days, he is a practising Catholic and a social conservative. "In 2011, the Greens will rock the republic," the party's leader, Cem Özdemir, had told a party congress late last year. Kretschmann and Nils Schmid, the leader of the Greens' coalition partner, are unlikely to rock the Musterlände, the Federal Republic's model state – renowned among northerners for the industriousness and conventionality of its citizens and their quaint way of talking.

On Monday, a headline in the online edition of *Der Spiegel* magazine suggested: "Kretschmann wants to plough up the Ländle." Nothing could be further from the truth. But the green-red government

can be expected to champion far-reaching environmental policies. More so than other states, Baden-Württemberg depends on nuclear energy, with some 60 per cent of its electricity being produced by nuclear power plants – about three times the average of the other fifteen German states. If the new state government wants to decommission the state's nuclear reactors, it will have to rely heavily on energy-saving measures and renewable energies to meet targets for the reduction of CO2 output.

Baden-Württemberg's dynamic economy puts it in an excellent position to promote the development of new technologies in the renewable energy sector. In recent years, its [research and development expenditure](#) ^[7] (as a percentage of GDP) has been higher than that of any other region in the European Union, resulting in more patents being registered than elsewhere. Skill levels are high; in Baden-Württemberg, more people per capita work in [high-tech industries](#) ^[8] than in Europe's other regions.

The nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island in 1979 and at Fukushima in 2011 had far-reaching consequences for the future of German electricity generation, although, unlike the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, they didn't affect Germany directly. The accident in 2011 will hasten the decommissioning of Germany's nuclear power industry. It has also changed the political landscape in the key German state of Baden-Württemberg, which is likely to take a leading role in the development of renewable energy and energy-saving technologies. And who is to say that the ripples will not be felt as far away as Pennsylvania and Japan? •

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[2] said: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/three/peopleevents/pandeAMEX97.html>

[3] descended on Hannover: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUzgAoW-GNA>

[4] elections:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Parliament_election,_1979_%28West_Germany%29

[5] agreement: http://www.bmu.de/atomenergie_sicherheit/downloads/doc/4497.php

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[7] research and development expenditure: http://cordis.europa.eu/baden-wuerttemberg/rd-indicators_en.html

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