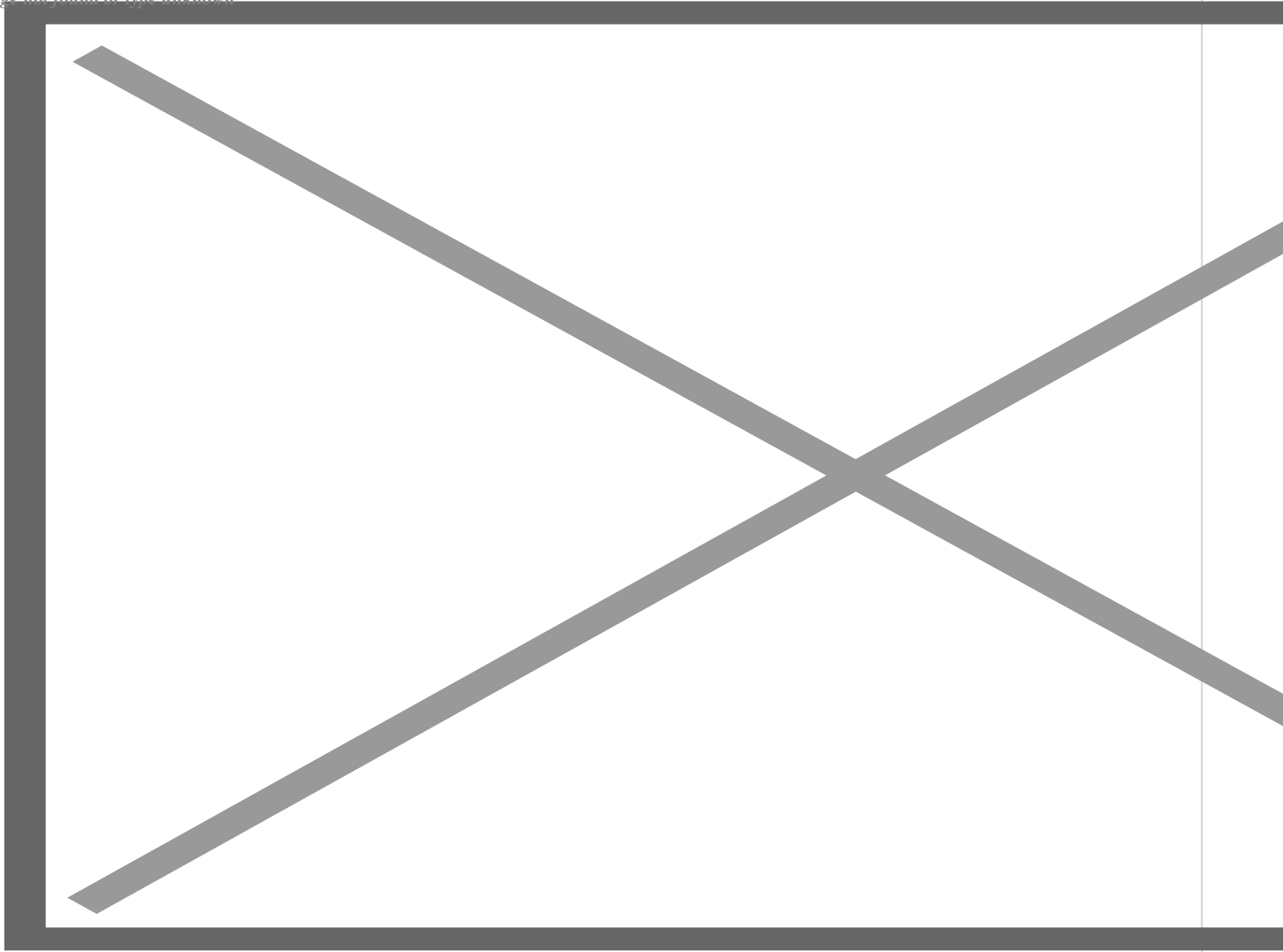


Merkel's party suffers defeats in two German state elections

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A voter casts her ballot for the state elections in the southern German federal state of Baden-Wuerttemberg in a polling station in Ludwigsburg, Germany, on March 14, 2021. (Photo by AFP)

Berlin, March 15 (RHC)-- German Chancellor Angela Merkel's center-right party appeared likely to suffer embarrassing defeats in two German state elections, exit polls suggest, six months before a national vote that will determine who succeeds the longtime leader.

According to Sunday's votes for new state legislatures in the southwestern automotive hub of Baden-Wuerttemberg, the Greens won 31.5% of the vote and Merkel's Christian Democratic Union 23%, down from the 27% the conservatives polled at the last state election in 2016, an exit poll for broadcaster ZDF and ARD showed.

In neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate, the left-leaning Social Democrats (SPD) came first again with 33.5% of the vote ahead of the CDU, which led there in opinion polls until last month but secured only 25.5% support in Sunday's election.

Amid anger over a sluggish start to Germany's vaccination drive, with coronavirus restrictions easing only gradually and infections rising again, Merkel's conservative-led coalition has been hit over the past two weeks by allegations that two lawmakers profited from deals to procure masks early in the coronavirus pandemic.

Along with fears of a potential third coronavirus wave, CDU officials worry the party's reputation took a hit after several conservative lawmakers quit over the allegations. The CDU has seen its national popularity wane from 40% last June, when Germany was widely praised for its response to the coronavirus pandemic, to around 33% this month.

Both regional election results open the way for potential regional alliances of the Greens, SPD and liberal Free Democrats, which already governed in Rhineland-Palatinate before Sunday's election.

Projections based on exit polls and a partial count of votes, indicated that those governors' parties -- the environmentalist Greens in Baden-Wuerttemberg and the centre-left Social Democrats in Rhineland-Palatinate -- were set to finish first, 7 to 9 percentage points ahead of the CDU. The CDU's showings of about 23% and 26%, respectively, would be the party's worst since World War II in both states.

The CDU leaders fear the same constellation of parties could gain enough support to leave their party in opposition at national level at September's federal vote. The results are also a blow to CDU party chairman Armin Laschet, who took pole position in the race to succeed Merkel by winning the CDU leadership in January.

After 16 years in power, Merkel is not seeking re-election in September, leaving the CDU without the 'Merkel bonus' that helped her conservative bloc win four consecutive national elections.

The loss in Baden-Wuerttemberg, where the CDU has been junior coalition partner to the Greens for the last five years, could help Laschet's Bavarian rival Markus Soeder in their contest to be the conservative chancellor candidate.

Soeder and Laschet want to settle the candidacy matter by May 23. No German chancellor has ever come from the CSU. Laschet says that he and Markus Soeder, the CSU leader and Bavarian governor who is the other serious contender to run for chancellor, will decide on the centre-right candidate to succeed Merkel in April or May. Soeder's political standing has risen during the pandemic.

"What we see today is that forming a government is possible without the CDU," said the Social Democrats' candidate for chancellor, current Finance Minister Olaf Scholz. "And that is what we are aiming for in the federal election campaign."



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