

# What next for Angela Merkel's CDU after two regional election defeats?

*Disappointing results in two regional elections on 14 March have raised doubts about the potential for the CDU to remain in power at Germany's federal election in September. **John Ryan** writes that with the party suffering from accusations of corruption and growing public dissatisfaction over its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is no longer unthinkable that an alternative coalition without the CDU could form the next German government.*

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the ruling party of German chancellor Angela Merkel, has been dealt [bitter blows in two important state elections](#). While the results are in part a reflection of regional politics, they also function as a practical indicator ahead of September's federal election. The results also raise questions for the new leadership of the CDU and for the selection of the party's next chancellor candidate.

## Record low vote shares

In Baden-Württemberg, the Greens won 32.6% of the vote (up 2.3%), while the CDU, junior coalition partner to the Greens until now, reached only 24.1% (down 2.9%) when compared to the last state election in 2016. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the Social Democrats (SPD) came first again with 35.7% (down 0.5%) ahead of the CDU, which led there in opinion polls until last month but secured only 27.7% (down 4.1%). This means that in both regions, the CDU received record low vote shares.

The SPD has managed to maintain its numbers in Rhineland-Palatinate, in part thanks to the popularity of state premier, Malu Dreyer. In Baden-Württemberg, the extremely popular Winfried Kretschmann has been in office for ten years. He is the only Green party member to serve as a state premier in Germany.

The elections on Sunday came at a delicate time for Armin Laschet, the new leader of the CDU. The poor performance by the Christian Democrats has undermined his authority and weakened his bid to run as the CDU/CSU's joint candidate for chancellor in September's federal elections. Various polls taken in the last few months, before a series of corruption scandals emerged and before the poor regional election results, found voters preferred the CSU's Bavarian state premier Markus Söder as their future chancellor by a wide margin. While traditionally the position of party leader would have automatically placed Laschet into the chancellor candidate role, the election results and polling signals mean that Söder is now the favourite to become chancellor candidate.

German media [reported](#) that as many as a third of those eligible to vote in Baden-Württemberg had already cast their ballots before the corruption scandals broke. In Rhineland-Palatinate, the figure was even higher, at [almost 37 percent](#). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many voters chose to cast their ballots by mail this year ahead of Sunday's election date. With less lead time, the results could have been even worse for the CDU.

Both regional election results open the way for potential regional alliances of the Greens, SPD and the liberal Free Democrats (FDP). That coalition construct, also known as a traffic light coalition due to the official colours of the three parties involved, was already the governing coalition in Rhineland-Palatinate following the 2016 elections. CDU leaders now fear the same constellation of parties could gain enough support to leave their party in opposition in Baden-Württemberg and at the national level following September's federal vote.

## Corruption accusations and Covid-19

The CDU/CSU has seen its support decline significantly in recent weeks due to the fallout from the corruption scandals and growing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. [Germany's comparatively slow vaccination programme](#) has been described as a "debacle" and a "[Covid nightmare](#)." Yet as damaging as this has been, it was the accusations of corruption that constituted the [biggest blow](#) before Sunday's elections.

The scandals centre on allegations of profiteering in mask procurement deals and foreign donations. They have already led to the resignation of two CDU members and one CSU member of the Bundestag. Nikolas Löbel, a now former MP for the CDU, bowed to pressure after revelations that his company earned commissions of about €250,000 for brokering protective mask sales contracts, while Georg Nüsslein, from the CSU, faces accusations he received €600,000 [to lobby for a mask supplier](#).



Credit: European Council

Meanwhile, the magazine Der Spiegel [reported](#) that CDU parliamentarian Mark Hauptmann was paid €16,744 by the Azerbaijani embassy in Berlin to advertise a shopping weekend in Baku in a local newspaper that Hauptmann publishes in the state of Thuringia. According to the report, the payment was made after Hauptmann had worked for years to establish cordial ties with Azerbaijan, consistently siding with the country despite its controversial human rights record. The governments of Taiwan and Vietnam also paid for ads in the newspaper, according to Der Spiegel. Axel Fischer, a CDU MP from Baden-Württemberg, has also had his parliamentary immunity suspended amid a criminal investigation into whether he accepted bribes from Azerbaijan. He denies any wrongdoing.

On 12 March there was a deadline set for lawmakers from Germany's governing conservative bloc to declare in writing that they had not profited from the Covid-19 pandemic. This is the CDU/CSU's "worst crisis" since a campaign-financing scandal at the end of the Kohl era that brought down the leadership, ushering in Merkel. The scandals are already morphing into a broader examination of MPs' extra-parliamentary income, and such scrutiny seems likely to trigger more uncomfortable revelations.

### The end of the road for the CDU?

As of now, most observers are betting on a tie-up between the Christian Democrats and the Greens following September's federal elections. A continuation of the current coalition between the conservatives and the Social Democrats is likely to be a mathematical option after the election, but it is not a constellation either side is eager to renew after governing together for most of the past decade. A three-way coalition between the Greens, Social Democrats and Die Linke would not currently have enough support. There is however a chance over the next six months that the Greens, SPD and FDP could build enough momentum to form a traffic light coalition. Upcoming opinion polls may show that these three parties gain more support.

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Given the corruption accusations and Covid-19 vaccination delays, trust in the chancellor and her cabinet is weakening. For several weeks now, public approval of the government's pandemic management has been sliding. This is hardly surprising in view of the many glitches in the vaccination and testing drives, the broken promises, the resurgent number of infections and a chancellor who is no longer able to assert herself against powerful state premiers. Merkel's party has announced a ten-point plan to tighten regulations on lobbying and bribery in the Bundestag. The plan foresees the prohibition of paid work on behalf of third-party interests in the Bundestag. But this may be too little too late.

The realisation after these two elections is the very real prospect that Germany may emerge from the September elections without the CDU/CSU being part of the government. The CDU/CSU is still the most popular party in Germany for now, but one federal poll showed its support at only 29 percent (the party's lowest ever), raising questions over whether it will get enough votes to form a coherent government. The regional elections affirmed the national trends that the slow rollout of vaccines and the recent accusations have left the CDU/CSU struggling to contain the damage. The level of Covid-19 infections in Germany remains stubbornly high. The availability of vaccinations remains low. Patience is also wearing thin over endless lockdowns.

Armin Laschet as the party's leader – but not as their chancellor candidate – has seen his popularity diminish over his handling of Covid-19. In comparison, Markus Söder, the CSU leader, has remained cool headed during the pandemic. The CDU/CSU had agreed to choose their chancellor candidate in May, but as results and opinion polls are showing a negative outcome, the decision to appoint their candidate may have to be brought forward. Angela Merkel's CDU needs to rethink fast. As the long-serving chancellor bids farewell, her party faces the real prospect of losing its grip on government altogether.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)*

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