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GERMANY

Rhineland-Palatinate elections in Germany bring tailwind for Friedrich Merz

The state election results in Rhineland-Palatinate are a tailwind for German Chancellor Merz, but the existential crisis for the SPD will leave marks in Berlin



A victory by the CDU in Rhineland-Palatine in Germany means that Gordon Schnieder (right) will become Minister-President, which will be a boost to Chancellor Merz (left)

No second nail-biter in German politics this month. After the last-minute victory of the Greens in the Baden-Wuerttemberg elections two weeks ago, the elections in Rhineland-Palatinate seem to have yielded a clean-cut result. According to the preliminary results at 7.30pm CET, the CDU was at 30.8% (from 27.7% at the last elections), ahead of the SPD at 27% (from 35.7%), pointing to a change of leadership in the state that had been led by SPD minister-presidents since the early 1990s. The AfD came in at 19.9% (from 8.3%) and is the third-largest party, while the Greens came in at 8% (from 9.3%). All other parties, for example, the liberal FDP and the Left Party failed to reach the 5% threshold. It looks as if the CDU and the SPD will form a coalition at the state level, along the lines of the coalition in Berlin, with CDU candidate Gordon Schnieder on course to replace the sitting SPD premier, Alexander Schweitzer.

While this result should finally be a welcome political tailwind for Chancellor Friedrich Merz in

Berlin, it will be a heavy blow to his coalition partner, the SPD. After the devastating 5.5% in Baden-Wuerttemberg, barely making the threshold to enter parliament, losing one of the last minister-president positions will hurt.

Impact of first two elections in Germany's 'super election year' on reform efforts

The Rhineland-Palatinate election was the second of five state elections this year, ahead of closely watched races in September in Berlin and the eastern states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony-Anhalt, where the far-right AfD is hoping to win its first major election.

What do the results of the first two elections in Germany's 'super election year' mean for national politics and reforms?

- Despite the last-minute loss in Baden-Wuerttemberg, today's result should strengthen Friedrich Merz's position in Berlin.
- The SPD is close to an existential crisis, which could put pressure on the two party leaders, Bärbel Bas and Lars Klingbeil, who are also crucial ministers in the national government (labour and finance). In fact, the SPD could be left with only two extreme options: go all-in on progressive reforms or essentially block all reform efforts by Merz.
- The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) is now clearly established as Germany's second-strongest party at the national level and has taken some 20% of the votes in both elections this year.
- The liberal FDP seems to have disappeared from the political landscape for now, having dropped out of both state parliaments, after it already missed the 5% threshold at the last national elections.

Tailwind for Merz but existential crisis of SPD will leave marks in Berlin

All in all, any reform efforts in Berlin have been put on hold because of the two elections this month. Consequently, the window for economic reforms is opening up, and maybe now for the last time under Chancellor Merz. It won't be open for long, probably only until the summer. Think of reforms of the health care system or the pension system but also of the actual implementation of last year's announced digital reforms, simplification agenda and reform of the federal system. A weakened SPD brings two extreme options: either the SPD becomes a genuine junior partner, potentially only waving through whatever the CDU proposes, or the SPD blocks reforms and eventually leads to a government breakup. With this month's election results, a reform compromise that pleases both coalition partners has become less likely.

Author

Carsten Brzeski

Global Head of Macro

carsten.brzeski@ing.de

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