



## State elections: Eyes peeled for AfD's scoring, little impact on federal race

- Next Sunday's regional election in the small eastern German state Saxony-Anhalt is the last electoral test in the run-up to the federal election in September. Polls suggest that the CDU will remain the strongest political force, despite being challenged by the right-wing AfD. The Conservatives will likely form another three-party government (without the AfD, that is).
- Even a narrow win would be a positive for the CDU's federal campaign. Whereas an AfD victory - though lacking coalition partners to form a government - would be a (non-lethal) blow for Laschet's election campaign.
- The federal election campaign is just heating up. The electorate seems a little disenchanted with Greens and their chancellor candidate, allowing the Conservatives to regain the lead in the neck-and-neck race in the polls. Still, the two parties are polling too close to speak of a turning point (yet).

Barbara Boettcher

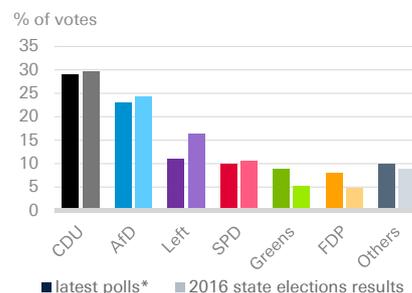
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**CDU challenged by right-wing AfD.** The upcoming regional election in tiny Saxony-Anhalt (some 1.8m voters, 3% of overall German voters) is seen as the last electoral test before the federal election on September 26. Admittedly, regional elections, in particular in the eastern German states, have their own dynamics, with Saxony-Anhalt having a somewhat politically disenchanted electorate, leading to rather low electoral participation. This might be explained by the region's comparatively weak economic performance now amplified by the pandemic, high emigration of younger people, an aging population and the exit from coal mining. Nevertheless, the regional election is getting attention in particular for the role of the AfD: The CDU is defending its position as the strongest party against the right-wing AfD (see Figure 1). In 2016, running for the first time in Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD won 24.3% of votes, becoming the second-largest parliamentary group (the AfD later made similar inroads in other east German state parliaments, see Figure 2). Latest polls see the CDU ahead of the AfD, though. The Conservatives can count on their rather popular PM, Haseloff, who has been in office since 2011. But the Conservatives' weaker standing overall and the infighting about the nomination of the CDU/CSU chancellor candidate might have disappointed some voters, pushing them into the camp of the non-voters or other parties. More than 45% of voters are still undecided whether to vote or who to vote for (Politbarometer). The Greens gained ground, potentially doubling their share of voters to 10%. Still, eastern Germany is tough terrain for the Greens and a low double-digit figure is way below the party's national polling average. The FDP will probably be among the winners, too, as polls suggest that it will pass the 5%-threshold and re-enter parliament after 10 years. For the SPD, it is a matter of stabilizing the voter share at a historically low 10%. The Left is threatened by an electoral defeat, risking the loss of about one third of voters, standing at about 10%.

Figure 1: Saxony-Anhalt: Previous election results and latest polls



Note: \*Politbarometer Extra, May 28  
Source: Wahlrecht.de

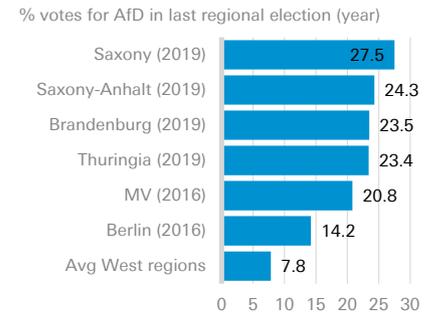


**Another CDU-led government on the horizon.** In the last two decades, Saxony-Anhalt has been ruled by almost any possible coalition. Since 2016, a so-called “Kenia coalition” of CDU-SPD-Greens has been in office. Even though the coalition is marked by tensions between the Conservatives and the Greens, chances for a continuation are high. The strong performance of the AfD forces parties to find “creative” solutions, as all have ruled out any collaboration with the AfD. However, coalitions with left-leaning parties (as the Greens are perceived) are not very popular among the very conservative CDU in Saxony-Anhalt, leading to tensions within the party. Thus, it decided that this time coalition agreements need the approval of the party base. The party base favors a coalition without the disliked Greens, i.e., a “Germany coalition” between CDU, SPD and FDP. This would also be the voters’ preferred coalition option, while a continuation of the Kenya-coalition is rejected by nearly half of the voters (Politbarometer). However, it remains to be seen whether this alliance will achieve a majority and whether the SPD would be prepared to change the coalition partner. Polls suggest a close race. The same applies for a CDU-Green-FDP “Jamaica” coalition – a defeat for the SPD that would be sent into opposition. In the rather unlikely event of the AfD coming in first, probably a four-party coalition between CDU, SPD, Greens and FDP would be formed. In any case, the incumbent PM already indicated that picking the coalition partners and agreeing on a political agenda for the next 5 years might well take until after the federal elections in September. Although some of the CDU’s base in Saxony-Anhalt are open to a more flexible approach to the AfD, this has been ruled out by the local leaders and – just this week – by Armin Laschet, the CDU chancellor candidate.

**Limited impact on the federal level.** State election outcomes can have severe repercussions on the federal level. The situation in Saxony-Anhalt brings to mind the 2019 elections in Thuringia when the distribution of seats and especially a strong AfD severely complicated the forming of a new government. The AfD’s coup to support the CDU and FDP in electing a PM ultimately served as the trigger for Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer’s demission as the CDU party leader. Times are different now, though, with the federal election just around the corner. An AfD victory would of course create disturbing political noise for the CDU’s election campaign, and dominate talk-shows and opinion pieces for weeks. But we deem any speculation that this would weaken Laschet to the extent that Söder could take over as candidate for chancellorship as unrealistic. To support the regional CDU, Laschet visited Saxony-Anhalt this weekend. He motivated citizens to participate in the elections and warned against a strong AfD, saying that this could lead to a “rude awakening” (Spiegel, May 29). Presumably, Laschet prefers to avoid another difficult debate about the CDU’s relationship with the AfD – which, however, is more a topic in eastern Germany than at the federal level. Here, the AfD is not nearly as strong as in the eastern states and scores around 10%.

**Federal election: CDU/CSU manages to regain a small lead in the tight race with the Greens.** On the federal level, the election campaign is just heating up. Frequent public appearances of the parties’ frontrunners have intensified insights into and discussion of specific political positions. Lately, this has not been to the advantage of the Greens. Their chancellor candidate Baerbock had to explain herself for retrospectively declaring allowances she received from the Greens as their party leader. In addition, the party got entangled in a discussion on the delivery of defensive weapons to Ukraine. Both are tricky issues for a party, having pacifist roots and calling for transparency. In the polls, this resulted in the CDU/CSU (25.1%, see Figure 4) regaining the lead in the neck-and-neck race with the Greens (22.6%). However, the lead remains within the statistical error range. It is therefore too early

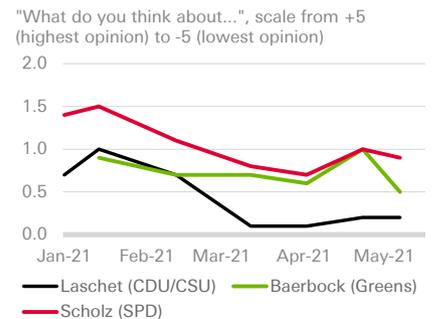
Figure 2: Strong AfD in East German states



Note: MV = Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

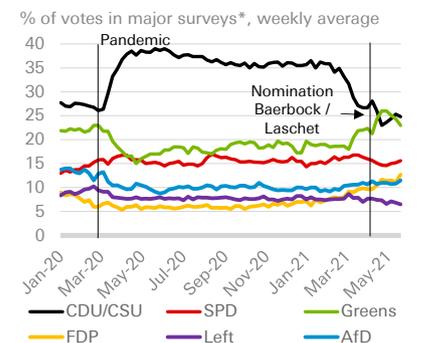
Source: Wahlrecht.de, Deutsche Bank

Figure 3: Baerbock’s recent loss in popularity



Source: FG Wahlen, Politbarometer

Figure 4: Popularity of major political parties since COVID-19 outbreak



Note: \* major political surveys taken into account: Allensbach, Kantar, Forsa, FG Wahlen, Infratest, INSA.

Source: Wahlrecht.de, Deutsche Bank



to speak of a burst of the Greens' (media) bubble. Still, the disappointment over the Conservatives seems to be subsiding a bit, for example, reflected in 56% of voters preferring a CDU/CDU-led government (+6pp since the beginning of May, Politbarometer May 21). A Green-led government is favoured by 38% of voters (-1pp). However, also the FDP (12.7%) continues to gain in the polls, probably a reflection of its constructive criticism of the government's pandemic management. The SPD remains tacked at the 15% mark and the Left moves slowly and dangerously close to the 5% threshold. All in all, we feel more comfortable with our baseline call of a black-green government.

We thank Ursula Walther for her valuable contribution.



# Appendix 1

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