

## Super Sunday Elections in Germany



## Political Parties in Turmoil, but Merkel Firm in the Driving Seat

A political earthquake was predicted ahead of voting day in Germany, where regional elections were held in three of the 16 states. Now the dust has settled, and what's become clear is that nothing much has changed: in all three states, the acting prime ministers are confirmed in office.

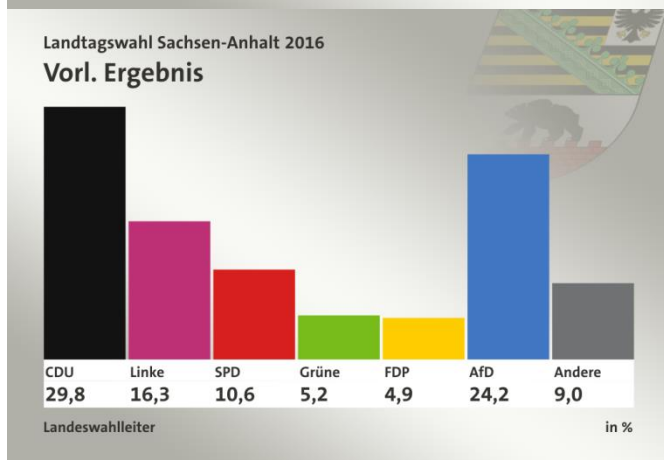
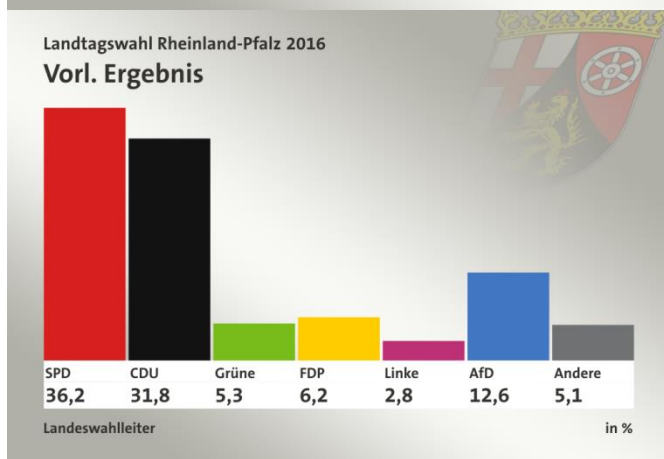
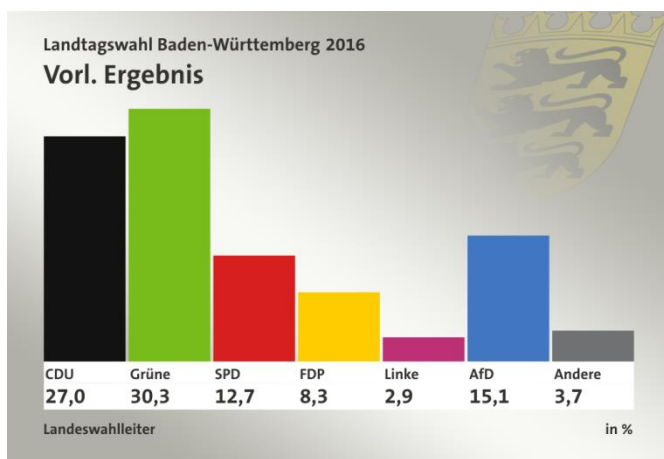
*Martin Kothé, head of FTI Consulting's Public Affairs practice in Berlin, comments on the outcome of elections in three German states on March 13 and how this could influence German politics on federal level and what this means for Angela Merkel's Grand Coalition.*

It's hard to think of a surer sign of continued stability, but that's what it is despite all the clamour of the media. True enough, though, underneath the surface, some tectonic rumble did indeed take place yesterday: in all three states the populist, xenophobic AfD or Alternative for Germany who managed to transform themselves within six months from an anti-euro party into an anti-migration party, reached double-digit results starting from scratch, thus posing serious questions to the political establishment of all traditional parties.

To all those who have predicted that after voting day, Angela Merkel and her grand coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats would be in serious trouble and the country in turmoil, the answer is: quite not so. Although Merkel's CDU took a serious beating across the board (what's most painful of course is that they lost the role as the leading party of Baden-Württemberg), no-one in the party leadership dares to challenge her: even when many have misgivings with the Chancellor's stance on the refugee crisis, they realize that without her, their chances of success would be even slimmer. Plus, there's also no serious contender for her job as party chairman of the Christian Democrats because potential candidates do not in fact offer an alternative solution to the refugee issue. So, while running Germany as Chancellor might very well be even less fun than it was before (which often shows

in the Chancellor's face), there's no reason to think of instability in Germany: the grand coalition will continue until the end of their term in 2017, knowing full well that early elections would only serve the AfD.

As for the Social Democrats, they need to come to terms with the fact that in two states they came in even behind the AfD and find themselves in the role of a small party who need to look to others to take them along to form a majority – or worse, no function at all because their share of the vote just isn't big enough to be decisive in forming a coalition. This causes a serious trauma in a party with a proud tradition of more than



Source: ARD, wahl.tagesschau.de

150 years as a vanguard of social progress, and this trauma can't even be consolidated by the fact that in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, the Social Democrats were able to hold on to power with their down-to-earth and much respected Prime Minister Malu Dreyer.

Much like the CDU, what the SPD needs most now is time, so the party leadership goes out of their way to support battered party leader Sigmar Gabriel in public and in private, because the last thing the SPD needs now is another change in leadership without a clear policy alternative.

With regard to the Greens, their triumph in Baden-Württemberg is indeed historic and will cause a lively internal debate within the party in Berlin: because this triumph has no leftist, progressive roots at all, but is the result of a campaign in which the Greens, and in particular their frontman in Baden-Württemberg, Prime Minister Winfried Kretschmann who is set to remain in the role, successfully mimicked methods and characteristics of their most disliked, longstanding opponent, the CDU. Kretschmann, it can be fairly asserted, in the end won the election because he was more CDU than the original.

Running the country will not become easier for Chancellor Angela Merkel, but that in turn will only highlight her singularity. Will she need to change course in the refugee crisis? Well no, because she already did: the days of open borders have been over for weeks already. Angela Merkel has once again changed course without talking too much about it in public, a method typical of her approach at times.

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(Martin Kothé, Managing Director)

So what are the key lessons to be learnt from these elections? One: there's no need to worry about instability coming to Germany. But two: the party political system is indeed in turmoil, and party managers will have to think hard of ways to regain some of the credibility they so massively lost. It's not a tactical issue, but a strategic one. The weeks to come will show if the political establishment in Germany has understood the lessons of yesterday's elections. One bottom rule continues to apply: Grand coalitions have a way of weakening the center and strengthening the fringes, in this case the fringes of the right.

\* Preliminary final result

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