



By: TA | AP Insight

A disappointing start for Merz's conservatives in the series of German state elections



Chancellor Friedrich Merz's party has made a disappointing start to a year packed with German state elections, suffering a narrow defeat in an important industrial region after a prominent candidate powered the environmentalist Greens to a come-from-behind victory.

Merz said Monday that his federal government, which has struggled to get Germany's **stagnant economy** moving, will have to "manage more, and more substantially, in terms of the necessary reforms so that we in Germany can get out of this difficult economic situation." The country has Europe's biggest economy.

Merz's center-right Christian Democratic Union was long confident of winning back the governor's office in Baden-Württemberg, a region of more than 11 million people in southwestern Germany that is home among many other companies to automakers Mercedes-Benz and Porsche.

The country's first and so far only Green governor, Winfried Kretschmann, is retiring after 15 years in charge of a traditional conservative heartland.

A late comeback

A CDU victory long looked likely despite the unpopularity of the 10-month-old national government. But the party's poll lead shrank ahead of Sunday's election thanks to a Green campaign focused on Cem Özdemir, a longtime federal lawmaker and former German agriculture minister.

Final results Monday showed the Greens taking 30.2% of the vote, just ahead of the CDU with 29.7% — a gain compared with five years ago but not enough for victory.

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The far-right, anti-migration **Alternative for Germany** nearly doubled its support to 18.8%, reflecting its gains in last year's national election. Merz's partners in the federal government, the center-left Social Democrats, lost half their support to poll an embarrassing 5.5%.

Özdemir, 60, touted his experience and leaned hard into the Greens' relatively conservative image in Baden-Württemberg — a contrast with the party's more left-wing approach nationally, where it is in opposition.

His 37-year-old CDU opponent, Manuel Hagel, was much less well-known and probably wasn't helped by a video from 2018 posted recently by a Green federal lawmaker in which Hagel talked about a visit to a school and a female student's "fawn-brown eyes."

The two parties are expected to govern Baden-Württemberg together, as they have in a coalition for the past 10 years, with Özdemir as Germany's first state governor with Turkish roots.

Merz underlined mainstream parties' refusal to ally with **Alternative for Germany**, or AfD, reiterating that "we will not work together with this party. Period."

Five state elections this year

Sunday's was the first of five state elections this year. The next, on March 22 in neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate, pits the national governing parties against each other.

It has been led since 1991 by the Social Democrats, who are in a tight race with Merz's CDU for first place.

In September, there are elections in Berlin and two regions in the ex-communist east, where AfD is particularly strong and hopes to get its first state governor.



Sunday's was the first of five state elections this year - Cem Özdemir

Merz conceded that Sunday's wafer-thin defeat was a “bitter result,” though he pointed to his party's gains and the fact that it has the same number of seats in the state legislature in Stuttgart as the Greens.

He congratulated Özdemir on a “personal victory” which, he argued, he won by distancing himself from the national Greens.

Merz argued that his government has done a lot to deliver on its promises, though “it's not yet enough,” and that there's a lot of support for “what I am doing at present in foreign and European policy.”

Merz, who has visited [Washington](#) and [Beijing](#) in the past two weeks, has sometimes drawn criticism for spending a lot of time on foreign policy.

“His foreign policy presence may be really good, but he can only gain popularity and the federal CDU can only gain in polls if things go better domestically,” Uwe Jun, a political science professor at the University of Trier, told Phoenix television.

“He needs significant improvements in the area of social and economic policy,” Jun said.