

**German centrist politics in crisis: the 2026 Landtag  
elections**

**I: Elections in Baden-Württemberg  
and Rheinland-Pfalz**

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## State parliamentary elections, March 2026: German democracy all bunged-up?

On the road to a new German government, the election itself is only halfway.

The new governing coalitions that could normally be expected to emerge a couple or so months after the elections for each state's parliament – the Landtag – are nothing if not familiar: in Baden-Württemberg, the continuation of the two-party coalition between the Greens and the Christian Democrats (CDU) that has governed there since 2016; in Rheinland-Pfalz, a carbon copy of the two-party coalition between the CDU and the Social Democrats (SPD) which took power at national level after the Bundestag election in February 2025.

What does the familiarity of these outcomes say about German democracy? Does it reflect a reassuring stability at a politically difficult time – or an inability to create anything new? The suggestion here that it shows how bunged-up German democracy has become is based on both the near-inevitability of these outcomes and the political fragility that rules other outcomes out.

In Germany, a new government can only be formed after an election once the parties have negotiated a coalition agreement that commands majority support in the new parliament. If only because the same Black-Red (CDU-SPD) coalition governing at the federal level will insist upon it, agreement will surely be reached in Rheinland-Pfalz.

In Baden-Württemberg, by contrast, there is no such certainty. Here, the Green-Black negotiation is being played for high stakes, with national implications, and where at least one side may judge there are incentives not to reach agreement at all.

# Background: the German States re-electing their Landtag in 2026

## Germany's 16 states and the 2026 elections



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## The South-West (March 2026)

- Baden-Württemberg and Rheinland-Pfalz
- Bordering France, Belgium and Switzerland to the west and south
- 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> most populous states (out of 16)
- 15.4m residents (18% of German population)

## The East (September 2026)

- Sachsen-Anhalt, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Berlin
- One state bordering the Baltic and Poland to the north and east
- 11<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> most populous states
- 7.4m residents (9% of German population)

## Background: voting, parties, firewall, evidence

### Voting in German parliamentary elections

- Voters cast two votes, a “first” vote for a constituency MP (decided by first-past-the-post) and a “second” vote for a party
- A party’s share of the parliamentary seats is in direct proportion to its share of the party vote (excluding parties with less than 5%)

### Three parties on the right (and their colour)

- CDU: Christian Democrats (black)
- FDP (yellow): Free Democrats (liberals)
- AfD (blue): Alliance für Deutschland

### Four parties to the left (and their colour)

- SPD (red): Social Democrats
- Die Grüne (green): Greens
- Die Linke (red): The Left
- BSW (purple): Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance

### Die Brandmauer (Firewall)

- The firewall around the AfD refers to the refusal of all other parties either to co-operate with it, or rely upon its support

### The evidence and comparisons made

- The support (share of party vote) for the parties in the 2026 elections compared with the support in these states in the 2025 Bundestag election
- The net shift in support for the parties in 2026 elections between the first (constituency) and second (party) votes
- Party strength (share of parliamentary seats) and likely coalitions in the 2026 parliaments compared with the 2021 parliaments
- Surveys of public opinion comparing the two lead candidates in Baden- Württemberg and demographic differences in support for the two main parties in Rheinland-Pfalz

## Headline election results and consequences: two different but familiar outcomes

Baden-Württemberg (8<sup>th</sup> March): a late surge leading to five more years of the same?

- Won by the Greens, for the fourth time since 2011, who by virtue of having the most votes ...
- ...earn the right to lead negotiations to create a new coalition government ...
- ... with the Christian Democrats (CDU), who came second ...
- ... likely leading to the third “Green-Black” coalition in a row, after 2016 and 2021

Rheinland-Pfalz (22<sup>nd</sup> March): a carbon copy of the 2025 Bundestag election?

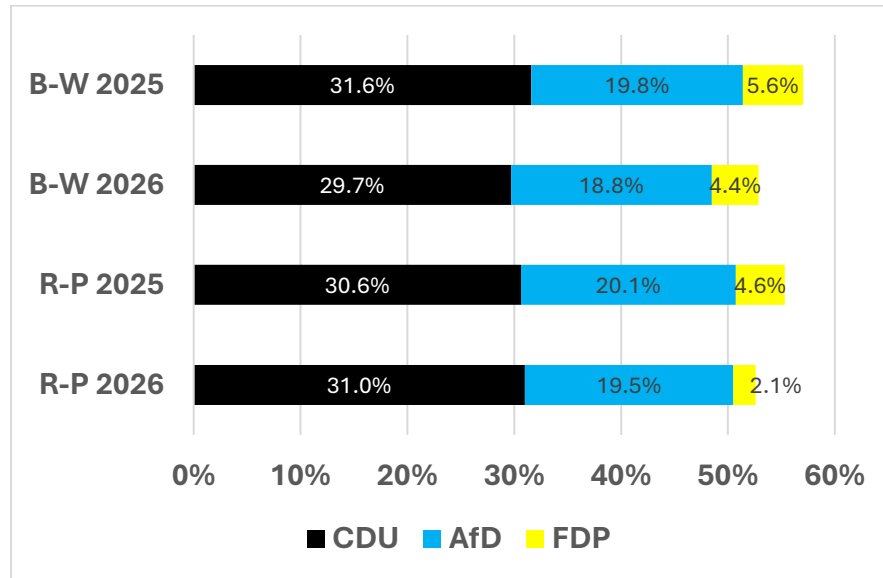
- Won by the CDU, for the first time since 1991, who by virtue of having the most votes ...
- ... earn the right to lead negotiations to create a new coalition government ...
- ... with the Social Democrats (SPD), who came second ...
- ... likely replacing the “Red-Yellow-Green” coalition from 2021 with a “Black-Red” one

An election in Germany is only halfway to a new government

- The new parliaments in the two states will hold their opening sessions in May
- Coalition negotiations must be completed within three months of the opening session
- A new government is only formed when a majority of all members of parliament support it in a secret ballot

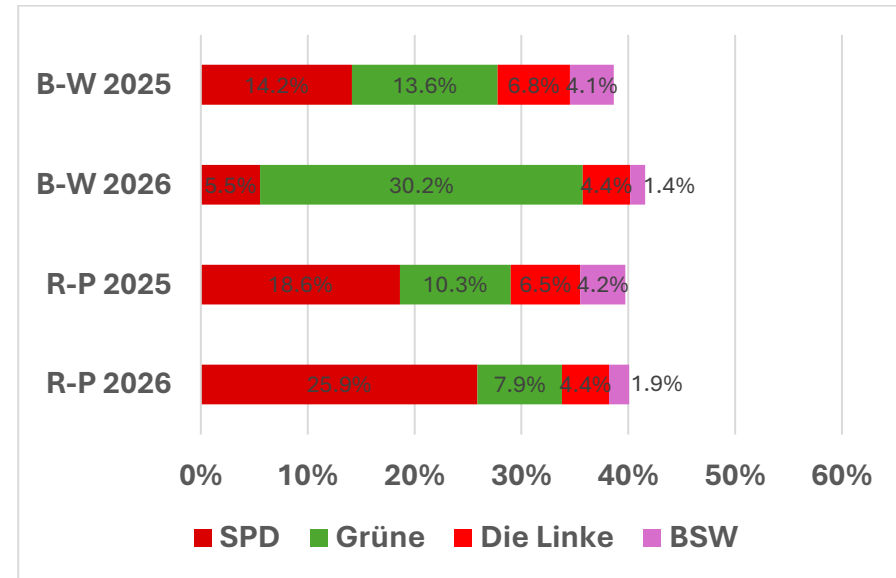
## Electoral support in March 2026 compared with February 2025 (Bundestag)

### Stability on the right



- Total, between 53% and 57%, down slightly
- CDU lead over AfD in 2025 still intact: no sign of gap closing as per national opinion polls
- Falling short of 5% threshold, FDP no longer in the state parliaments

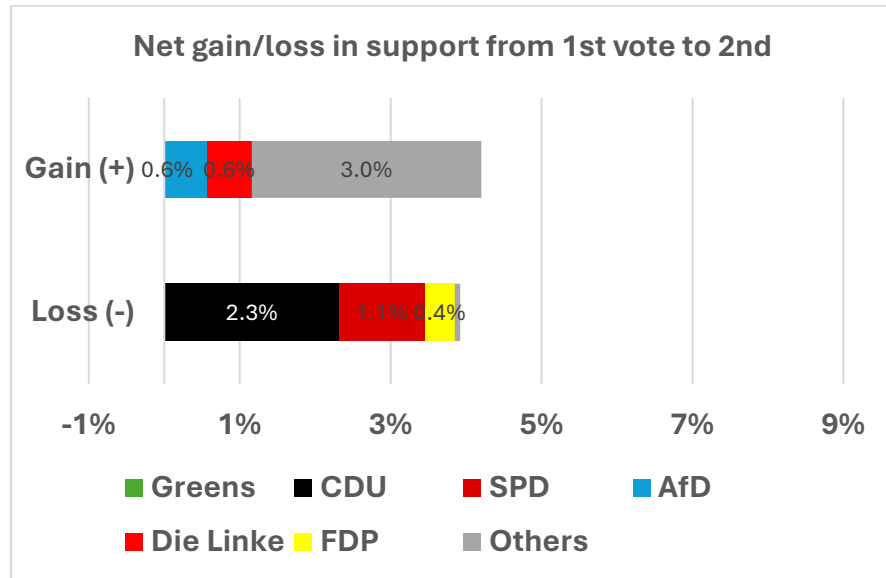
### Fragmentation and instability to the left



- Total, between 39% and 42%, up slightly
- 2025: similar outcomes in the two states (combined far-left above 10%)
- 2026: very different outcomes for Green and SPD (and far-left falls back)

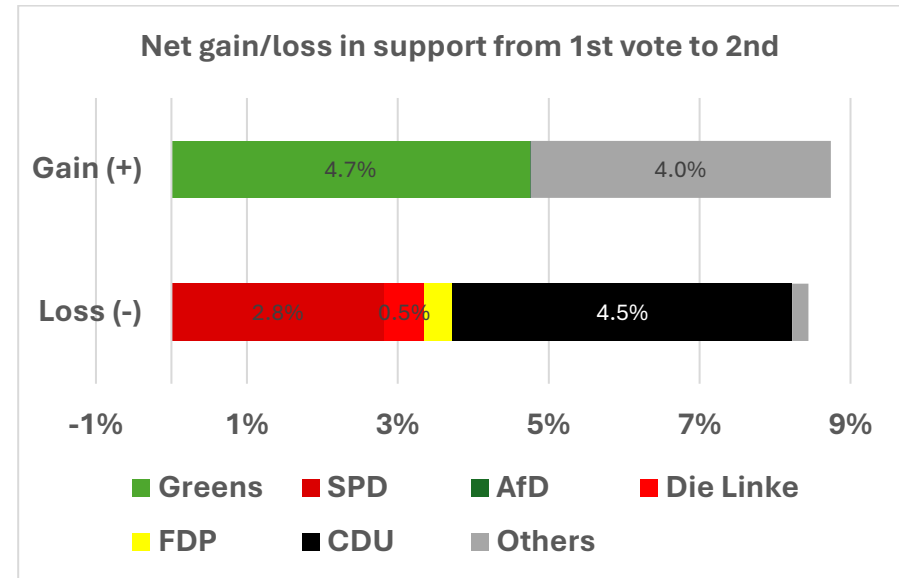
## Net shifts in support between the 1st (constituency) and 2<sup>nd</sup> (party) votes in 2026

Rheinland Pfalz: net shift of about 4%



- Support for CDU, SPD, FDP lower in 2<sup>nd</sup> vote than 1<sup>st</sup>; support for Greens unchanged
- Net shift to minor parties (including Die Linke) as well as to the AfD

Baden-Württemberg: net shift of more than 8%

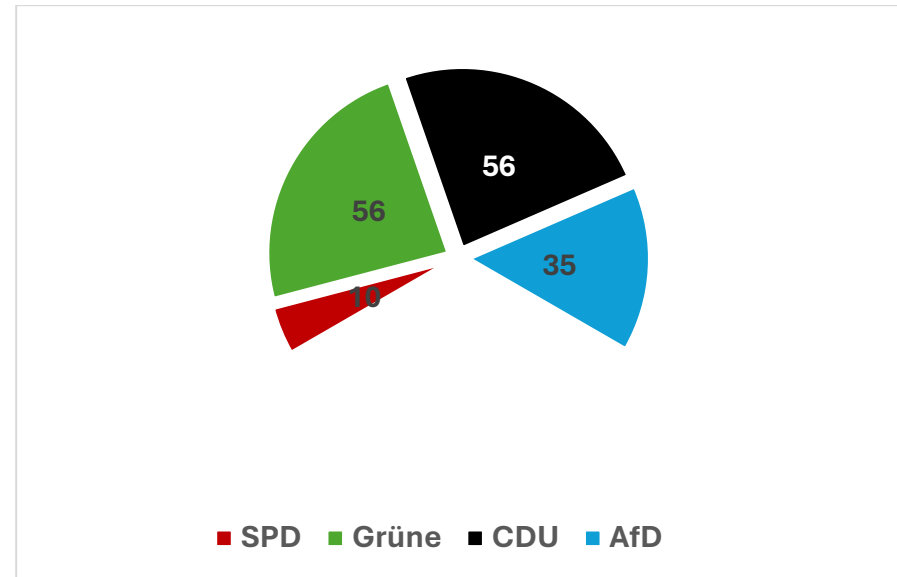
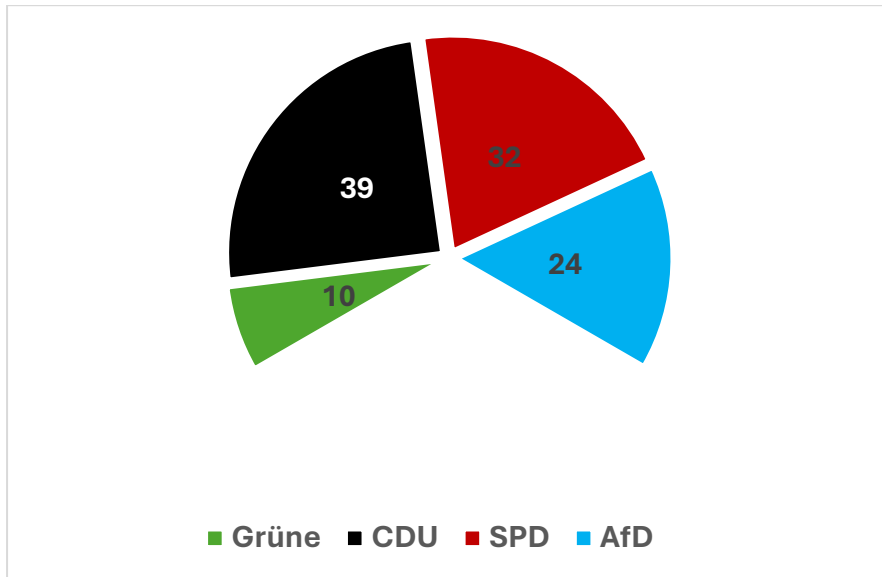


- Support for CDU, SPD, FDP much lower in 2<sup>nd</sup> vote than 1<sup>st</sup>; support for AfD unchanged
- Net shift to Greens or minor parties (excluding Die Linke)
- Net shift to Greens larger than shift from left
- The Greens wouldn't have won without the 2nd votes of some whose 1st vote was CDU

## Party strength in the 2026 state parliaments: possible governing coalitions

Parties and seats: 2026 compared with the last parliaments elected in 2021

- Rheinland-Pfalz: four parties, down from six (6 FDP and 6 independents elected in 2021)
- Baden-Württemberg: four parties, down from five (12 FDP elected in 2021)



Majority two-party coalitions: what's possible on the numbers and what's possible politically

- On the numbers, three coalitions are possible but the firewall round AfD rules two of them out, leaving only Black-Red
- On the numbers, three coalitions are possible but the firewall round AfD rules two of them out, leaving only Green-Black

## The Black-Red coalition in Rheinland-Pfalz: voters' preferences in depth

SPD voters in 2021 who voted CDU in 2026 are enough on their own to account for the CDU win

- 18% of the CDU's 2026 support is said to have come from people who voted SPD in 2021
- Based on the CDU overall 2026 vote share, this means an 11% swing between the two parties, double the CDU's winning margin

The two coalition partners together depend heavily on support from older voters

- A large majority (74%) of the over 60s voted for either the CDU or the SPD, whereas almost as many of those under 30 (68%) voted for parties other than these two

Yet the centre doesn't hold

- CDU, SPD or FDP voters from 2021 made up one third of the AfD's support in 2026, about the same as the number who voted for the AfD in 2026 having previously done so in 2021

While the SPD is unattractive to many left voters

- The SPD got only a third of the 53% of 18-24 year-olds who voted for parties to the left

And cannot claim to be the "natural" choice of working people

- At least as many blue-collar workers voted AfD (29%) and CDU (26%) as voted SPD (25%) while at least as many white-collar workers voted CDU (28%) as voted SPD (27%)

## The Green win in Baden-Württemberg: better at managing the negatives?

Opinion polls long left no doubt that the new government would be another Green and Black coalition

- The question was which party – and which party’s candidate for Minister-President – would lead it
- This gave the election the flavour of a head-to-head contest between two party leaders
- Opinion polls had long put the CDU ahead – but its lead was narrowing as the election drew close

### Green candidate: Cem Özdemir

- First elected, to the Bundestag, in 1994
- 67% of voters said he was good for his party’s performance (9% said he harmed it)
- Özdemir’s campaign sought to maintain its distance from Green party in the Bundestag
- 64% of CDU supporters (and 54% of all supporters) said the politics of the Green party in Baden-Württemberg were different from the politics of the federal-level Greens

### CDU candidate: Manuel Hagel

- First elected, to the Landtag, in 2016
- 28% of voters said he was good for his party’s performance (24% said he harmed it)
- Days before the election, a Green member of the Bundestag released a recording of a 2018 TV interview in which Hagel made remarks about the appearance of a schoolgirl who had asked him a political question

An opinion poll found that a Green-Black coalition under Green leadership would be welcomed by:

- 67% of SPD supporters, 56% of Die Linke supporters and 29% of CDU supporters

## Rheinland-Pfalz: a less striking result, but one much more likely to be repeated

The FDP's exit from both state parliaments in 2026 echoes their exit from the Bundestag in 2025

- Another echo: the FDP in Rheinland-Pfalz was in a Red-Green-Yellow coalition before the election
- If the FDP's exit is repeated elsewhere (as opinion polls suggest), two-party coalitions of the centre will in future have to come from the CDU, SPD or Greens

The Rheinland-Pfalz result looks much more to be the norm in future rather than the exception

- In the 14 other western German states, plus Berlin, the CDU(or CSU) is normally first in the opinion polls and never below second, while SPD, normally second, only trails the Greens in Bavaria
- Nordrhein Westfalen, currently governed by a Black-Green coalition, may be the one state where the Greens could challenge for first place (March 2027)

The firewall keeping the AfD out of government leads to a different sort of right-wing dominance

- Parties of the right command a parliamentary majority, but the firewall means this translates into a centrist coalition led by the CDU and a parliamentary opposition led by the AfD
- To lead the opposition brings prominence and privileges, a reward the AfD gets even in third place
- Obligated to serve as the junior coalition partner, the SPD, fettered by the collective responsibility of office, is almost bound to disappoint all but the most pragmatic of its supporters

## Baden-Württemberg: the importance of what happens next

It is always the case that the election itself is only halfway to forming a new German government

- But these negotiations, led by Cem Özdemir between the Greens and the CDU to reach an agreement on which a coalition can be based, may be especially fraught for both parties

For the Greens, this is the first chance since the Bundestag election to fashion a policy programme

- In the very difficult economic circumstances caused by the Russia/Ukraine and US/Iran wars
- For a state whose economy rests on the car industry and high-end manufacturing
- Where Özdemir's promise of pragmatism must be principled enough to secure the support of his party's state MPs

While the CDU will not be able to dismiss the Greens as easily it has since the Bundestag election

- During the Bundestag campaign, the CDU's Bavarian sister party (CSU) sought to pressurise CDU leader Friedrich Merz into ruling out, in advance, any Black-Green coalition after the election
- Without this commitment, so it was said, the AfD would achieve a clean sweep across the east
- The threat of a heavy defeat at the hands of AfD in the eastern state of Sachsen-Anhalt in September is sure to be a consideration for the CDU in these negotiations
- In these negotiations led by the Greens, the CDU's room to fudge an agreement will be limited

The new parliament has three months from when it first meets to agree upon a new government

- If coalition negotiations fail, for whatever reason, to produce an agreement that has the support of a majority of newly-elected members, parliament will be dissolved and a new election called

## Conclusion: hemmed in by explicit and implicit firewalls, the CDU now has to choose

The Green win in Baden-Württemberg was a surprise but a CDU and Green coalition was not; nor was the CDU-SPD coalition in Rheinland-Pfalz a surprise. As the opinion polls stand, an SPD and CDU coalition is the only one possible were almost any western German state to hold an election now.

The familiarity of the outcomes in these two elections reflects a lack of viable alternatives. The reason there are so few coalition options is the level of support now going to the AfD, coupled with the firewall, supported by all the other parties, that excludes it from government.

But exclusion from government is not exclusion from politics or parliament. Leading the opposition, the AfD is free to drive the political narrative rightward. Leading the government, the CDU can adopt elements of the AfD politics when it sees fit. In this way, German politics is pulled to the right.

Baden-Württemberg offers a chance to re-establish a governing green politics, but negotiating a coalition agreement there requires the CDU to move away from its opposition to all things green – as if the party had put a firewall, if not around the Greens themselves, then at least around their politics.

Overshadowing this negotiation is the state election in the eastern state of Sachsen-Anhalt. Now governed by a CDU-led centrist coalition, opinion polls show the AfD winning by a wide margin. An agreement that might harm the CDU's prospects in Sachsen-Anhalt ever further seems unlikely.

To keep the AfD out of government in Sachsen-Anhalt, the CDU will need Die Linke, now in third place, in its coalition. Yet the CDU refuses to co-operate with Die Linke too. Something soon has to give.

## Sources and notes

### Page 2

- Map created with [mapchart.net](https://mapchart.net)
- Population statistics: [Statistisches Bundesamt \(Destatis\)](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Home/home_node.html), „Bevölkerung: Bundesländer“ (Code: 12411-0010), data for 31/12/2024

### Page 3

- The Greens' identification with the left may be contested: hence the label “parties to the left” rather than “of the left”

### Pages 4, 5, 6 and 7

- 2026 election results (votes and seats), Baden-Württemberg: [Landeszentrale für politische Bildung](https://www.landeszentrale.de/ergebnisse-zur-landtagswahl-2026-in-baden-wuerttemberg), „Ergebnisse zur Landtagswahl 2026 in Baden-Württemberg“
- 2026 election results (votes and seats), Rheinland-Pfalz: [Landeswahlleiter](https://www.landeswahlleiter.de/landtagswahl-am-22-maerz-2026-landesergebnis-details), „Landtagswahl am 22. März 2026, Landesergebnis, Details“, Wahlkreisstimmen (1st votes) and Landesstimmen (2nd votes)

### Page 5

- 2025 Bundestag election results (votes), “[The Federal Returning Office, Bundestag election 2025, Baden-Württemberg](https://www.the-federal-returning-office.de/bundestag-election-2025-baden-wuerttemberg)” and “[Rheinland-Pfalz](https://www.the-federal-returning-office.de/bundestag-election-2025-rheinland-pfalz)”

### Page 8

- Voters' party preferences, Rheinland-Pfalz: [ZDF and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen](https://www.zdf.de/forschung/2024-03-15-waehler-und-partien-2024): slides 49 (CDU from SPD), 28/29

(CDU/SPD by age), 50 (AfD from FDP/SPD/CDU), 25 (SPD among young), 42/43/45 (working people)

- Estimate of 11% swing from SPD to CDU (twice 18% of CDU 31% vote share) has low certainty – but inference of a large, likely decisive swing is still robust.

### Page 9

- Voters' opinions of candidates and parties, Baden-Württemberg: [ZDF and Forschungsgruppe Wahlen](https://www.zdf.de/forschung/2024-03-15-waehler-und-partien-2024), slides 9 (leaders), 20 (different Green politics) and 12 (attitudes to a Green-led coalition)
- Background on the leading candidates: [Wikipedia \(German\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Özdemir), [Özdemir](https://www.wahlrecht.de/landtagswahlen/baden-wuerttemberg/oezdemir) and [Hagel](https://www.wahlrecht.de/landtagswahlen/baden-wuerttemberg/hagel)

### Pages 10 and 11

- Opinion polls on the levels of party support in other German states: [wahlrecht.de, Landtagswahlumfragen](https://www.wahlrecht.de/landtagswahlen)

### Page 11

- Source of the story about pre-election CSU/CDU fears about a coalition with the Greens is: [Der Spiegel](https://www.der-spiegel.de/2024-12-14-das-gespenst-spricht-fraenkisch), „Das Gespenst spricht Fränkisch“, Nr 51, 14-12-2024, esp. p.30.