



New CDU leader Laschet - in contested pole position for Chancellorship

And the winner is...Armin Laschet

Winning 53% of delegates' votes, Armin Laschet - the PM of NRW and Merkel loyalist - secured a slim majority in the run-off for the CDU party leadership on Saturday. This does not come as a surprise, as Laschet was widely seen as the candidate with a small lead in a tight race. In the end, having most governing experience and a track record of winning elections probably tipped the scale in favour of Laschet (e.g. the former SPD stronghold NRW in 2017). Being well-connected within the CDU also paid off for him. However, with a mere difference of 55 votes this is no landslide victory, though still a clearer win for the Merkel camp than AKK's 17-vote win over Merz in 2018. The slim majority is a reflection of the existing divisions within the party, leaving Laschet with the task of bridging those as soon as possible in this decisive super-election year. Norbert Röttgen (coming third in the election) quickly signalled support for Armin Laschet and was elected to the CDU's steering committee.

Friedrich Merz: What role for him?

Merz - representing the CDU's conservative camp - did not take the offer to join CDU's executive body claiming he wanted to "prevent widening gender imbalances" in the committee. Instead, shortly after his defeat, he made the blunt and arguably confrontational offer to replace Peter Altmaier as economic minister in the current government. Merkel's speaker immediately rejected this. Both Armin Laschet and Markus Söder reiterated that they want Merz to stay "within the team", but with no reference to any future government position. Merz's reaction to his defeat and the renewed frustration of his supporters could make Laschet's leadership challenge to unite the party even more of an uphill battle. Merz could play an important role in bringing in more centre-right voters (not least with regard to regional elections in eastern German states) and to increase the appeal of the CDU to business. According to a Forsa survey (HB January 15, 2021), Merz had been the favorite candidate of the business elites - but at the same time, more than 60% of those surveyed wanted a continuation of Merkel's centrist policy course. Indeed, with Merz' chances of playing an important role in the next government severely squashed, the CDU is unlikely to correct its drift towards the left, which took place during the Merkel years. On the contrary, Laschet is widely seen as in favour of state intervention and industrial policy rather than believing in markets and private initiative.

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Policy priorities of Armin Laschet: more of the same?

Being a unifying figure, people tend to underestimate him. Laschet pledges to stick to most of chancellor Merkel's policies. But he also stressed in his speech to the delegates that "more of the same" essentially focuses on the result, i.e. remaining in government and governing successfully. He acknowledged, that retaining a strong voter base at the center of society requires effort and new concepts. He represents the moderate centric policy stance of the CDU and reiterated his commitment to integrate the different camps within the CDU. His smoothly functioning CDU/FDP government in the state of NRW proves that he is capable of achieving that: The cabinet reflects the full spectrum of views within in the CDU incl. a law-and-order interior minister and a labour minister from the leftish wing.

In terms of policy priorities he is likely to pay particular attention to industrial policy being confronted with the ongoing structural change in his NRW and Germany. Modernising the country is a top priority. In the ZDF interview yesterday evening, he rejected a political obligation for home office and called for a less politically driven discussion of the minimum wage. He is a dedicated supporter of European integration and the alliance with France. During the pandemic he was the only CDU grandee and state PM to leave the borders to neighbouring EU partners (Belgium and the Netherlands) open. He was heavily criticised for that, in particular by Markus Söder. Laschet's election as party leader – though only a first step towards political leadership of Germany - offers relief for foreign observers, who had feared a more restrictive EU policy approach under Merz (FT, January 15). For more details on Armin Laschet's policy priorities please see our [Focus Germany](#) from last week. Sharpening the party's post-Merkel profile for the upcoming election campaign will be a major task for the new party leadership. But in the end, agreeing on a new party programme and the CDU election platform is not just a top-down approach but will have to include all wings of the party.

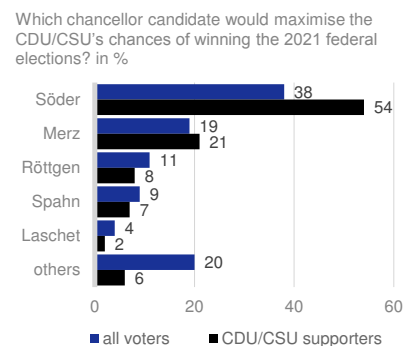
Liberals are Laschet's favoured coalition partner, still wishful thinking based on current polls

Laschet openly calls for a coalition with the liberal democrats (FDP), his junior coalition partner in the NRW state government. However, such a coalition currently lacks a majority at the federal level by a wide margin. According to the latest polls (7-day average of all polls), the CDU/CSU is leading the pack with 36% of total votes, followed by the Greens with 19% and the SPD with 15%. The FDP is trailing with 6% of total votes (see [Wahlrecht.de](#)). Thus, there are currently only two scenarios for a post-election majority government: (i) Another remake of the grand coalition - but this has been ruled out by the SPD leadership; (ii) a conservative-green coalition. While the latter is still our baseline, Laschet cautioned that such a coalition after the federal elections in September would face substantial policy hurdles, except for the fields of foreign and European policy.

Laschet and the chancellor candidacy: Bavarian PM Markus Söder is far more popular

Laschet is now in pole position for being nominated as the CDU's chancellor candidate. However, it is not a given this time that the CDU leader is also nominated the CDU's chancellor candidate - as influential CDU grandees such as ex-FM Schäuble and the CDU's party whip Brinkhaus admitted recently. In Saturday's TV appearances, Laschet kept a low profile with respect to that question. He emphasized that the decision will be taken jointly with Markus Söder, chair of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, shortly after Easter. Markus Söder echoed this view in his TV appearance as well (ZDF, Heute Journal).

Figure 1: Söder tops the chancellor popularity ranking



Source: Spiegel, Jan 11



But the field of potential candidates seems to have narrowed further. The chances of health minister Jens Spahn seem to have been weakened by his misplaced promotion of his running mate Laschet (and himself) during the Q&A session of the party convention. The fact that he received the lowest number of votes among the six vice-chairmen of the CDU corroborates this assessment.

Still, if Laschet's popularity ratings remain weak (see Figure 1), this will put Markus Söder in a strong position in the talks between CDU and CSU in late spring. On the other hand, strong CDU results in the regional elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate on March 14, could bolster Laschet's position substantially. The decisive factor will be, what happens to the CDU's overall popularity, when it sinks in that Merkel is really leaving.



Appendix 1

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