

Germany: Final of a political casting show

On Friday, 1001 delegates will vote on the next chairman or chairwoman of the CDU, marking the first end of the Merkel era



German Chancellor,
Angela Merkel

An unusually turbulent political year in Germany draws to a close. What started with a failed attempt to form an unprecedented government coalition with CDU/CSU, Greens and the liberal FDP, followed by the third grand coalition in Angela Merkel's fourth term, several crises in the summer months, now ends with Angela Merkel's last days as leader of the CDU. On Friday, the CDU party congress will vote a new chairman or chairwoman. It will mark the end of an era. Angela Merkel has been the leader of the CDU since 2000.

One Merkel, 12 candidates and 1001 delegates

Since Merkel's announcement in late October that she will step down, several more or less prominent candidates have thrown their hat into the race. Never before has the CDU had an open election for the party chair. On Friday, 1001 party delegates will vote on the new chair. An open vote is such a new thing that there even is no official procedure. The current party board will meet on Thursday evening to discuss the procedure of the vote, possible speaking times and other details. The only thing that seems for sure, according to the CDU statutes, is that the party leader has to get the absolute majority of the votes.

Up to now, twelve CDU members have officially announced their candidacy but the race is actually limited to three candidates: current secretary-general of the CDU and former minister-president of Saarland, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK); the current minister of health, Jens Spahn, and the party whip of the 2000s, Friedrich Merz.

The vote is not only a decision on the next party leader and possibly the party's candidate for chancellor but also on the future course of the party.

Under AKK, the party is expected to continue more or less the course of the Merkel era, staying in the political centre. Under Spahn or Merz, the party is expected to move more towards the political right wing, trying to regain AfD voters.

Spahn, Merz and AKK have been touring throughout the country for several weeks to present themselves and to discuss with party members. During this tour, Merz and AKK came out as the most likely winners of Friday's vote. Spahn fell short of substantial support. According to recent polls, AKK is more popular than Merz amongst all Germans, while Merz seems to have a small lead within the CDU. Spahn is running far behind in all polls. The fact that the race will only be between AKK and Merz is also reflected by prominent CDU members now offering their support for one of the two candidates. Recently, former minister of finance, Wolfgang Schaeuble, gave his public support for Merz.

Only one thing is for sure: the outcome of the Friday vote is highly unpredictable. Party congresses can develop own characters and momentum. Also, it looks as if no candidate will manage to gain an absolute majority in a first round. This could make Jens Spahn, or better his supporters, the kingmaker(s).

Impact on Germany and Europe should be limited

As exciting as this vote might be, the bigger question is what the impact will be on German and European politics. Contrary to an often heard view that AKK would be positive for Merkel, while Merz would mean trouble, we think that both would work well with Merkel as chancellor. Even Merz, who definitely is not Merkel's best friend, will first want to build up his profile in the run-up to the next elections. An interesting detail is that the chancellor does not have to be a member of parliament. So Merz could theoretically replace Merkel, in case she steps down before the end of her term. However, our base case view is that the CDU and any new chairman or woman will support Merkel's current course and have an interest in bringing the current government to the official end of the current term, ie, 2021. The bigger risk for the existence of the government coalition is the SPD. Another severe loss at the European elections next year could eventually trigger the SPD exiting the coalition. But this is for next year. First, the CDU's casting show will bring an end to one of the most turbulent political years in Germany since the reunification.

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