

Analysis The Race to Replace Merkel Begins. A Look at Those Vying to Lead Germany's Top Party

Three candidates vying to replace chancellor as leader of the center-right party include a Merkel loyalist and an old foe; all must combat rising challenge of liberal and populist parties to their left and right.



German chancellor Angela Merkel waving to supporters at a Christian Democratic Union election party, December 4, 2018. Martin Meissner, AP

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A party primary in Germany this Friday could determine who becomes the next "leader of the free world," following Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent decision to step down as chairwoman of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

The conservative party will be choosing its first new leader in nearly 20 years, with Merkel's successor in a decent position to head the next government in 2021. Recent polls show the center-right party ahead of its rivals, although that popularity has been slipping for more than a year now.

Some conservatives say the decline is due to the liberal immigration policy Merkel imposed on her party in late 2015, when she drew both praise and brickbats for allowing hundreds of thousands of refugees into Germany.

The chancellor's critics would like to see the CDU move to the right on immigration, in a bid to stem the continued rise of the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, which is now the third-largest party in the German parliament.

Friday's race to become party chairman - Merkel is set to remain as chancellor until her fourth term officially ends in 2021 - is between three wildly different candidates.



Christian Democratic Union leadership candidates Friedrich Merz, left, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and Jens Spahn in Seebach, central Germany, November 21, 2018. Jens Meyer, AP

According to the polls, the favorite to replace Merkel is one of her loyalists, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (more commonly known as AKK). She is the party's general secretary and a confidant of the chancellor. Although Kramp-Karrenbauer has somewhat distanced herself from her patron recently, her election would likely see a continuation of Merkel's centrist policies.

However, although she appeals to the more liberal voters Merkel has brought to the party, AKK's ascension would likely do nothing to quell dissatisfaction from other parts of the CDU. In a bid to counter that, the 56-year-old has said she wants provide a greater platform for the different viewpoints within her party.

Kramp-Karrenbauer has repeatedly spoken out against anti-Semitism in Germany and accused the AfD of harboring anti-Semites. She is also strongly opposed to the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel, and in May dedicated an entire op-ed in Germany's largest tabloid, Bild, to the subject.

Kramp-Karrenbauer's biggest rival is Friedrich Merz. The 63-year-old served as leader of the conservative faction in the Bundestag from 2000 until 2002, until Merkel unseated him and began reshaping their party. Merz eventually quit politics in 2009, going on to work as a corporate lawyer for various businesses. Since 2016, he has been supervisory board chairman for the German subsidiary of BlackRock, the world's largest investment management firm.

His corporate background is clearly seen in his economic agenda, in which he proposes tax cuts for the rich and the implementation of tax-free stock investments. He is also an avowed Atlanticist, heading a U.S.-German think tank

to promote transatlantic relations. He has also urged Germany to get tougher on Russia, and in 2016 supported the European Union's sanctions against Russian President Vladimir Putin.

However, Merz's corporate roots and elitist aura have also been a source of criticism. He identifies as middle class, despite his declared annual income of 1 million euros (nearly \$1,335,000).

He was the first to declare his candidacy to replace Merkel and is running a close second in recent polls - appealing to the party's traditionally conservative supporters. He promises to take a tougher stance on immigration, even questioning the constitutional right to seek asylum in Germany.

That kind of message could signify a return to power for the party's old, right-leaning establishment, which had been marginalized under Merkel and her more centrist peers. Merz could possibly encourage voters who had switched to the AfD to return to the fold, but his fiscally and socially conservative profile could also drive away more center-leaning voters.

The final candidate is Jens Spahn, who is seen as the rank outsider. The 38-year-old has been a vocal critic of Merkel's immigration policy over the years, developing a network of up-and-coming politicians within the party.

He has also warned about anti-Semitism being imported into Germany due to its influx of Muslim immigrants. Anti-Semitism is "an omnipresent part of everyday life" in a number of Muslim countries, Spahn said last December. He faced criticism for his remarks, with the German Jewish newspaper *Jüdische Allgemeine* accusing him of using allegations of anti-Semitism to bash immigrants while conveniently forgetting its role in Germany's history.

He currently serves as health minister in Merkel's governing coalition and has won plaudits for a program to hire some 13,000 caregivers for the elderly - a profession in which Germany suffers a chronic shortage.

He has also repeatedly attacked Germany's Green Party for its supposedly liberal and globalist beliefs, and presents himself as being tough on immigration. However, that message does not seem to be clicking with the party base.

As a result, the 1,001 delegates at Friday's annual party congress in Hamburg are

expected to choose between Kramp-Karrenbauer and Merz (although a poll published Sunday in Bild Am Sonntag said barely a quarter knew who they were voting for, or were prepared to say publicly).

Whoever wins will face a challenging future. The new leader of the CDU may have to position themselves against Merkel's policies as she sees out her last term as chancellor - potentially making the party appear divided. Merz and Merkel are said to endure a difficult relationship due to their historic power struggle in the early 2000s. Indeed, should he become the new party leader, it is possible Merkel might step down as chancellor before 2021, leading to new elections or difficult negotiations with the party's coalition partners.

Any power struggle could also lead to a further decline in the party's popularity. The Green Party has surged in the polls since Germany's last federal election in late 2017, and now presents itself as a liberal alternative to the center-right party. This means that the winner on Friday may have to deal with their party being downgraded to being just one among many, and not the automatic first choice to run the country.



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