

ASG Analysis: The Dynamics Behind the Race to Become Japan's Next Leader

September 27, 2021

Key takeaways

- Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will select its replacement for outgoing president and current Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on September 29.
- While the Suga administration saw its popularity sag over the past year because of voter dissatisfaction over the government's handling of Covid-19, Japan's opposition parties have been unable to capitalize. As a result, the LDP is a strong favorite to win upcoming elections for the powerful lower house of the Diet (Japan's parliament), which means that its leader will retain the post of prime minister.
- Taro Kono, currently the minister for administrative reform and Japan's vaccine czar, is the strong favorite in recent polls of the general public and rank-and-file LDP members. Kono has been buoyed by his public profile as a strong advocate for reforming Japan's government and economy, including by accelerating digitalization.
- Kono's polling support among mainstream voters and a mix of ordinary LDP members and younger elected officials does not guarantee him victory. Opaque and complex LDP factional politics will have a major impact on the outcome of the race, so Fumio Kishida, a faction leader and LDP heavyweight, and Sanae Takaichi, a protégé of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, could still emerge victorious.
- There are real differences on foreign and domestic policy between these three leading candidates, so the outcome will be meaningful for the direction Japan will take under its next prime minister.
- All three are strong supporters of the U.S.-Japan alliance, and have emphasized the importance of responding to the strategic challenges posed by China, so we expect Japan will continue to deepen economic and security collaboration with the United States and the other Quad partners.

Overview

September 29, 2021	LDP presidential election
TBD Before November 28	House of Representatives election (465 seats)

This fall, Japan will hold two critical elections that will determine the next prime minister. First, the ruling

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) will hold its presidential election on September 29. The winner of that party contest will immediately replace Yoshihide Suga as prime minister and will lead the ruling party in the upcoming election of the House of Representatives, the powerful lower house of the Diet (Japan's parliament). The current four-year terms of the members of the House of Representatives expire at the end of this parliamentary session on October 21, and the election must be held before the end of November. The new prime minister will likely decide the timing of the election.

With his public support plummeting below 30 percent amid the resurgence of Covid-19, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced on September 3 that he would not run for another term as LDP president. Suga's abrupt decision came because key LDP power brokers were becoming increasingly convinced that the party needed a new standard bearer before it faced the voters. Those concerns had grown over the summer, as the LDP suffered surprising defeats in both the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election in July and the Yokohama mayoral election in August. Four LDP Diet members have announced that they will run for the party presidency, and despite the LDP's weakened condition, most political analysts expect the party to retain its majority in the lower house election. Japan's opposition parties have not been able to capitalize on the Suga government's travails, as their public support still trails behind the LDP, according to recent polls.

LDP presidential election

The LDP Presidential Election Committee decided on August 26 that the party's presidential election will be held on September 29. The new LDP president will hold office for three years, until the end of September 2024.

The last LDP presidential election, which was held September 14, 2020, had a smaller electorate, with only Diet members and 47 LDP prefectural chiefs voting. This time, however, the election committee has decided to return to the more traditional system. In addition to Diet members, all party members who have paid party dues for the past two years will be eligible to vote, with their total votes given equal weight to the votes cast by Diet members. If one candidate receives a majority of votes in the first round, they will be elected. If no candidate receives a majority, however, a runoff election will be held between the top two candidates. The runoff will have a much more restricted group of voters, consisting only of the 383 LDP Diet members and 47 LDP prefectural chiefs. Under these different eligibility rules, LDP Diet members will gain control if the race goes to a runoff.

Candidates

With Suga out of the race, there will be four candidates competing for the party presidency: former Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, who lost to Suga in the previous presidential election; Minister of Government Administration and Regulatory Reform Taro Kono; former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications Sanae Takaichi, a protégé of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe; and another former MIC Minister, Seiko Noda. Takaichi and Noda are competing to become the first female LDP president; previously, only one woman had run for the LDP presidency in its nearly 66-year history.

In early public polling, Kono has emerged as the most popular of the four, tallying 31 percent and 27 percent support in recent Nikkei/TV Tokyo and Asahi News polls, respectively. Kishida has trailed significantly, with 14 percent support in both polls. Takaichi has not yet been able to boost

her public support rates out of the single digits. Noda, a late entry, similarly has not yet attracted much public support.

The election will be decided, however, by LDP elected officials and party members. In a survey of rank-and-file members conducted by Kyodo News on September 17 and 18, Kono was the strong front-runner, with 48.6 percent support, followed by Kishida at 18.5 percent and Takaichi at 15.7 percent, while Noda received only 3.3 percent. In a survey of LDP legislators conducted by Nikkei/TV Tokyo on September 21 and 22, however, the race was much closer, with Kishida leading with support of over 30 percent of respondents, Kono with just over 20 percent support, and Takaichi close behind, also with just over 20 percent. A Mainichi poll of LDP lawmakers reported similar results, with Kishida slightly ahead of Kono and Takaichi a close third.

The LDP presidential election historically has not been a popularity contest, and LDP presidents have often been selected in back room deals between faction leaders. This year, however, public dissatisfaction with the Suga administration raised alarms among many LDP politicians, particularly younger Diet members and local elected officials. These concerns caused LDP leaders to push Suga to step down, and could make popularity with the public a bigger consideration in the LDP presidential election this year. This would appear to strengthen Kono's candidacy.

Each of the four candidates is pursuing a different strategy to maximize their appeal to fellow party members in the run up to the vote.

Kono has long cultivated a reputation as a reformer and maverick, emphasizing his outsider status among party leaders rather than pursuing factional ties and personal relationships favored by more traditional politicians. As a result, Kono has been viewed with suspicion by many senior LDP members. Kono also has raised alarm bells among his party peers over policy, particularly his strident calls for Japan to phase out nuclear power as soon as possible. Over the past several years, however, Kono has tried to demonstrate that he can be a team player, moderating his own policy views during his terms as foreign and defense minister, and agreeing to take on the thankless task of leading Japan's Covid-19 vaccination program in addition to his role as minister of administrative reform. In kicking off his campaign, Kono laid out an agenda that appeared to signal his willingness to soften his policy positions to win support from fellow party members. Notably, Kono told reporters that "resuming operations of nuclear power plants, [given that they] were confirmed to be safe, would be necessary as we aim for carbon neutrality. Nuclear power would be gone someday, but I would not tell them to stop tomorrow or next year." Kono emphasized the importance of boosting investments in renewable energy, smart grid, and 5G infrastructure in order to boost GDP while promoting carbon neutrality.

Kishida, a faction leader who has followed a more traditional political path, has tried to position himself as a reformer advocating for generational change within the ruling party. During the past several months Kishida has called for a shake-up in party leadership, urging the replacement of LDP Secretary-General and faction leader Toshihiro Nikai, and for term limits on top party posts to create more opportunities for younger politicians. At the same time, Kishida has tried to appeal to supporters of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by emphasizing the need for Japan to respond to the strategic and economic threat posed by China. He has also pledged to continue with the main pillars of "Abenomics" – an expansionary monetary policy, flexible fiscal spending, and growth strategy – while focusing greater attention on the problem of rising income inequality.

Kishida has also called for additional fiscal stimulus to strengthen the economic recovery in the face of the continuing pandemic.

For her part, **Takaichi** has tried to position herself as the heir-apparent to former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe by appealing to the conservative wing of the party. She has called for maintaining male-only Imperial succession, promised to continue to visit Japan's controversial Yasukuni Shrine, and called for large increases in defense spending, including for more offensive weaponry. She also has promoted "Sanaemics," also a clear continuation of Abenomics. Despite Abe's support, Takaichi is not yet as popular with the general public, which could make her a risky pick for the party.

Noda, who has served in the House of Representatives since 1993, does not belong to a faction and was only able to gather the necessary 20 endorsements from other Diet members one day before the September deadline. Drawing on her personal experience with fertility treatments and as the parent of a child with disabilities, Noda has focused on the need for new policies to support parents in order to reverse the country's declining birth rate. Noda has positioned herself as a champion for women, children, the elderly, and the disabled, and has called on her party to do more to "lift up the weak in society."

Kono, Kishida, and Takaichi have all been outspoken about the economic and security challenges posed by China and have pledged to work closely with the United States and continue Japan's participation in the Quad in order to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region. While each candidate has emphasized different aspects of their foreign policies, all three have called for Japan to strengthen its military capabilities to respond to military threats from China and North Korea, and expressed interest in improving ties with Taiwan.

Covid-19 response

Predictably, Covid-19 also has been a key issue for the four LDP presidential candidates. Kono, who currently serves as the minister in charge of Japan's Covid-19 vaccination program, has pledged greater transparency by providing a wider variety of data on Covid-19 to the public, enabling a more informed policy discussion. Kishida has called for the creation of a "Health Crisis Management Agency" to centralize and strengthen the response to infectious diseases. Takaichi has said she would consider legislation to enable enforcing lockdowns to respond to future viral outbreaks, and has proposed increasing spending to provide more resources for medical workers, enable local governments to lease hotels to increase accommodation for patients, and grant new subsidies for drug makers so they can expand production of treatments. Noda has said that she felt very disappointed that none of the candidates had touched on children, women, and the disabled, as well as care policies and the poverty gap, and that she has wanted to start by addressing the loneliness and difficulties women face due to Covid-19.

Role of factions

As in past elections, intra-party factions will have a significant impact on the outcome of the race. While factional politics are notoriously opaque, recent press reports indicate that the LDP's seven major factions are taking a variety of approaches to the election. The Kishida faction, with 46 members, appears to be united behind its leaders' candidacy. In contrast, according to the *Asahi Shimbun*, the Hosoda faction – the largest in the party, with 96 members – has decided to encourage its members to support either Takaichi or Kishida, but are not opposed to Kono. Again

according to the *Asahi* and *Yomiuri*, the Aso faction is encouraging its 53 members to support Kono or Kishida, but is not opposed to Takaichi. Meanwhile, the Takeshita faction (52 members), Nikai faction (47 members), Ishiba faction (17 members), and Ishihara faction (10 members) are allowing their members to decide their own votes. If these reports are accurate, these factional dynamics may make this leadership election even more unpredictable than usual.

Outgoing Prime Minister Suga and former LDP Secretary General Shigeru Ishiba both have announced they will support Kono in the election. It is not yet clear whether the members of the Ishiba faction will follow their lead on election day. Abe has announced his support for Takaichi. The second-largest faction, led by Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, has not yet taken a position. Although Kono is a member of the Aso faction, he is not close to Aso or other influential faction members, such as Akira Amari. Aso and Abe, who were close allies during Abe's tenure as prime minister, view Ishiba as one of their primary rivals within the party. As a result, Kono may face difficulties as he seeks support from these competing groups. Young LDP members (46 percent of the total), who have not traditionally wielded much influence in LDP presidential elections, are very concerned about whether they can retain their seats in the current political environment and may balk if they feel party leaders intend to select an unpopular LDP president to lead them into the lower-house elections.

LDP presidential election candidates					
Name	Key backers	Career	Biography	Number of previous runs for LDP presidency	Public opinion
Taro Kono, Minister of Administrative Reform (Aso faction)	Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Former LDP Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba	Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Defense, Minister for Administrative Reform	His father, Yohei Kono, served as LDP president and foreign minister. Kono worked as a company employee at Fuji Xerox (now Fujifilm Business Innovation). Public opinion polls show high support among those under 30.	1 (2009)	27% (Nikkei, TV Tokyo Poll, September 9-11)
Fumio Kishida, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs (Kishida faction)	Former METI minister and influential lawmaker Akira Amari	Chairman of the LDP Policy Affairs Research Committee, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chairman of the LDP Election Strategy Committee	His grandfather and father were both members of the House of Representatives. After working as a company employee at the	1 (2020)	14% (Nikkei, TV Tokyo Poll, September 9-11)

			Long-Term Credit Bank of Japan (now Shinsei Bank), Kishida began his career in politics.		
Sanae Takaichi, Former Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications (No faction)	Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe	LDP Chairwoman of the LDP Election Strategy Committee, Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications	Graduated from the Matsushita Institute of Government & Management, which has produced many Diet members and businesspeople. Protege of former Prime Minister Abe.	0	7% (Nikkei, TV Tokyo Poll, September 9-11)
Seiko Noda, Acting LDP Secretary-General (No faction)		Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Minister of Consumer Affairs, Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications, Chairwoman of the LDP General Affairs Committee, Chairwoman of the House of Representatives Budget Committee	Her grandfather was Uichi Noda, who served as minister of construction. She expressed her desire to run for the presidency in the past three elections, but in each case, she was unable to gather the 20 nominees necessary to run.	0	N/A

Source: Nikkei

House of Representatives election

Timing

The current four-year term of the 465 members of the House of Representatives will expire on October 21 and the election must be held before November 28. As of September 27, the date for the House of Representatives election had not yet been decided. With the election of the new LDP president now scheduled for September 29, it is likely that the new LDP leader – who will immediately take the post of prime minister – will decide when to call the election. The House of Representatives is elected through a hybrid electoral system, with 176 members elected from 11 multi-member constituencies by a party-list system of [proportional representation](#), and 289 elected from single-member constituencies via a first-past-the-post system.

Outlook

Without a new LDP leader, it is difficult to assess the outlook for the party's performance in the House of Representatives election. The party hopes that by turning to new leadership, it will increase its appeal to voters. The LDP won an overwhelming victory during the previous election for the House of Representatives in 2017, which has put it in a very strong position in the Diet. Currently, the LDP holds 276 seats (well above the 233 needed for a majority) and its coalition partner, the Komeito, 29, for a total of 305 seats. The LDP and Komeito would need to lose at least 73 seats in the upcoming election to lose their majority. While recent polling does not indicate any surge in support for Japan's fractious opposition parties, negative public views of the Suga government – particularly over its handling of Covid-19 – mean voters may decide to punish the ruling party by casting protest votes. In addition to its relationship with the Komeito, the LDP also cooperates with a small party called Nippon Ishin, or the Japan Innovation Party. Following the election, particularly if the LDP's loses a significant number of seats, collaborating with other parties could become more important.

A poll of Japanese voters published by NHK on September 13 appeared to indicate that the LDP remains in a strong position relative to the opposition parties. The LDP received 37.6 percent support from respondents, with no other party registering more than single-digit support. Komeito received 3.6 percent support. The largest opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party, mustered only 5.5 percent support, with the Communist Party at 2.9 percent, the Japan Restoration Society at 1.1 percent, the Social Democratic Party at 0.6 percent, the Reiwa Shinsengumi Party at 0.4 percent, and the National Democratic Party of Japan at 0.2 percent. Over 40 percent of respondents said they did not support any party.

A major challenge for the opposition parties is how to determine their strategy for contesting the 289 single-member districts. With multiple opposition parties fielding competing candidates in the same districts, they risk splitting the vote and handing victory to the LDP or Komeito candidates. The Constitutional Democratic Party, the largest opposition party, plans to field 212 candidates in single-member districts, while the Communist Party plans to run 126. The LDP is fielding candidates in almost every such district, and Komeito is fielding nine.

The LDP and most of the opposition parties have not yet announced their plans for the 176 seats that will be elected from the 11 multi-member/proportional representation constituencies.

Number of candidates for each party's single-seat constituency election and announced independent candidates for proportional districts (as of August 6, 2021)			
Party	Candidates for single-member districts	Candidates for proportional districts	Incumbents
LDP	278	0	276
Constitutional Democratic Party	212	0	109
Komeito	9	26	29
Communist Party	126	21	12
Ishin	65	0	10
Democratic Party for the People	21	2	8
Social Democratic Party	10	3	1
N Party	20	1	1

Reiwa	20	0	0
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Source: Asahi Shimbun

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