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The Constitutional Democrats face their own leadership dilemma

Key takeaways

- Constitutional Democratic Party leader Izumi Kenta may face up to five challengers in the party's 23 September leadership election, including former prime minister Noda Yoshihiko.
- As the party's chance of vying for power have improved, questions about who should lead the party, what its policy program should be, and how it should conduct election campaigns have deepened, freighting the leadership election with significance.

Even as the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) leadership election has [attracted](#) significant media and public attention, the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) is preparing for its own leadership contest, which will be held on 23 September, shortly before the LDP's on 27 September. While not as consequential as the LDP's election, which will determine Japan's next prime minister, the LDP's waning fortunes and the public's growing appetite for political change means that who leads the CDP may have higher stakes than previous leadership elections for the leading opposition party.

As a result, incumbent leader **Izumi Kenta** faces a growing field of challengers, which on Friday, 30 August gained its most significant entrant, former prime minister **Noda Yoshihiko**, who consulted extensively with Ozawa Ichirō and other party heavyweights before launching his bid. Noda joins **Edano Yukio**, CDP founder and Izumi's predecessor as party leader; **Mabuchi Sumio**, who was a transport minister under Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) prime ministers; and **Eda Kenji**, a former deputy party leader and veteran opposition politician and reformer. A sixth candidate, first-term

lawmaker **Yoshida Harumi**, may also be preparing to enter the race, given that the current field is composed entirely of older (aside from the 50-year-old Izumi) male politicians associated with the DPJ.

Yoshida's potential bid highlights the key questions that the CDP faces in its leadership contest. The sustained decline in the LDP's support since the kickback scandal surfaced has boosted the CDP, which performed well in by-elections in April and other local elections. This has [raised](#) hopes that the public might be more willing to consider an opposition-led government than at any point since the DPJ was driven from power in 2012 – which has also led Ozawa and others in the CDP to worry that Izumi, who was a junior lawmaker when the DPJ held power and therefore did not hold high government office, would be unable to convince voters that the CDP is ready to govern on day one and therefore to look to DPJ veterans like Noda, the last DPJ prime minister, and Edano, who became famous as the chief cabinet secretary during the 11 March 2011 triple disasters.

At the same time, however, the CDP has been rattled by the “Ishimaru shock,” when Ishimaru Shinji, a little-known mayor from a small town in Hiroshima prefecture [surged](#) past veteran opposition lawmaker Renhō to finish second in the Tokyo gubernatorial election in July. The ease with which a virtual unknown was able to deploy little more than stump speeches and social media to surge past one of the CDP's leading figures stunned the party, but also suggested that while the CDP (including its predecessor parties) has been out of power for almost twelve years, it is still viewed as a tired establishment party by many voters, particularly younger voters and may therefore struggle to appeal to voters eager for political change. If the LDP opts for a “generational change” candidate like Koizumi Shinjirō or Kobayashi Takayuki or selects either Takaichi Sanae or Kamikawa Yōko to be Japan's first female prime minister, the CDP could have a difficult time arguing that it represents a spirit of change in Japanese democracy.

Thus, the CDP's leadership vote could be enormously consequential for the party's future as a viable alternative to the LDP. The party's voters – which in the first round includes national lawmakers, candidates nominated for national office, prefectural and local lawmakers, and around 100,000 dues-paying rank-and-file members – will have to determine whether presenting a “responsible” centrist or even conservative image to the electorate will serve the party better than retaining the younger but less experienced Izumi, a political neophyte like Yoshida, or a veteran like Mabuchi who is still relatively fresher than Noda or Edano. This choice extends to policies – Noda, when he was prime minister, was derisively described as leading the “Noda faction” of the LDP, while under Edano and Izumi the CDP has tried to have a more progressive, center-left coloration, particularly on social and cultural issues – as well as to electoral strategy. Noda has firmly rejected efforts by Edano and Izumi to coordinate with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) to reduce the number of candidates it fields to consolidate the non-LDP vote. Instead, Noda wants the CDP to ally with the conservative populist

Nippon Ishin no Kai, a party that has not only rejected cooperation with the CDP but also seeks to supplant the CDP as the leading opposition party.

It is difficult to anticipate who will prevail in this contest, not least because the process is dominated by party insiders. Diet members and CDP nominees for national office control half the votes in the first round; the party's roughly 1200 prefectural and local legislators hold another 25% of the first-round votes; the rank-and-file members are responsible for only the remaining 25%, distributed proportionally. The CDP still has factions organized its leading figures, suggesting that the outcome will likely be the outcome of negotiations among the party's bosses ahead of the runoff that is likely to result from the large field. As the only former prime minister in the field, Noda may enter the race as the favorite – in multiple polls he has a sizable advantage with the public, significantly ahead of second-place Edano and third-place Izumi – but whether this is simply due to name recognition or reflects a genuine preference remains to be seen. Nevertheless, CDP members face a meaningful choice about the direction of their party next month, and no easy answer when it comes to what choice will be most useful for positioning the CDP to compete in a general election that could be coming soon after the LDP's leadership election.

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