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Noda's victory augurs more competitive politics

Key takeaways

- Former prime minister Noda Yoshihiko won comfortably in the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party's (CDP) leadership election on 23 September.
- Noda faces obstacles in coordinating with other opposition parties ahead of a snap election that could be held as early as next month, but his election signals a “realistic” pivot by the CDP as Noda stressed his determination to appeal to moderate conservatives and his ability to govern from day one.
- While a change of ruling party is unlikely in a snap election, Noda's comeback suggests that regardless of who wins the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) leadership, the political system will be more competitive going forward.

In a [campaign](#) entirely without drama, former prime minister **Noda Yoshihiko** won the leadership of the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) on Monday, 23 September. Noda's comeback, twelve years after he led the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) into an electoral defeat at the hands of Abe Shinzō's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), is a significant shift for the CDP. The party was founded in the wake of the DPJ's collapse in 2017 to be a more center-left party than the DPJ had been, but Noda's election signifies a pivot to the center, as the former prime minister has a more conservative reputation – as prime minister he was mocked by rivals as leading the LDP's “Noda faction” – and has talked about appealing to moderate conservative voters disenchanted with the LDP.

Noda assumes the leadership of the CDP with significant support for his new approach. Although the vote went to a runoff between Noda and CDP founder **Edano Yukio**, Noda received the most support from both the CDP's national representatives (and candidates for national office) and its rank-and-file members and local lawmakers, and

then won in the second round with 55% of the lawmakers and nominees and a majority of the party's 47 prefectural chapters.

Ultimately, with Noda at its helm, the CDP will take a more realist approach heading into the next general election. By opting for the former prime minister, in contrast to the younger incumbent **Izumi Kenta**, the party is hoping to signal its determination, seriousness, and capacity for wielding power. He is poised to moderate some of the party's stances – on foreign policy and national security, stressing the importance of close relations with the United States; on fiscal policy, ruling out a consumption tax cut as favored by some CDP members; and on climate and energy, walking back the party's pursuit of a phase-out of nuclear energy – while promising a cleaner politics than the scandal-ridden LDP. Noda is also promising a tactical shift in the CDP's approach to the next election, emphasizing the need for the CDP to coordinate with center and center-right parties – including Ishin no Kai – in order to break the ruling coalition's majority, rather than continuing coordination with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) as pursued by Izumi and runner-up Edano.

While Noda's rivals were offering similar policy appeals, none could match Noda's experience – Edano has been chief cabinet secretary but not prime minister – and polls showed that none could match Noda's appeal to the broader public, with Noda having at least twice as much support as Edano, his main rival. This may reflect Noda's greater name recognition, a benefit of having been prime minister, but also could reflect meaningfully greater support for Noda, who has a reputation for plain speaking and a self-effacing sense of humor (famously referring to himself as a loach, an unattractive freshwater bottom-feeding fish, to describe his kind of homely folksiness).

To be sure, Noda faces considerable challenges and possibly only a month before he will have to lead his party into a general election. Even before Noda's election, the JCP began announcing nominations for dozens of constituencies that already feature CDP candidates, a number that could grow. Noda is betting that he can attract enough independents and LDP supporters to make up for whatever votes the CDP loses on the left from JCP candidates running in the same constituencies. It could work, but it is a gamble. Noda is also betting that he can cement cooperation with the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP), another DPJ offshoot, and the center-right Ishin no Kai, whose leaders have been firm in their opposition to electoral coordination with the CDP. Noda will not have much time to bridge these gaps and reduce the risk of opposition candidates "cannibalizing" the non-LDP vote in marginal constituencies.

Nevertheless, as the LDP approaches its own leadership election on Friday, 27 September, Noda's election places additional pressure on the ruling party. Although its fortunes have improved since Prime Minister Kishida Fumio announced that he would not seek reelection, the LDP's next leader will face a political heavyweight on the opposition benches, a skilled debater and campaigner with greater name recognition than Izumi. LDP voters will have to consider which of its candidates match up best with

Noda, whether, for example, by electing the right-wing **Takaichi Sanae** would allow Noda to poach moderate conservatives or electing the relatively inexperienced **Koizumi Shinjirō** might enable Noda to use his experience as prime minister to his advantage and turn Koizumi's youth into a liability.

But regardless of whether Noda's victory influences the LDP's vote, the CDP's pivot to Noda is an indication that the Japanese political system is shifting a more competitive direction. Even if the CDP is unable to take power in a snap election, if Noda can reduce the ruling coalition's majority, make gains in the 2025 upper house elections, and keep the new prime minister under pressure, the LDP will appear less dominant (and, potentially, more divided) and the timeline for another change of government could be markedly compressed.

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