

11 September 2025

Flawed field vies to lead LDP through historic crisis

Key takeaways

- With the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election set for 4 October, the field is already taking shape: smaller than 2024, all veterans of that race.
- The likely candidates all have vulnerabilities that prevented them from winning last year and which they will have to overcome to win this year.
- The race will be dominated by discussion over who will be best able to revive the party's fortunes and strengthen the government's control of the Diet.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election, set for Saturday, 4 October with a filing date of 22 September, already looks different from the 2024 race that featured a lengthy shadow campaign before nine candidates ultimately declared. The 2025 race will likely be more pared back, with a smaller field – it appears there will be five candidates at most – and a narrower focus as the candidates contend over who will be best suited to stabilize the government's control of the Diet by bringing a new partner into the ruling coalition.

Thus far, one candidate has officially announced their candidacy, **Motegi Toshimitsu** (69), the former secretary-general, foreign minister and trade negotiator, and faction boss. **Kobayashi Takayuki** (50), a former economic security minister announced on Thursday that he will make an official announcement next week. **Hayashi Yoshimasa** (64), the current chief cabinet secretary and principal lieutenant to former prime minister Kishida Fumio, and **Takaichi Sanae** (64), the runner-up in the 2024 race, are also preparing to announce her candidacy. Meanwhile, Agriculture Minister **Koizumi Shinjirō** (44) will likely announce his candidacy next week.

In the early days of the campaign, **it is already clear that the campaign may turn less on where the candidates stand on major issues and more on their ability to**

address the two major challenges that have threatened the LDP, the marked decline in the party's public support and the government's loss of majorities in both houses of the Diet. As such, the policy debate thus far seems to have focused more on the candidates' willingness to accommodate opposition demands on fiscal stimulus and tax reform than on their policy visions, while candidates have touted their relationships with opposition lawmakers. For example, Motegi, in announcing his candidacy, stressed that he would unify the party with the best possible leadership team and spoke positively about entering coalition negotiations with both Ishin no Kai and the Democratic Party for the People (DPFP). Kobayashi touted his youth and his ability to connect to voters the LDP has overlooked. Koizumi, meanwhile, met with DPFP Secretary-General Shimba Kazuya Wednesday in his capacity as agriculture minister but reportedly spoke with him privately about the "political situation." Hayashi,

meanwhile, recently met with former Ishin leader Baba Nobuyuki and current parliamentary affairs chief Endō Takashi. Meanwhile, Takaichi has already received a negative endorsement, as Kōmeitō chief Saitō Tetsuo suggested that if she were to win, his party would leave the coalition, a potentially significant threat though perhaps an empty one.

Meanwhile, with the most likely candidates all veterans of last year's race, **their strengths and weaknesses are well known and each has glaring, potentially disqualifying vulnerabilities, making the outcome of this race especially difficult to anticipate.** The leadership race could ultimately be decided on which candidate is least objectionable to the greatest portion of the

The LDP field takes shape

Formally announced



Motegi Toshimitsu (69)
Former Motegi faction; LDP secretary-general; significant leadership experience; unpopular

Intention announced



Kobayashi Takayuki (50)
Former Nikai faction; former economic security minister; generational change candidate



Takaichi Sanae (64)
No faction; economic security minister; very close with Abe; right-wing favorite



Hayashi Yoshimasa (64)
former Kishida faction; chief cabinet secretary; disliked by right wing

Pending but likely



Koizumi Shinjirō (44)
No faction; son of former PM Koizumi Junichirō; popular with public; close to Suga

The Liberal Democratic Party will select its next leader on **4 October**, with the campaign formally beginning on **22 September**. Here is the state of the race as of 11 September.

Power brokers



Suga Yoshihide (76)
Former PM; close to, Koizumi



Asō Tarō (84)
Faction boss; former PM; close with Motegi



Kishida Fumio (67)
Former PM; former faction boss, close to Hayashi



Ishiba Shigeru (68)
Outgoing PM; close to Hayashi, Koizumi

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parliamentary party than on a positive mandate for that candidate.

Koizumi is relatively popular with the public, would signal a **dramatic generational changing of the guard**, would **communicate a certain vigor**, and may be **best positioned to expand the ruling coalition**. However, **last year he was unable to convert high poll numbers into rank-and-file votes**, finishing a distant third between Takaichi and Ishiba Shigeru in the first round's rank-and-file voting even as he received the most votes from lawmakers. This underperformance may have been due not only to gaffes but also to **a certain incredulousness on the part of LDP supporters that Koizumi is ready to be prime minister at his age**. For Koizumi to win, **he will need to say a dramatic increase in his support from the party rank-and-file**, since with former prime minister Suga Yoshihide's backing he will likely have robust support in the parliamentary party again. He may face an additional obstacle this year, to the extent that his advocacy for agricultural reforms leads agricultural cooperatives to campaign against him.

Takaichi, meanwhile, nearly won last year and enjoys significant name recognition and public support, but over the past year **many of her supporters have lost their seats**. She also benefited from Asō Tarō's backing last year, which swelled her support from LDP lawmakers to 72, only three behind Koizumi's 75. **Asō, however, has not indicated whether he will throw his faction's weight** behind any candidate in the first round. She may therefore have to make up some lost ground, but the proportionality of voting by rank-and-file members means that **it will be difficult to replace lost lawmaker votes with support from the grassroots**. **She could also suffer from the perception** that she will exacerbate rather than heal intra-party divisions and that she is poorly suited to the negotiations required to expand and maintain the ruling coalition.

Of course, also working against Takaichi is **Kobayashi's candidacy**. **The younger conservative may trail Takaichi in opinion polls and among grassroots supporters**, but **he is the favorite of younger conservative lawmakers and another potential herald of generational change** for the LDP more broadly. The failure of the Takaichi and Kobayashi camps to coordinate could **cripple the LDP right's chances of retaking the leadership more broadly**. Kobayashi, meanwhile, may be older than Koizumi but **he has a thinner resume than the younger candidate** – having held only a single ministerial post that did not entail running a ministry, whereas Koizumi has now helmed two ministries – and could therefore face some of the same doubts about his ability to lead the government that Koizumi faces.

Motegi, meanwhile, has a familiar set of strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, he has **extensive experience** in both government and party executive posts and will undoubtedly also tout his experience negotiating a trade agreement with the first Trump administration. On the other hand, **he has virtually zero public support** for his candidacy, both from LDP rank-and-file or the public more broadly. **He also has a reputation as a difficult boss and colleague**, limiting his support from the parliamentary party. In the current climate, **he is unlikely to be helped by his age** – he

will turn 70 three days after the leadership election – or by having been a former faction boss; neither will help the party reconnect with the public.

Perhaps **the candidate with the most significant upside is Hayashi**. Hayashi has extensive foreign and domestic policy experience; hails from the party's moderate wing; and has been largely scandal free. **He performed unexpectedly well last year**, finishing fourth in the first round, and among the LDP candidates, was the third most popular choice in a recent *Nikkei* poll. He has a warm personality and is known for his musical ability, which could help him connect with voters. **In this five-candidate race, he may the greatest chance of a surge in support that at least propels him into a runoff**. However, in a runoff, particularly one in which neither of the conservative candidates advances, **Hayashi's chances could falter to the extent that he is likely the candidate that the LDP right least prefers**, given their belief that he is too soft on China and memories of his longstanding feud with Abe Shinzō, who like Hayashi hailed from Yamaguchi prefecture. Meanwhile, he and Koizumi will likely be competing for many of the same lawmakers, and a Koizumi surge would severely limit Hayashi's chances of advancing.