

International

Armin Laschet: Comeback king after Merkel's crown

Merkel to bow out of politics after Sunday's election

BERLIN: Armin Laschet, the candidate from Angela Merkel's party to succeed her as chancellor, may have had a dismal election campaign marred by gaffes, but he also has a knack for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, which could still see him triumph in Sunday's polls. The affable 60-year-old has a reputation for endurance and what *Der Spiegel* magazine has described as an ability to "sit out" his opponents, even when the chips are down. Elected as head of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in January, Laschet was for some time the clear favourite to become Germany's next chancellor when Merkel bows out of politics after Sunday's election.

But recent polls have shown the conservative alliance of the CDU and the Christian Social Union (CSU), its Bavarian sister party, trailing behind the Social Democrats (SPD) and on course for their worst election result since World War II. A particular low point for Laschet came in July, when he was caught on camera laughing during a tribute to the victims of deadly floods in North Rhine-Westphalia, where he is the regional leader. He has also been widely criticized over his dithering response to the COVID-19 pandemic in that region, with the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper describing him as "indecisive, sometimes acting impulsively".

Miscalculated?

If Laschet does manage to bring his party home as the winner on Sunday, it would not be the first time he has defied expectations. Laschet won the vote to become CDU leader against the odds, and went on to secure the conservatives' nomination to be chancellor candidate after a drawn-out battle with the more popular Markus Soeder of the CSU.

How Germany's complex electoral system works

BERLIN: In many countries, a strong lead in the polls often results in a landslide—but things are not so simple under Germany's complex election system. In the end, frontrunner Olaf Scholz, the current vice-chancellor and finance minister, may be forced into torturous coalition haggling with any number of potential partners to succeed Angela Merkel at the chancellery. The reason is post-war Germany's election system, which mixes the "winner-takes-all" approach of Britain and the United States with the proportional representation system that allows for more small parties.

Most women, most parties

A total of 60.4 million people over the age of 18 are eligible to vote for the next government of the European Union's most populous nation and its biggest economy. Women voters outnumber men at 31.2 million and 29.2 million, respectively. About 2.8 million will be first-time voters on election day, September 26. Voter participation four years ago stood at 76.2 percent, up nearly five points from 2013 and higher than in many other Western democracies. This year, 33 percent of the candidates for the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, which ultimately elects the chancellor, are female—a post-war record. A whopping 47 parties are fielding candidates—another first.

He also outperformed the polls to secure his impressive 2017 election win in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state. Asked in a recent TV interview whether he thought he was often underestimated, Laschet replied that "many have certainly miscalculated". A devout Catholic, Laschet was born in Aachen, a spa city in western Germany near the border with Belgium and the Netherlands, where his father fed the family digging for coal. "When you're down in the mine, it doesn't matter where your colleague comes from, what his religion is or what he looks like. What is important is, can you rely on him," he told party colleagues in January. Laschet initially studied law in Munich before working as a journalist, including for several years as the editor of a Catholic newspaper. After first joining the CDU as a teenager, he was elected to the Bundestag German parliament in 1994 and to the European Parliament in 1999. He became head of the CDU in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2012 and has been state premier there since 2017.

'Passionate European'

A defender of multiculturalism, Laschet has a reputation for being even more pro-migration than Merkel and famously backed the chancellor during the fallout from Germany's 2015 refugee influx. A self-described "passionate European", he is a fluent French speaker and met his wife and the mother of his three children, who is of French-speaking Wallonian origin, singing in a church choir.

In his office in Duesseldorf, Laschet keeps a golden bust of his hero and alleged distant relative Charlemagne, the king of the Franks credited with uniting Europe - a fitting role model for a man often praised for his ability to unify. "Polarizing is easy - anyone can do it," he told a party conference earlier this year. "We

Five-percent hurdle

When German voters enter the polling booth, they make two crosses on the ballot paper—one for a direct representative in their local district, the other for their preferred political party. The first vote is meant to ensure that each of Germany's 299 districts is represented in the Bundestag. In the second—and in many ways decisive—vote, citizens choose a party. Ahead of election day, the parties write up their "candidate lists" in each of the 16 states. The names at the top have the biggest chance of getting a seat. The party with the most votes then gets to send the most lawmakers to the lower house.

For example, if a party scores three direct seats through the first vote but is eligible for 10 seats overall through the second vote, seven more names on the party's state are also given seats. A complication arises when the direct and party votes are out of balance because voters "split" their ballot. When a party earns more direct seats than it is entitled to through its share of the party vote, it is granted the extra seats anyway. These are called "overhang" seats.

As a result, the size of the Bundestag can expand far beyond its minimum size of 598 seats. After the 2017 election, the chamber had 709 lawmakers—a figure which could even grow larger. Parties which score below five percent of the second vote stay out of parliament altogether. This is meant to prevent excessive political fragmentation and stop potentially extremist parties. The far-left Die Linke party is flirting with the five-percent bar in the polls and its success or failure could be a key factor in post-election coalition arithmetic. Once polling booths close at 1600 GMT, the question will be whether any alliance of parties has an absolute majority to elect a chancellor—half of all the lower house seats plus one. —AFP



BERLIN: A defaced election campaign poster featuring Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party leader and candidate for Chancellor Armin Laschet reads: 'Shot dead for Germany' instead of 'Determined for Germany' in Berlin ahead of parliamentary elections on September 26. —AFP

have to speak plainly, but not polarise. We have to be able to integrate. Keeping a society together and bringing it together, that is hard work."

Known for his jolly persona, Laschet is a regular at the famous carnival celebrations in North Rhine-Westphalia and was even awarded a "prize against deadly seriousness" by the Aachen carnival club last year. But he also showed his serious side when responding to the crisis in Afghanistan, accusing NATO of the "biggest debacle" in its history. Afghanistan gave Laschet "the first opportunity to present himself as a statesman in the making", *Die Welt* daily said. "This was no longer the friendly Rhinelander." —AFP

Germany's climate militants fight for parliamentary seats

MONCHENGLADBACH: Dressed in a rainbow-colored unicorn costume, Kathrin Henneberger once camped on a beech tree, trying to save a forest from destruction. Come Monday, she hopes to be one of Germany's newly elected MPs. The 34-year-old counts among one of Germany's most prominent climate militants standing in Sunday's general elections for a seat in parliament. After years of occupying coal mines or blocking power stations, Henneberger and other activists now want a direct say in the halls of power.

Like Henneberger, Jakob Blasel, who co-founded the German chapter of Fridays for Future school strikes, is running on the Greens' ticket. "The places where decisions are made are decisive for our demands," Blasel, 20, told AFP. Blasel pointed to recurring droughts in 2018-2019 and July's deadly flooding as evidence that the impact of climate change has already reached the doorstep of every German. The floods that struck western Germany over the summer claimed 181 lives and destroyed homes, schools and other critical infrastructure. In the south of Germany, scientists in the Bavarian Alps this year issued another alarming warning of irreversible damage wrought on nature. —AFP