

Who is Markus Söder, Bavaria's premier?

CSU chairman Markus Söder was long seen as a strong contender to replace Angela Merkel as a conservative chancellor. But after a power struggle with CDU head Armin Laschet, he stepped aside.



Markus Söder heads the Christian Social Union

Bavarian State Premier Markus Söder bowed out of the contest to be the conservative CDU/CSU bloc's candidate to succeed Chancellor Angela Merkel in Germany's September general election.

"The die is cast. Armin Laschet will be the CDU/CSU's candidate for chancellor," Söder told a press conference in Munich. This brought to an end what was seen as an acrimonious power struggle, during which Söder and his growing number of supporters pointed to the CSU chair's better performance in opinion polls, which could make him a more competitive candidate.

Few German politicians have seen their fortunes rise in public opinion during the coronavirus crisis as much as Markus Söder, Bavaria's state premier and head of

the Christian Social Union (CSU), the conservative Bavarian allies to Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU). As the chair to the council of state premiers, he has played a prominent part in crisis meetings.

Söder began his latest tenure as state premier in April 2018, following his reelection, with a hymn to his home state: "Bavaria is seeing golden times. Bavaria is strong. Bavaria will grow. Bavaria is solid. Bavaria is safe. Here the world is still in order, and it will stay that way." The subtext of that speech was the CSU's age-old message: Bavaria is fine as long as the CSU is fine.

A political all-rounder

But Söder's rise to the top was a long struggle that has seen delays, patience, haggling, and probably a fair bit of skullduggery and backroom dealing.



Horst Seehofer and Markus Söder were bitter rivals for many years

Markus Söder spent a long time as a regional wannabe. After all, he was made CSU party leader as early as 2003, a post he held for four years. But there was little doubt: he was aiming for the top. Like Franz-Josef Strauss before him, he embodied the drive, the dynamism, and the pride that many Bavarians believe is their hallmark.

Yet it took him another 11 long years before he was strong enough to overtake his predecessor Horst Seehofer — currently Germany's interior minister — to become Bavarian state premier. The rivalry between the two was bitter — and on occasion, simply out of control. Söder, CSU general secretary as long ago as 2003 to 2007, never made a secret of his sense of a higher calling.

After 2007, he took on a string of posts in the Bavarian Cabinet: minister for federal and European affairs, minister for environment and health, minister of finance, development, and Heimat - that untranslatable patriotic German word whose closest equivalent is homeland. It was only in March 2018 that he finally took over from his longtime rival Horst Seehofer, the current federal interior minister, as head of the Bavarian government.



As a youngster, Söder was an admirer of Franz Josef Strauss.

Ambition and patience

Ironically, although the 54-year-old highlights his loyalty and dedication to Bavaria in almost every statement, he is in fact something of an outsider. He hails from a pocket of Bavaria called Franconia, where people fly their own flags, sing their own songs, and worship their own football team.

Söder might have been Bavarian premier since 2018, but he is quick to point out that he was not born in the opulent state capital Munich, but rather in the historic city of Nuremberg, the capital of Franconia. Add to that: Söder is also a Protestant in a Bavaria that insists fiercely on its Catholic identity. And it goes without saying that the football team he supports so feverishly is not Bayern Munich, but 1.FC Nürnberg.

As a youngster, Söder was not just a fan of his local football team, but also an admirer of the man who more than any other personified post-World War II Bavaria: Franz Josef Strauss. The mercurial, compelling and sometimes authoritarian Strauss led the CSU party — the Bavarian conservatives — for nearly three decades, during which he also served as a cabinet minister in Bonn and chief minister in Bavaria. The young Markus Söder was fascinated by Strauss — not least by his legendary rhetorical wizardry — and hung a picture of the fiery rabble-rouser above his bed.



For a carnival event in 2016 Markus Söder chose to dress up as Bavaria's King Ludwig II

Representing both the traditional and the modern

Söder has also been able to encompass the whole spectrum from the traditional to the modern. “We want to be modern but stay Bavarian,” he said in his first government declaration in April 2018. “We will manage the future and care for the problems of every individual. Do and care — about the broad strokes and the small worries: that’s our philosophy.” But since the Bavarian state election in October 2018, which brought a historically poor 36.7% for the CSU, he has had to share his government with conservative rivals, the Freie Wähler (Free Voters).

Yet he quickly became a strong partner for Merkel, ending the days when the Seehofer-led CSU occasionally appeared to act as the strongest opposition party to their CDU partners. Söder led the center-right attacks on the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), opposing both left and right-wing extremists.



Markus Söder outperformed Armin Laschet in opinion polls

As the coronavirus crisis began, it was Söder who rose to be among the most popular politicians in Germany. His quick, clear declarations — from closing schools to stopping professional football — left other state premiers trailing

behind him, particularly Armin Laschet, leader of Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, who eventually beat him to be the conservative bloc's candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor.

And today? "His only real political goal was to become chief minister of Bavaria. Well, he achieved that," Munich journalist Roman Deininger tells DW.

The fact remains: Becoming the conservative candidate to replace Angela Merkel in September's national election is one thing; however, winning that election is quite another. And, as observers have continually cautioned: this is an election where there is a lot to lose.

This article has been translated from German and was updated since its first publication.

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