

5.3.1 HANDOUT

GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN GERMANY

The most important German political institutions are:

- the Bundestag – The lower house of the federal parliament
- the Bundesrat – The upper house of the German parliament whose members represent the sixteen federal states
- the Bundesregierung – The federal administration, consisting of the Chancellor and her cabinet, usually elected from the Bundestag
- the Bundespräsident – The head of state, (the Federal President) representing Germany as a whole – aloof from actual politics or the running of the government.

The Bundestag

The Bundestag is elected by the people every four years. The Bundespräsident nominates a candidate for the position of Chancellor, who is then elected by the Bundestag (always the head of the ruling party or coalition). Any representative in the Bundestag or Bundesrat, or (as is most often the case) the Bundesregierung (executive branch or administration) may propose legislation, which is then debated in the Bundestag (first and second reading). Most of the real work of reviewing and discussing legislation is done in the standing committees (consisting of 13–33 members from different parties). When a vote is taken in the full session of the Bundestag, each member votes according to his/her conscience. Legislation that affects the federal states must be approved also by the Bundesrat. The President of the Bundestag ranks second in the hierarchy after the Bundespräsident.

The Bundesrat

The Bundesrat is the upper chamber of the parliament. It represents the federal states. Its membership is not elected by direct national vote, but delegated by the state governments. Depending on its population, each state sends three to six representatives to the Bundesrat. The Bundesrat consists of 69 members. The president of the Bundesrat, who acts as the federal president's deputy, is one of the prime ministers of the federal states (or the mayors of the city-states of Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen), who serves in this capacity in rotation, holding the office for one year. Therefore, the prime minister of any one state becomes President of the Bundesrat once every 16 years. The Bundesrat has an important function in the legislative process. The Bundesrat's consent is required for constitutional amendments and for federal legislation which directly affects state affairs. On other issues, the Bundesrat may enter an objection to a law passed by the Bundestag, but its objection may be overridden by a majority of Bundestag members. If the Bundestag and the Bundesrat fail to agree, the Joint Committee – which consists of members of both houses – is asked to consider the matter. In most cases this committee has managed to work out a compromise. In case no compromise is reached, the legislation is set aside. The balance of political forces in the Bundesrat changes if the majority party in a federal state loses the next state election. Therefore the case can arise where the majority party in the Bundestag and the Bundesrat are different. The President of the Bundesrat stands in for the Federal President when he is absent.

The Bundespräsident

The Federal President is the head of state. He represents Germany in international affairs, concluding treaties with other countries and receiving the credentials of foreign ambassadors and envoys, and cultivating the image of Germany in the rest of the world. He formally appoints and dismisses federal civil servants, federal judges, and officers of the federal Armed Forces. His freedom of decision is limited since his directives and orders require the countersignature of the Federal Chancellor or the appropriate Federal Minister. The political powers of the Federal President are described in the Basic Law (constitution). The idea of the drafters of the Basic Law was to have a head of state with severely limited powers, to avoid the mistakes of the past. The Federal President has no direct influence on other constitutional bodies. He remains apart from party politics. A law comes into effect when it is signed by the Federal President. The Federal President is not directly elected by the people. He is elected by a majority vote of a special assembly called the Bundesversammlung, which meets every five years just for this purpose and consists of the members of the Bundestag and an equal number of representatives of the state legislatures. The Federal President serves for five years.

The Bundesregierung

The German Federal Government, the “Cabinet”, is made up of the Federal Chancellor and the Federal Ministers. The Chancellor presides over the Federal Cabinet. She selects the ministers and makes proposals that are binding on the Federal President for their appointment or dismissal. The Chancellor also decides the number of ministers and their portfolios. She lays down the government policy guidelines. In accordance with these guidelines the Federal Ministers manage their portfolios independently and on their own responsibility. In the course of day-to-day politics, the Chancellor must also have regard for agreements with partners in the government coalition. Not without reason is Germany’s system of government termed a “chancellorship democracy.” The Federal Chancellor is the only cabinet member elected by parliament, and she alone is answerable to it.

German Political Parties:

CDU/CSU

The CDU (Christian Democratic Union) was founded in 1945 and is Germany’s main conservative party as well as the largest. The CDU is rooted from the Center Party, a Catholic political party founded in 1870. In October of 1990 the West German CDU and the East German CDU merged. The CDU has approximately 485,000 members. The CDU does not exist in the state of Bavaria. Its sister party, with which it is allied, is called the CSU (Christian Social Union) and is the only state party. In the Bundestag the two sister parties form one joint parliamentary CDU/CSU block.

SPD

The SPD (Social Democratic Party) is one of the two major contemporary parties in Germany. The tradition of the SPD goes back to the 19th century (founded 1875) and was one of the first Marxist-influenced parties in the world. The SPD is a re-creation of the former mainly labor-oriented party of the same name which the Hitler regime outlawed in 1933, and traditionally represents the interests of the working class. In September of 1990 the east and west branches of the party merged. In 2012 the SPD in Germany had approximately 485,000 members.

FDP

The FDP (Free Democratic Party) was founded in 1948 and is a pro-business party that promotes free market economy, civil liberties, human rights and individual liberty. It has served as a junior partner in coalitions with both the strong CDU/CSU and SPD and has been in the federal government longer than any other political party. As of 2011, the FDP party, often referred to as the Liberals (or Libertarians on the US political scale), had approximately 63,000 members.

Die Grünen

Die Grünen (The Green Party) was formed when Bündnis 90, an eastern German grassroots movement, merged with The Greens, a western German party. The Greens evolved from citizens’ initiatives and the environmental movement; they formally established themselves as a party in 1980. The Greens were formed out of pacifism and environmental activism and while in government with the SPD, pushed through nuclear power phase-out and enacted laws easing immigration and same-sex marriage. As of 2012, the Green party had approximately 60,000 members.

Die Linke

Die Linke (The Left Party) is the result of a merger in 2007 of the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism- founded in February 1990 in East Berlin, as the successor to East Germany’s Party of Socialist Unity (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, SED) and WASG, a group of trade unionists. As a democratic socialist political party, The Left (Die Linke) is the most left-wing party of the five represented in the Bundestag. As of 2011, the Left Party had approximately 70,000 members.

Sources:

Der Spiegel. (2009). A Quick Guide to Germany’s Political Parties. Retrieved September 2012 from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/where-do-they-stand-a-quick-guide-to-germany-s-political-parties-a-651388.html>

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