

Topic 4 Political Symbols of Germany

Lesson 1 What is the Basic Law of Germany?

Lesson Objective

The student will analyze and compare major ideas in both the Constitution of the United States and the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Materials and Resources

- Handout 7 “Preambles”
- Worksheet 16 “Comparing Preambles”

Strategies

Begin the lesson by explaining the purpose of a constitution to students. Most countries have a constitution in which the basic rules for citizens living together are written down. The Federal Republic of Germany has had no constitution since 1949, but rather a “Basic Law.” The choice of the term “Basic Law” was intended in 1949 to make clear that the “Basic Law” was valid for the Federal Republic of Germany and that a constitution for a reunified Germany would have to be worked out in the future.

The “Basic Law” was not ratified by a vote of the people, but rather by a vote of representatives in the parliaments of the federal states that had been formed in the Western occupation zones and the Parliamentary Council elected by the state parliaments. It took effect on May 23, 1949.

In the forty years that followed, the Basic Law proved to be a solid foundation for democracy. Since the day of the unification of Germany on October 3, 1990 this Basic Law has also been valid for the five

new federal states and eastern Berlin. Germany is a republic with a federal structure in which the federal states share power and responsibilities with the central government. The relationship between the federal government and the state government is spelled out in the Basic Law.

Both the “Basic Law” of Germany and the U.S. Constitution have preambles which set down basic purposes of government. Have students in small groups read the preambles of the two countries in **Handout 7 “Preambles”** and then answer the four questions about both countries in the data retrieval chart in **Worksheet 16 “Comparing Preambles.”** Each group should be given just one worksheet, and remind them that they must all agree with the answers before writing them down. Call on individuals randomly to explain their group’s answers. Then, conclude the activity by having the whole class discuss the last question about the common characteristics of democratic governments.