



GERMAN FEDERAL ELECTIONS

EDUCATION GUIDE

Bertelsmann
FOUNDATION

TOP | TRANSATLANTIC
OUTREACH PROGRAM



The Bertelsmann Foundation (North America), Inc., established in 2008, was created to promote and strengthen the transatlantic relationship. Through research, analysis, forums, and audiovisual and multimedia content, we seek to educate and engage our audience on the most pressing economic, political, and social challenges facing the United States and Europe. We are the U.S. arm of the Germany-based Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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Founded in 2002, the Transatlantic Outreach Program (TOP) is a public/private partnership that provides curriculum and study tour experiences relevant to contemporary Germany for specific multiplier groups in North America, including social studies educators, STEM educators, and workforce development professionals interested in the German apprenticeship model. The partners of the Transatlantic Outreach Program include the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Goethe-Institut, Deutsche Bank AG, and Siemens AG. Find TOP online at www.goethe.de/top and on social media [@topteachgermany](https://twitter.com/topteachgermany).

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FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY



With 83 million people, Germany is the largest democracy in the European Union and one of the largest in the world. Every four years, Germans vote to determine the composition of the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament and Germany's foremost democratic institution. This election

also sets the stage for a new governing coalition, chancellor, and cabinet. Given the complexity of Germany's electoral process, the Bertelsmann Foundation and Transatlantic Outreach Program have created this guide to help provide a better understanding of its ins and outs.

CAPITAL:

BERLIN

STATES:

16

POPULATION:

83,190,556 MILLION

AREA:

**357,022 SQUARE KILOMETERS /
137,847 SQUARE MILES**



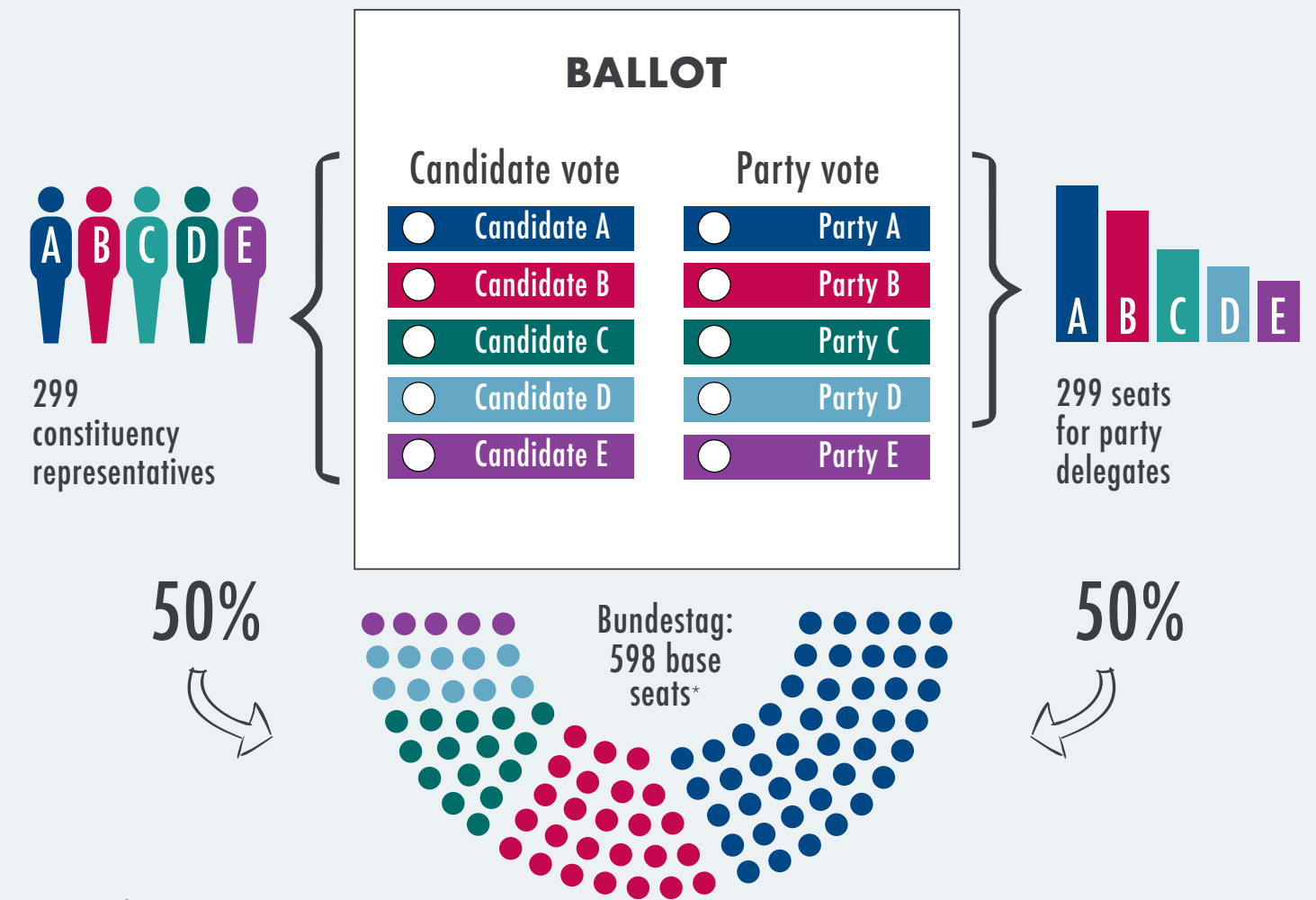
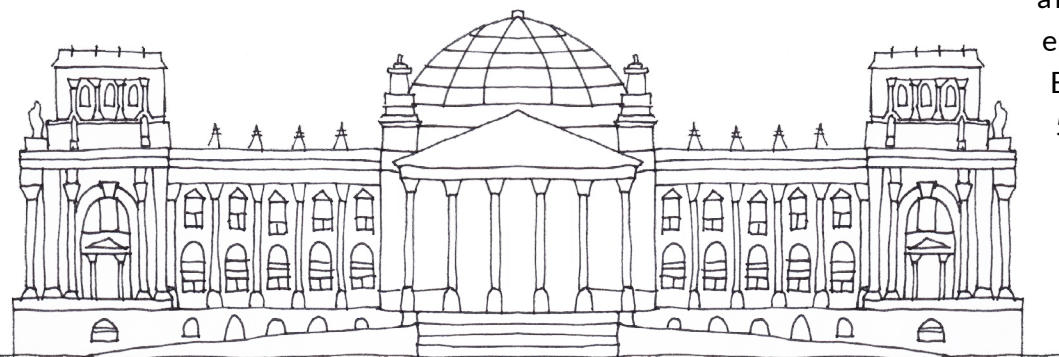
HOW GERMANY'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM WORKS

When Germans go to the ballot box for a parliamentary election, they cast two votes. The first (Erststimme) is for a candidate from their respective district and the second (Zweitstimme) is for a political party. These two votes impact the composition of the Bundestag, with a base of 598 seats. The first vote determines who will represent the 299 proportional voting districts from the North Sea to the Alps and from the Black Forest to Berlin. These districts are formed by an independent review of the latest census — to avoid partisan gerrymandering, or redistricting to favor one party, which is common in the United States and often suppresses voter participation.

The first vote is a first-past-the-post process, similar to the United States, meaning the candidate who receives the most votes

wins the seat. The second vote, based on proportional representation, determines the overall percentage of seats a party receives in the Bundestag. Interestingly, the second vote arguably matters more. A party must clear a 5 percent hurdle or win at least three constituencies to enter parliament. The number of seats a party gets is based on the percentage of the vote it receives. If a party wins 30 percent of the vote, it receives 30 percent of the seats. Besides the 299 directly elected representatives, the remaining members of the Bundestag are pulled from lists the political parties assemble before the election. If you are a candidate, the higher the percentage of votes your party receives, the better your chances are that your name will be called up. Ultimately, to make sure that representation is proportional, extra seats, called overhang,

are added at the end, expanding the Bundestag beyond the 598 base. Since 2017, the Bundestag has therefore counted 709 members.



*Source: Deutsche Welle

70% PERCENT

TURNOUT IN THE 2017 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

60,4 MILLION

ELIGIBLE VOTERS IN 2021

31,2 MILLION

WOMEN



29,2 MILLION

MEN



1/3

OF GERMAN ELECTORATE IS

OVER 60 YEARS OLD

LARGEST ELECTORATES BY STATE:

NORTH RHINE-WESTPHALIA, BAVARIA, AND BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG

<https://www.dw.com/en/german-election-process/a-37805756>

GERMANY'S MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES

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GERMANY'S PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY OFFERS A WIDE RANGE OF POLITICAL PARTIES. IN FACT, AROUND 40 PARTIES RECEIVED VOTES IN THE 2017 NATIONAL ELECTION. OVER THE YEARS, MANY PARTIES HAVE COME AND GONE, BUT THIS GUIDE PROVIDES BACKGROUNDS ON THE PARTIES CURRENTLY REPRESENTED IN PARLIAMENT.

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CDU **CSU**  

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister-party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), traditionally work together and represent the center-right of Germany's modern political spectrum. Some of Germany's best-known leaders have come from the CDU, including the country's three longest-serving heads of state, chancellors Konrad Adenauer, Helmut Kohl, and Angela Merkel. CDU and CSU voters tend to be more conservative on economic and civil liberties issues.

SPD

On the center-left of Germany's political spectrum are the Social Democrats (SPD), the country's oldest political party. Historically a champion of workers' rights, the SPD enjoyed major success in the 1960s and '70s, producing some of Germany's most consequential chancellors and policy decisions, like Willy Brandt and his Ostpolitik, which improved relations between East and West Germany during the Cold War.



The Green Party, or simply, the Greens, evolved out of environmentalist, anti-nuclear, and anti-war protest movements in the 1970s. The protest-movement-turned-political party still focuses primarily on combating climate change but has also expanded its platform to become a mainstream center-left party. Its popularity nationwide has increased in recent years, signaling its continued influence on German politics in the future.



The Free Democratic Party (FDP) has been a fixture of postwar German politics. Commonly referred to as the Liberals, the FDP is akin to the Libertarian Party in the United States. Traditionally, it has served as a decisive partner of either the CDU or SPD to form a majority governing coalition. The laissez-faire FDP tends to be center-right, aligning with the CDU on economic issues, but also center-left, aligning with the SPD and the Greens on civil liberties issues.

DIE LINKE.

Die Linke, or Left Party, has its origins in East Germany's former Communist Party. It enjoys especially strong support in the East, where some nostalgia remains for comprehensive "cradle-to-grave" support from the state. While it has never served in a national coalition, Die Linke has featured in state-level governments.



The Alternative for Germany (AfD) catapulted into the national spotlight in the wake of the European migrant crisis in 2015. Its highly controversial populist, far-right, anti-immigration platform has made it a political pariah, traditionally shunned by Germany's other parties. Accordingly, the AfD has never featured in a governing coalition.

HOW TO BUILD A GOVERNING COALITION

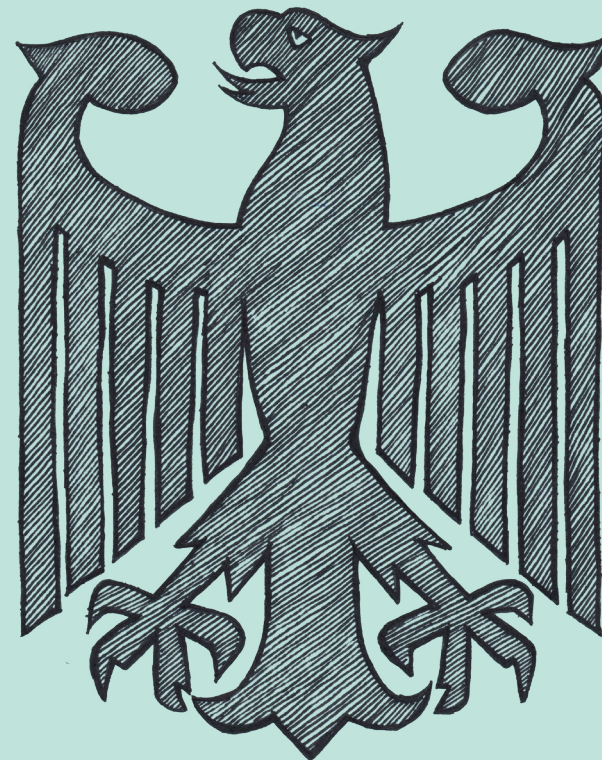


When polls close on election day in Germany, it is nearly certain that no single party will win more than half of the 598 seats. Instead, political parties that were competitors the day before the election enter negotiations to form a coalition and govern the country for the next four years.

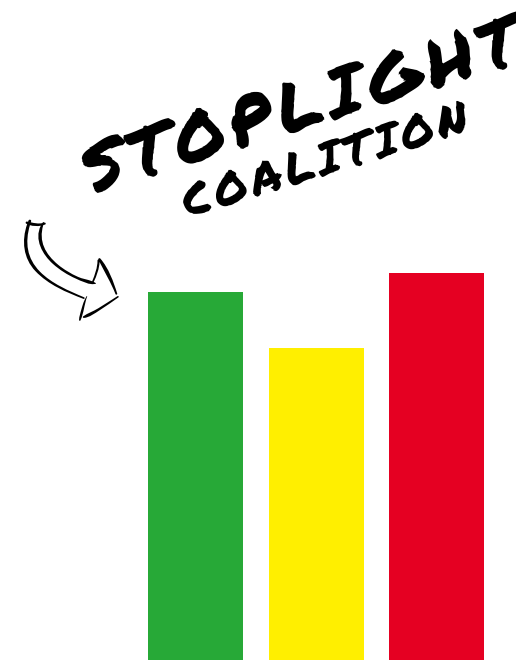
But how do political parties that were competitors one day decide to work together the next? For a start, Germany's system of proportional representation encourages parties to compromise.

After the dust from the election settles, the parties survey the

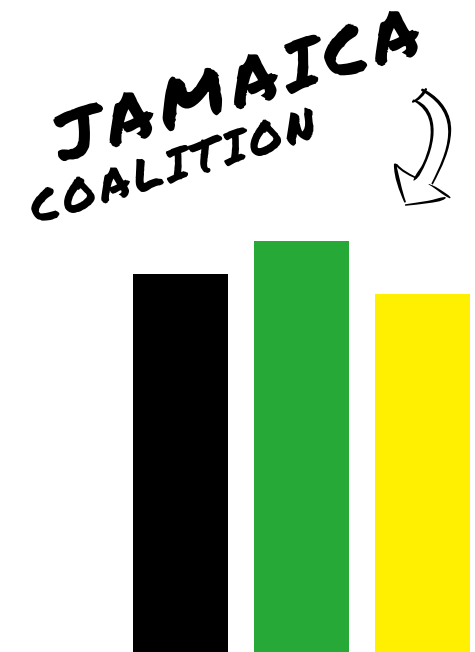
landscape, and do some good, old-fashioned math: Which two or three parties need to come together to control more than 50 percent of the 598 seats in the Bundestag? If Party A receives 26 percent of the vote, Party B receives 23 percent, and Party C receives 11 percent, then they may form the ABC coalition controlling 60 percent of the seats in the Bundestag. Within this coalition, there would be one senior coalition partner, Party A, and two junior coalition partners, B and C. If parties D, E, and F receive 14 percent, 12 percent, and 6 percent of the vote, then Party D becomes the so-called leader of the opposition.



There are many options for coalitions, and there have been a wide range of them at the national and state levels over the past 75 years. The most common configuration is the Grand Coalition between Germany's two main parties, the CDU and SPD. Since Germany's main political parties are associated with specific colors, pundits piece together what coalitions could look like by giving them colorful names like the **"Stoplight Coalition,"** consisting of the parties represented by the colors **green (the Greens), yellow (FDP), and red (SPD).**



Another common coalition is the **"Jamaica" coalition, consisting of the colors of the Jamaican flag: black (CDU/CSU), green (the Greens), and yellow (FDP).** In that example, the red party (SPD) would likely be the lead opposition party in the Bundestag,

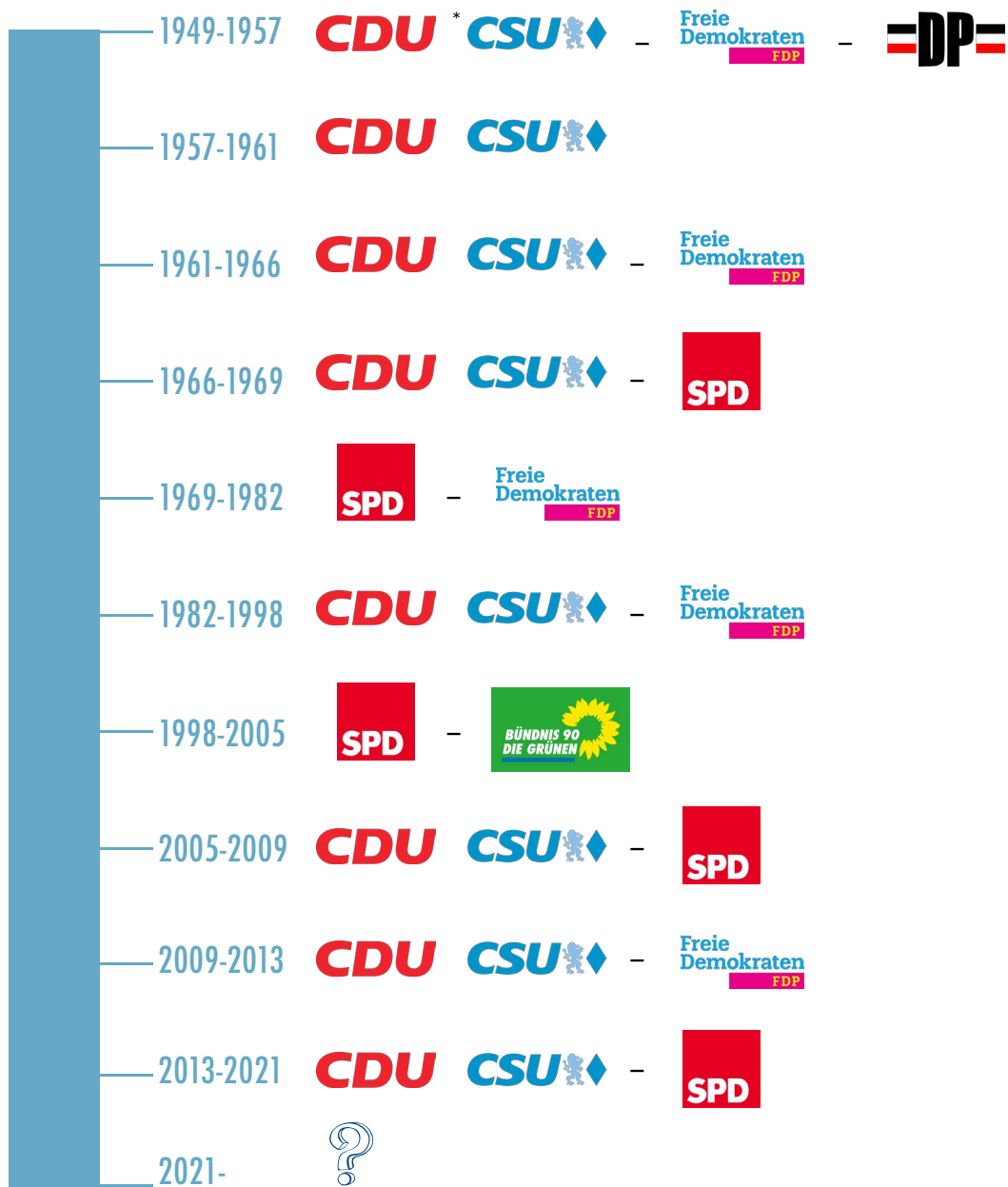


with the purple party (Die Linke or the Left) and the light blue party (the far-right AfD) also playing opposing roles, but not necessarily aligned with each other. There is no formal opposition coalition.

But simple math is hardly enough for political parties to want to join forces. The force of attraction to one another's platforms is even more important. If parties find alignment and are willing to compromise, then they may be on the path to forming a government. If interests diverge between parties, a coalition will likely reach a dead end. For example, there has never been a coalition agreement with the far-right Alternative for Germany. Although mathematically, the AfD could work with another party to form a coalition, its xenophobic platform has kept other parties from cooperating with it.

GOVERNING COALITIONS

SINCE 1945

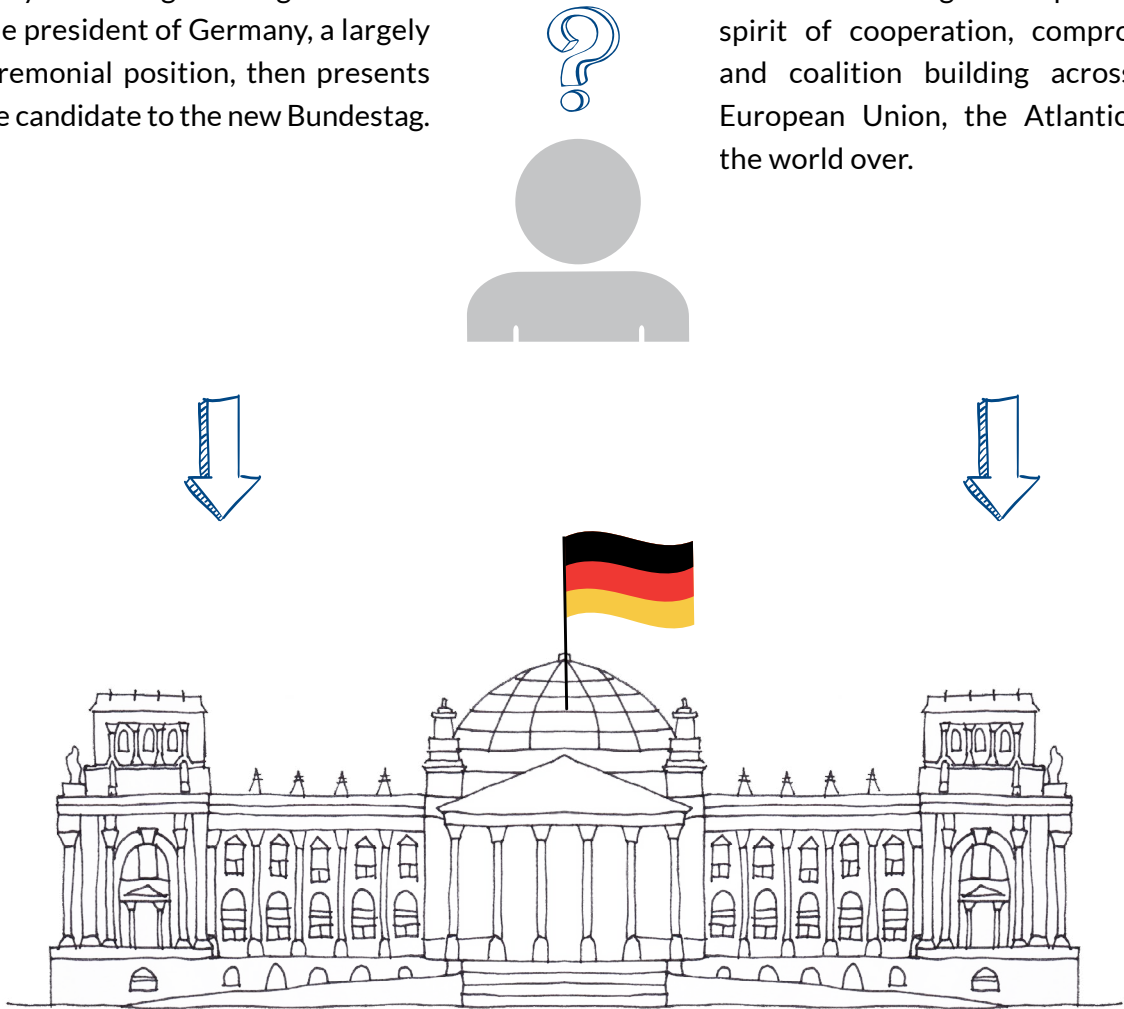


*GERMAN PARTY
<https://www.dw.com/en/a-history-of-germanys-coalition-governments/g-41818483>

CHOOSING A CHANCELLOR AND CABINET

Unlike the president of the United States, Germany's head of state, or chancellor, is not directly elected by the German people. Instead, once a coalition government is formed, the parties collectively decide who will be the new government's chancellor candidate. Typically, the candidate represents the larger party in the governing coalition. The president of Germany, a largely ceremonial position, then presents the candidate to the new Bundestag.

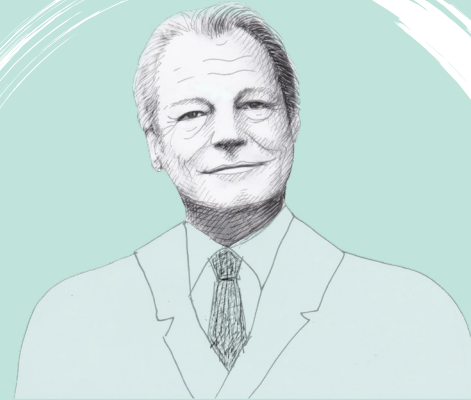
Finally, in a secret ballot, the chancellor is elected via a majority in the Bundestag. Electing the chancellor and then appointing the various Cabinet positions according to the coalition agreement are the final steps in building the federal government. Lights, camera, action: A new government is ready to take the stage and promote a spirit of cooperation, compromise, and coalition building across the European Union, the Atlantic, and the world over.



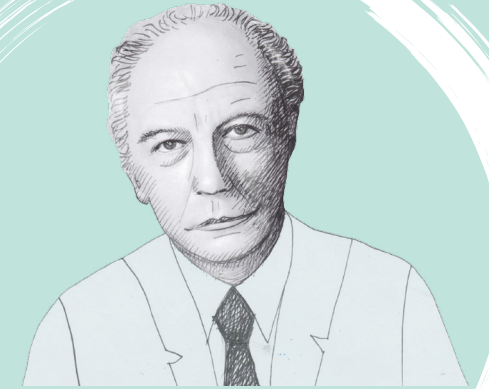
CHANCELLORS SINCE 1945



ANGELA MERKEL
CDU (2005-2021)



WILLY BRANDT
SPD (1969-1974)



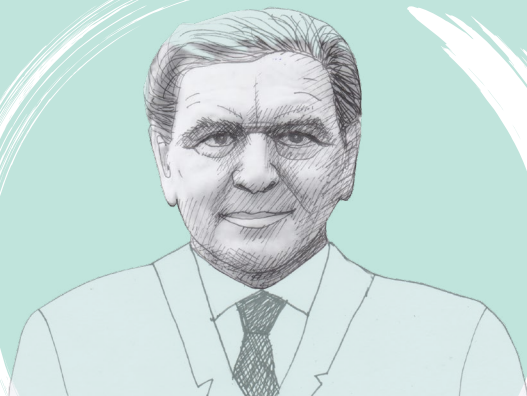
WALTER SCHEEL
SPD (1974)



HELMUT KOHL
CDU (1982-1998)



KURT GEORG KIESINGER
CDU (1966-1969)



GERHARD SCHRÖDER
SPD (1998-2005)



HELMUT SCHMIDT
SPD (1974-1982)



LUDWIG ERHARD
CDU (1963-1966)



KONRAD ADENAUER
CDU (1949-1963)



GLOSSARY

REICHSTAG:

A governmental building based in Berlin that houses the Bundestag.¹

BUNDESTAG:

The lower house of German parliament, representing the nation as a whole and elected by universal suffrage under a system of mixed direct and proportional representation.²

COALITION:

A temporary alliance of distinct parties for joint action in government.³

ERSTSTIMME (FIRST VOTE):

The first vote cast by German voters when voting for a candidate in their constituency in elections to the Bundestag.⁴

ZWEITSTIMME (SECOND VOTE):

The second vote cast by voters for a political party in elections to the Bundestag.⁵

OVERHANG:

Additional seats added to the Bundestag to ensure proportional representation for political parties.⁶

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

The Transatlantic Outreach Program (TOP) offers additional resources for high school social studies classrooms. These lessons align to national content standards for learning and are structured according to the Inquiry Design Model (IDM). More specifically, refer to Lesson 4.2: “The More the Merrier - Germany’s Multiparty Political System”; Lesson 4.3: “The German Electoral System”; Lesson 4.4: “Germany’s Federal Government” at www.goethe.de/germanyinfocus.

And for more on the broader U.S.-German relationship, please visit the Bertelsmann Foundation at www.bfna.org.

¹<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Reichstag-building-Berlin-Germany>

²<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bundestag>

³<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coalition>

⁴<https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/599/erst-und-zweitstimme>

⁵<https://www.bpb.de/mediathek/599/erst-und-zweitstimme>

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqVqzE1utKw&t=74s>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. How is the process of electing Germany’s head of state, the chancellor, different from electing the president of the United States?
 2. Which parties are currently represented in the Bundestag and what are their main characteristics?
 3. Based on the coalitions and party platforms, which parties are most likely to work together and form a coalition?
 4. How do German national elections differ from the elections in the U.S.?
 5. How do German national elections differ from the elections in the United States?
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