

Formative Stages of German Politics. The Contested Rise of Parliamentary Democracy, 1867-1967

Overview

The project aims at an institutionalist explanation of core features of the contemporary German political system. Previous attempts conceive of the German post-war “democratic miracle” as a product of fortunate circumstances that Germany experienced during the 1950s-1970s, namely an economically prospering society under the US security umbrella and with very limited self-sustained involvement beyond its borders. We argue, in contrast, that the establishment of stable democratic rule in this period and its endurance to the present day have their roots in institutional features of the German political system and practices of the elites embedded into them established well before 1945. Starting with the formation of Germany as a nation-state in the 1860s-1870s we inquire into how these features and practices evolved into present-day parliamentary democracy. In this vein, we create an encompassing data-set on the German electoral, party, and parliamentary systems for the Wilhelmine, Weimar and early post-war eras, covering inter alia district-level electoral alliances, candidatures, and electoral results; party policy positions; roll-call votes, and legislative data. The project is funded by the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung.

Duration:

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Research Team:

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Funding:

[Fritz Thyssen Stiftung](#)

Details

Beyond the “Democratic Miracle”

The German post-war political system is often conceived of as a “democratic miracle”: a product of the fortunate circumstances in the 1950s-1970s, when Germany enjoyed an era of an ever more benign security environment within the Western alliance under the US security umbrella, ever deeper political integration into the project of European integration, and only very limited self-sustained involvement beyond its borders. This account is interlinked with another miracle, the economic “Wirtschaftswunder”, with growth rates surpassing pre-war levels by far, bolstered by a

massive expansion of the welfare state. But the roots of the Wirtschaftswunder go much deeper than 1945. And German economic development beyond the oil crises and the end of the Golden age has long been identified as owing much of its successes to the system of production established as early as the late 19th century. Though fortunate, the immediate post-war circumstances then only served as a catalyst for the forces channeled through this system towards prosperity rather than as its cause.

We argue that, as with the Wirtschaftswunder, the establishment and endurance of stable democratic rule in post-war Germany have their roots in rules and practices established well before 1945. The project thus aims at an institutionalist explanation of core features of the contemporary German political system. In this vein, we inquire into what we call the “parliamentarization” of Germany in the period 1867-1967, i.e. the enduring and contested process of political elites establishing parliamentary-party rule over legislation and over the making and breaking of governments. We focus on the three core settings in which this process took place: the predominantly legislative sphere under the Constitutionalist guise of the Empire, 1867/71-1918; the dualism of parliament and president in the Weimar era, 1919-1933; and the formative years of the post-war parliamentary regime, 1948/49-1967.

Towards a Theory of Parliamentarization

The rules in place during these three periods are on the hand pieces of legislation, e.g. the electoral law. They have been subject to intense political and academic scrutiny during the 1950s to 1980s, a prominent example being the “lesson from Weimar” in terms of effects of proportional representation on the fragmentation of the party system in the Weimar era as a mechanical consequence. We however venture beyond treating these rules in isolation from each other and from their behavioral consequences on party elites. Weimar’s hyper-proportional electoral system, for instance, did not only allow entry into parliament to many small parties. It also meant an incentive for individual parliamentarian elected on a large party’s list to split from this party, setting-up a party of their own on a platform tailored to the demands of some segment of society, and then competing with their former party. This would in turn imply a loss of control of party leaders over their backbenchers and result in a trade-off for party leaders between government participation (and compromise with other party leaders to each other’s electoral detriment) and mandate-maximization (and loss of legislative sway). The ensuing practice would then not necessarily foster fragmentation of the party system as such but decrease the capacity of elites to act collectively, and especially so during crises.

It is an explanation of these practices and the way they were changed from one institutional setting to the other that we are interested in. With a view to the electoral system, party elites, as embodied by the prime ministers of the German Länder, for example managed to fence off party-political competition among elites-as-party-representatives from competition for mandates among individual parliamentarians by the introduction of the five-percent hurdle for Federal elections in May 1949. The immediate effect of this rule – no mandates for very small parties – then is again only one part of our explanation. The ensuing practice – backbenchers securing re-election via supporting elite decisions in parliament and elites being able form enduring rather than one-shot

alliances with each other – is a core feature of modern German democracy.

Effective Number of Parties in German General Elections, 1867-1969

A Long-term and Comparative Agenda

Practices like this lend themselves to taking the long-term perspective on parliamentarization that we pursue in this project. Our goal then is a systematic account of the formative stages of contemporary German democracy.

With a view to this goal we have been assembling a data-base under the guise of the Bremen Reichstag Project since 2011. From May 2015, it inter alia covers data on all parliamentarians, candidacies, electoral alliances and electoral results at the federal and district levels from 1867 to 1969, individual-level behaviour in roll call votes in the period 1890-1933, and public and private bills between 1890-1933. This allows, for example, identification of legislative coalitions within each legislative term, and gauging the extent to which these coalitions reflected pre-electoral party alliances. The project aims at broadening and consolidating this data-base.

Shares of Mandates of two legislative coalitions accounting for lack of party discipline,
Light-blue: Established parties and Center Party; Dark-blue: Established parties and Left-liberals

The project systematically employs a quantitative approach to documenting and analyzing legislative behavior. It is the first of this kind to address the German pre- and early post-war parliaments this way, and to do so under a unified theoretical framework. In this vein, we aim at also broadening and fostering our enduring co-operation with scholars engaged in research on the formative stages of contemporary political systems across Europe.

Distribution of Pre-electoral Alliances by Party, General Election 1912

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Publications**Monograph reviewed**

Manow, Philip, 2015: [Mixed rules, mixed strategies - candidates and parties in Germany's electoral system](#), Colchester: ECPR Press

Journal Article reviewed

Schröder, Valentin; Manow, Philip, 2020: [An Intra-party Account of Electoral System Choice](#), in: Political Science Research and Methods, 8 (2), pp. 251 - 267, (forthcoming), 01.04.2020

Article in Edited Volume

Manow, Philip, 2016: [Warum haben sich einige Länder für das relative, andere für das absolute Mehrheitswahlrecht entschieden?](#), in: Kaube, Jürgen; Laakmann, Jörn (Ed.), Das Lexikon der offenen Fragen, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, pp. 51 - 52

Working Paper/Discussion Paper

Schröder, Valentin; Manow, Philip, 2016: [Too Clever by Half? Low-threshold Closed-list Proportional Representation and Party Split in Weimar Germany, 1919-1930](#), CES Open Forum Series/27/2016, Cambridge/Massachusetts: Center for European Studies, Harvard University, [Link](#) (Date: 05.01.2017)

Lecture

Schröder, Valentin, 2018: [Democratization Turning on a Hinge: Fragmented Middle Class and Non-responsible Government in First-wave Democratizing Countries](#), Parteienwettbewerb in der Demokratie. 1. Tagung des Norddeutschen Kolloquiums Sozialwissenschaften, SOCIUM Forschungszentrum Ungleichheit und Sozialpolitik, Universität Bremen, Bremen, Germany, 09.02.2018

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Schröder, Valentin; Manow, Philip, 2018: [An Issue for the Masses: Sponsorship Centralization and Specialization as a Function of Party Organization](#), Grenzen der Demokratie / Frontiers of Democracy. 27. Wissenschaftlicher Kongress der DVPW, Deutsche Vereinigung für Politikwissenschaft (DVPW), Frankfurt/Main, Germany, 25.09.2018, [Link](#) (Date: 02.10.2018)

Schröder, Valentin; Manow, Philip, 2017: [The End is not Nigh: Cabinet Stability and the Role of the Government in German Legislation, 1890-2005](#), 7th Annual General Conference of the EPSA, European Political Science Association (EPSA), Mailand, Italy, 22.06.2017, [Link](#) (Date: 05.09.2017)

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