



Germany — Va-PoReg Country Report

Kailitz, Steffen, et al., 2026: Varieties of Political Regimes (Va-PoReg). Country Report Germany, Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JYEL7U>

01/18/1871 Start Constitutional Monarchy: The German Empire (also referred to as Imperial Germany) was founded on 01/18/1871. On this date, the southern German states, except for Austria, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein, joined the North German Confederation, and the new constitution took effect on 04/16. This constitution established the title of German Emperor for Wilhelm I, who was the King of Prussia from the House of Hohenzollern. Otto von Bismarck, serving as the Minister President of Prussia, assumed the role of Chancellor, becoming the first head of government. The regime initially adopted universal male suffrage, which was considered one of the more progressive electoral systems of that era. According to LIED, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period. LIED classifies political liberties as absent, whereas V-Dem's PCLI already codes them as somewhat present. From 1900 to 1908, as per Polity5's classification, the executive experienced moderate limitations on authority, placing it in the second intermediate category. Since 1909, based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive encountered substantial institutional limitations on power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. The political structure of the German Empire combined elements of authoritarianism with nascent democratic practices, reflecting a constitutional monarchy with pronounced power imbalances (Anderson 2009, Wehler 1983). The Kaiser (Emperor) wielded significant executive authority, particularly in foreign and military affairs. The Chancellor, appointed by the Kaiser, was responsible only to him, not to the Reichstag, the parliament. The Bundesrat, representing the federal states, held considerable legislative power and acted as a conservative counterweight to the Reichstag. The Reichstag itself, elected through universal male suffrage, had limited influence over the executive, though it retained control over the budget and legislation. This system allowed for some elements of representative government while maintaining a strong autocratic core. Political parties operated within the constraints of this system, but the lack of real parliamentary accountability and the dominance of the Prussian elite limited the extent of democratization. The balance of power reflected a hybrid regime that combined modern electoral processes with traditional authoritarian structures, creating a hybrid regime under the overarching dominance of monarchical and aristocratic authority.

08/04/1914 End Constitutional Monarchy/Start Autocratic Monarchy: During World War I, the German Empire shifted sharply from a constitutional system toward autocratic rule. A key turning point was 08/04/1914, the day of the so-called Burgfrieden, when all partisan disputes in the Reichstag were set aside in the name of national unity. This suspension of political debate marked the beginning of the parliament's de facto self-marginalization, as its role was increasingly reduced to merely endorsing war-related expenditures and decrees. With constitutional checks gradually eroded, rapid and centralized decision-making became paramount. By around 1916, military leaders such as Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff assumed decisive roles, directing the state's course with minimal parliamentary oversight. This evolution from a system of shared power to an autocratic, military-dominated regime profoundly transformed German political culture and left enduring marks on the nation's postwar legacy.

11/09/1918 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Democratizing Regime: On this date, Germany experienced a pivotal transformation as Emperor Wilhelm II abdicated his throne, ending over seven decades of

Hohenzollern rule and transitioning the nation from a constitutional monarchy to a republic. We code this regime change event to be a popular uprising, as the demonstrations and strikes by soldiers and workers significantly drove the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the proclamation of the Republic. This event initiated a non-electoral, multiparty transitional regime primarily led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). In the wake of World War I, widespread dissatisfaction with the imperial government fueled the emergence of workers' and soldiers' councils, known as Räte, during the Rätephase or Council Phase. These grassroots councils advocated for democratic reforms and greater representation, organizing approximately 3,500 strikes and protests across Germany. This surge of social unrest highlighted the population's demand for significant political and social changes. The Rat der Volksbeauftragten (Council of People's Representatives) was established on 11/09/1918 as an interim government composed mainly of the SPD and USPD. This coalition aimed to stabilize the nation, address urgent post-war challenges, and steer Germany toward a democratic governmental structure. Unlike the previous imperial system based on hereditary succession, this multiparty approach sought to create a more inclusive and representative governance framework, laying the groundwork for the eventual formation of the Weimar Republic. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, and V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as ambiguous regarding the status of political liberties. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive.

01/19/1919 End Democratizing Regime/Start Electoral Democracy: On this date, federal elections, the first in the newly established Weimar Republic, were held. The elections to the national assembly were free and fair. This was the first nationwide election after the November Revolution of 1918 and aimed to establish a constituent assembly responsible for drafting a new constitution. Notably, this election marked the first time women in Germany were granted the right to vote and stand as candidates. The German National Constitutional Assembly convened for the first time on 02/06/1919, in Weimar, leading to the period known as the Weimar Republic. On 02/11/1919 the National Assembly elected Ebert as the provisional president (Reichspräsident) with votes from the so-called Weimar Coalition, which included the SPD, the Center Party (Zentrum), and the German Democratic Party (DDP) (Büttner 2008: 107). Philipp Scheidemann became prime minister (Kanzler) of this coalition. Scheidemann's government did not last long. In June, he and his cabinet opted to resign rather than sign the Treaty of Versailles (Büttner 2008, Henig 2002, Kolb 2005). Despite the new Constitution, Germany's political situation remained unstable. Bauer remained in office until 03/27/1920, when he resigned following the attempted coup in Berlin – known as the Kapp Putsch – that unfolded between 03/13/1920 and 03/17/1920 (Erger 1967). In 1923, the “unity government”, led by Gustav Stresemann, also collapsed due to the failed Munich coup, also known as Hitlerputsch.¹ Generally, the Weimar Republic was characterized by unstable coalitions and frequent changes in governmental power. The political system lacked legitimacy, which is often attributed to a deficiency of democratic political culture. Also, in the later years of the Weimar Republic, President von Hindenburg accumulated more and more powers, which the constitution reserved for times of crises. As a result, Prime Minister Heinrich Brüning, appointed by von Hindenburg in 1930, became increasingly dependent on the president's favor and the former's cabinet cynically came to be called the “Presidential Cabinet”.² The attempted coups and unstable governments during times of economic decline and a rise of political extremism posed existential threats to the democracy. The Weimar Constitution established universal suffrage in 1919 with a minimum voting age of 20.³ Furthermore, the constitution established an extensive set of civil and political liberties as well as judicial independence.⁴ However, LIED considers political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI classified them as present until 1929 and somewhat present since 1930. The elections were the first to include female suffrage.⁵ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this period LIED categorizes elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as somewhat free, fair and clean. According to the Polity5 indicator, during this period, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. From 1920 to 1931, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as

indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive. For 1932, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. For the following year, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are limited. At the same time, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. In 1932, the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP), led by Adolf Hitler, secured a plurality in competitive elections.

01/30/1933 End Electoral Democracy/Start Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy: On this date, Adolf Hitler (NSDAP) was appointed chancellor by President Paul Hindenburg. This was a result of the election victory the year before. Following a fire that engulfed the Reichstag, the new regime swiftly enacted enabling laws, leading to the dismantling of civil liberties. This move declared a "permanent" state of emergency and shortly thereafter resulted in the prohibition of opposition. The regime promptly initiated the establishment and growth of significant paramilitary organizations such as the Sturmabteilung (SA) and the Schutzstaffel (SS), which carried out an extensive campaign of political repression (Shirer 1960: 267-72, Benz 2006: 16, 20-22, 26, 50-58, Berman 2019: 250, Casey et al. 2020: 7). The Nazi regime was based on the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race and the inferiority of other races, especially Jews. The Nazis believed that the Jews were a threat to Germany and that they needed to be eliminated. The Nazi regime also persecuted other groups, such as Roma, homosexuals, and political opponents. For the Nazi regime both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI state political liberties as absent. According to LIED only executive elections were held in 1933, from 1934 onward no multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. However, for 1933 according to Polity5, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

05/08/1945 End Germany [Right-Wing (Fascist) Autocracy]:

For the time between 05/08/1945 and 10/03/1990 see Germany, West and Germany, East

10/03/1990 Start Liberal Democracy [Continuation Regime Spell of Germany, West, Liberal Democracy]: On this date, Germany was reunified. The East German Länder became part of the Federal Republic of Germany. However, this is not coded as a new regime spell since it was clearly a continuation of the regime spell that started on 08/14/1949 in West Germany.⁶ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Elections since reunification are categorized as competitive by LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as free, fair and clean. The institutional setting mirrors that of West Germany before reunification. Germany remained a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral system consisting of the Bundestag and the Bundesrat. The head of government remains the federal chancellor, elected by the Bundestag. The head of state is the largely ceremonial president. Germany's political landscape is influenced by its totalitarian past, with constitutional protections implemented to prevent authoritarianism. This stability is exemplified by the four consecutive terms served by Chancellors Kohl and Merkel from the Christian Democratic Union Party (CDU). From 1982 to 1998, Helmut Kohl of the CDU served as Chancellor of West Germany. During his 16-year tenure, he oversaw the reunification with the GDR after the fall of the Soviet Union and laid the groundwork for Germany's accession to the EU.⁷ He was followed in office by the SPD politician Gerhard Schröder who served two terms in office as leader of a coalition with the Green Party, although he called snap elections before finishing his second term.⁸ In those snap elections, the CDU regained the chancellorship under Angela Merkel, Germany's first female chancellor. She would then be reelected three times before retiring from politics in 2021.⁹ Although stability has characterized the nation since the mid-20th century, recent years have witnessed growing political tensions, largely driven by a notable influx of asylum seekers and the surging popularity of right-wing populist movements and especially the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).¹⁰ On 09/26/2021 federal elections were held. The coalition government composed of the SPD, the Green Party, and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), led by Olaf Scholz of the SPD as chancellor, took the chancellorship

from the CDU. The elections were deemed free and fair. On 11/06/2024 chancellor Olaf Scholz announced the dismissal of finance minister and FDP party leader Christian Lindner over disputes regarding economic policies. On 12/16/2024 Olaf Scholz called and subsequently lost a vote of confidence, with the result that the Bundestag (parliament) was dissolved on 12/27/2024 and the 2025 federal elections being held roughly six months earlier than initially planned, on 02/23/2025.¹¹ Following the elections CDU/CSU and SPD formed a government coalition and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier officially proposed Friedrich Merz (CDU) for the election as Chancellor on 05/05/2025. The Bundestag (parliament) voted on the matter on 05/06/2025, and Merz failed to reach a majority in the first round, which was the first occurrence of a suggested chancellor not securing the vote in the first round. He reached the required majority in a second vote on the same day, and he and his cabinet were sworn into office.¹² Civil liberties and political rights are generally guaranteed. According to FH, for the assessed regime period, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. Therefore, both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI score a constant presence of political liberties since the reunification. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. The case of the fascist NPD party illustrates the restraint that the constitutional court has exhibited when it comes to the banning of parties. In 2017 the court ruled that although the NPDs program was in violation of the constitution and banning it would therefore be justified, it did not possess the political relevance to actually pose a threat to the constitutional order. Therefore, the court decided not to ban it.¹³ This case amongst others serves to highlight the internal complexities that democracies face in preserving themselves. On the one hand, threats to democracy are approached by revoking their democratic rights, yet any democracy needs to extend those democratic rights wherever possible.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html>, see narratives for version 5.0, Germany_R: 2.
- ² <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html>, see narratives for version 5.0, Germany_R: 3.
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weimar_Constitution#
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1919_German_federal_election
- ⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/German_Federal_Republic_2014?lang=en
- ⁷ <https://www.bundestkanzler.de/bk-de/kanzleramt/bundestkanzler-seit-1949/helmut-kohl>
- ⁸ <https://www.bundestkanzler.de/bk-de/kanzleramt/bundestkanzler-seit-1949/gerhard-schroeder>
- ⁹ <https://www.bundestkanzler.de/bk-de/kanzleramt/bundestkanzler-seit-1949/angela-merkel>
- ¹⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/germany/freedom-world/2023>
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_German_government_crisis
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_German_federal_election#Chancellor_election
- ¹³ <https://www.bmi.bund.de/DE/themen/verfassung/parteienrecht/parteiverbot/parteiverbot-node.html>

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