Western Europe: France and Germany

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France and Germany are at the heart of European politics. They are two of the largest states and economies in Europe, and have been centrally involved in the political developments in Western Europe for at least the last century and a half. They continue to be important states in the European Union and in global politics. For example, the governments of both states have been crucial actors in the attempts to deal with the economic and Eurozone crises in the past decade. Some knowledge and understanding of French and German political institutions and policies is, therefore, essential for students of European and comparative politics.

France and Germany are interesting case studies in a course on comparative politics, as the two countries exhibit both differences and similarities in their post-World War II political developments. For the first 40 years or so of the post-war period, the differences were arguably more visible (for example, in the nature and stability of party systems, the nature and role of the executive branch, territorial state organization, economic policy frameworks, welfare state arrangements, immigration policies, and approaches to European integration). By contrast, in recent times, it appears that similarities in issues such as economic and immigration policy, approaches to European integration and party political developments have become more pronounced. Particularly salient have been the rise of newer and often populist parties (such as the Front National and Macron’s party in France, and the AfD in Germany) and the resulting challenges for ‘mainstream’ parties, and the increasingly central role of the politics of immigration in both countries.

This module will focus on these recent political developments. It will, however, move beyond a sole focus on recent strategies and actions by political actors, and explore the extent to which these developments are rooted in challenges and changes to the post-war political economic foundations of the French and German political systems. More particularly, we will explore how processes of globalisation and European integration, as well as the post-2007 economic crisis have changed the economic policy and welfare state frameworks in both countries and how this may have affected party politics and political stability. The lectures for this module will, therefore, start with an account of the post-war political economic foundations of French and German politics and how these have been challenged in recent years, and then explore how these have informed recent political developments such as the rise of populism.

This module will give students an introduction to some important features of and recent developments in French and German politics (although it, of course, it is not aiming to provide full overviews of the politics of the two countries), and provide them with a better feel for how a comparative focus can help us understand the domestic politics of states.

Background and general reading

Specific readings for the supervision essays will be indicated in the last section of this guide. It is, however, strongly recommended that students do some background reading post-war political developments in Western Europe more broadly, and on the recent political history of France and Germany. This section provides some suggestions for this (the ones indicated with a ‘•’ are
specifically recommended as background reading), as well as some general texts on French and German politics.

**General overviews of post-war European political history**
- Derek W. Urwin, *A political history of Western Europe since 1945*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, 1997). [Solid and useful overview of political development in Western Europe until the 1990s.]

**France**

**Germany**

**Political biographies**
An interesting and enjoyable way of learning about recent French and German political history is to read biographies of some of main political actors. Some interesting biographies are:

**Lectures**
This module has six lectures, which are given in the last six weeks of Michaelmas term. The schedule of the lectures is as follows:
1. Historical background to French and German politics
2. Political economy of France and Germany: main post-war features
3. Political economy of France and Germany: globalisation and European integration
4. Political foundations of the post-war arrangements in France and Germany
5. France and Germany since 2007: economic crisis and increased salience of immigration
6. France and Germany since 2007: increasing political volatility and the rise of populism

Supervisions

Students will do two supervisions for this module. Some students will do these supervisions in the first six weeks or so of Michaelmas term, while others will do one supervision near the end of Michaelmas term and the other early in Lent term. The lecturer will contact the students near the start of Lent term to notify them of the specific arrangements (timing, supervisor, etc.).

The first supervision will focus on some of the recent challenges and changes to the political economic foundations (economic policy and welfare state frameworks) of French and German politics. The second supervision will focus on the main political changes (such as the increasing salience of populist parties and immigration issues) in recent years.

The exact essay questions and full reading lists for both supervision assignments will be added shortly. The list below gives an indication of the readings that will be on the reading lists. Together with the descriptions above and the indicated background readings, this should give students sufficient information at this stage to make an informed choice about their optional modules.

Some relevant readings for the supervision assignments


Peter A. Hall, Governing the economy: the politics of state intervention in Britain and France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Parts I, III, IV.


