Module F – 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 since 2008. 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), the resulting challenges for ‘mainstream’ parties, and the increasingly central role of the politics of immigration in both countries.

This module is organised around a focus on developments over time in the party systems of France and Germany. It will, however, move beyond a narrow focus on parties and the strategies and actions by political actors, and explore the extent to which these developments are rooted in features of, and challenges and changes to, the post-war political and economic foundations of the French and German political systems. We will explore how processes of globalisation and European integration, as well as the post-2007 economic crisis, have affected the French and German states and how this may have affected party politics and political stability. The lectures for this module will start with an account of the post-war political and economic foundations and the party systems in France and Germany, and then explore how these have been challenged and changed in recent years, as exemplified by the rise of populism. At the end of the module, we will look at the current state and the likely future development of the two countries’ party systems.

This module will give students an introduction to some important features of and recent developments in French and German politics (although, 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 materials

Specific readings for the supervision essays are indicated in the last section of this guide. It is, however, strongly recommended that students consult some background materials on 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 (‘•’ indicates those that are specifically recommended), as well as some general texts on French and German politics.

General overviews of post-war European political history

France

Germany

Political biographies
An interesting and enjoyable way of learning about French and German political history is to read biographies of some of the main political actors. Some interesting biographies are:
Documentaries and news reports
Another option is to look at some documentaries and news reports on French, German or European politics. Here are some suggestions for publicly available materials (of varying picture quality) which focus on key aspects of the post-war political history of France and Germany.

On Europe:
- ‘The making and breaking of Europe’ (part 1 and part 2) (Al Jazeera, 2017) [47 mins each part].
- ‘Postwar Europe: how to create the long peace’ (Then & Now, 2018) [13 mins].

On France:
- ‘Portraits of power - De Gaulle’ (1999), part 1 (‘Force of Character’) [23 mins] and part 2 (‘Republican monarch’ [23 mins].
- ‘May 68: when France took a stand’ (France 24, 2018) [12 mins]. (For a longer documentary on this theme with lots of authentic visual material: ‘1968 riots in Paris, French strikes’ (France Documentary, 2014) [39 mins].)
- ‘France’s socialist experiment’ (AP, 1982) [18 mins].
- ‘Veterans: the French in Algeria’ (Al Jazeera, 2010) [23 mins].

On Germany:
- ‘1949 - One year, two Germanies’ (DW, 2019) [42 mins].
- ‘Portraits of power - Adenauer: Germany reborn’ (1999) [23 mins].
- ‘German reunification - a short history’ (DW, 2017) [43 mins].

On the current leaders and politics in Germany and France:
- ‘Angela Merkel: a profile’ (BBC, 2017) [12 mins]. (If you would like to see more in-depth profiles of Merkel, you can look at ‘The making of Merkel’ (BBC, 2013) [59 mins] and ‘Eternal Chancellor’ (DW, 2019) [43 mins].)
- ‘Angela Merkel steps down: what next?’ (BBC, 2018) [15 mins].
- ‘French election explained: Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen go head to head’ (Channel 4, 2017) [22 mins]
- ‘President Macron: populism’s nemesis or catalyst?’ (BBC, 2019) [14 mins].

Lectures

This module consists of 6 lecture. These lectures will be delivered in-person (assuming Covid-related guidelines allow this), but the intention is to also record them and make them available on the POL4 Moodle site.

The topics of the lectures are as follows:

1. Introduction and historical background
2. Post-war party systems in France and Germany in comparative perspective
3. Explaining variation in party system developments in France and Germany
4. Changes in the political contexts and party systems in France and Germany in recent decades
5. Right-wing populist parties in France and Germany
6. The current state of French and German party systems
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 early in Michaelmas term to notify them of the specific arrangements (timing, supervisor, etc.).

The first supervision focuses on broad patterns in the party systems in the post-war party systems of France and Germany and how these relate to the post-war state in both countries. The second supervision focuses on similarities and differences in the factors that have induced the rise of populist political actors and parties in France and Germany in recent years.

The exact essay questions and full reading lists for both supervision assignments are indicated below. When preparing their supervision essays, students are expected to read the indicated Core readings and also sample some of the suggested Supplementary readings according to their specific interests. These supplementary readings, which are organised in particular categories (French party system, broader French context, German party system, broader German context, and comparative or more general readings on party systems and the broader context), should also be useful when preparing for the exam. [Note that there is a considerable overlap between some of the readings in each category, so there is certainly no expectation or need to read many of them.] For the second supervision topic, which touches on more recent developments, students should also feel free to look themselves for additional resources for their essay.

Supervision 1

Essay question: Why has the party system generally been more stable in Germany than in France in the post-war period?

Core readings:

Herbert Kitschelt and Wolfgang Streeck, “From stability to stagnation: Germany at the beginning of the twenty-first century,” West European Politics 26, 4 (2003): 1-34 (only pages 1-10 relevant!).

Supplementary readings:

Party system in France


**Broader context in France**


**Party system in Germany**

- Michelle Hale Williams, “Kirchheimer revisited: party polarisation, party convergence, or party decline in the German party system,” *German Politics* 17, 2 (2008): 105-123.

**Broader context in Germany**


**Comparative and/or more general readings on party systems and context**


**Supervision 2**

**Essay question:** To what extent are the factors behind the recent rise of populist parties in France and Germany similar?

**Core readings:**


**Supplementary readings:**

**Party system in France**


**Broader context in France**

Susan Milner, “Socio-economic policy and governance: the difficult and contested politics of reform,” and Emilie Tran, “The yellow vests movement: causes, consequences and...
significance,” in Helen Drake, Alistair Cole, Sophie Meunier and Vincent Tiberj (eds), Developments in French Politics 6 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).


Party system in Germany


Liam Byrne, “How the SPD lost the future: the party’s crisis as a loss of future-imagining,” German Politics (forthcoming, 2020) (available online).

Broader context in Germany


Comparative and/or more general readings on party systems and context

Erik Jones et al, eds., *Developments in European politics 2* (London: Palgrave, 2011), chapters by Paul Webb (on political parties), Erik Jones (on the effects of globalisation), Bob Hancké (on transformation to varieties of European capitalism), Elisabetta Gualmini and Martin Rhodes (on welfare states), and Joppke (on immigration policy).


Mock Exam Questions

1. To what extent have the post-war party systems of France and Germany been shaped by different forces?

2. To what extent can social changes explain the rise of populist parties in France and Germany?