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

This module will be 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 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 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 how the French and German responses to the Covid-pandemic illustrate features of the two countries’ political 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

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 French and German political history is to read biographies of some of the main political actors. Some interesting biographies are:
Julian Jackson, *A certain idea of France: the life of Charles de Gaulle* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), or


**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](https://www.aljazeera.com)) (Al Jazeera, 2017) [47 mins each part].
- ‘Postwar Europe: how to create the long peace’ (Then & Now, 2018) [13 mins].

On France:
- ‘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) [39mins].)
- ‘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 hours of lectures, divided up in 12 lectures of 25-30 minutes each. These lectures will be recorded and made available on the POL4 Moodle site at the start of Michaelmas term. As they are pre-recorded, it is obviously not possible to ask questions during the lectures; however, you can ask any questions you have on the lectures in the supervisions. Some of the lectures will have suggestions for materials students could look at to complement the lecture content.

The topics of the lectures are as follows:
1. Introduction: focus of the module
2. Background: historical foundations and features of the post-war state in France and Germany
3. Background: key differences and similarities between the two cases
4. Post-war party systems in France and Germany: features and illustrations
5. Post-war party systems in France and Germany: explanations
6. Political economic context: characteristics and challenges in France and Germany
7. Political economic context: attempted reforms and changes in France and Germany
8. Party system volatility in France and Germany: indications and causes
9. The rise of populist parties in France and Germany
10. Explanations for and implications of the rise of populist parties in France and Germany
11. Recent developments: French and German responses to the Covid-19 pandemic
12. Conclusions: the state of the party systems in France and Germany

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 will focus 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 and political economy in both countries. The second supervision will focus 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. 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:


*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**


**Party system in Germany**


Thorsten Faas and Tristan Klingelhöfer, “The more things change, the more they stay the same? The German federal election of 2017 and its consequences,” *West European Politics* 42, 4 (2019): 914-926.

Liam Byrne, “How the SPD lost the future: the party’s crisis as a loss of future-imaging,” *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?