

Preface

German politics today offers an overview of the principal features of the German political system. The sequence of chapters emphasises four important characteristics of Germany's political system: the way in which history, especially twentieth-century history, has shaped the post-Second World War political system; the stability and adaptability of that system, qualities which were demonstrated by responses to the challenges of reunification; the unusual importance within the political system of legal rules, many of which are derived from the Basic Law (the constitution of the Federal Republic); and the significance of Germany's association with European integration.

The first chapter surveys the historical background of the present-day political system. More than any other western European polity, that of the Federal Republic has been shaped by what has happened in the past. In particular, the Basic Law designed in 1948–49 was a direct response to the failure of Germany's first experiment with democracy: the regime of the Weimar Republic (between 1919 and 1933), and to the horrors and disasters brought upon Germany, and upon the rest of Europe, by the totalitarian Nazi regime (1933–45) which supplanted the Weimar Republic. But history has affected present-day politics in other ways. Questions concerning the boundaries of the German state (the 'German question') and Germany's proper relations with its neighbours to the east and to the west have been themes recurring through Germany's political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This chapter also reviews the development of the political system in the first forty years of its existence, and looks at the 'other Germany': the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its significance for the Federal Republic in the period to 1989.

Until 1988, that first chapter would have sufficed as historical context. In the late 1980s, the post-war division of Germany seemed to be firmly entrenched as part of the 'German question'. A few sentences about the extreme unlikelihood of German reunification occurring in the foreseeable future, and a

reference to how the constitutional requirement that reunification remain an ultimate goal for the Federal Republic was incongruent with political reality, as some German politicians themselves were claiming in the 1980s: that would have been sufficient treatment of the division of Germany in an introduction to a textbook on the West German political system.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 changed everything. It showed that the future of divided Germany was not predictable. The second chapter therefore provides a brief summary of the momentous events in the GDR from May 1989 (when controversial local elections took place in the GDR, and Hungary began to dismantle its section of the 'iron curtain': the border with Austria), through what some commentators have called the 'revolution' in the GDR, which certainly included the downfall of the communist regime there, to the processes which resulted in German reunification on 3 October 1990. It also examines the problems of adaptation which reunification had caused: social, economic and psychological adaptation, but of course political adaptation also. Nothing like this has been seen in recent times: the merging of two states within one nation after forty or more years of profound separation.

Chapter 3 examines in some detail the principal influences which have shaped the present-day political system. These include the Basic Law itself and the particular pattern of political institutions to which it gave birth; the Constitutional Court, as responsible both for the interpretation of the Basic Law and for adjudication of controversies concerning its provisions; and a variety of other influences, ranging from the social market economy to political culture, which have shaped and constrained the development of the political system of the Federal Republic.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the electoral system and electoral behaviour of the Federal Republic, and the features of what is sometimes referred to as the 'party state'. The Federal Republic is more than just a 'party state', though; it is very much a *federal* republic, and this federal element, while creating an additional set of opportunities for democratic politics, also can often be of considerable importance in political controversies and conflicts which arise. So Chapter 6 reviews the structure, operation and political effects of Germany's particular version of federalism.

In Chapters 7 and 8 the core institutions of government are analysed. The federal president is head of state and moral leader of the nation, a moral leadership the more efficacious because the president is denied partisan political powers. The office of chancellor is not only the most important position in the political system; it is also the most stable. By 2014, at the time of writing this book, there have only been eight chancellors in the first sixty-five years of the Federal Republic (including the first female chancellor). By comparison, the United Kingdom has had thirteen prime ministers since 1945, and the USA twelve presidents since the death of Roosevelt in 1945. The sources of the chancellor's political power, his or her relationship with coalition partners, with the cabinet ministers and with the machinery of government, together

with the process of policymaking, constitute the subject-matter of Chapter 7. The structure and powers of the two legislative chambers, the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, the legislative process, and the role of the elected representative are examined in Chapter 8.

Where there is policymaking, and consequently the power to affect – for better or worse, for richer or poorer – the fate of individuals, groups, business enterprises, trade unions or other associations, one can expect to find interest groups at work. The Federal Republic is no exception. In Chapter 9 the role of interest groups is examined, together with their opportunities to affect policy, the political strategies they adopt, and the structure of the more significant interest groups.

Chancellor Kohl, at the time of reunification, promised a ‘European Germany’. Chancellor Adenauer, the first chancellor of the Federal Republic, took early steps to ensure that the Federal Republic became embedded in a network of institutions and relationships that linked West Germany to its West European neighbours, especially in the fields of the economy and military security. Chapter 10 charts the path taken by West Germany to develop links to ‘Europe’ over the years, and examines the ways in which membership of what has become the European Union impinges upon the domestic politics of the Federal Republic.

The Weimar Republic was a fragile democracy. The Bonn Republic – in its early years especially – was in many ways a special, one might almost say an ‘abnormal’, democracy. Today the questions can be asked (questions to which an affirmative answer is anticipated): Is the Germany of the Berlin Republic now a ‘normal’ democracy? Has it overcome its past? Has it coped more or less successfully with the special challenges of reunification? The concluding chapter looks at the measures Germany can take in defence of its democratic arrangements (‘combative democracy’); the challenges which the polity has faced from extremism and prejudice; the effects of ‘new politics’ on Germany’s democracy; and Germany’s changing role in the international system. In this way a balance sheet – provisional, as all such assessments of a country’s politics must be – can be attempted, in terms of the qualities of democracy, efficiency and stability of the political system of Germany today.

Deliberately, for reasons of intellectual coherence and restrictions of space, policy sectors such as the economy, social services, immigration or foreign affairs are not treated in this book in any detail. To have done so would have meant deciding upon a selection of policy areas to cover: the environment? industrial policy? labour relations? And policy areas can swiftly go in or out of fashion; new issues arise, old issues lose their saliency, so any treatment in 2014 of, say, Germany’s defence policy or its policy concerning energy supply, immigration or terrorism, might in four or five years’ time have been overtaken by events.

For readers interested in such policy issues, or indeed wishing to study in more depth aspects of Germany’s modern political history, the Constitutional

Court, electoral behaviour or coalition strategies, many monographs and articles in academic journals are available, and some of the more accessible of these are listed at the end of each chapter.

Textbooks necessarily have to be divided into chapters according to some logical principle. Politics itself is not so amenable to classification and segmentation. To understand what is going on in an election campaign in Germany, to appreciate why certain policy decisions are taken, to comprehend the sensitivity of sections of the German public to certain social or economic developments (such as immigration, the possible accession of Turkey to the European Union, or the economic crises affecting the Eurozone), it may well be necessary for the reader to draw upon material from several of the chapters in this book. Anyway, no textbook can provide all the information necessary for a thorough understanding of day-to-day politics in Germany – or elsewhere. The reader is strongly advised to use three sets of resources to supplement this textbook. History books provide the means to appreciate the historical context in which current political events are occurring. A map of Europe will remind the reader of Germany's central location in Europe, and of how many neighbours (and so how many potential problems with those neighbours) Germany possesses: Switzerland and Denmark, Belgium and Austria, Luxembourg and the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, France and Poland. Newspapers, magazines, the internet and the broadcast media will provide up-dates on how politics is developing in the Federal Republic.

Whatever else might be said about Germany, its politics in the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first century generally have been extremely interesting, and often have been fateful for itself and for other countries in Europe. To understand its politics, it is necessary to know about its past, its political system and its role in Europe. It is hoped that this book will provide the basis for such an appreciation of German politics today. Since the first edition was completed, Germany has experienced the formation of a second and now a third 'grand coalition', the election of a female chancellor, a degree of reform, long overdue, of the federal system, and the formation both of a relatively strong new party: the Left party, and a right-wing party advocating Germany's exit from the euro currency union: the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has gained seats in the European Parliament and several Land legislatures. These developments, and changes in aspects of politics such as trade union membership, the failure in 2013 of the Free Democratic Party (FDP) to retain Bundestag representation, and membership of extremist organisations have been treated in this new edition.

This book, in its two previous editions and in this revised edition, owes much to the many friends and colleagues in Germany who have provided information, advice and hospitality over many years. I am also grateful to the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) for their generosity and excellent arrangements at the time of the Bundestag election observation visits organised for the International Association for the Study of German Politics.

Chapters of this edition have benefited from the scrutiny and helpful suggestions of colleagues in the United Kingdom: Simon Bulmer, Dan Hough and Joanna McKay, for which I am in their debt. No responsibility rests with them for any flaws in this book, but I am very grateful for their kind and wise advice. I also benefited from the advice of anonymous referees when presenting the proposal for this revised edition.

Geoffrey K. Roberts
Manchester, November 2014