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Where will I vote?

How being a citizen of two different democracies
will influence my future



(<https://www.areweeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/rickys-article-copy.png>)

I was born to a German father and American mother and have held two citizenships since birth. St. Louis, Missouri, where I grew up, has a long history of German immigration dating back to the mid-1800s. English and German echoed throughout the home, as my parents attempted to teach my siblings and I both languages. *Muzzy in Gondoland*, a BBC language learning cartoon dubbed in many languages—including German—often played on the television, and always on roadtrips.

My first exposure to Europe, and Germany, was at the age of four, where I met the other half of my family for the first time. They went from people I'd imagined to real people I had met. At just four years old, I realised there were big differences in how Germans live their everyday lives compared to Americans.

My dad described Germany as a country where you could drive as fast as you wanted on the Autobahn, but also one where riding a bike into town was a possibility—no car needed. The high level of organisation—down to the types of

trash bins available—amazed me. The direct way that people talked felt natural to me. My favourite discovery was the idea of *Stoßlüften*, or the importance of introducing fresh air inside for wellness, even in the dead of winter. These experiences slowly led me to learn more about the German language and culture, although my progress would linger for many years before being given the opportunity to grow.

Not so harmonious

German language courses didn't begin until age 14 at my school, but I was eager to master the language despite the wait. At my school, these classes sought to teach the language, culture, and how life in German-speaking countries differed from the US, including a taste of politics.

Several weeks of learning about the culture and government setup culminated in a lesson about the German multi-party system and what each one stood for. The previous lessons had been taught through rose-tinted glasses, with Germany painted as a multicultural, accepting and environmentally conscious country.

Our teacher closed the door later in that lesson, and told us that we were going to talk about something serious and potentially controversial. I turned to my friends, and we shared confused glances. She wanted to mention the scary fact that some far-right parties were growing in Germany, with increasing support of anti-immigration policies and the removal of environmental and social policies. My perception of Germany changed from a harmonious country, to one with remnants of Nazi ideology that were beginning to gain wider traction. The party she primarily referred to was Alternative für Deutschland.

Shortened to AfD, the party stands for anti-immigration policies—especially after the mid-2010s refugee housing crisis—and opposes membership to the European Union. In 2019, my view of the country as a dreamland in comparison to the US was further chipped at when I went to Stuttgart as part of a high school exchange programme. Temporary asylum housing had opened next to our school. I asked my fellow students about it and noticed that the sentiment surrounding it was rather mixed. Some students scoffed at the fact the asylum seekers were in Germany and said that their proximity to the school posed a threat, while others accepted their presence and the fact Germany had taken in millions of asylum seekers.

Just a year later, the 2020 US presidential election took place, which mobilised extremist groups in the country, culminating in the 6 January 2021 Insurrection. The pandemic also took its toll on both countries. There were protests against masks and lockdown measures around the world, including in Germany, where extremist groups gained a sense of unity against governments. The protests in Germany remained mostly non-violent, while the US completely mishandled

many, allowing citizens to assault healthcare workers and public servants, which led me to wonder how the differences between the two countries' governments creates different outcomes.

The best pick

Learning about the multi-party systems that exist in the rest of the world has made me question why voting in the US always felt like I was choosing the “lesser evil” instead of voting for the best candidate. While other parties besides Republicans and Democrats exist, those “third” parties rarely succeed in getting a number of votes substantial enough to stand a chance. Frustrated with this American reality, I wanted to look at the multi-party system in Germany.

Germany currently has over 700 members from seven parties representing its citizens in the *Bundestag*, the German equivalent of the House of Representatives. Germany is just over double the population of California—the most populous US state—and yet has nearly 300 more representatives than the House of Representatives, set at 435 members to represent the entire nation. This is not to be confused with the US Senate, which has two members per state, regardless of population. Despite the fact that only half of the members of the Bundestag are directly elected—the other half being party-appointed representatives—the larger breadth of representation means that constituents are likely to be served in a more focussed manner.

Already, German democracy looked like a better, more up-to-date system than America's in my eyes. One where citizens not only directly elect a representative, but also a party. Having a larger pool of candidates rather than just two to choose between means that people can pick the best option for them.

Two different puzzles

The 2021 Capitol Insurrection happened on my birthday. Watching the footage on the news felt like a comedy skit from SNL, leaving a permanent impression on my brain.

After the dust of the insurrection had settled, Joe Biden was sworn in as president, allowing the US a sigh of relief. Later in 2021, Germany would hold its federal elections for a new *Bundestag*. Both countries' heads-of-state were changing at the time, with long-time incumbent Angela Merkel leaving her post, and Donald Trump rocking the global political scene of its relative stability. Angela Merkel—Germany's *Bundeskanzlerin* since 2005—chose not to run for re-election, leaving behind a legacy as one of the most influential leaders of Europe in the 21st century.

On the German ballot are two sections; the directly elected representatives and the political parties. Voters choose the candidate that they feel best represents them, and then the political party they most agree with. This elects a total of 598 members, half are voted through by citizens, and the other half appointed by parties. The percentage a party gets in the vote decides how many seats they can fill out of the party-appointed 299 seats. However this can vary—if a party has 80 of their representatives elected, but their proportional party vote says they only get 70, the 10 extra seats are kept as “overhang”. To keep the party representation to the vote, other parties then get extra “balance” seats, leading to a current German parliament of 736 members.

In comparison, the US House of Representatives has 435 members that are split up proportionally between states according to population. Voting districts are drawn by state parliaments every decade when the population census comes out, because each district must contain about the same number of people. Some are drawn in such a way to give a party a higher chance of winning the district’s vote, meaning whole cities can be bi- or even trisected, skewing results and leaving people in districts that may not represent them.

For example, my college town was in its own district for the last decade, with the city limits respected, however, in the most recent revision of the voting districts, the town has been split along its main boulevard—Broadway. This means that people once in a Democrat-leaning district now vote for a different representative than their neighbour across the street.

Germany includes a 5% bar in overall votes that parties must pass before they can be represented in the *Bundestag*, meaning extremist groups and minority opinions are kept out unless citizens agree with those ideals. This is another area where the US lacks—with the electoral college

(https://www.nytimes.com/article/the-electoral-college.html?unlocked_article_code=P9KjIZ1QJxtvXtxHD2CPoisaAxXIRLth3W7ajTAhJjmzdoXOBTarm51hQsmOxYG9-HQLSnQ0bRrdE-k4rvoa9Xmbew7ppssKA_P5P5kYkeNoI-XsZM3b6kc776mbxuobgRCU3NsgfqRnXGHOhm00gDRcixbbZQ5VdOcdDCjMODEEFJHbyVJO1Vxla1-zp3IX9EChG76Yfxs0UHDczAtaW85wlaJXEtDEvhpPTE9HQNrM3PROK--edoAitySG9K2wfVcL6lW8lsM_qVrwLyfoy1VHSshJRC2MuS9BFClJYXEr6jjVTjgeOdX7KXHbgWlJvFGnzg&smicshare)

being called into question by citizens during nearly every presidential election I can remember. While George Washington warned against the dangers of having (two) political parties, no measures protect against the parties entrenching themselves as the only two options. Checks and balances may protect the three branches of government (executive, judicial and legislative) from becoming too powerful over one another, but do not protect against the power that the country’s two parties have accrued through decades of little to no opposition.

Who will represent me

Being the third-largest country in the world by population, the US government has not grown with its population. The setup of the government has been largely the same since the Great Depression, and has a constitution dating back to 1788, with the latest amendment now being over 30 years old.

Every government will always have its flaws. However, Germany has proven to maintain the modernity of their governmental institutions, most recently in 2013 with the use of overhang and balance seats. The number of seats in the House of Representatives was set in stone at 435 because of a law passed in 1929. The US population has nearly tripled since then, leaving more voices for one representative to express in government. A US representative represents about 750,000 people, while a German *Bundestagsabgeordnete* (district) has 280,000 people to represent.

As some might say, history holds the answers. I think that's true. As someone who's passionate about democracy and wants it to continue thriving, I've always found it puzzling why a democracy would remain entrenched in 200-year-old guidelines. In 1929, the average number of people in a US district was almost exactly what a German *Bundestagsabgeordnete* has today: 280,000.

As the US continues to be unstable and stubborn in its ways, Germany is becoming an increasingly appealing place to move my life to because of its willingness to keep a democracy that represents its people. I also feel that it is a country better suited to act in the collective best interest going into the future. For example, with environmental policies being implemented and benefits for families who have children, not to mention generous time-off policies. Voting in Germany seems like it will be in my future unless the system in the US changes soon.

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