

The Bundestag and German Citizens: More Communication, Growing Distance

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Abstract: *This contribution examines how links between citizens and Members of the Bundestag have evolved since 1949. The focus will be on institutional incentives relating to the electoral system and the rules of procedure in the Bundestag. In addition, new incentives arising from technological developments (especially internet and Web 2.0 applications) will be explored in their effect on individual parliamentary behaviour vis-a-vis citizens and in the Bundestag's 'corporate' links (i.e., links not based on electoral incentives in the constituencies and the chamber) with citizens. In particular, the development of petitions and electronic petitions will be assessed. While the evidence presented suggests that Bundestag Members have enhanced communication with citizens, this has not halted the decline in popular support for the House. In line with other advanced liberal democracies, trust in parliament is declining as a result of a more critical, less deferential citizenry.*

Keywords: Bundestag, parliamentary reform, parliamentary practice, parliamentary behaviour, institutional trust

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Introduction

It is a necessary condition for political representation 'that the actions of ... policy makers are supposed to be responsive to the wishes of the people' (Powell, 2004: p.273). For representation to be *democratic*, responsiveness must be accompanied by 'institutionalized arrangements that reliably create such connections, most importantly and irreplaceably 'the free and competitive national election in which all citizens can participate equally' (ibid., pp.273-4). Democratic parliaments are assemblies of winners of such competitive elections. In their classic study of substantive representation in the US Congress, Miller and Stokes (1963) identified two mechanisms to ensure the responsiveness of such elected representatives: (a) the electoral process itself, which gives constituents the possibility to choose representatives that pledge policies in line with their own preferences; and (b) between elections, the representatives' actions in the legislature are connected with constituents through the formers' perceptions of the preferences of the latter. Assuming that Members of Parliament (MPs) care about getting re-elected and voters care about MPs' responsiveness: MPs have incentives to communicate their policy proposals and explain their legislative activities to voters; voters have incentives to communicate their policy preferences to candidates. While Miller and Stokes (1963) modelled constituent-deputy relations as a dyadic process of representation, European party democracies require some theoretical and empirical strategies of analysing the dyad between constituency and individual MP in a model that accounts for the role of political parties.

This paper will examine how the links between citizens on the one hand and individual Members of the German Bundestag (MdBs), (parliamentary) parties and the Bundestag as an organization are structured, and have evolved, in recent years. The evidence presented suggests that communicative links have become stronger over the years. Simultaneously and seemingly paradoxically, however, the Bundestag has lost support amongst citizens. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an empirically convincing causal explanation for this paradox, a number of plausible reasons for it will be discussed.

Historical Context

Although the tradition of (pre-democratic) parliamentary representation reaches back at least to the Middle Ages in German-speaking territories, the relationship between citizens and their parliament(s) has been fraught with suspicion and outright mutual contempt since the failed liberal revolution of 1848 (e.g., Patzelt, 2000; Sontheimer,

1983). After the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, there was naturally some concern whether the country's newly established democratic and parliamentary institutions were supported by a sufficiently broad democratic political culture (Almond and Verba, 1963). Regular surveys were carried out demonstrating a gradual increase of popular confidence in the Bundestag and other democratic institutions between 1950 and the late 1970s (see Schüttemeyer, 1986). Since the 1970s, however, scepticism about the performance and legitimacy of the parliamentary institutions has grown again. This change, which follows a trend in many advanced liberal democracies (see, for example, Pharr and Putnam, 2000), resulted largely from the frustration of a younger generation of Germans, who were better educated than previous generations, were more critical, sought more personal involvement in politics and felt that many MdBs were insufficiently responsive to their concerns (e.g., in questions of environmental policy, gender issues or nuclear disarmament). German unification (1990) posed additional challenges for representative democracy and its institutions. Although there was relatively broad support for unification in East Germany, a significant minority did not feel that their preferences and concerns were represented adequately in unified Germany's national parliament (for a recent account see Gabriel, 2009). This propelled the Party of Democratic Socialism (now Die Linke) into the Bundestag. Initially this party, the successor of the discredited ruling party of the communist German Democratic Republic, was seen primarily as a 'regional' party particularly responsive to the concerns and ideological preferences of many East German citizens (Hough 2002). Although its alliance and eventual merger with the predominantly West German WASG (Electoral Alternative Employment and Social Justice) after 2005 contributed to some electoral success in Western federal states after 2005, its electoral strongholds have remained in the Eastern federal states and Berlin (Falter, Gabriel and Rattinger, 2006; Bundeswahlleiter, 2009: pp.73, 80).

Apart from broader questions of citizens' evaluations – and misperceptions (Patzelt, 2000) – of parliament, long-standing institutional traditions and rules of the Bundestag itself have shaped its relationship with citizens. The Bundestag has traditionally been criticised for being a hard-working chamber where the relationship with the public leaves much to be desired. In early appraisals of the Bundestag's performance, Hennis (1966), Steffani (1971) and others criticised the chamber's lack of effective communication with citizens in the public arena of the plenary. This criticism, in which the British House of Commons often served as a role model, was generally accepted by parliamentarians and underpins a number of parliamentary reforms since the 1960s. In 1965, so-called 'Topical Hours' (Aktuelle Stunden) were introduced to encourage short debates on current issues. In 1966, live radio and television coverage of the Bundestag plenary sessions was permitted; in 1969, the length of individual speeches was reduced to 15 minutes (except for one main speaker from each parliamentary party), partly in order to turn debates into livelier exchanges; this limit was reduced to ten minutes in 1995. In 1995 a series of further reforms was introduced: a 'core time' of four to six hours per week was introduced in which debates on 'fundamental issues' were to be scheduled. No other important

parliamentary business should take place during this time. This was to enable Members to attend plenary debates and avoid the publicly damaging image of a vast number of 'empty seats'. The time allocated for questions for oral answer was to be extended when considered necessary. If the parliamentary parties agreed, the Speaker was empowered to extend 'attractive' debates. Although the Green party's proposal to generally open up committee deliberations to the public was rejected, the concluding session of committee deliberations on bills or other issues could now be held in public, if the committee majority wished. In addition, media representatives, individual visitors and groups of visitors were allowed to attend (Schindler, 1999: 2848-87). Despite the reforms, the Bundestag's institutional mode of operation and 'culture' has remained one of a committee-based parliament.

Electoral System

As suggested above, the electoral system is a crucial institution structuring the relationship between citizens and representatives. The German mixed-member system of proportional representation with a two-tier districting system is essentially 'a system of proportional representation, restricted by a 5 per cent clause, with a personalised element' (Jesse, 2000: p.127). Half of the minimum² of 598 Members of the Bundestag are elected at the lower level by plurality vote in single-member districts. Proportionality of the aggregate outcome is achieved through adjustment at the upper level where the other half of deputies is elected from federal-state-based party lists (for details see Saalfeld, 2005). The mixture of district-based and party-list-based MdBs has generally encouraged relatively close links between voters and representatives. In an empirical study comparing the effect of different electoral systems on citizens' ability (a) to name their local parliamentary candidates and (b) the frequency of their contacts with representatives, Norris (2004: pp.238-46) found that the links between citizens and MPs in Germany are clearly stronger in countries with pure list systems and do not differ greatly from countries using plurality vote in single-member districts.

In practice, Germany's mixed-member system does not really produce two different 'classes' of MdBs. Of the 622 successful candidates elected to the German Bundestag in 2009, 299 were elected by plurality vote in single-member constituencies, whereas 323 were drawn from party lists. However, 610 out of the 622 MdBs elected in 2009 (98.1 per cent) had run as candidates in constituencies (Dobmeier, 2010: p.52). In other words, the parties frequently safeguard the election of constituency candidates by simultaneously nominating them for relatively secure positions on the party lists. Nevertheless, some authors found a stronger constituency focus amongst those MPs elected in single-member constituency races (Klingemann and Wessels, 2001; Stratmann and Baur, 2002; Lancaster and Patterson, 1990; Gschwend and Zittel 2008).

Table 1: Attribution of electoral success to individual campaign effort amongst candidates for the 2005 Bundestag election

Questions: How important was your personal effort in your constituency to (a) your personal election result and (b) your party's share of the second vote? (Answers are percentage points of the vote attributed to personal and party success by the MP.)

| | Obs. | Mean | Med. | Std. Err. | Std. Dev. | 95% Conf. Interval | |
|---|------|-------|------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|-------|
| <i>All candidates</i> | | | | | | | |
| % attributed to personal result | 593 | 29.97 | 10 | 1.37 | 33.24 | 27.29 | 32.65 |
| % attributed to party's share of 'second votes' | 585 | 19.94 | 7 | 0.98 | 23.78 | 18.01 | 21.87 |
| <i>MPs elected by first-past-the-post in constituencies</i> | | | | | | | |
| % attributed to personal result | 83 | 32.24 | 10 | 3.81 | 34.75 | 24.66 | 39.83 |
| % attributed to party's share of 'second votes' | 78 | 21.11 | 6 | 2.75 | 24.26 | 15.64 | 26.58 |
| <i>MPs elected via party lists</i> | | | | | | | |
| % attributed to personal result | 97 | 26.89 | 10 | 3.26 | 32.07 | 20.42 | 33.35 |
| % attributed to party's share of 'second votes' | 96 | 18.33 | 5 | 2.30 | 22.55 | 13.76 | 22.90 |

Note: All mean values were tested (t-tests) against a null hypothesis of perceived zero impact. T values not reported. All tests significant at the one-percent level.

Source: Calculated from Gschwend, Schmitt, Wüst and Zittel (2005), items wk_b22_1, wk_b22_2, a7_2_05 and a8_2_05

The fact that most successful MdBs compete in constituency races, even if they get elected via their parties' lists is important for their attitude towards citizens. Table 1 draws on data from the German Candidate Study 2005. This data set is based on post-election interviews with 1,031 candidates from all relevant parties running for election in 2005. These respondents included 212 elected parliamentarians, 96 of whom were elected directly in single-member constituency races, 116 were elected via party lists.³ Unsuccessful and successful candidates alike believe their own campaign effort made a positive difference to both their personal result in the constituency and their party list's results. The belief in a 'personal vote' is statistically significant when tested against the null hypothesis of no personal impact. The median candidate and elected MP (irrespective of election mode) believe that his or her personal effort increased his vote by approximately 10 per cent. All candidates also believe that their effort makes a positive difference to the party's success, albeit to a lesser extent (median values ranging from 5 to 7 per cent). Although these perceptions may be exaggerated, the electoral system does not discourage MdBs and candidates to see themselves as more than merely representatives of their parties.

Table 2: Election success and personal qualities as perceived by MPs (2005)

Question: How important are the following personal qualities for a candidate's chances of succeeding in the (2005) election (on a seven-point scale from 1=very important to 7=not important at all)?

| Variable | <i>Constituency MPs</i> | | | | | <i>Party-list MPs</i> | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|-----------------------|------|-----------|-----------|--------------------|
| | Obs. | Mean | Std. Err. | Std. Dev. | 95% Conf. Interval | Obs. | Mean | Std. Err. | Std. Dev. | 95% Conf. Interval |
| Policy expertise | 94 | 2.06 | 0.12 | 1.17 | 1.82 2.30 | 114 | 2.46 | 0.13 | 1.43 | 2.20 2.73 |
| Personal character | 95 | 1.84 | 0.10 | 1.01 | 1.64 2.05 | 114 | 2.47 | 0.14 | 1.46 | 2.20 2.74 |
| Leadership ability | 95 | 2.54 | 0.10 | 1.00 | 2.33 2.74 | 113 | 3.04 | 0.13 | 1.36 | 2.79 3.30 |
| Being close to citizens | 95 | 1.43 | 0.09 | 0.86 | 1.26 1.61 | 114 | 1.94 | 0.11 | 1.15 | 1.73 2.15 |

Note: All mean values were tested (t-tests) against a null hypothesis captured by the statement "not important at all". T values not reported. All tests significant at the one-percent level.

Source: Source: Calculated from Gschwend, Schmitt, Wüst and Zittel (2005), items b23b17_1, b23b17_2, b23b17_3 and b23b17_5.

Nevertheless there are differences in emphasis when successful candidates (i.e., MdBs) were asked what personal qualities are most likely to contribute to electoral success. Table 2 includes four characteristics: Policy expertise, personal character, leadership ability and 'being close to citizens'. Since attitudes were measured on a scale from 1 (the respective personal characteristic is very important) to 7 (characteristic is not important at all), low mean values suggest that the average MdB attributes high importance to the particular personal trait. All mean values were tested (with a t-test) against the null hypothesis (characteristic not important at all) and were found to be highly significant at the one-percent level. Table 2 demonstrates, above all, that 'being close to citizens' (that is, close interaction with citizens) is considered to be the most important personal characteristic, whereas leadership ability is deemed least important. This is true for both MdBs elected in single-member districts and those elected via party lists. However, the emphasis is clearly more pronounced amongst parliamentarians elected in single-member constituency contests. Inspection of the 95 percent confidence intervals suggests that election mode makes a significant difference in this respect.

Communication Between Elections

Given Germany's mixed-member electoral system, MPs have strong incentives to cultivate links with constituents and other citizens (e.g., representatives of interest groups and party activists). There are a number of general studies of constituency activities (Patzelt, 1993; Patzelt and Algasinger, 2001; Mayntz and Neidhardt, 1989; Schönbohm, 1973). Whether elected as constituency representatives or via a party list, German MPs tend to invest a considerable share of their funds for staffing in constituency services, including a constituency office and regular surgeries. Typical activities include the processing of letters to MPs, visits to companies, organisations and party activists in the constituency and visits of constituents in the federal capital (Bartels, 2008).

As for mediated contacts, studies of media use and coverage suggest that there is a 'communication hierarchy', with leading politicians attracting the bulk of the national (especially electronic) media attention, whereas backbench MPs maintain closer links with the local press. Four-fifths of all parliamentarians in the Bundestag and the state parliaments seek direct, regular contact with journalists, and the vast majority meet journalists on a regular basis (for an example, see also Bartels, 2008: p.492). In recent years, personal web pages on the internet have been a very important means of communication for MPs, whose features often provide channels for constituents to contact MPs (Zittel, 2003).

Founded in 2004, the non-partisan charity 'Parlamentwatch' provides an internet-based platform (www.abgeordnetenwatch.de) monitoring the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary activities, the voting behaviour and the income of MPs. Most importantly, it allows citizens to address questions to representatives at all levels of the political

system and provides an additional forum for direct contact between citizens and representatives. For some MPs (e.g., Bartels, 2008: p.490), answering questions on this platform has become a regular feature of their communication with citizens. Other MPs boycott the platform.

Direct, interactive communication between citizens on the one hand and Members of the Bundestag as well as political parties on the other has developed significantly since the election of 2005. For the purposes of this study, the use of Web 2.0 applications by Members of the current Bundestag (elected in September 2009) was established by coding whether or not the 622 MdBs maintained active Facebook and/or Twitter accounts on 18 November 2010 (cut-off point) and operated these accounts themselves (as opposed to maintenance and operation by the party or other organizations, for details see Dobmeier, 2010).⁴

Out of a total of 622 MdBs, 439 (70.6 per cent) used at least one of the two applications, 181 (29.1 per cent) used both. Only a minority of MdBs (148, 23.8 per cent of the total) used three Web 2.0 applications or more. The number of people reached via Facebook and Twitter can be estimated by counting the number of Facebook 'friends' and Twitter 'followers'. Only three MdBs with active Facebook accounts (0.8 per cent of all Facebook users amongst MdBs) had more than 10,000 'friends': Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel had the highest number (over 54,000), followed by then Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg with just over 43,000 and SPD parliamentary party leader Frank-Walter Steinmeier with over 10,000. Yet, these numbers are relatively untypical. Out of the 383 Facebook users amongst MdBs in 2010, 310 (80.9 per cent), had fewer than 1,500 Facebook friends. Similarly, the vast majority, 140 out of the 208 Twitter users amongst MdBs (67.3 per cent) had fewer than 500 followers.

This confirms Zittel's (2003) earlier finding that German MdBs have been relatively conservative in embracing Web 2.0 technology for direct communication with citizens. Nevertheless, there are significant variations amongst parliamentarians. In a second step, therefore, further information was collected on each individual MdB, including the deputy's party and age as well as his or her election mode (elected directly in a single-member district or via one of the party lists), marginality of seat for those elected by first-past-the-post, length of service in the Bundestag and front-bench status. After fitting a multivariate logistic regression model, it was found that the odds of an MdB using Facebook or Twitter were significantly affected by party membership and age, holding all other variables mentioned above constant. The younger the MdB, the higher is his or her likelihood of using of Facebook and Twitter. Almost three-quarters of all Liberal (FDP) MdBs and more than four-fifths of their Green colleagues have an active Facebook account, compared to considerably smaller percentages amongst Social Democrats (SPD, 65.5 per cent), members of Die Linke (59.2 per cent) and slightly less than half of all Christian Democrat (CDU/CSU) MdBs. Precisely the same pattern can be seen in the data on the usage of Twitter, albeit at a lower level. For both independent variables (age and party), χ^2

tests were carried out to check for the robustness of the relationship. Both, the differences by age group and by party are statistically significant at the one-percent level (two-tailed). How can these variations be explained? At this stage, it is only possible to provide explanations that have a certain degree of plausibility. Both FDP and Greens have fewer members and organizational resources they can draw on than the other parties (Die Linke has a strong organization in the East). In addition, they have a higher percentage of young voters than the other parties. Direct communication via Web 2.0 applications may help Liberal and Green MdBs to compensate for their parties' organizational disadvantages.

Table 3: German parliamentary candidates' membership of associations and groups (2005)

Question: Are you a member of any of the organizations or associations listed below? IF so, how often have you attended any meetings in the past 12 months? (Number of respondents and row percentages in parentheses, n=1,031)

| Group or association | Member | | How many meetings have you attended in the past 12 months? | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--|------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| | Yes | None | 1 or 2 during the year | About 1 every 3 months | About 1 per month | About 1 per week |
| Trades union | 336 (100%) | 147 (31.48%) | 162 (34.69%) | 73 (15.63%) | 47 (10.06%) | 38 (8.14%) |
| Professional association | 237 (100%) | 123 (36.39%) | 138 (40.83%) | 46 (13.61%) | 26 (7.69%) | 5 (1.48%) |
| Interest group, citizen action group | 406 (100%) | 67 (12.88%) | 153 (29.42%) | 126 (24.23%) | 135 (25.96%) | 39 (7.50%) |
| Sports club | 391 (100%) | 101 (21.31%) | 128 (27.00%) | 80 (16.88%) | 74 (15.61%) | 91 (19.20%) |
| Cultural organization | 410 (100%) | 50 (10.22%) | 153 (31.29%) | 139 (28.43%) | 112 (22.90%) | 35 (7.16%) |
| Religions organization | 265 (100%) | 69 (18.65%) | 92 (24.86%) | 93 (25.14%) | 79 (21.35%) | 37 (10.00%) |
| Social organization | 462 (100%) | 63 (11.58%) | 164 (30.15%) | 137 (25.18%) | 128 (23.53%) | 52 (9.56%) |
| Leisure group | 201 (100%) | 84 (26.92%) | 63 (20.19%) | 52 (16.67%) | 52 (16.67%) | 61 (19.55%) |
| Valid responses total | 975 (94.57%) | | | | | |

Source: Calculated from Gschwend, Schmitt, Wüst and Zittel (2005), items a9 and a9_1 to a9_8

Virtually all MdBs maintain offices in their constituencies and tend to allocate at least one-half of their support staff to constituency work (see Saalfeld, 1997: pp.37-8). Table 3 provides some information on the type of contacts German parliamentary candidates (including MdBs) usually maintain via membership in (often local) voluntary associations. These contacts constitute an important part of MdBs' constituency work. Although the data are merely a snapshot that should not be overinterpreted, the information is supported by other data on MdBs' time budgets and the type of direct contacts they maintain with citizens. Over 94 per cent of all respondents to the German Candidate Study 2005 (see above) belonged to at least one voluntary organisation. The extent to which MdBs actually devote a significant amount of time to attend meetings of such groups varies. Leisure, cultural, sports and religious groups (including churches) are the most important civil-society organisations whose meetings many MdBs attend regularly. Nevertheless, considerable amounts of time are also devoted to the activities of Interest groups, citizen action groups and trades unions, whereas involvement in professional associations is less important.

Political Parties in the Chamber: Parliamentary Debates and Interpellation

In its fundamental norms and rules, the Bundestag is not a very 'public' parliament. Compared to the United Kingdom, the chamber works much more strongly through its specialised standing committees. Legislative standing committees, committees of enquiry, commissions and other bodies do have the possibility to hold public sessions (especially public hearings), but generally meet in private. In the 2005-2009 Bundestag, for example, 110 out of the 2,234 meetings of standing committees (4.92%) were held in public. In addition, there were 475 public hearings and evidence sessions held by the Bundestag's committees and commissions (Enquête Kommissionen). For the entire period of 1949-2009, the ratio of public to non-public sessions in the Bundestag was 1:7.5, with a gradual but significant move towards more frequent public sessions in recent decades (1990-94: 1:6.0; 1994-98: 1:5.8; 1998-2002: 1:5.8; 2002-05: 1:5.4; 2005-09 [under the slightly different conditions of a 'grand coalition' of the two major parties] 1:2.5) (all data from Feldkamp, 2010: pp.11-2).

While committees partly operate in a 'cross-party mode' (King, 1976), the plenary and its relationship with the public is shaped by the partisan conflict between government and opposition parties. Prior to 1983, the Bundestag parliamentary parties made relatively limited use of various forms of public parliamentary interpellation and questioning. Since the advent of the Greens in the 1983 election, opposition parties have made more use of parliamentary questions as a means of holding the government accountable in public debates than previously (Saalfeld, 1998: pp.63-4).

The Bundestag's rules of procedure provide the opposition with a number of devices to question the government and force a debate on current public issues on the floor of the chamber:

1. The *Große Anfrage* is one of the most powerful instruments available to the opposition parties to extract information from the government and – based on this information – force floor debates on issues of their own choice. Only a parliamentary party or an equivalent number of MdBs can demand them. The government is expected to answer such questions in writing within three weeks. If the government refuses to answer, a parliamentary party or an equivalent number of members can still demand a full plenary debate on the issue. In the vast majority of cases the government responds, and the ensuing parliamentary debate is based on the government’s written answer, which is published before the debate takes place (Saalfeld, 1998).
2. *Kleine Anfragen* are – often quite comprehensive and detailed – written questions, which are answered in writing by the government. They are an important means for Members of the Bundestag to extract information. Nevertheless, questions and replies are on public record. Although they do not directly trigger a major plenary debate, the information provided by the government can be used in other forms of parliamentary questioning. Only parliamentary parties or an equivalent number of members can ask such questions. The government is expected to answer within a fortnight, though it also has the option of refusing to answer or giving a confidential reply.
3. In each regular week, Members of the Bundestag will be collectively allocated up to 180 minutes for *questions for oral answer*. Members of the Bundestag may ask one short question for oral answer per day and up to two questions per week. Although such questions may be tabled by individual members, they are expected to be cleared with the relevant party working groups, executive committees and whips’ offices (Arndt, 1989: pp.670-1). These questions frequently deal with local issues arising from the MPs’ constituency work.
4. The rules of procedure also allow individual members to ask ‘*urgent questions*’. Such questions must be submitted to the Bundestag Speaker’s office by noon on the day before the question is to be asked. The speaker then decides whether the question at stake qualifies as one of ‘urgent public interest’.
5. *Aktuelle Stunden* are short, topical one-hour debates which can be demanded by any parliamentary party or an equivalent number of members. Since 1983, the use of such short debates has grown considerably, facilitated by procedural reforms and a generally more competitive opposition (Saalfeld, 1998: p.63).
6. So-called ‘*cabinet questions*’ allow MdBs to ask specific ministers questions of ‘current interest’ as well as questions about the preceding cabinet meeting (Schindler, 1994: pp.984–6).

Table 4: Opposition Activity on the Floor of the Bundestag, 1990-2009

| Bundestag period | Große Anfragen | | Kleine Anfragen | | Mündliche Anfragen (Question Hour) | | Of these: Dringliche Anfragen | | Aktuelle Stunden | |
|------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | N | % tabled by opp. | N | % tabled by opp. | N | % tabled by opp. | N | % tabled by opp. | N | % tabled by opp. |
| 1990-94 | 98 | 85.7 | 1,382 | 98.1 | 4,215 | 66.1 | 57 | 92.3 | 103 | 80.6 |
| 1994-98 | 156 | 89.7 | 2,070 | 89.1 | 3,574 | 80.90 | 34 | 85.3 | 103 | 85.4 |
| 1998-02 | 101 | 95.1 | 1,813 | 99.1 | 3,309 | 96.3 | 80 | 97.5 | 141 | 81.6 |
| 2002-05 | 65 | 100.0 | 797 | 99.7 | 2,550 | 98.9 | 37 | 100.0 | 71 | 69.0 |
| 2005-09 | 63 | 98.4 | 3,299 | 100.0 | 2,814 | 94.1 | 111 | 100.0 | 113 | 81.4 |

Source: Feldkamp (2010: 15)

Table 4 demonstrates that these instruments of parliamentary interpellation and questioning are indeed largely a 'weapon' of the opposition parties. A comparison with data from 1949-90 (Saalfeld, 1998) demonstrates the increase in the use of these instruments since 1983. While this potentially provides citizens with richer information on the government's record and the opposition parties' policy positions, it has not necessarily helped to enhance the chamber's legitimacy: The increased confrontation between government and opposition has been largely symbolic and limited to Bundestag plenary. Schmidt (2002: p.80) points out that the institutional structure of Germany's co-operative federalism requires a substantial degree of inter-party co-operation across government-opposition lines. Nevertheless, the parties appeal to their respective social constituencies and activists by using a far more adversarial rhetoric, which 'tends to undermine the co-operation potential required for legislation in the hidden Grand Coalition State in the Federal Republic of Germany.'

Access to the Bundestag as a Corporate Body

Television is the main medium German citizens use to access the Bundestag. Parliamentary proceedings on the floor of the Bundestag are televised. Nevertheless, television footage has not necessarily improved public understanding of how the Bundestag works. Frequently, the focus of media coverage is on clashes between, or rows within, the parties, on 'empty seats' in plenary sessions and scandals, rather than the day-to-day work MPs do in parliamentary and party committees, or in their constituencies. The Bundestag has also established its own parliamentary television services (Parlamentsfernsehen). The footage is offered free of charge to public and private television stations. It has increasingly been used by private news channels. This may have contributed to an increased willingness of parliamentary committees to meet in public and have their proceedings televised (Feldkamp, 2005: pp.795-6).

In recent years, the Bundestag as body has expended significant resources to make the chamber more accessible. It has developed its website with a link to pages informing about various possibilities to visit the Bundestag and access its resources. The Bundestag makes significant resources available to fund visits by ordinary citizens. Each MdB has the possibility to invite up to three groups of up to 50 constituents per

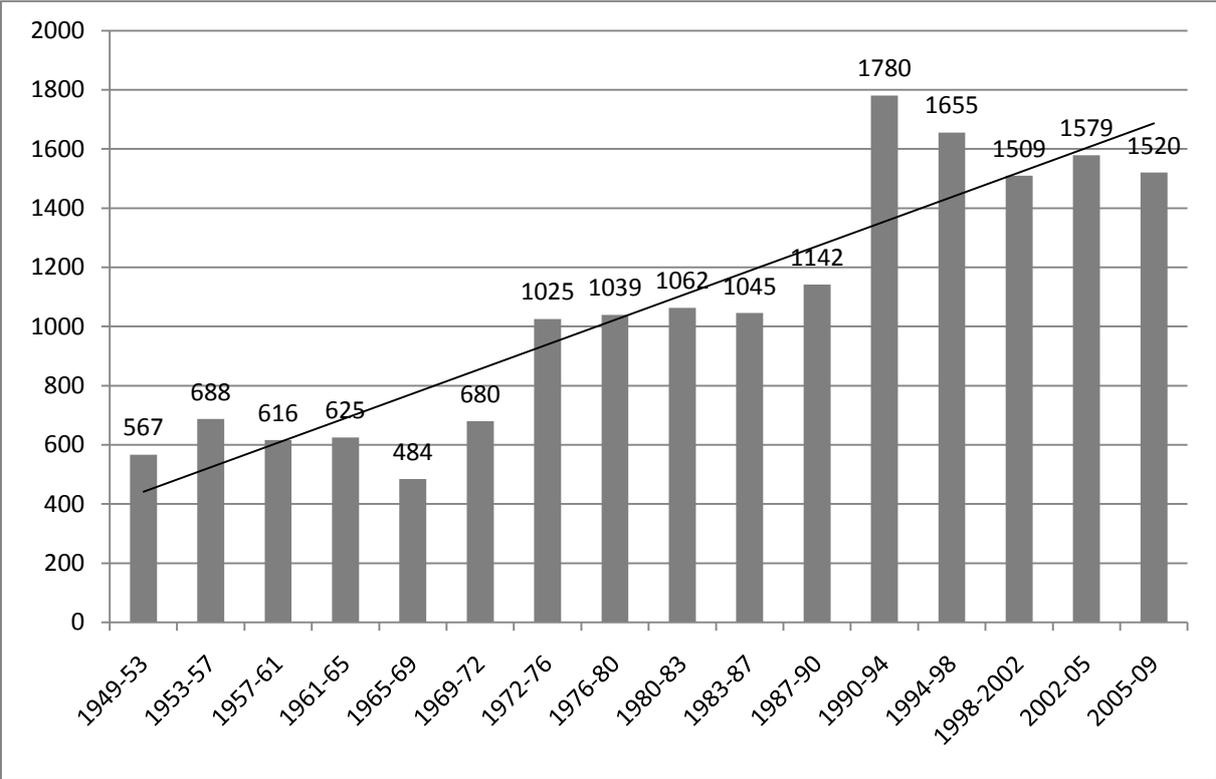
annum. Expenses for travel and accommodation are covered by the Bundestag. In addition, each MdB is allowed to invite 200 further constituents (individuals or small groups such as school classes) per annum to visit the Bundestag with at least their travel expenses covered. Finally, MdBs can host an unlimited number of visitors who cover their own expenses. MdBs make extensive use of these possibilities and invite tens of thousands of visitors per year. In 2001, for example, the total number of funded visits exceeded 45,000, and the total number of all visitors to the Bundestag plenary was in excess of 600,000 persons (Feldkamp, 2005: p.782).

The Bundestag has offered information on the internet since 1996 using the domain name www.bundestag.de. The website allows MPs to design their own personal pages, provides a 'Web-TV' channel transmitting some proceedings of the Bundestag (including public committee meetings) online and 'video-on-demand' services. The public record of parliamentary debates has been made available online in a searchable data base going back to 1994 (Feldkamp, 2005: pp.793-4).

Petitions

Finally, German parliaments as institutions (as opposed to the work carried out by individual parliamentarians) provide a systematic infrastructure to process citizens' grievances and petitions. Article 17 of the Basic Law grants every resident in the Federal Republic the right to address petitions to the responsible authorities as well as to parliamentary chambers both at the federal and state level. Petitions are defined as demands or complaints addressed to the executive branch or the Bundestag requesting legislation, administrative action or redress of particular grievances. They have to relate to a matter affecting the relationship between residents and the state. Demands for information or expressions of opinion are not admissible. There are two fundamental types of petition in the rules of procedure for the Bundestag Petitions Committee. 'Individual' petitions (Einzelpetition) can be submitted by individual German residents, if a personal issue is at stake. If there is a more general 'public' issue, the petition is referred to as 'public petition' (öffentliche Petition). Such petitions can be submitted by single individuals or many. Such 'mass' petitions will usually be signed by a large number of residents.

Figure 1: Average Monthly Number of Petitions Received by the Bundestag, 1949-2009



Sources: Calculated from Schindler (1999: 3133) for 1949-90; Feldkamp (2010: 17) for 1990-2009.

In quantitative terms, citizens use this right extensively. In the 2005-2009 legislative term, for example, the Bundestag received 69,937 petitions from individuals and mass petitions signed by a total of 183,884 persons (Feldkamp, 2010: p.17). The use of the right to petition by citizens has increased over time. Figure 1 reports the average monthly number of petitions received by the Bundestag in the parliamentary terms between 1949 and 2009. Monthly averages were calculated in order to control for the variations in the duration of parliamentary terms.⁵ In the Bundestag terms between 1949 and 1969, the chamber received, on average, between 484 and 688 petitions per month. The average figures increased dramatically to over 1,000 in the 1972-76 Bundestag and remained at that level until 1990. In the 1990-94 Bundestag the average number increased to nearly 1,780. The 1994-98 Bundestag displayed a similarly high volume (1,655). One of the main causes of the increase in the 1970s is the activity of citizens' initiatives and new social movements which began to utilise all channels available to them in their attempt to bring their concerns on the political agenda and put pressure on governments and parliaments. The leap in the 1990-94 and 1994-98 Bundestag terms may be explained by the economic and social problems of unification in Eastern Germany and the fact that unification led to an increase in the number of citizens by approximately 17 Million. Many East German citizens faced serious problems in claiming their rights in the Federal Republic's welfare regime, especially with regard to pensions.

According to Article 45c of the Basic Law, citizens' complaints and proposals are to

be processed and, if considered necessary, followed up by a Bundestag Committee on Petitions. Currently (2009) the Committee consists of 26 Members nominated by the Bundestag parliamentary parties proportional to their seat shares in the chamber (2009: 10 CDU/CSU, 6 SPD, 4 FDP, Die Linke 3, Bündnis '90/Die Grünen 3). The committee is supported by a staff of approximately 60, about 15 of which are qualified lawyers. The support staff is mainly responsible for the screening and sifting of complaints as well as for the preparation of investigations and reports. Between 1949 and 1975, the Committee was appointed regularly by the Bundestag, although the chamber was not constitutionally obliged to do so. In 1975 a constitutional amendment made it a constitutional obligation for the Bundestag to set up a Committee on Petitions each parliamentary term. In addition, the Committee's rights were strengthened significantly. Except for issues of national security, the federal government and the federation's administrative agencies are obliged to grant the Committee on Petitions access to all documents, information and their premises. The Committee has the power to call witnesses and experts including members of the federal government and the complainants. It can investigate a complaint directly in the relevant agency and at the appropriate level. It is obliged to inform the minister about its investigation, but does not need the minister's approval. It cannot, however, investigate matters that were not explicitly referred to it in a specific complaint.

In 2005, the Bundestag reformed its rules of procedure for petitions with a view to enhance public access. It became compulsory for the Petitions Committee to arrange a public hearing of representatives of the petitioners, if a mass petition is signed by at least 50,000 persons. Moreover, the chamber created the possibility to submit petitions electronically via the Bundestag website (so-called 'e-petitions'). Initially a pilot project conducted in collaboration with the Scottish Parliament, the Bundestag improved the process and accepted it as a permanent feature in 2008. In the case of 'public' petitions, the text of the petition is uploaded to the Bundestag website (usually) for six weeks. During this period, it can be signed by further petitioners who have logged into the appropriate website and entered their name. Since 2008, e-petitions can also be discussed publicly in an online forum. The recommendations or decisions of the Petitions Committee concerning public petitions are uploaded to the website.

The introduction of e-petitions did not increase the overall number of petitions submitted to the Committee. The number of petitions submitted online was just over 2,000 in 2006 and 2007. Approximately 2% of all petitions submitted to the Bundestag are currently published on the internet. The opportunities to use the online discussion forum has been used extensively by citizens, especially after the initial software was replaced and the system became more user-friendly. The reforms of 2005/2008 enhanced the publicity of the petitions system, although it is unclear what use members of the Petitions Committee are making of the information produced by online discussions (Lindner and Riehm, 2008; Lindner and Riehm, 2009: pp.506-11; see also Riehm, Coenen and Lindner, 2009; Riehm and Trénel, 2009).

The Committee is an important feedback channel between Parliament and citizens. Like the parliamentarians' constituency 'surgeries', it can be considered to be an important 'fire-alarm' in the sense of McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), which can be raised by citizens in the event of an administrative problem and provides elected politicians with low-cost information on the implementation of policies by administrative agencies. It also gives Members of Parliament feedback on unanticipated effects of laws, which can be addressed in subsequent legislation. Yet, in reality the sheer number of petitions completely overwhelms the Committee. Given its modest resources (especially time), the Committee cannot follow up all complaints and petitions. Even if a complaint is taken up, citizens have to wait several months for a response. Frequently, Members do not have the time to visit the administrative agencies concerned or hear a sufficient number of witnesses. The Committee has a reputation of being 'apolitical' and is often seen to be a typical assignment for parliamentary 'freshers'. The Committee's input into the deliberations of the parliamentary parties' working groups and the Bundestag's departmental standing committees (the main parliamentary agencies dealing with legislation) also leaves room for improvement. Finally, issues that are controversial between government and opposition or potentially embarrassing for the government have virtually no chance of being followed up by the Committee as the government parties' representatives on it can always block an investigation using their majority.

The 'success rates' of petitions vary from session to session. Data for the 1990-94 Bundestag represent a fairly typical pattern, however: In this period, the Bundestag received a total of 73,370 individual petitions of which it considered 54,439.⁶ More than eight (8.3) per cent of the petitions were successful resulting in some form of redress; about one-quarter (24.2 per cent) were rejected. In 48.2 percent of the cases, the Committee responded by providing the complainant with information or advice (Saalfeld, 2002, p.**). In some cases, the Committee makes recommendations to the House, in other cases it requests the Federal Government to deal with a problem. If a petition touches on controversial issues, the Committee often does not make a recommendation but refers the 'material' to the government. Finally, the Committee publishes an annual report accounting for the number and type of complaints as well as its responses (Ismayr, 1992: 445-60).

How Citizens View the Bundestag and Its Members

Given the initial lack of a consolidated democratic political culture in Germany, the expectations German citizens have of their parliament and other political institutions have been monitored regularly through opinion polls and academic studies since the 1950s. Substantial sums have been devoted to civic education in schools, institutions of adult education, the federal armed forces and other public organisations. Similarly, the political parties and their foundations, the trade unions, the churches and other civil-society organizations were able to draw on public funds to promote democratic values in civic education. These efforts were reinforced once again after unification in

1990. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that the expectations German citizens have of their parliament(s) and parliamentarians remain unrealistic – very much like citizens in other liberal democracies. Much of what Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) found for the US Congress could be repeated for German citizens in very similar terms:

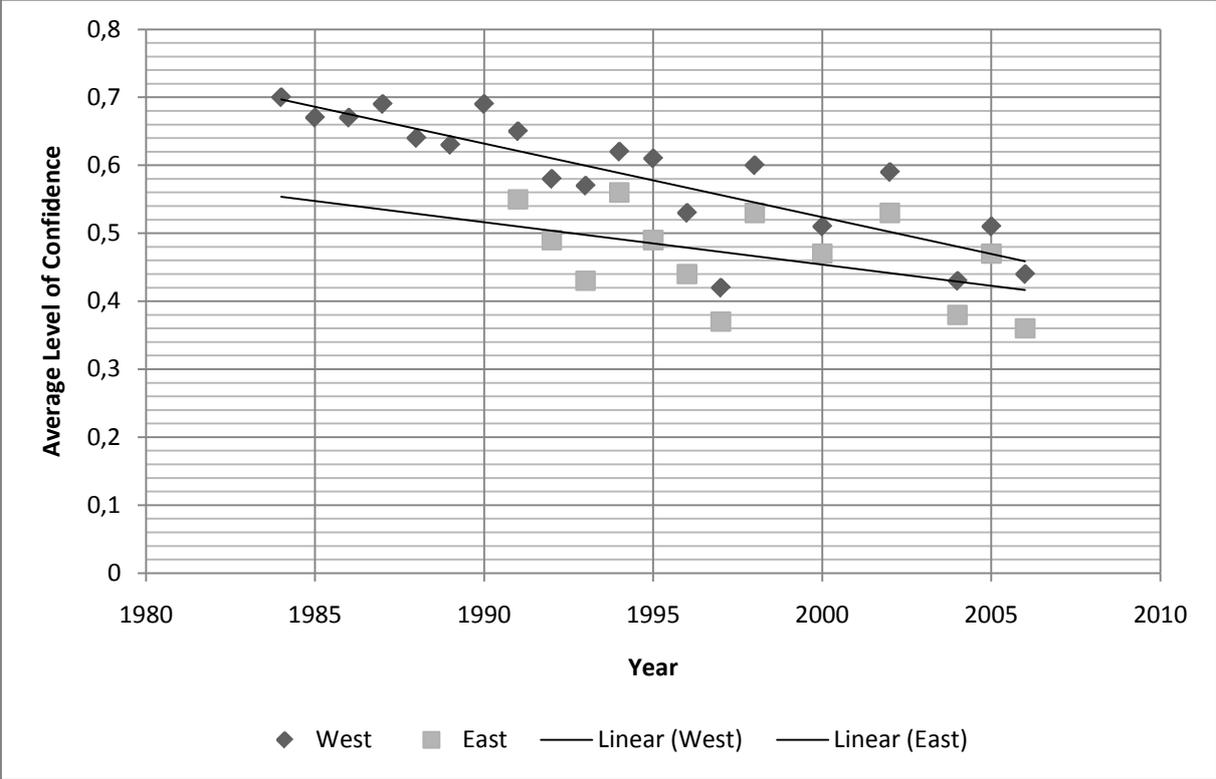
People profess a devotion to democracy in the abstract but have little or no appreciation for what a practicing democracy invariably brings with it. ... People do not wish to see uncertainty, conflicting options, long debate, competing interests, confusion, bargaining, and compromised, imperfect solutions. They want government to do its job quietly and efficiently ... In short, ... they often seek a patently unrealistic form of democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995: p.147).

Patzelt's (1998; 2005) empirical studies demonstrate that this diagnosis holds for today's Germany as well. He believes Germany's constitution is ultimately characterized by a 'misfit' between parliamentary institutions, which are strongly influenced by the Westminster model, and a 'constitutional ideology' (Verfassungsideologie) influenced equally strongly by notions of direct and populist democratic thought. This is reflected in the result of surveys: Most Germans know that the federal government is elected by the Bundestag and that parliamentary politics is characterized by an adversarial relationship between government and opposition parties. Nevertheless, surveys do not show a majority to support such a system. Many citizens would much rather see what is essentially a presidential system with a single government leader on the one hand and an independent parliament as representation of 'the people' on the other. The majority of citizens are critical of the unity displayed by parliamentary parties in the Bundestag and attribute it to discipline rather than cohesion. Many voters consider MPs to be unrepresentative members of an elite of professional politicians out of touch with ordinary people. Instead, they favour amateur politicians exercising their elective office only for a short period of time before returning to 'regular' jobs in the economy. And the vast majority of respondents are in favour of strengthening 'direct' democracy at the national level (Patzelt, 2000). Replicating previous analyses (e.g., Herzog et al., 1990), Patzelt (ibid.) also finds strong differences between these popular perceptions and preferences and the perceptions of German MPs who accept the logic of parliamentary systems of government, do not generally feel subjected to undue pressure from the whips, support the professionalization of parliamentary politics and are somewhat more sceptical of the use of referendums.

Survey questions measuring the 'trust' or 'confidence' of citizens in their political institutions are believed to be a valid indicator of 'diffuse support' in Easton's (1975) sense. Support for, and trust in, the Bundestag have been questions regularly studied by public opinion polls since 1949. Although the wording of questions and the scales used to measure attitudes have not always remained constant, some rough trends are discernible. Between 1949 and the late 1970s the share of respondents to

surveys indicating a 'favourable impression' of the Bundestag nearly doubled from 21 per cent in 1950 to 39 per cent in 1978. Since 1978, however, favourable responses dropped dramatically to as little as 15 per cent in 1992 (Saalfeld, 1997). This finding is correlated with a similar drop of people identifying with political parties, the most important agents of parliamentary politics and the key linkage organisations between government and citizens. Based on similar (if not identical) questions on people's trust in the Bundestag as an institution, Gabriel (2009) demonstrates that levels of trust have not 'recovered' since the early 1990s. If anything, they have declined further.

Figure 2: Confidence in the German Bundestag 1984-2006 (Western and Eastern Germany)



Source: Graph generated from data in Gabriel (2009: 420)

Although surveys of this type provide merely a series of snapshots taken at discrete points in time, there is little doubt that confidence in the 2000s seem to have remained at levels much lower than observed in the 1960s, 1970s or even 1980s. Levels of confidence are declining both in Western and Eastern Germany. Initially the aggregate drop in levels of confidence in Germany may have been partly a result of markedly lower levels of confidence in Eastern Germany. These levels have remained lower in the East, they have continued to decline from these lower levels, but the differences between East and West are no longer as clear-cut as in the early 1990s, mainly resulting from a sharper decline of confidence in the West (Figure 1).

Paradoxically, this decline occurred despite the fact that the Bundestag has become a more professional, open, transparent and active parliament since the 1960s – and despite the fact that German citizens are much better informed. This apparent

paradox is similar to the experience of other liberal democracies and has attracted considerable attention in the US (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; 2002) as well as in Germany itself (e.g., Gabriel, 2009; Patzelt, 1998, 2005; Roericht and Patzelt, 2003). Therefore, it is unlikely to be a result of specifically ‘German’ contextual factors, although specific events may have contributed to the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ observed within that longer-term trend. The gap between improving institutional performance on the one hand and public confidence on the other may be partly due to changing citizen expectations (Norris, 1999; Putnam and Pharr, 2000), partly owing to continuing deep misunderstandings of the logic of parliamentary democracy (Patzelt, 1998), or simply result from a dislike of seemingly adversary and indecisive parliamentary politics on the part of citizens (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Patzelt, 2005).

Table 5: Respondents Expressing Confidence in German Institutions: The Bundestag in Comparison, 1984-2008

| | 1984 | 1994 | 2000 | 2002 | 2008 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Universities | 56.9 | 59.3 | 69.8 | 68.0 | 67.4 |
| Police | 64.3 | 58.3 | 66.2 | 64.7 | 65.5 |
| Federal Constitutional Court | 69.8 | 56.2 | 59.5 | 61.6 | 61.9 |
| Judiciary | 55.1 | 43.9 | 45.2 | 46.4 | 47.0 |
| Newspapers | 35.9 | 31.3 | 32.0 | 31.0 | 35.2 |
| Federal Government | 48.3 | 26.1 | 26.6 | 28.2 | 29.2 |
| Bundestag | 50.0 | 26.1 | 25.5 | 30.9 | 26.9 |
| Television | 32.6 | 23.2 | 21.0 | 22.0 | 24.3 |
| European Parliament | — | 20.5 | 22.7 | — | 22.6 |
| Political Parties | — | — | — | 14.8 | 14.1 |
| Trade Unions | 32.0 | 28.0 | 32.6 | — | — |
| Employers’ Associations | 31.9 | 23.3 | 23.8 | — | — |

Source: Calculated from ALLBUS Kumulation 1980-2008, items V204, V205 (Bundestag), V210, V211, V212, V213, V214, V215, V216, V217, V220, percentage of respondents expressing confidence in the listed institutions (scale values 5 to 7 on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 [no confidence at all] to 7 [very strong confidence]). The institutions are ranked in descending order on their values for 2008.

The latter point is plausible if one considers the trust Germans have in other public institutions. Table 5 demonstrates that non-partisan bodies such as courts, universities or the police force have clearly not suffered as steep a decline in public trust than the Bundestag and, indeed, the political parties.

Conclusions

The link between citizens and Members of the Bundestag has been strongly affected by the chamber's culture as a 'committee parliament'. Detailed scrutiny of legislation in committees has effectively had priority over controversial and lively debate on the floor of the chamber. Nevertheless, institutional incentives to maintain close links with voters in the electoral districts have always been strong: the mixed-member system, decentralised candidate selection within the parties and relatively generous state funding of support staff in the constituencies have been the main institutional features in this context. Current surveys suggest that MdBs strongly believe in the electoral utility of maintaining a strong constituency presence.

Whilst the 'armoury' of opposition parties to force public debates on the floor of the chamber has always been impressive compared to Westminster democracies, it has not been until 1983 that opposition parties began to use these tools more extensively and effectively. With their commitment to grass-roots democracy and transparency, the advent of the Greens in the 1983-87 Bundestag increased competition amongst opposition parties and arguably influenced the way Bundestag parliamentary parties used these instruments. A series of procedural reforms agreed by the parties in the chamber has strengthened at least the possibilities and time for topical debates, although these possibilities have remained a necessary rather than a sufficient condition. In recent years, technological advances contributed to a further strengthening of the communication between MdBs and citizens beyond the constituency level. After a slow start, MdBs are now using the internet more extensively to communicate with citizens directly. The Bundestag as a corporate body has devoted resources and employed new technology as well, including much more developed internet presence and the introduction of e-petitions and associated channels for citizen discussion in online forums.

Despite these developments, trust in the Bundestag and in MdBs has continued to decline both in Eastern and, at an accelerated pace, in Western Germany. While the reasons for this seemingly paradoxical development are not entirely clear, the reasons are unlikely to be related to peculiarities of the German polity, at least not since the 1970s when the Federal Republic had matured as a democracy and its political culture was no longer influenced by the authoritarian traditions of the past. Like in other contemporary advanced liberal democracies, German citizens have become more accepting of democratic norms, but they have also become more critical – and similar to their US counterparts, German citizens seem to prefer decisive, clear, non-partisan action to seemingly unproductive political controversies and 'squabbles' on the floor of the chamber.

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Notes

¹ Ralf Dobmeier is the author of those parts of this contribution that deal with the use of Facebook and Twitter.

² There may be so-called 'excess mandates' (Überhangmandate): If a party gains more 'direct' constituency mandates than it would be entitled to according to its proportional share of the vote, the party keeps these seats and the Bundestag is enlarged.

³ The German Candidate Study 2005 is a largely standardised survey of all 2,346 candidates of SPD, CDU, CSU, FDP, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and Linkspartei standing for the Bundestag election of September 2005. The field phase was October to December 2005. The response rate amongst all candidates was approximately 44 per cent. With 212 responses from those who eventually got elected to the Bundestag, the response rate amongst MdBs was around 34 per cent. For further information see the principal investigators' website on http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte/gcs/homepage_e.html.

⁴ So-called 'fake accounts' were excluded.

⁵ These averages represent the total number of petitions received by the Bundestag in a parliamentary term divided by the number of full months the respective parliamentary term lasted.

⁶ Petitions are not considered, for example, if the issues at stake are subject to court proceedings, if they only express opinions, if they are anonymous or insulting. The largest category of petitions not considered were those referred to the Petitions Committee of state parliaments, because the subject matter fell within the ambit of state competencies.