



General  
information  
about Germany



## The political and legal system in Germany

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany is the 'Grundgesetz' (Basic Law).

Articles 1–19 of the Basic Law are the constitutional rights which every individual holds before the state. The most important aspects of the basic rights are:

- ▶ The protection of human dignity
- ▶ The right to life and physical integrity
- ▶ Equality before the law\*
- ▶ Freedom of faith, expression, assembly and the press
- ▶ Freedom to choose and practise a profession
- ▶ Guarantee of property and the right to inherit

### ! \*Equal rights and tolerance in Germany:

Article 3 in the Basic Law explicitly states that men and women have equal rights. Furthermore, discrimination based on sex or gender, parentage, race, language, home country and origin, faith, religious or political opinions and disability is prohibited.

Article 20 entails the constitutional principles which the structure of the political system in Germany is based upon. These are:

- ▶ Federal Republic
- ▶ Democracy
- ▶ Constitutional state
- ▶ Welfare state

## Federal republic

Germany is a federation of 16 states ('Bundesländer'). Each state has its own capital. The capital of the Federal Republic is Berlin.

- ▶ Baden-Württemberg; Stuttgart
- ▶ Bayern (Bavaria); Munich
- ▶ Berlin; Berlin
- ▶ Brandenburg, Potsdam
- ▶ Bremen; Bremen
- ▶ Hamburg; Hamburg
- ▶ Hessen (Hesse); Wiesbaden
- ▶ Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), Schwerin
- ▶ Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony); Hannover
- ▶ Nordrhein-Westfalen (North Rhine-Westphalia); Düsseldorf
- ▶ Rheinland-Pfalz (Rhineland-Palatinate); Mainz
- ▶ Saarland; Saarbrücken
- ▶ Sachsen (Saxony); Dresden
- ▶ Sachsen-Anhalt (Saxony-Anhalt); Magdeburg
- ▶ Schleswig-Holstein; Kiel
- ▶ Thüringen (Thuringia); Erfurt

## Democracy

Germany is a democratic state which means that it is ruled by the people. Integral aspects of a democracy are:

- ▶ Elections
- ▶ Separation of Powers
  - Executive (government and administration)
  - Legislature (parliament)
  - Judiciary (courts)

## Welfare state

Germany is a welfare state. In general, German citizens provide for themselves. However, the welfare state safeguards them from certain risks through insurance, e.g. health insurance or unemployment insurance. The welfare state also seeks to compensate for economic differences between citizens, e.g. through free access to schools and universities.

## Political life in Germany

### Political parties

Every citizen has the right to be politically active on the local, state or federal level. Possible forms of political involvement are interest groups, citizens' initiatives, trade unions and political parties.

Parties nominate their candidates for the following elections:

- ▶ Local (municipal), city council elections
- ▶ State parliaments ('Länderparlamente')
- ▶ Federal parliament ('Bundestag')
- ▶ European Parliament

If you are interested in a party's political agenda, you can look up and read its party programme online.

## Elections

Elections in Germany are general, direct, free, equal and secret (Article 38 Basic Law).

German citizens can vote in all elections. If you are a citizen of another EU country and registered with the municipal authority, you may vote and be elected (in some states) in municipal elections ('Kreise and Gemeinden').

## Integration councils and advisory boards

Integration councils and advisory boards ensure the representation of immigrants (e.g. Integrations(bei)rat, Migrations(bei)rat, Ausländerbeirat). They usually have an advisory function regarding issues of migration, immigration and integration. They sometimes also hold the rights to petition or to speak at local government meetings.



### Websites for more information

**Federal Agency for Civic Education**  
www.bpb.de

**Federal Immigration and Integration Council** ('Bundeszuwanderungs- und Integrationsbeirat')

www.bzi-bundesintegrationsrat.de  
**Municipal Elections for EU citizens**  
www.europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/residence/elections-abroad/municipal-elections/germany/index\_en.htm



Photo: colourbox.de

### Freedom of religion

The Basic Law guarantees the freedom of faith and conscience and the freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed as well as the undisturbed practice of religion. This also entails that you may have no religion at all.

There is no state religion in Germany. Additionally, the state may not favour or discriminate against any religion.

The majority of Germans are Christian and belong to the Catholic or Protestant Church. The third-largest religious community in Germany are Muslims. Other religious denominations in Germany are Jews, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists etc.

German holidays (Sundays, Easter, Christmas) are predominantly rooted in Christian traditions. However, in some states, it is possible to exempt children from school for holidays of other religions.

In Bavaria, religious education is a mandatory subject. However, parents can choose from three variations of the subject: Catholic religious education, Protestant religious education and Ethics, which is non-denominational. You should ask your child's teacher about the specific possibilities and regulations at its school.

### Safety

Germany is a relatively safe country. While you should not take any unnecessary risks (e.g. walking around in badly lit areas at night or leaving front doors unlocked), you do not have to be overly worried about crime.

### Police

The German police are trustworthy and provide reliable assistance. The police patrol on foot, by bike, by car, by motorcycle and sometimes on horseback.

You can call the police free of charge by dialling 110 if you are in an emergency, in an accident or need help. If you have lost your wallet or your bike was stolen, the police might be able to help you as well. If you are not sure whether you should call or not—remember that it is better to be safe than sorry.