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The German President

Who is Frank-Walter Steinmeier and what is his role?

With Chancellor Angela Merkel reliably the focus of international interest in German politics, it is all too easy for observers from abroad to overlook the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany is just that: a federal republic. Power in Germany is spread across a range of persons and institutions, and so the relentless slew of articles about "Merkel", her intentions and her prospects, blinds many observers to the complexity and diversity of Germany's political system.

A case in point was the election of Frank-Walter Steinmeier as Germany's next president on Sunday 12th February, which barely scraped a mention in most international news outlets, doing slightly better on social networks thanks to eye-catching photos of the colourful cast of electors (including a celebrity drag queen and national football trainer Jögi Löw). For many outside of Germany, the images raised two questions: why do sports coaches and TV personalities get to elect Germany's president? And: Germany has a president?

More than just a title

The President of the Federal Republic of Germany is the head of state, signing international treaties, welcoming state visitors to the official Berlin residence of Bellevue, and naming the Chancellor following elections or changes of government. In terms of heads of state, Germany's system locates the office of president somewhere in between the operational and ceremonial ends of the scale (the US and French presidents are highly operational; the British monarch almost entirely ceremonial). The President is elected for a period of five years, but indirectly by the *Bundesversammlung* or Federal Convention, a body convened solely for the purposes of electing the President and composed of the elected members of the national parliament (*Bundestag*) and of delegates from the regional parliaments, many of whom send prominent personalities along with elected politicians (hence the Jögi Löw/drag queen snaps).

This indirect mandate is the reason why the German President is expected to leave the business of government to the Chancellor, who draws legitimacy from popular support for their policies as expressed in a general election. It is the President, however, who enacts laws resulting from policy – and may refuse to sign an act if he or she discerns a violation of the constitution. The historical reason for this particular provision is key to understanding the German President's importance: the Nazis came to power by popular vote. In a situation in which a general election is won by a party seeking to dismantle the existing democratic order, the President's ability to refuse unconstitutional laws is expected to be one of the barriers to a repeat of the country's descent into dictatorship. In a contrasting reaction to the failure of Weimar democracy, the President may not, however, rule by decree, an ability held by Weimar presidents of which is considered to have created political and legal precedent for Hitler's dictatorial powers.

The historical backdrop against which the office of president in the Federal Republic was conceived has made exercising it into a complex balancing act: while it is all too easy to be criticised for overstepping the mark, occupants of Bellevue can also come under fire for being too quiet. Since, beyond its role in a constitutional emergency, the office of president is not politically decisive, most active politicians are unwilling to stand; yet political outsiders may lack an understanding for the complexities of the role. As such, finding a suitable candidate who can unite cross-party support in the Congregation is a political headache of the first order, and experienced Social Democrat Steinmeier has already gained a lot of respect for giving up an active political role as Foreign Minister in the current CDU-SPD Coalition in order to take up what many consider to be a poisoned chalice.

Walking a political tightrope

Horst Köhler, for instance, although elected in 2004 on the initiative of Angela Merkel's CDU, made his growing disagreements with the tax and business policy intentions of her second coalition government clear and was frequently told to rein is his criticism, resigning mid-term in 2010 after ill-advisedly talking about German economic interests and "war" in the context of the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan. His successor Christian Wulff, however, was considered a shallow political lightweight – and resigned during media investigations into his personal financial connections to business magnates during his preceding tenure as head of the state of Lower Saxony.

What Wulff's two-year presidency made clear was that, for all the uncertainty about the precise political remit of the office, Germany

expects clear moral leadership from its president. Joachim Gauck, Wulff's successor and still President until Steinmeier is sworn in on 18th March, is widely considered to have saved the role from this toxic cocktail of controversy and irrelevance: a church pastor who headed the Office for Stasi Records from 1990 to 2000, Gauck is an unquestioned moral authority who, having campaigned for and been instrumental in the fall of the East German dictatorship, remains vocal and eloquent about the importance of democracy. With Germany suffering the same rise in populist sentiment sweeping the western world, his convictions gained new urgency in his final months as president, prompting weekly DIE ZEIT to comment that, on the eve of his departure, he is needed more than ever. (In a telling sign of the complexities the role, however, the paper also published an opinion piece criticising Gauck as self-obsessed and overly concerned with speechifying.)

Nevertheless, Steinmeier looks set to maintain Gauck's emphasis on constitutional democracy (a cogent focus given the office's political *raison d'être*), proclaiming in his acceptance speech that "When the foundations are shaking elsewhere, we must shore up these foundations with renewed vigour." The office of President of the Federal Republic of Germany might just find itself becoming better known internationally in the coming years.



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