

Germany

A variety of local elections in a federal system

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The structure and functioning of local government in Germany

Germany has a long federal tradition. It formally comprises the federal level and the states (*Länder*). Constitutionally speaking, local government is not a third tier of government but part of the states' administrations (executive branches). However, Article 28(2) of the German Basic Law guarantees the protection of the institution of local authorities, the principle of 'universality of duties': local authorities can regulate and administer their own affairs in their own responsibilities, and they are entitled to defend themselves before the courts in cases of interference from their state governments or any other territorial corporation (Knemeyer 2001: 174). This guarantee applies to local governments across all states. Apart from that, each state has its own local government constitution (*Gemeindeordnung* or *GemO*) – enacted by the respective state governments – that defines the institutional framework of local government. Other state-specific laws such as local electoral laws complement these local constitutions.¹ Local government in Germany is attributed a high degree of autonomy (Ladner et al. 2019; Vetter 2007; Hesse 1991). Due to German cooperative federalism, local governments traditionally have a multipurpose profile. They fulfill not only self-governing functions (e.g., general administration of the municipality, housing construction and city planning, public transport, culture, recreation, and sports) but also functions delegated to them by the federal or respective state government. While they enjoy great discretion over self-governing functions, they have little to no discretion over mandatory or delegated responsibilities (water supply, wastewater disposal, waste disposal, issuing passports and identity cards, vehicle licensing, etc.). Germans show higher trust in local and regional authorities than in state or federal authorities. Similarly, they are more satisfied with local democracy than with democracy at higher levels of government (Vetter 2011: 6, 2019: 14).

Due to the federal structure, the institutional framework of local government varies from state to state. Germany has 16 states, three of which are city states: Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen. As their administrations fulfill both state and local government functions, this chapter refers only to local governments and local elections in the remaining 13 states. In all of them, local government is a two-tier system consisting of districts (*Kreise*) and municipalities (*Kommunen*). Some of these municipalities – mainly large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants – are independent (*kreisfreie Städte*), fulfilling the functions of both a district

and a municipality. All other municipalities belong to a district. The 13 states differ with regard to the number and average size of their municipalities: while municipalities in densely populated North Rhine-Westphalia have about 45,000 inhabitants on average, municipalities in Rhineland-Palatinate have only 1,800 (see Table 11.1). After reunification, the total number of municipalities in Germany was about 16,000. Today, only about 10,800 remain, mainly as the consequence of amalgamations in the east German states, where the number of municipalities has been reduced by 68%. Similar amalgamations had already taken place in west Germany in the early 1970s, when the number of municipalities was reduced by more than 60%.

Until the 1990s, local government systems in Germany followed one of four models: the Magistrate form (*Magistratsverfassung*), the strong mayor form (*Bürgermeisterverfassung*), the North German council form (*Norddeutsche Ratsverfassung*), or the South German council form (*Süddeutsche Ratsverfassung*) (Gunlicks 1986: 73ff.; Knemeyer 1999). In all four models, the elected council was formally the highest decision-making body of the municipality. The systems

Table 11.1 Number and average size of municipalities across the German states, 1991 and 2020

	Number of municipalities (independent or part of a district)			Average number of inhabitants (in 1,000)		
	1991	2020	Change	1991	2020	Change
Schleswig-Holstein	1,131	1,106	-2%	2.3	2.6	12%
Hamburg	1	1	0%	1,659	1,841	11%
Lower Saxony	1,031	942	-9%	7.2	8.5	18%
Bremen	2	2	0%	341	341.5	0%
North Rhine-Westphalia	396	396	0%	44	45.3	3%
Hesse	426	422	-1%	13.6	14.8	9%
Rhineland-Palatinate	2,304	2,302	0%	1.6	1.8	8%
Baden-Wuerttemberg	1,111	1,101	-1%	8.9	10.1	13%
Bavaria	2,051	2,056	0%	5.6	6.4	13%
Saarland	52	52	0%	20.7	19.1	-8%
Berlin	1	1	0%	3,436	3,645	6%
Brandenburg	1,794	417	-77%	1.4	6	322%
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	1,124	726	-35%	1.7	2.2	31%
Saxony	1,626	419	-74%	2.9	9.7	235%
Saxony-Anhalt	1,367	218	-84%	2.1	10.1	386%
Thuringia	1,710	634	-63%	1.5	3.4	123%
Total East	7,621	2,414	-68%	1.9	5.2	171%
Total West	8,506	8,381	-1%	7.7	8.4	9%
Total	16,127	10,795	-33%	5.0	7.7	55%

Note: The table does not display the very limited number of areas not belonging to any municipality or district (gemeindefreie Gebiete; $N = 210$ in 2020, mainly located in Bavaria and Lower Saxony). These areas are either state or federal property or the property of the Bundesanstalt für Immobilienaufgaben. Most of these areas are uninhabited (forest and water areas, military training areas, etc.).

Sources: Number of municipalities and inhabitants 2020, www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Laender-Regionen/Regionales/Gemeindeverzeichnis/Administrativ/Archiv/Verwaltungsgliederung/Verwalt1QAktuell.html (accessed August 2020); number of inhabitants 1991, www.statistik-bw.de/VGRdL/tbls/tab.jsp?rev=RV2014&tbl=tab20&lang=de-DE (accessed August 2020)

differed, however, in terms of the power of the local council vis-à-vis the local executive branch and the degree of party politicization. In the South German council form (Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg), the council was weakest. The mayor was directly elected for eight years. He or she headed both the council and the administration, and consensual policymaking was dominant with a low degree of party politicization. In the strong mayor form (Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, and part of Schleswig-Holstein), the mayor was elected by council majority for a term of ten years. He or she not only chaired council committees and meetings and controlled the agenda but was also the chief administrative officer and the legal and ceremonial head of the town. In the Magistrat form (Hesse and parts of Schleswig-Holstein), the council was headed by a chairperson elected from the council members. The council elected the executive committee (*Magistrat*), consisting of the mayor and several deputies, with all members being equal and having one vote each. In the North German council form (North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony), the council was strongest vis-à-vis the executive branch. The mayor was elected by the council as the chairperson and the ceremonial head of town. However, the councilors also elected a chief administrative officer, leading to a kind of ‘city manager form’ of local government and administration. In the early 1990s, major institutional reforms that were described as the ‘triumphal march of the South German municipal constitution’ (Knemeyer 1999: 105; Wollmann 2003) led to a convergence of the local institutional systems: while citizens were given more means to participate in local politics, the strength of (national) parties in local politics weakened (Vetter 2009).

Today, local councils constitutionally are still the main body of the local political systems, but mayors are directly elected and citizens may initiate binding referendums in all states. Even small local lists may now obtain seats on the local councils, as thresholds have been abolished. And voters may change the parties’ candidate lists by splitting and/or cumulating their multiple votes (exceptions: North-Rhine Westphalia and Saarland). These institutional features follow the model of local government that has predominated in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria since the 1950s. With the exception of these two forerunner states, all state governments also passed legislation in the 1990s that allows mayors to be recalled, with the vote being initiated either exclusively by the citizens or by the local councils or the citizens (Kuhlmann 2009: 240; Holtmann et al. 2017: 100–101). Due to these changes, today most local government systems follow the strong mayor model (Kuhlmann 2009; Egner 2017; Heinelt et al. 2018). Despite this trend of convergence, however, we still find differences in local policymaking due to path dependencies: there is higher politicization and a more competitive way of policymaking in North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, and Hesse, while local policymaking in Baden-Wuerttemberg and the east German states has always been characterized as more consensual (Holtkamp 2008: 121; Bogumil and Holtkamp 2013: 36ff.).

Horizontal and vertical characteristics of local elections in the German multilevel system

In every state, local elections for municipal and district councils are held on the same day, but election days (and years) differ from state to state. In general, the concurrence of local council and federal or state elections is avoided to guarantee the independence of local elections from political trends at higher levels of government. This is not the case for local and European elections, however: in 1979, two states (Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate) started to hold local council elections on the day elections to the European Parliament were scheduled. Today, local council elections coincide with elections to the European Parliament in nine out of 16 states.

While federal elections are held every four years, the local council legislative term is five years in all states except Bavaria (six years). In Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg, mayors have been elected directly since the 1950s. In the other 11 of the 13 states discussed here, the respective state governments introduced direct election of mayors during the 1990s, following a trend that had started in Hesse and was, in some states, partly a response to pressure from the opposition parties at the state levels (Vetter 2009). The direct election of mayors coincides with local council elections only in Bavaria. In all other states, mayoral and council elections are held separately, with the terms of office differing for councils and mayors (Bogumil and Holtkamp 2013: 32). North Rhine-Westphalia is currently changing back to concurrent elections of councils and mayors. Binding local referendums (direct democracy) have by now been institutionalized in all states, although the legal frameworks differ in terms of thresholds for signatures and quotas for the approval of the referendums. Referendums only rarely coincide with other local, state, European, or federal elections (Kost 2013; Mehr Demokratie e.V. 2018).

Whether local elections and their outcomes have a barometric function for the governments of the states or the federal government is questionable for two reasons. First, due to the differences between the local and the national party systems, it is unclear whether voters explicitly want to punish or reward the federal or state governments or whether they just prefer local lists to represent them in the local councils. Second, local elections are not held on the same day in all states (except for those states with concurrent local and European elections), and their outcomes do not affect the power relationship between governing and opposition parties either at the state or at the federal level. This is why their salience is low and nationwide attention to their outcomes from the media or the parties at higher system levels is limited.

Local electoral systems: trending toward more power to the citizens

Local electoral systems across the German states differ, and they underwent several changes in the 1990s (Meyer 2007; Table 12.2). The juridical regulations are specified either in the local constitution of each state or in additional state-specific local electoral laws. Voter registration is automatic for all elections in Germany. The active right to vote in federal elections is restricted to people with German citizenship, and the minimum voting age is 18. These regulations differ for local elections: citizens of Germany and other EU member states are entitled to vote if they have lived in the respective municipality for a certain time, which varies from state to state [e.g., three months in Baden-Wuerttemberg (§12(1) GemO BW) or 16 days in North Rhine-Westphalia (§7 KWG NRW)]. Voting age differs as well: since the 1990s, 11 out of 13 states have lowered the voting age in local elections from 18 to 16. The state legislators were more reluctant to change the minimum age for state elections. The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds in the total population is about 3%. Empirical studies of federal elections have shown that turnout for the youngest age group is somewhat higher than for the age cohort 21–25, but nevertheless is well below the general average.² The same seems to hold for local elections (Leininger and Faas 2020: 155).

In all states, mayoral elections follow a two-round majority system (age and citizenship requirements for participation in mayoral elections are the same as for local council elections), while local councils are elected via systems of proportional representation with only minor exceptions, mainly in very small municipalities in Rhineland-Palatinate (Holtmann et al. 2017: 95; Meyer 2007: 432). Local elections are usually held at large. In those states where the local electoral laws allow voters to split and/or cumulate their multiple votes, parties offer open lists to the electorate.³ The number of votes ranges from three (Lower Saxony and the five east

German states) to as many votes as there are seats on the council. Council sizes in the states differ according to the size of the municipalities. For example, the number of votes in Baden-Wuerttemberg is eight in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, and 60 in municipalities with more than 400,000 inhabitants. In Hesse, the number varies between 15 votes in municipalities with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, and 105 votes in municipalities with more than 1 million inhabitants. North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland are the only states where closed lists are still used, and voters may cast only one vote in the council elections. Local elections also differ with regard to the formula used to translate votes into seats: the d'Hondt method favoring bigger parties is used in Saxony and Saarland. The other states follow either the Hare/Niemeyer or the Sainte-Laguë/Schepers method. Finally, thresholds for local council elections, which used to vary between 3% and 5%, were abolished in all states where they existed (Table 11.2).

Turnout, party systems, and gender across states: variations in detail – similarities in trends

In Germany, voter registration is automatic for elections at all levels (local, state, federal, European). Therefore, the number of eligible voters and the number of registered voters are more or less the same, and turnout is measured as the percentage of eligible voters who actually cast their vote(s).⁴ Turnout for local council elections in Germany has always been lower than turnout for national elections (Vetter 2019). Exceptions are rare cases of local elections that were held together with federal elections, as in North Rhine-Westphalia in 1994 and in Brandenburg in 1998. Comparing turnout figures across states and over time, the data indicate persistent differences in the levels of local turnout (Figure 11.1). In the 1950s, local turnout in Saarland, for example, was 87.6%, while in Baden-Wuerttemberg it was below 70% (18.4% difference; Vetter 2019). By the beginning of the new millennium (2002–2005), local turnout was 63.2% in Bavaria, but only 42.1% in Saxony-Anhalt (21.1% difference). This pattern suggests that the level of local council election turnout is affected by institutional, cultural, or political contexts that vary among states and that explain path dependency over time. Baden-Wuerttemberg, in general, shows the lowest local council turnout rates compared to other west German states. Turnout rates in Saarland, Bavaria, Hesse, and Rhineland-Palatinate have always been significantly higher. Voter participation in Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, and North Rhine-Westphalia tends to fall in between. Turnout in east Germany is generally lower than in west Germany, a fact that holds not only for local council elections but for federal and state elections as well.

Apart from these interstate differences, the level of turnout for local council elections in Germany has developed in remarkably similar ways over the last three decades. At the end of the 1980s, local council turnout averaged above 70%. The situation changed in the 1990s, when local turnout started to fall sharply in all states. By 2016, average participation in local elections in the west German states was 51.6%. In the east German states, turnout was even lower at 49.9% on average. To conclude, local election turnout has fallen by almost 20 percentage points since the beginning of the 1990s, and the decline in turnout was far more pronounced for local than for federal elections (1990–2013: –6.3 percentage points).

The declining trend seems to have come to a halt and even been reversed in those states where the latest local elections were held on the same day as the elections to the European Parliament on 26 May 2019: turnout for local council elections that day was, on average, about 10 percentage points higher than for the 2014 elections. This unexpected change is attributable to the high salience of EP elections in 2019. But turnout had already increased for the latest federal election in 2017 and the latest state elections. The rising trend is linked to increasing politicization due to issues such as climate change, immigration, the future of the European Union, and the rise of the

Table 11.2 Variations in the electoral systems in 13 German states

State	Legislative term (since year)	Voting systems (2019) ¹	Number of votes (since year)	Concurrent EU elections (since year)	Voting age (since year)	Seat allocation (since year)	Abolition of thresholds (year)
Baden-Wuerttemberg	5 (1979)	PR with open lists	Max. (1953)	Yes (1994) ²	16 (2014)	Sainte-Laguë (1946)	1953
Bavaria	6 (1960)	PR with open lists	Max. (1946)	–	18	Sainte-Laguë (1949)	1956
Hesse	5 (2001)	PR with open lists	Max. (2001)	–	18	Hare/Niemeyer (2001)	1999
Lower Saxony	5 (1979)	PR with open lists	3 (1981)	–	16 (1996)	Hare/Niemeyer (1981)	1946
North Rhine-Westphalia	5 (1964)	PR with closed lists	1	Yes (2014) ²	16 (1999)	Sainte-Laguë (2009)	2004
Rhineland-Palatinate	5 (1964)	PR with open lists	Max. (1989)	Yes (1979)	18	Sainte-Laguë (2014)	1989
Saarland	5 (1974)	PR with closed lists	1	Yes (1979)	18	d'Hondt (1959)	2009
Schleswig-Holstein	5 (1998)	Personalized PR with closed lists	As many as there are direct mandates	–	16 (1998)	Sainte-Laguë (2013)	1994
Brandenburg	5 (1993)	PR with open lists	3 (1990)	Yes (2014)	16 (2014)	Hare/Niemeyer (1990)	1993
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	5 (1994)	PR with open lists	3 (1990)	Yes (1994)	16 (1999)	Hare/Niemeyer (1990)	2004
Saxony	5 (1990)	PR with open lists	3 (1990)	Yes (1994)	18	d'Hondt (1994)	1994
Saxony-Anhalt	5 (1994)	PR with open lists	3 (1990)	Yes (1994)	16 (1999)	Hare/Niemeyer (1990)	1994
Thuringia	5 (1994)	PR with open lists	3 (1990)	Yes (1994) ²	16 (2019)	Hare/Niemeyer (1990)	2009

¹ Abbreviations: PR, proportional representation; Max, as many votes as there are seats on the local council.² Exceptions: Thuringia in 2004; Baden-Wuerttemberg in 1999; North Rhine-Westphalia in 2019.Source: www.wahlrecht.de/kommunal/index.htm (accessed 13/3/2019) and Holtmann et al. (2017: 96f)

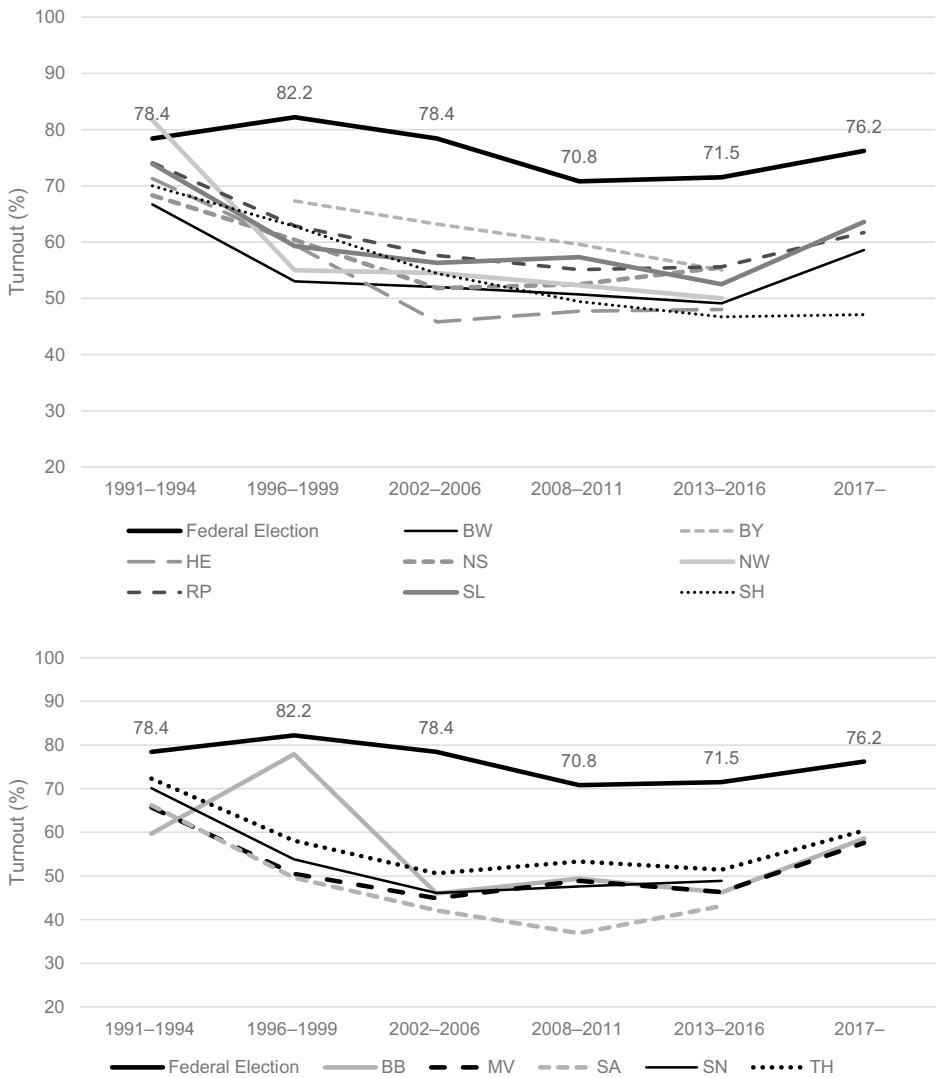


Figure 11.1 Voter turnout for federal and local elections in Germany, 1991–2019

Sources: Author's collection of aggregate data from the states' statistical offices

'new' right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which mobilized conservative, right-wing, and former nonvoters to cast their votes in these elections (Haußner and Leininger 2018).

Data for 11,323 municipalities across 12 states for the years between 1998 and 2002 show a significant and strong negative relationship between municipality size and local turnout (Pearson's $R = -0.56^{**}$).⁵ The strong negative effect holds for all states and was replicated using data from the most recent local council elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg (2019) and North-Rhine Westphalia (2014; see Figure 11.2).

Regarding the political context of local elections in Germany, the story is again one of differences. We find consensual patterns of local policymaking in states such as Baden-Wuerttemberg,

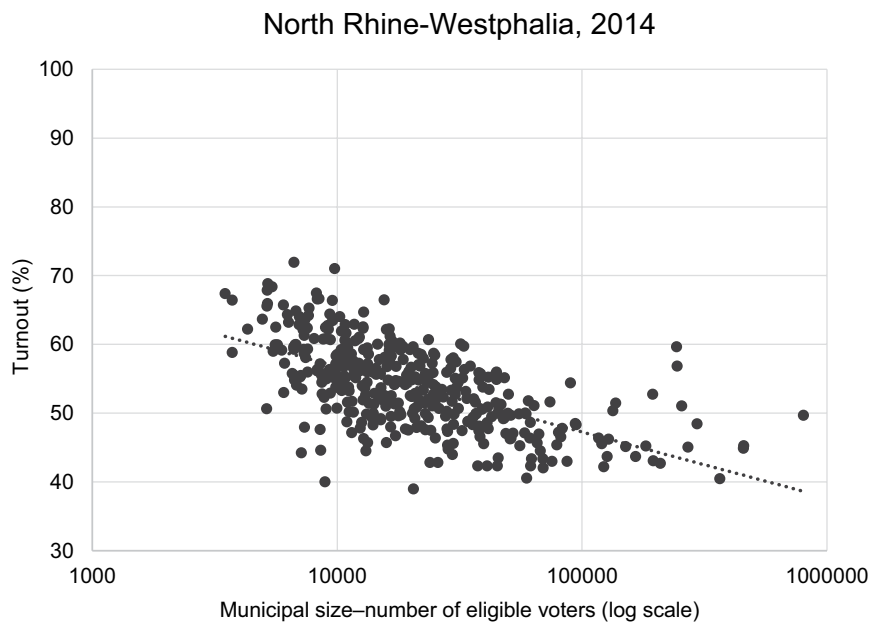
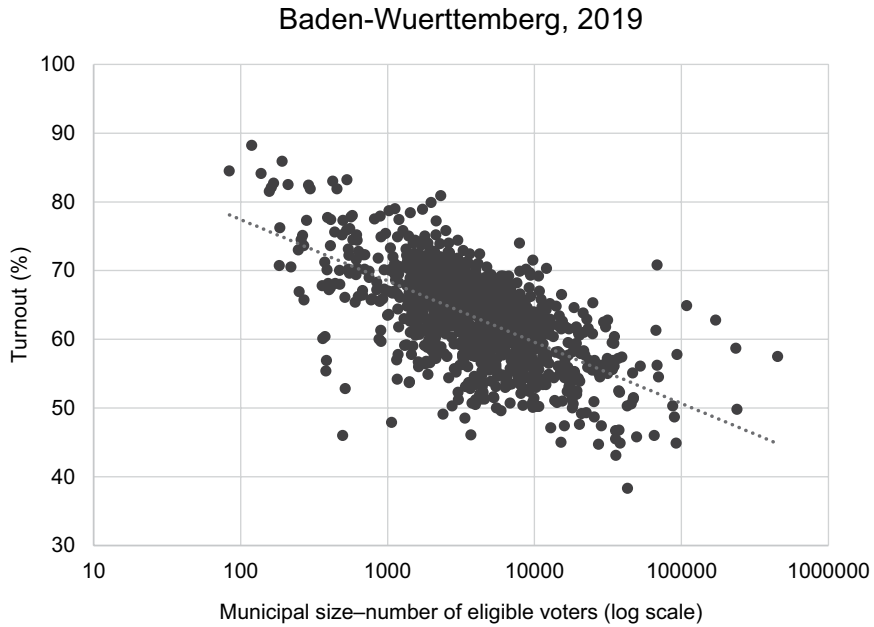


Figure 11.2 Voter turnout for local council elections in Baden-Wuerttemberg (2019) and North Rhine-Westphalia (2014) by number of eligible voters

Source: Author's calculations based on data collected from the statistical offices in North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Wuerttemberg

where the nationalization of the local party systems is low, municipalities tend to be small, mayors have a strong position vis-à-vis the councils, and electoral systems are more personalized. More competitive patterns of local policymaking still predominate in states such as North-Rhine Westphalia or Saarland, where the local party systems are characterized by a high degree of nationalization, municipalities tend to be large, electoral systems are less personalized, and mayors are less powerful vis-à-vis the councils. Since the institutional reforms in the early 1990s (see previous discussion), there has been a trend toward more consensual local policymaking, but competitive patterns in North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland can still be observed due to path-dependencies and differences in the institutional design (Holtkamp 2008).

The fragmentation of the party systems in the German multilevel system has increased at all levels since 1990. At the federal level, the effective number of parliamentary parties rose from 2.6 in 1990 to 5.1 in 2017 due to losses by the two formerly largest parties, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and Social Democrats (SPD), a rising number of seats for smaller parties such as Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Greens) and PDS/Die Linke (Left), and the emergence of the new right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has held seats in the Bundestag since 2017. The trend at the local level is similar. First, local party systems traditionally differ across states with regard to their degree of nationalization (i.e., the presence of national parties at the local level). In North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland, national political parties still win a high share of votes in local elections. These parties win far smaller percentages (of the vote) in other states, such as Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, Thuringia, and Saxony (Reiser et al. 2008; Holtkamp and Eimer 2006). Table 11.3 shows for two exemplary states (North Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Wuerttemberg) the aggregate shares of votes for national parties

Table 11.3 Shares of votes for national parties and ‘other’ parties/local lists in local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Wuerttemberg, 1994–2019

<i>North Rhine-Westphalia</i>	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	
CDU (Christian Democrats)	40.3	50.3	43.3	38.7	37.5	–
SPD (Social Democrats)	42.3	33.9	31.7	29.4	31.4	–
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Greens)	10.2	7.3	10.3	12.0	11.7	–
FDP (Free Democrats – Liberals)	3.8	4.3	6.8	9.1	4.7	–
PDS/Die Linke (The Left)	–	0.8	1.4	4.3	4.7	–
AfD (Alternative for Germany)	–	–	–	–	2.6	–
Others	3.4	3.4	6.5	6.5	7.4	–
<i>Baden-Wuerttemberg</i>	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
CDU (Christian Democrats)	31.6	36.0	33.2	28.2	28.3	22.1
SPD (Social Democrats)	24.1	21.7	19.9	18.2	17.7	14.1
Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Greens)	7.7	5.2	8.2	10.3	11.5	16.5
FDP (Liberals)	3.5	3.0	3.7	6.2	3.7	4.9
PDS/Die Linke (The Left)	–	–	–	–	1.7	2.2
AfD (Alternative for Germany)	–	–	–	–	1.5	3.0
Others	33.1	34.1	35.0	37.1	35.6	37.2

Notes: Numbers indicate the share of votes (percent) in local elections aggregated at the state level. For North Rhine-Westphalia, this includes council elections in districts and independent municipalities; for Baden-Wuerttemberg, it includes independent municipalities and municipalities that are part of a district. The category ‘others’ comprises local lists and independents, as well as small parties running in state and federal elections, lists from parties and local groups, or single candidates. The reporting of these groups/parties differs between the states’ statistical offices.

Sources: Author’s collection of data from the websites of the states’ statistical offices.

that run in local elections and for other, mainly independent local lists, as well as for smaller parties running in federal elections (see also Goehlert et al. 2008; Morlok et al. 2012). Across all states, the degree of nationalization is lower in smaller municipalities than in larger ones (Kuhn and Vetter 2013). But recent studies show that other parties are becoming stronger even in medium-sized and larger cities. The trend of party system fragmentation therefore holds not only for the federal but also the local level, especially in larger cities (Bogumil 2010: 44f.).

There are no general gender quotas for local elections in Germany. Compared to the state and the federal levels, the number of female representatives is lowest on local councils (Eder et al. 2016). Across all states, the share of female councilors was far below 50% in 2019. The trend across all German states since 2008 shows a minimal increase of around 2 percentage points (Figure 11.3). Again, there is significant variation across the states: while the share of female councilors is around 30% in Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, and

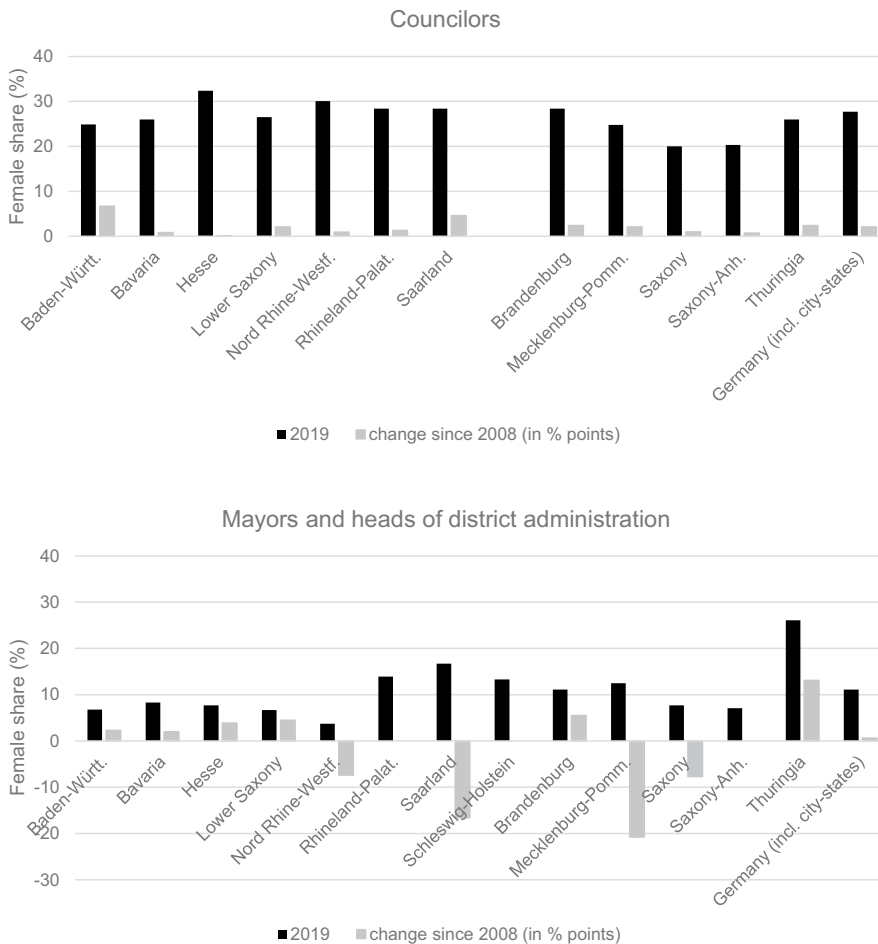


Figure 11.3 Women's representation among German councilors, mayors, and heads of district administrations by state (2019)

Source: Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (2020: 10, 16)

Rhineland-Palatinate, which is similar to the share of female MPs in the federal parliament 2019 (31.2%), it is only about 20% in Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. The share of female candidates seems to be higher where the Greens, the Left, and the Social Democrats hold a significant number of seats on the local councils, as these parties introduced internal gender quotas in the 1980s and 1990s (Holtkamp and Schnittke 2010; Holtkamp et al. 2017). A similar pattern – although at an even lower level – can be observed for the share of female mayors and heads of administration in the districts and independent municipalities, varying between 4% in North Rhine-Westphalia and 26% in Thuringia (2019). Here too, the figures show only a minimal total increase of 0.6 percentage points since 2008.

Discussion

Federalism makes studying local elections in Germany a challenge. There is not only variation in local elections within states, with the size of the municipality being one of the most important variables affecting local elections, but also large variation across states in terms of local elections' institutional, political, and cultural contexts, which trace back for decades. As there is no central or federal office providing data on local elections, local electoral data have to be collected from each state's statistical office individually. This explains at least partly why local election studies in Germany are still rare. Studies using individual level data are even rarer and often refer to single municipalities (e.g., Gabriel et al. 1997; Schmitt-Beck et al. 2008). Despite these difficulties, it is the high number of cases embedded in different structural, institutional, and political contexts that makes studying local elections in Germany interesting.

The contexts of local elections have changed remarkably over the last few decades. We see a converging trend in the institutional frameworks of local politics and local elections across states, which can be summarized as a trend toward a more citizen-oriented way of local policymaking (introduction of directly elected mayors, binding local referendums, abolishment of thresholds for council elections, changes in the electoral systems with more open lists, and opportunities for splitting and cumulating votes; Vetter 2009).

Despite interstate differences and differences between municipalities of different size, local elections also share common characteristics: first, turnout levels remain lower for local than for federal or state elections. But we found a strong, declining trend across all states, which was more pronounced than turnout decline for federal elections. Whether the increasing turnout numbers observed during the latest elections will change this pattern remains to be seen. Some authors conclude that the institutional reforms from the 'decade of democratic innovations', such as the implementation of initiatives or referendums, were the main drivers behind this decline, thereby reducing the importance of local elections for political participation (Klein 2018). But referendums and initiatives are still only rarely used: around 300 initiatives and referendums were held across 11,460 municipalities and districts between 2013 and 2017 (Mehr Demokratie e.V. 2018: 19). And turnout also declined in states where institutional reforms were only marginal (e.g., Baden-Wuerttemberg). It is therefore plausible that the decline in turnout is not paralleled by a significant shift in local participation to other arenas of political activism, but instead has to be explained at least partly by factors such as the enlargement of the electorate due to the Maastricht treaty, which affects all states.

Second, we find similarities across states with regard to changes in the local party systems: fragmentation is rising at both the federal and state levels, but it is stronger at the local level especially in larger municipalities, where an increasing number of votes is cast for independent local lists or small parties challenging national parties in local elections.

Both trends might be indicators of a depoliticization and marginalization of local politics in the German multilevel system. Horizontally, at the local level the rising number of nonvoters might indicate an increasing detachment of citizens from local policymaking. And the fragmentation of the party systems might weaken the capacities of the local councils not only for forming coalitions for effective policymaking but also for controlling the now directly elected and often powerful mayors heading the local administrations. Vertically, fragmentation and the growing success of independent local lists might detach municipalities from policymaking at higher system levels. Local lists have no vertical party linkages across different system levels. They lack the vertically structured national parties' function of local interest representation at higher system levels, except for Bavaria where the *Freie Wähler* voting bloc has recently become a party and a coalition partner in the state government. Local (or municipal) interests in Germany are not represented in an additional chamber either at the state level or at the federal level (in contrast to the states' interests, which are represented in the German Bundesrat). The loss of the national parties' vertical linking potential might therefore result in the marginalization of local politics within the German multilevel governance system. Whether these trends will continue and what consequences they may have deserves attention during the coming years to identify the prospective role of German local democracy within an encompassing European multilevel governance system.

Notes

- 1 The local government constitutions in the west German states were adopted by the respective state governments after World War II and have since been amended several times. In the east German states, they were adopted in 1993 and 1994, followed by several amendments. The local constitutions and local electoral laws can be accessed via www.wahlrecht.de/gesetze.htm#bw-kw.
- 2 See www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/bundestagswahlen/205686/wahlbeteiligung-nach-altersgruppen (accessed August 2020). Further comparative data regarding the openness of the local electoral markets, submunicipal and district voting, and whether and how municipalities are divided into electoral wards are currently not available.
- 3 There is no general information available on how intensively voters make use of ticket splitting and/or cumulating multiple votes in German local elections. Data from the local elections in Stuttgart, the state capital of Baden-Wuerttemberg, show that the number of voters changing ballots has fluctuated over the last 35 years by around 60%, not indicating any trend (Schwarz 2014: 204).
- 4 Data on local turnout refer to elections for the councils of districts and independent municipalities except for Baden-Wuerttemberg, where the data refer to council elections in independent municipalities and municipalities that are part of a district.
- 5 Aggregate turnout data at the municipal level across 12 German states had been collected for the research project 'Kommunale Wahlbeteiligung in den deutschen Bundesländern' (2006–2009) funded by the German Research Foundation DFG. Data for Schleswig-Holstein were not available. Municipal size was measured by the logged number of inhabitants in 2003.

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