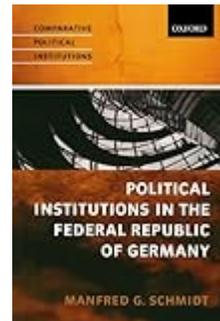


Manfred G. Schmidt. *Political Institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 288 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-878259-9.



Reviewed by John Foster (University of Washington)

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Judged by the standards toward which it explicitly strives, Manfred G. Schmidt's book has much to recommend it. Schmidt is a political scientist at the University of Heidelberg and has published extensively on domestic politics and the role of political parties in the Federal Republic of Germany, both before the *Wende* and since. *Political Institutions* is essentially a textbook intended for upper level undergraduates and graduate students. Schmidt breaks down the complex structure of the German political system into manageable segments, devoting chapters to the executive branch, the role of the legislature, the structure and function of the judiciary, and the various connections between governing institutions and the general population. In keeping with the book's intended function, the author ends each chapter with a series of questions for discussion, as well as a list of relevant further readings which is thorough without being so comprehensive as to be overwhelming.

Schmidt's account is extensively informed by current literature in this field, making particularly heavy reference to Peter Katzenstein's *Policy and Politics in West Germany: The Growth of a Semisovereign State*. Katzenstein's book was one of the most extensive treatments of the structure of governmental institutions in the period before the *Wende*. Schmidt's book is, to a great extent, an attempt to update this treatment in light of the massive

changes (but also significant continuities) that have characterized the government of Germany since 1990. The overall approach of this book is social scientific, with many of the benefits and flaws that, from the historian's perspective, one might expect. While clearly cognizant of theoretical work surrounding this topic (as the extensive bibliography demonstrates), the book is not overburdened by it. Rather, Schmidt's use of the terminology and conceptual frameworks available in the field of comparative politics is, by and large, straightforward and practical. This is certainly a virtue given the Byzantine complexity of German political institutions, as well as of the theoretical frameworks that have been developed to describe them. Schmidt's approach is explicitly institutionalist and clearly aligns itself with the Weberian liberal tradition in German sociology and political science. These tendencies are nowhere more clearly in evidence than at the beginning of the chapter on Germany's parliamentary bodies. Here Schmidt explicitly invokes Weber's critique of the structure of German governmental institutions in the late *Kaiserreich* and early Weimar periods as a means of highlighting the sorts of problems that the postwar German government was attempting to avoid (pp. 74-76).

Schmidt places heavy emphasis on the degree to which the German political institutions involve large

doses of cooperative action between governing parties and those in opposition. As is often the case in works coming out of the social sciences, Schmidt's prose is sparing, although not to the point that it compromises readability for the sake of clarity. Schmidt makes frequent reference in the course of his descriptions to illustrative moments from German politics in the postwar period, but this does not amount to providing a historically thorough account of the development of the institutions in question. In a textbook for courses on comparative politics extensive historical treatment of this topic falls outside the stated purview of the book. However, the lack of a substantial historical dimension gives the book a very presentist demeanor and gives the institutions under discussion a somewhat static appearance. Moreover, while this text is explicitly aimed at students who are not yet fully conversant in the political history of Germany, Schmidt's examples are frequently quite brief and seem to presume a relatively advanced knowledge of German history and politics. One might further quibble with

Schmidt's decision generally to exclude treatment of factors arising outside the proper institutional structures of the state, for instance the *ausserparlamentarische Opposition* that has played such an important role in German political life since the 1960s. From the perspective of the political scientist such matters must seem to fall outside the purview of a work whose purpose is to provide the most concise and useful account possible of the structure of German political institutions. Yet the generally unhistorical qualities of this book hamstring its usefulness from the point of view of instruction in the field of history.

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