



On the status of parliamentarism in general and in Germany in particular

Reflecting on the Occasion of the United Nations International Day of Parliamentarism

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Parliaments seem to be popular. In fact, they are almost universally agreed upon: Today, most countries in the world have some sort of parliament, if only in name. According to the United Nations, there are over 44,000 members of parliament worldwide. However, they operate under very different conditions: There are countries with free elections and countries without free elections; countries with fair competition between parties and candidates and countries where this is not the case; countries where anyone can run for parliament and countries where this is not possible; there are countries where parliaments control the government and a number of others where the government controls the parliament.

This year illustrates that reality in a particularly striking way: 2024 may well go down in history as the year in which more people than ever before will have the opportunity to vote in a single year: All told, in more than 50 national contests, more than 40 percent of the planet's population is expected to vote. In dozens of

other countries, people vote in local, regional and national elections, including, most recently, those for members of the European Parliament. And then there are elections that were not on the schedule to begin with, such as in France. According to the data from *The Economist's* Democracy Index, the most democratic country going to vote is Iceland; the least democratic is North Korea. More importantly, not everywhere where elections are announced elections actually take place - especially with minimum democratic standards. In fact, according to The Economist's annual democracy index for 2023, only 24 of the 167 countries surveyed worldwide are "full" democracies, with only 7.8 percent of the world's population living there.

On the occasion of the United Nations International Day of Parliamentarism on June 30, I would like to take the opportunity to make some basic remarks on the status of parliamentarism in general and in Germany in particular. June 30 is no coincidence because it is the date on which the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) was founded in 1889 as a multilateral political organization to promote international cooperation and resolve conflicts through parliamentary dialogue. Although international cooperation and exchange is not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about the work of parliaments and parliamentarians, interparliamentary exchange has become in fact an important part of bilateral relations between democracies. Parliamentarians promote the interests of their countries as well as dialogue and cooperation with their counterparts and work to build consensus on international issues. The international exchange among parliamentarians is more open, more direct and often more independent and diverse than at the governmental level. In this context, the IPU is a valuable organization that allows parliamentarians from different countries with different traditions and levels of development to exchange experiences.

However, 135 years after the creation of the IPU, it is hard to argue that parliaments and parliamentarians are at the height of their public image. On the contrary, democratic institutions are losing trust and popular support in countries around the world. Populists on the left and right, as well as national movements, are challenging the core beliefs of parliamentary democracies. Recent surveys of Germans' trust in political institutions illustrate the extent of this crisis of confidence: Compared to the previous year, trust ratings for ten key political institutions have fallen, in some cases by double digits. Less than 40 percent of respondents trust the Bundestag, and political parties traditionally come in last with less than 20 percent. Germany is no exception; in the United States, public trust in the federal government is close to record lows - less than 20 percent trust the government, and only 32 percent trust Congress. In the United Kingdom we see a similar result: Parliament and political parties are widely distrusted, with only 24 percent trusting Parliament and 12 percent trusting the parties.

The lack of trust in core institutions of parliamentary democracy indicates that the relationship between those represented and their representatives is noticeably disturbed. A significant part of the public feels that their concerns are overseen or ignored by their elected representatives in parliaments. Such pronounced mistrust, which is reflected not only in polls but also in low voter turnout, has a delegitimizing effect on parliaments. After all, trust is the foundation of our social and political order. Every political mandate is an advance in the confidence of citizens in the future actions of their parliamentarians.

Parliaments can only be as strong and trustworthy as their members. Not surprisingly, the loss of trust is partly due to the misconduct of some representatives who shamelessly exploit privileges or enrich themselves in unseemly ways. However, I believe that the widespread distrust of

parliamentarians goes deeper than the bad examples of a few bad apples. Since we live in the age of identity politics, a frequently cited attempt to explain this concerns the representativeness of parliamentarians. A popular reference here is the proportion of university graduates in a parliament, which is usually higher than in the population as a whole, or the demand for gender parity, the statistically appropriate consideration of younger and older people, people with and without a migration background, to name just a few examples.

But this is a misunderstanding: Representative democracy is based on the political equality of all citizens. Contrary to an identity-political understanding of representation, according to which the interests of bakers or pensioners can best be represented by members of precisely those groups, parliament does not have to be a statistical reflection of society; that is neither its claim nor its purpose. Its task is to make laws, to control the government and to decide on the budget with its revenues and expenditures. To do this, it needs competent and responsible members of parliament, appointed for a limited period of time in free elections in which each voter decides for himself who he wants to represent him.

So what can be done to mend the relationship between citizens and legislators? Politicians have to find answers to complex questions and explain their decisions. It is of fundamental importance whether they generally give answers that they assume will be popular or whether, after a process of deliberation, they arrive at answers that seem politically convincing - with the subsequent task of seeking majorities for them, i.e. making them popular. It becomes questionable when the first mechanism is seen as the only one that promises success.

A key factor in all of this is the ability of members of parliament to communicate with citizens. The more complicated the issues, the more patiently and understandably they must be explained. But communication is not a one-way

street; it is also about listening and responding to citizens' concerns. This is perhaps one of the most important skills for parliamentarians in today's world, especially in the face of highly communication-savvy rivals who know how to influence public debate through their offensive presence on social media and the formulation of seemingly simple solutions.

Public opinion has long regarded more direct citizen participation as an effective means of combating the perceived loss of confidence in parliamentary democracy. This is not wrong, but it ignores the fact that referendums tend to encourage the unacceptable oversimplification of complicated issues and are therefore the ideal platform for populist vote catchers. The Brexit referendum is an important example of this. Those looking for the ideal way out of the crisis of confidence by watering down the idea of representation should also bear in mind that most citizens' petitions and referendums fail due to the low turnout of eligible voters.

The philosopher Volker Gerhardt gave us the simple but accurate observation: "Sovereign is the citizen who entrusts himself to a representative, recognizing that he cannot decide or do everything." In other words, sovereign is the citizen who decides to be represented. A great deal of skepticism on the part of the representatives is inherent in the system and certainly helpful, but without basic trust it is not possible. At the same time, parliamentarians would do well to remember where their power comes from.

The stakes are high. Yet most citizens in established democracies take functioning parliaments, elections, and the rule of law for granted or as the norm. Obviously, this is not the case – not historically and not in terms of the world's political systems today. In fact, one of the crucial lessons of history is that political systems are mortal. This is encouraging with respect to authoritarian systems, which are

also not protected as historical monuments. But we don't realize enough that this is equally and even more true for democratic systems.

No one should know this better than the Germans: This year we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the German constitution, the Basic Law. In 1949 it was already the second attempt to establish democracy in Germany, after the Weimar Republic had failed early and dramatically after less than 14 years and ended in a catastrophe.

There were many reasons for the failure of Germany's first attempt at democracy. According to many historians, the most important reason was that the Weimar democracy did not have the acceptance and broad support it needed to overcome numerous challenges from within and without. It was not, as is sometimes claimed, a "democracy without democrats": there were committed democrats, some of whom gave their lives for democracy. But there were certainly too few of them, and their rivalry among themselves was even more pronounced than their awareness of the common responsibility of all democrats for the validity of the constitution. This is why the first German democracy failed - and why more and more voters gave their votes to anti-democratic parties, until they ended up dominating the freely elected parliament and unhinged the constitution with their majorities.

This is a pattern that has become a spectacularly typical feature of the recent past and of the present. The two US political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt put it in a nutshell in their 2018 book *How Democracies Die*: "Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves. [...] Democratic backsliding today begins at the ballot box." And it continues in parliaments, one might add.

The lesson of Germany's failed first attempt at democracy is therefore clear, but that does not make it easy: Democracy needs democrats. This is a universal lesson for all democracies. They need civic engagement. When this is lacking, democracies bleed or collapse. It is important to recognize that democratic systems are inherently more fragile than authoritarian systems because, unlike authoritarian systems, they provide their opponents with the means to fight against their own norms and rules. Paradoxically, they must also do so in the interest of the seriousness of their own principles, which in turn presupposes that anti-democratic positions will be compensated for and neutralized by a majority of democrats - as long as they exist. Ultimately, the survival of democracies is decided not in marketplaces or courts, but in voting booths and parliaments.

The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, which was adopted as a provisional measure, is now one of the oldest valid constitutions in the world. It is valued and appreciated as a proven basis for our coexistence. But it must be lived, defended and secured against all challenges – as must all democratic constitutions around the world. Our democracies, our freedom, and our future are at stake. And that is our responsibility!

About the Author

Prof. Dr. Norbert Lammert was born on 16 November 1948 in Bochum, Germany. He is married, with four children. He attended grammar school, specializing in classics, & obtained Abitur (higher-education entrance qualification) in 1967.

Following a period of Military service between 1967 & 1969, he went on to study political science, sociology, modern history & social economics at the University of Bochum & the University of Oxford (England) from 1969 to 1975, graduating in 1972, with a doctorate in social sciences to follow in 1975.

He lectured in political science, initially at the universities of applied sciences in Bochum & Hagen, & then at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum up until 2005, becoming an Honorary Professor there in 2008. Prof. Lammert has published numerous works in the field of research into political parties & societal, economic & cultural policy issues. He has also undertaken freelance work as a lecturer and writer.

A Member of the German Bundestag from 1980 to 2017, Prof. Lammert was a Member of the Committee on Economics from 1980 to 1989. From 1983 to 1989, he served as Deputy Chairman of the Committee for the Scrutiny of Elections, Immunity & the Rules of Procedure, & Chairman of the German-Brazilian Parliamentary Friendship Group.

From 1989 to 1998 he served as Parliamentary State Secretary, initially at the Federal Ministry of Education and Science (1989-1994), then at the Federal Ministry of Economics (1994-1997) & the Federal Ministry of Transport (1997/1998). From 1995 to 1998 he was also the Coordinator of German Aerospace Policy, & spokesman on cultural & media policy for the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag from 1998 to 2002.

Since 1999, he has been Chairman of the CDU's discussion group on culture. From 1996 to 2006 he was Chairman of the Bundestag group of CDU parliamentarians from North Rhine-Westphalia. Prof. Lammert held the position of Vice-President of the German Bundestag from October 2002 to 2005 & went on to serve as the President of the German Bundestag from 2005 to October 2017.

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