Facts
The Bundestag at a glance
2 Tasks of the Bundestag
4 German Bundestag – 19th electoral term
6 The Bundestag makes the laws
10 The Bundestag elects the Chancellor
12 The Bundestag scrutinises the Government
14 Members of Parliament – envoys of the people
22 The main organs of the Bundestag and other Bundestag bodies
30 Parliamentary elections
36 Bundestag buildings
38 The Reichstag Building
44 The Paul Löbe Building
46 The Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building
48 The Jakob Kaiser Building
52 More about the Bundestag
The German Bundestag is the supreme constitutional organ of the Federal Republic of Germany and the only organ of the state that is directly elected by the people. As the Basic Law puts it, “All state authority is derived from the people”. And the people – the sovereign body – lend their power to Parliament for a limited time only. Every four years, the voters go to the polls in parliamentary elections to determine who will represent their interests in the Bundestag. State authority is exercised in Germany by the classical triad of legislature, judiciary and executive, each of which checks and balances the others. In the interplay of these three branches, the legislative role devolves on the Bundestag. Only it can enact federal laws that are binding on all people in Germany. This places great responsibility in the hands of Parliament, which guides the nation’s political and social development.

Tasks of the Bundestag
The Bundestag, however, does not only make laws. It also elects the Federal Chancellor, who is head of the executive, that is to say of the Federal Government. The head of government is thus directly determined by Parliament. This shows how closely the constitutional organs are linked in the system of checks and balances, in spite of the separation of powers. The votes of the Members of Parliament also weigh heavily in the election of the Federal President, as the Federal Convention, which elects the Head of State, comprises all the Members of the Bundestag and an equal number of representatives of the federal states (Länder). In addition, the Bundestag is also involved in appointments to other high offices. For example, it elects half of the judges of the Federal Constitutional Court, the President and Vice-President of the Federal Audit Office and the Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information.

The Bundestag exercises an important power of scrutiny over the Government. No Chancellor or government minister can escape this scrutiny. In votes on government projects, the Federal Chancellor depends on the confidence of Parliament. If a government cannot convince the Members of the Bundestag, it cannot pursue its political aims.

In order to perform this scrutinising function, Members of Parliament must be able to inform themselves about the work of the Government and its plans. To this end they have a number of rights and instruments at their disposal, such as major and minor parliamentary questions and debates on matters of topical interest. The Bundestag also forms permanent committees, whose main task is to participate in the legislative process, and special bodies like committees of inquiry, which are appointed almost exclusively for the purpose of scrutinising the Government.

The Bundestag has regulated its own affairs independently in its Rules of Procedure, which set out the requirements for the performance of its tasks, the conduct of its meetings and the manner of its deliberations.
The election to the 19th German Bundestag on 24 September 2017 brought significant changes to the composition of Parliament. The CDU and CSU, which traditionally form one parliamentary group, obtained 246 seats, while the SPD received 153 seats. 69 seats went to The Left parliamentary group, and 67 to Alliance 90/The Greens. The AfD is new to the Bundestag, and obtained 92 seats (94 initially at the start of the electoral term); the FDP, too, is also represented once again this electoral term, with 80 Members. Two Members left the AfD parliamentary group to become independent Members. With 709 Members, the 19th Bundestag is the largest in history in terms of numbers. The CDU/CSU and SPD once again formed a governing coalition, referred to as a “grand coalition”.

On 14 March 2018, the Bundestag elected Angela Merkel (CDU/CSU) as Federal Chancellor for the fourth time. Of the current 709 Members, 263 (approx. 37 percent) are new to Parliament, while 446 parliamentarians already have experience within the Bundestag. The range of ages spans several generations, with the youngest Member, Roman Müller-Böhm (FDP), who was born in 1992, 52 years younger than the Presi-
dent by Seniority, Hermann Otto Solms (FDP). The longest-serving Member is Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU/CSU), who has sat in the Bundestag since 1972 and has thus entered his 13th electoral term there. The proportion of women in the Bundestag is 30.9 percent, a significant decrease compared with the 18th electoral term (approx. 37 percent).

Members’ trades and professions

Many occupations are represented in Parliament, with Members coming from a wide variety of fields: skilled trades and medicine are represented alongside artistic professions, industry and economics. The largest groups in terms of occupational background are the Members who have come from posts in the public sector or from self-employment: 173 are civil servants, 209 belong to independent professions or have been otherwise self-employed. Many are qualified in law, economics, business management or engineering. Fifteen Members are still following courses of study or training.

Members’ faiths

Almost half of all Members of the Bundestag declared that they belonged to one of the two Christian churches in Germany. Two Members are Muslims and one Member belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church. Twenty-two Members state that they have no religious affiliation, while three others are atheists. A room is available in the Reichstag Building for all Members’ religious reflection – the Reflection and Prayer Room, a peaceful and unassumingly spiritual haven designed by Düsseldorf-based artist Günther Uecker. On Thursday and Friday mornings when Parliament is sitting, the bells of Cologne Cathedral ring out in the Bundestag at exactly 8.35. The sound of the bells is reproduced on a tape recording and invites Members to attend morning prayers. The room has been deliberately designed as a multi-faith place of worship but can be given a Christian, Jewish or Muslim tone by means of religious symbols. The stone edge of a raised section of floor shows where east is, enabling Members to face Jerusalem and Mecca.
Decisions are taken in the Bundestag that affect everyone, because only the Bundestag can enact the federal laws that are binding on all people in Germany. Legislation is an extremely complex task and one to which a great deal of parliamentary work is devoted.

Before the legislative process begins, there must first be an initiative, in other words an idea for a legislative bill. A legislative initiative may come from the Federal Government, from within the Bundestag or from the Bundesrat. Many individual steps have to be taken before a law enters into force. A bill cannot pass through the Bundestag without being carefully examined by Members in parliamentary committees and having

The Bundestag makes the laws
its pros and cons documented in amendment motions, committee reports and parliamentary resolutions. For this reason, each bill is discussed three times, as a rule, by Parliament at plenary sittings. These deliberations are known as readings.

At first reading, the discussion is generally about basic principles. In many cases, the House will decide to shorten this stage by referring the bill without debate to the competent committees.

In committee, the bill is probed by specialised politicians from all of the parliamentary groups, who examine its substance and its implications. Hearings of experts can also be arranged for this purpose. The second reading of the bill is then held in the plenary chamber; at this stage it is generally accompanied by proposed amendments. Only after this discussion can the third reading and the final vote take place.

This means that the Members of Parliament vote on every bill, which they do either by standing up or by a show of hands. It can happen that the result is not clear or that the Presiding Committee cannot agree on the outcome. In such cases the Hammelsprung system of division doors is used, in which all Members leave the chamber and re-enter it by one of three doors, marked Ja, Nein and Enthaltung (abstention). Two secretaries are stationed at each door to count the Members through, and in this way a clear result is obtained. The Hammelsprung method is also used if doubts are expressed before a vote as to the presence of a quorum and the Presiding Committee does not ascertain that there is a quorum.

Referral by the House: every bill is examined and discussed by Bundestag committees.
Through the Bundesrat, the 16 federal states (Länder) play a part in national legislation. Bills affecting the interests of the Länder require the explicit consent of the Bundesrat. In the case of other bills, the Bundesrat may lodge an objection to their adoption. If the Bundestag and Bundesrat cannot agree on a bill, they can refer the matter to the Mediation Committee. This committee, comprising 16 representatives each from the Bundestag and Bundesrat, tries to find a compromise. The role of the Mediation Committee can be particularly important when the majority groups in one House are in the minority in the other. If the Mediation Committee arrives at a compromise, this must be put to the vote in the Bundestag and then in the Bundesrat before the new act can enter into force. Sometimes differences of opinion between the Bundestag and Bundesrat prove irreconcilable. In the case of a bill requiring the consent of the Bundesrat, this signals the final defeat of the proposal. In cases where the Bundesrat only has the right of objection, however, the Bundestag can overrule its objection.

The legislative process
1) immediate rejection: referral by the Bundestag or Bundesrat is possible
2) confirmation of the legislative decision or no motion for amendment
3) if amendment motion is rejected, original legislative decision prevails
4) if withdrawal is proposed and the Bundestag gives its consent, the bill is defeated, otherwise it is referred to the Bundesrat
The Federal Chancellor is the head of government in Germany and has a powerful position. He or she determines the guidelines of government policy and proposes candidates for ministerial office to the Federal President. Politically, of course, these decisions are subject to obligations arising from the coalition agreement. The Chancellor is elected by the Bundestag at the start of the electoral term.

The Bundestag elects the Chancellor
The Bundestag may also depose the head of government by means of a constructive vote of no confidence, in which the majority of Members of Parliament express their lack of confidence in the Chancellor. At the same time they must elect a successor. This mechanism, however, is very seldom used and presupposes the loss of a governing majority, for example if a coalition is dissolved or splits. This is why there have only ever been two constructive no-confidence motions in the history of the Bundestag. The first was in 1972, when a CDU/CSU motion to replace Willy Brandt (SPD) was defeated, and the other was in 1982, when Helmut Schmidt (SPD) had to give way to opposition leader Helmut Kohl of the CDU/CSU.

The Federal Chancellor may also table a confidence motion in order to establish whether the majority of the House still supports his or her policies. If the Bundestag denies the Chancellor a vote of confidence, the Basic Law prescribes that the Federal President, acting on a proposal from the Federal Chancellor, may dissolve the Bundestag within 21 days. A confidence motion may, therefore, pave the way for early elections. The Bundestag need not be dissolved, however, if a majority of its Members elects a new Chancellor. There have been five confidence motions, the most recent having been tabled by Gerhard Schröder in 2005. The Bundestag did not give him a vote of confidence, as a result of which the Federal President dissolved the Bundestag and called fresh elections.

First female head of government: in 2018 the Bundestag elected Angela Merkel (CDU/CSU) as Federal Chancellor for the fourth time, shown here being sworn in by Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU/CSU), President of the Bundestag.
One of the traditional functions of a parliament in a democratic state is the scrutiny of government. This role is naturally performed first and foremost by the opposition groups, which cannot muster a parliamentary majority in the Bundestag, although Members from the groups in the governing coalition engage in scrutiny too through their participation in parliamentary processes. The Federal Government is required to keep the Bundestag regularly informed of its plans and intentions.

Among the key instruments of scrutiny are the budgetary powers of the Bundestag. In the annual Budget Act, the Bundestag determines the level of public revenue and expenditure, for which the Federal Minister of Finance is accountable to Parliament. The budget debates are undoubtedly a highlight of the parliamentary year. As with all other debates in the plenary chamber, government policy is under scrutiny, and the Government must justify its policies to Parliament.

The German Bundestag has a wide range of instruments with which it can scrutinise the work of the Government. For example, individual Members can submit written questions to the Government, and government representatives...
are required to give direct answers to Members’ questions at a question-and-answer session with ministers after cabinet meetings and at parliamentary Question Time.

In addition, the parliamentary groups in the Bundestag can demand written information on particular issues by means of ‘major’ and ‘minor’ parliamentary questions. Answers to major questions quite often lead to parliamentary debates in which the Government is required to present its case and answer questions. There is also the debate on a matter of topical interest, an instrument used chiefly by the opposition groups to subject government policy to critical analysis. The debate, focusing on an issue of general interest, is held at the request of a parliamentary group or at least five per cent of the Members of the Bundestag or on the basis of an agreement reached at a meeting of the Council of Elders.

During the 18th electoral term from 2013 to 2017, the Members of the Bundestag put 14,012 written and 3,119 oral questions to the Federal Government. A total of 555 laws were adopted, and there were 245 regular plenary sittings.

The size of the parliamentary workload is reflected in the fact that more than 13,000 Bundestag printed papers were published in total in the 18th electoral term.

Committees of inquiry have proved to be an incisive instrument for the parliamentary scrutiny of government activity. These committees can be appointed at the request of at least a quarter of the Members of the Bundestag. The Members serving on committees of inquiry can require the submission of government files, summon government representatives as witnesses and question them, which is sometimes even done in front of live television cameras.

The Bundestag also scrutinises the Government through the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces. The Commissioner is appointed by the Bundestag for the purpose of parliamentary scrutiny of the armed forces. He keeps Parliament up to date on the situation in the Bundeswehr and intervenes in cases where the fundamental rights of military personnel are infringed.

The Bundeswehr is often described as a “parliamentary army”, because the Federal Government cannot send its troops on armed missions abroad without the consent of the Bundestag.
Is membership of the Bundestag an occupation like any other? Certainly not, for Members of Parliament are temporary envoys who must seek a vote of approval from the electorate at each general election. They have a mandate, or commission, to represent the people to the best of their ability. As Members of the German Bundestag they hold a high public office, which gives them certain rights but which also requires them to comply with many rules and fulfil numerous obligations.

In principle, any person who is eligible to vote in the Federal Republic of Germany may stand as a candidate for election to the Bundestag. Candidates are normally put forward by a party whose political aims they share.

Members of Parliament – envoys of the people
Freedom of conscience and cooperation

Parliamentary work is wide-ranging, which makes consultation and coordination imperative. This is the task of the parliamentary groups. As political alliances of Members of Parliament, they prepare Bundestag decisions and are indispensable to the work of Parliament as a whole – without parliamentary groups, the Bundestag would fragment into hundreds of individual interests. The groups have their own parliamentary rights, such as the right to introduce bills and motions, to demand a debate on a matter of topical interest or a recorded vote in plenary and to address major and minor parliamentary questions to the Federal Government. None of the Members of the German Bundestag can be forced to subscribe to the opinion of his or her parliamentary group. This principle is laid down in Article 38 of the Basic Law, which guarantees the free exercise of a mandate. It states that Members of the Bundestag are representatives of the whole people, not bound by orders or instructions and subject only to their conscience. This freedom has frequently been in evidence, chiefly in connection with particularly momentous decisions, such as those on military missions, on the choice of capital city and seat of government in 1991 and on matters relating to the regulation of abortion and genetic engineering. Even Members who do not belong to a parliamentary group, besides being entitled to speak and vote in plenary, have numerous rights that no majority can deny them. For example, in plenary debates they can move points of order and
table amendments, deliver oral or written explanations of vote, put questions to the Federal Government and be a non-voting member of a parliamentary committee.

All Members of Parliament enjoy two privileges – immunity and indemnity. Immunity means that criminal investigations or a formal charge may only be made against individual Members of the Bundestag with the consent of the House, except in cases where the Member is arrested while committing a criminal offence or on the following day. Immunity is limited to the duration of a person’s membership of the Bundestag and can only be lifted by a decision of the Bundestag. Indemnity means that Members of the Bundestag may at no time be subjected to court proceedings or disciplinary action or otherwise called to account outside the Bundestag for a vote cast or for any speech or debate in the Bundestag or in any of its committees. This indemnity does not apply to defamatory insults. These rules are chiefly designed to guarantee the proper working of Parliament.

Between Parliament and constituency

Members of Parliament normally have two places of work: the Bundestag and their constituency. Regardless of whether they were elected to the Bundestag as constituency Members or from a regional list, they look after their constituents. They engage with the public, are frequently involved in local politics and report on their parliamentary activities. In regular surgery sessions, they learn of the problems and interests of local people and feed this knowledge into their deliberations in Berlin. Constituency issues are not sold short in Berlin either. Although Members have a particularly tight schedule in the weeks when Parliament is sitting, every parliamentary group has regional subgroups in which Members discuss the political concerns of their federal state and local area.
No time for a media circus

There is a widespread myth that Members of Parliament spend their time moving from one talk show to another. Television viewers are often irritated too when they see a sitting of the Bundestag with the chamber only half full. The public are largely unaware of the wide range of tasks a parliamentarian has to perform. Day after day legislative bills, amendment motions, parliamentary questions and government replies, as well as opinions and reports on topical issues, appear on each Member’s desk. The bulk of Parliament’s legislative work is actually done in committee. Applying the principle of division of labour, Members organise themselves into committees, subcommittees and working groups. In addition, there are numerous appointments to be kept with experts, members of the public and journalists. In particular, a Member of the Bundestag needs to be in the chamber for agenda items that are relevant to a committee on which the Member serves or to the constituency he or she represents, for landmark debates or government policy statements and certainly for votes. There are more than 13,000 new printed papers in an electoral term. They must be read and processed, then discussed at meetings of working parties, parliamentary groups and committees. Many of them are ultimately the subject of a decision in the plenary chamber. Instead of holding speeches, Members often meet behind the scenes to seek solutions and compromises.

In the public eye: the media keep a close watch on proceedings in the Bundestag.
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<th>Monday</th>
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<tr>
<td>8.00</td>
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<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Press appointment</td>
<td>Office work</td>
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<td>9.00</td>
<td><em>Arrival from</em></td>
<td>Meetings of working parties and working groups</td>
<td>Committee meeting</td>
<td>Plenary sitting (all day), normally two core-time debates followed by other debates and possibly a debate on a matter of topical interest</td>
<td>Plenary sitting</td>
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<td>13.00</td>
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<td>Preparation for the sitting, meetings of working parties</td>
<td>Meetings of project groups and thematic groups</td>
<td>Plenary sitting with post-Cabinet questions to the Government, Question Time and, if required, debate on a matter of topical interest</td>
<td>At the same time: group of visitors from the constituency, press interview, office work</td>
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<td>14.00</td>
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<td>Office work</td>
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<td>15.00</td>
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<td>Parliamentary group meeting</td>
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<td>17.00</td>
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<td>Meeting of the parliamentary group executive</td>
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<td>18.00</td>
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<td>Continuation of committee meeting</td>
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<td>19.00</td>
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<td>Political talks</td>
<td>Evening events (panel discussions and lectures)</td>
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<td>Land group meeting</td>
<td>Group of visitors from the constituency</td>
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A full schedule: timetable for a sitting week
Sitting weeks

If it is to run smoothly, the work to be performed in a sitting week needs a clear basic structure and a fixed timetable. After returning from their constituencies, the Members of Parliament prepare with their staff on Monday for the parliamentary week, determining their activities and priorities. On Monday afternoon the parliamentary group executives and the executive bodies of the parties hold meetings. On Tuesday the parliamentary groups convene to discuss the items on the agenda. In the morning, the groups’ working parties meet to prepare for the meetings of the parliamentary committees, which normally take place on Wednesdays. The permanent committees, whose members are drawn from all the parliamentary groups, are the bodies that perform the specialised work of Parliament. At the committee meetings the groups present their views on legislative proposals, thrash out compromises and prepare drafts designed to attract majority support. These are then discussed and put to the vote in the public plenary sittings on Thursday and Friday.

Head-to-head debate – speaking times in the chamber

Who is allowed to speak in the plenary sittings and for how long depends on the relative size of the parliamentary groups. The allocation of speaking time to the individual groups is regularly determined in an agreement at the start of the electoral term. In addition to the relative sizes of the groups, other factors are generally taken into consideration, including a bonus for smaller groups and extra time for the opposition. Within the agreed framework it is up to parliamentary groups themselves to decide which Member can speak for how long on a particular topic. Under the Basic Law, the members of the Federal Government and the Bundesrat are generally permitted to speak for an unlimited amount of time. In practice, their speaking times are credited to the relevant parliamentary group. Independent Members are allocated speaking time separately.
Technical consultations on the fringe at a plenary sitting.
The President of the sitting ensures that speaking times are observed, along with the principle that arguments are heard for and against the motion. They can also direct speakers to discontinue speaking or, if need be, turn off the microphone. The fixed sessions in the sitting weeks provide a framework for work. In addition to the work in the parliamentary groups, committees and plenary sittings, there are a range of other events such as conferences, presentations and conversations with the press or with representatives from associations. In addition, there are often groups of visitors or school pupils from the constituencies who wish to meet their representative in Parliament.

**Terms of employment – offices, remuneration and allowances**

The temporary nature of membership of Parliament dictates that a person’s career must not be impaired if he or she is elected to Parliament and performs his or her wide-ranging tasks in a responsible manner. For this reason, all Members of the Bundestag are entitled to monetary allowances and benefits in kind, including furnished and equipped office in the Bundestag and the right to use domestic transport services in the performance of their official duties. These benefits are supplemented by a flat-rate expenses allowance, currently amounting to around €4,300, from which a Member of the Bundestag meets the cost of maintaining a constituency office and a second residence in Berlin, for example. A staffing allowance enables Members to pay their employees – research assistants and office staff – in Berlin and in their constituency office. Their own pay – known as Members’ remuneration – is taxable. The level of Members’ remuneration is prescribed by law; since 2018 it has amounted to around €9,800 per month.
President of the Bundestag

The President of the Bundestag is the chief representative of Parliament. The President and the Vice-Presidents form the Presidium, the supreme authority of the Bundestag. In national protocol, the President of the Bundestag takes second place in order of precedence below the President of the Federal Republic and above the Federal Chancellor and the presidents of the other organs of the Constitution. This reflects the precedence of the legislative over the executive branch, of the Bundestag over the Federal Government. The President of the Bundestag is the chief officer of Parliament. Together with the Vice-Presidents and the Council of Elders, he or she directs the business of the Bundestag. The President...
safeguards the rights of Parliament and represents it externally. The President of the Bundestag exercises the proprietary and police powers in the premises of Parliament and, together with the Vice-Presidents, takes the major decisions concerning the staff of the Bundestag Administration. He or she is elected for the duration of the electoral term and chairs the plenary sittings in rotation with the Vice-Presidents.

The status of the President and Vice-Presidents is particularly evident when they preside over the plenary sittings of Parliament, where they are required to conduct the deliberations fairly and impartially, ensure that the debating rules are observed and that duties are properly performed and maintain order in the House. If a Member of the Bundestag infringes the code of parliamentary conduct, the President may issue a reprimand or a call to order, withdraw the Member’s right to speak, impose a fine or suspend him or her from sittings and committee meetings for up to 30 sitting days. Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU/CSU) was elected President of the Bundestag for its 19th electoral term.

**Presidium**

The President of the Bundestag and the Vice-Presidents form the Presidium, which is elected for the duration of an electoral term. A member of the Presidium cannot be relieved of his or her office by a resolution of the Bundestag. The Presidium meets regularly in every sitting week to discuss matters pertaining to the management of the House.

During the 19th electoral term, Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU/CSU) is assisted by Vice-Presidents Thomas Oppermann (SPD), Hans-Peter Friedrich (CDU/CSU), Wolfgang Kubicki (FDP), Petra Pau (The Left Party) and Claudia Roth (Alliance 90/The Greens).

The President of the Bundestag and the Vice-Presidents: (top row, from left) Wolfgang Schäuble (CDU/CSU), Thomas Oppermann (SPD) and Hans-Peter Friedrich (CDU/CSU), along with (bottom row from left) Wolfgang Kubicki (FDP), Petra Pau (The Left Party) and Claudia Roth (Alliance 90/The Greens).
Council of Elders

The Presidium is assisted in conducting the business of Parliament by the Council of Elders, the composition of which reflects the relative numerical strength of the parliamentary groups. Its members need not be the oldest Members of the House, but they are experienced parliamentarians.

The Council of Elders, which is chaired by the President of the Bundestag, comprises the members of the Presidium and 23 other Members. Its meetings are also attended by a representative of the Federal Government. Its meetings are also attended by a representative of the Federal Government.

The Council of Elders assists the President of the Bundestag in the performance of his or her duties and takes decisions on the internal affairs of the Bundestag, except where such matters are reserved for the President or the Presidium. The foremost duty of the Council of Elders consists in setting the work programme of the Bundestag and the agenda for its plenary sittings. In addition, it is the task of the Council of Elders to deal with disputes concerning the dignity and rights of Parliament or the interpretation of the Rules of Procedure and, if possible, settle them.

The parliamentary groups

Parliamentary groups are the political heart of the Bundestag. Their size and composition mirrors the results of the parliamentary elections. The work of the Bundestag is determined to a great extent by the parliamentary groups. To form a group, it is necessary to muster at least five per cent of the Bundestag membership.

Groups have an important formal function, since their relative strengths determine the composition of the Council of Elders and the parliamentary committees as well as the allocation of committee chairs. They are also major contributors to the handling of substantive issues, firstly as links between political aspirations throughout the country and their practical attainment in Parliament and secondly as trailblazers for decisions of the Bundestag. To this end the various parliamentary groups form working parties covering one or more committee portfolios; these working parties examine the issues that are being discussed by the specialised committees and prepare the position of the group. For this reason, it is not only Members of Parliaments who have staff to assist
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For this reason, it is not only Members of Parliament who have staff to assist

Left:
The chairs of the parliamentary groups in the 19th electoral term (top row from left): Ralph Brinkhaus (CDU/CSU), Andrea Nahles (SPD), Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel (AfD), Christian Lindner (FDP); (bottom row from left) Sahra Wagenknecht and Dietmar Bartsch (The Left Party), along with Katrin Göring-Eckardt and Anton Hofreiter (Alliance 90/The Greens).

Top:
The parliamentary group level in the Reichstag Building: the parliamentary groups are major hubs in the parliamentary process.
them in their work; the parliamentary groups also engage assistants to conduct research and provide advice.

As alliances of all the Members of Parliament belonging to a party or, as in the case of the CDU/CSU group, related parties, the parliamentary groups are important and often vital cogs in the machinery of Parliament, not only because they decide on the formulation of new bills or on political strategies for plenary debates but also because they are often a kind of ‘parliament within Parliament’.

Even though the members of a group concur in their fundamental political positions, it happens time and again that a wide variety of opinions are held on specific issues. At the discussion stage, when the collective will is still taking shape, the group members are not necessarily all of one mind. As happens in the chamber between groups, there are frequently lively and sometimes quite polarised debates before the various positions are ascertained and, if possible, reduced to a common denominator. This, too, makes the groups crucial factors in the political process within Parliament.

Committees

The Bundestag appoints committees to prepare its resolutions. In the 19th Bundestag there are 24 permanent committees, each comprising between 14 and 49 full members and the same number of substitute members. The committees are organs of the whole Parliament; for this reason, their composition reflects the relative strengths of the parliamentary groups, which, for their part, decide how many committees are to be appointed, what the remit of each committee will be and how many members each will have. There are, however, four committees whose appointment is prescribed by the Basic Law. These are the Defence Committee, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union and the Petitions Committee.
Plenary refers the bill to the lead committee after first reading. Lead committee makes a recommendation for a plenary decision at second reading. Lead committee discusses the bill in detail, draws up a proposal designed to attract majority support in plenary. Subcommittee prepares a proposal for a decision or drafts a decision. Committee refers a proposal for a decision to the subcommittee. Subcommittee may be deployed to deal with some aspects of the bill. Committee asked for an opinion draws up an opinion, which the lead committee must take into account.

To enable them to exercise parliamentary scrutiny of the Federal Government, the committees also have the right to take up an issue on their own initiative, which means that they can address matters within their respective spheres of competence even without a mandate from the House.
The remits of the Bundestag committees generally match the portfolios of the various government ministries, which also helps to ensure parliamentary scrutiny of the Federal Government. There are exceptions, however, through which the Bundestag pursues political priorities of its own. These include the Committee for the Scrutiny of Elections, Immunity and the Rules of Procedure, the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, the Committee on Tourism and the Sports Committee. As a rule, the committees do not meet in public.

Most of the work on new legislation takes place in committee. The committees prepare the plenary transactions of the Bundestag and draw up proposals for decisions which are designed to attract majority support. In the committees, Members of Parliament focus on a specific policy area. They discuss all the bills referred to them by the House and try to find a compromise in committee. If necessary, committees may avail themselves of external expertise by arranging hearings. The outcome of the committee proceedings is a recommendation for a decision, on the basis of which the Bundestag adopts the bill.

**Committees of inquiry**

A significant instrument of the Bundestag for scrutinising the Federal Government is the right enshrined in Article 44 of the Basic Law to appoint committees of inquiry. Indeed it is required to do so at the request of at least one quarter of its Members. Committees of inquiry investigate possible abuses in government and administration and possible misconduct on the part of politicians. To this end, it can hear witnesses and experts and can order the submission of files for its perusal. The committee of inquiry sets out its findings in a report to Parliament, which is considered in plenary. In order to guarantee effective parliamentary scrutiny of the armed forces, the Defence Committee is entitled to constitute itself as a committee of inquiry at any time.
Study commissions

On the motion of at least one quarter of its Members, the German Bundestag is bound to appoint a study commission to prepare decisions on wide-ranging and significant issues. Study commissions comprise Members of the Bundestag and external experts. They submit reports and recommendations to the Bundestag.

Petitions Committee

By means of petitions, anyone in Germany can influence public policies or the organisation of social interaction. Petitions provide everyone in the Federal Republic of Germany with a means of direct recourse to Parliament. The right of petition is a fundamental right that has been enshrined in the Basic Law since 1949. Requests or complaints to the Bundestag are dealt with by the Petitions Committee, which examines and discusses the petitions. In this way, the members of the Petitions Committee learn at first hand how legislation affects ordinary people. Among the options open to the Committee is referral of a petition to the Federal Government for action, consideration or information.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces

Every member of the armed forces is free to address complaints direct to the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces without going through service channels. As a rule, the Commissioner always acts upon learning of circumstances that seem to indicate a breach of the fundamental rights of military personnel. The Commissioner investigates particular occurrences on the instructions of the Bundestag or its Defence Committee or acts on his or her own initiative. In this way, the Commissioner for the Armed Forces functions as an auxiliary organ of the Bundestag for the purpose of parliamentary oversight of the armed forces. The Commissioner reports to the Bundestag once a year on the results of his or her work.

Advocate of service personnel: Hans-Peter Bartels (l.), Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, is sworn in by then-President of the Bundestag, Norbert Lammert (CDU/CSU).
In a democracy, the power of the state emanates from the people. The voters entrust the representatives of the people with power for a limited time. Who governs the country and makes the laws depends on two crosses that the electorate make on their ballot papers. In the elections to the 19th German Bundestag on 24 September 2017, all German citizens who had reached their 18th birthday by election day were eligible to vote.
Any German national aged 18 or over can stand as a candidate. Those who are elected to the Bundestag are said to have received a mandate from the people. The word comes from the Latin mandatum, meaning an instruction or commission. They represent the people for a limited time until a new Bundestag is elected. At every parliamentary election, voters have two choices to make. With their first vote, they choose the person whom they wish to be their personal representative in Berlin. Every candidate who wins the largest share of the vote in his or her constituency is directly elected to the Bundestag. The Federal Republic is divided into 299 constituencies, from Flensburg in Schleswig-Holstein, which is Constituency No 1, to Homburg in the Saarland, which is numbered 299. What determines the balance of power between parties in the Bundestag is the second vote. By making this cross on their ballot papers, voters determine which party or coalition will win a large enough share of the vote to elect one of its members to serve as Federal Chancellor. Every party can campaign for seats in the Bundestag by drawing up Land lists of candidates. The party submits such a list in one or more federal states, listing in sequence the candidates it deems suitable. If a party wins enough second votes in a given Land to merit the allocation of ten seats and has won four constituency seats in that Land, the party’s top six list candidates take the remaining six seats. Parties campaigning in an election are subject, however, to the
5% hurdle, whereby a party must win at least five per cent of the national vote in order to enter the Bundestag. There is one exception: if a party wins at least three constituency seats, it enters Parliament with the number of seats corresponding to its percentage of second votes even if it falls short of the 5% threshold. This threshold is designed to prevent a splintering of the party system that might weaken Parliament.

In principle, half of the seats in the Bundestag are distributed on the basis of the Land lists, while the other half are constituency seats. This, however, accounts for only 598 of the 709 seats in the 19th Bundestag. The additional 111 seats comprise 46 overhang mandates and 65 balance mandates. Overhang mandates occur when the number of constituency seats won by a party in a particular Land exceeds the number of seats to which it would be entitled on the strength of the second vote. In the 19th electoral term the CDU/CSU received 43 overhang mandates, and the SPD received three. Since the parliamentary election of 2013, however, the effect of these overhang mandates has been offset by the allocation of additional seats, known as balance mandates, the purpose of which is to ensure that the ultimate distribution of seats accurately reflects the proportional distribution of the second votes. For this reason, the SPD has been allocated 19 of these balance mandates, the FDP fifteen, the AfD eleven, and The Left Party and Alliance 90/The Greens ten each.

How the Bundestag is elected.
First vote – candidate

- A: Direct mandate
- B: Direct mandate
- C: Direct mandate

Second vote – party

- Land list with candidates 1
- Land list with candidates 2
- Land list with candidates 3

Winner takes all

Constituency candidate (first vote) → Direct mandates

Proportional representation

Land lists (second vote) → Candidates from the Land list

The proportion of second votes determines the number of seats won by each party.

299 Members

709 Members

410* Members

*Including 46 overhang mandates and 65 balance mandates at the start of the 19th electoral term.
On 20 June 1991, the German Bundestag decided that the seat of Parliament and Government would be moved to Berlin. In accordance with a decision taken by the Council of Elders, the new home of Parliament was to be the Reichstag Building. Following international architectural competitions, a new parliamentary quarter emerged in the Spreebogen area, where the River Spree arches northward, its focal point being the restructured Reichstag Building with its walk-in glazed dome. Every year some three million people from all parts of the world visit the parliamentary buildings in Berlin.

Three new parliamentary buildings have been constructed around the Reichstag Building. These are the Jakob Kaiser Building, the Paul Löbe Building and the Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building. These structures combine imposing and transparent architecture with highly functional design and innovative green technology.

Bundestag buildings
The Reichstag Building in Berlin, the heart of parliamentary democracy in Germany.
**The Reichstag Building**

An imposing building with monumental facades, the Reichstag has an immediate powerful effect on the beholder. Entering the building, its visitors find a modern interior equipped with state-of-the-art technology. British architect Norman Foster managed to preserve the historic shell of the Reichstag Building while creating the interior space for a modern, outward-looking Parliament. The outer shape of the Reichstag Building has not changed, but modern elements have been incorporated, and so the old architecture blends with rather futuristic forms, the whimsical complementing the starkly functional in innovative harmony.

The basement and ground floor contain facilities belonging to the Parliamentary Secretariat and the technical building services as well as supply installations. Above them, on the first floor, is the plenary level with the main debating chamber. Next comes the intermediate visitors’ level, and the following floor is the presidential level. Above this is the area occupied by the parliamentary groups, and finally there are the roof terrace and the dome.

The plenary level on the first floor, recognisable by its blue doors, is reserved for Members of Parliament, their staff and members of the Federal Government, while the western lobby is also accessible to media representatives. All around the plenary chamber there is room for the parliamentary activity that takes place outside the chamber. First of all, there are the mingling areas – the traditional lobby – along with a reference library and the eastern lobby. There are also lounges for Government members and a counting room for recorded votes or secret ballots. The focal point of the Reichstag Building is the plenary chamber with its floor area of 1,200 square metres. Measuring 24 metres from floor to ceiling, it covers virtually the full height of the building, and its interior is visible from almost all the floor levels of the surrounding structure as well as from the inner courtyards and from many other viewpoints.
Reichstag blue: the colour of the seats in the plenary chamber was specially designed for the Bundestag.
Plenary chamber and seating plan
For visitors to plenary sittings, a mezzanine floor was constructed above the plenary level. The visitors’ gallery in the plenary chamber provides an excellent view of the Members of the Bundestag at work. Six tribunes arranged in a semi-ellipse offer a total of about 430 seats for visitors, official guests of the Bundestag and journalists. From these tribunes the visitor’s eye is drawn straight to the glazed wall behind the podium where the large Bundestag eagle is suspended. Below its talons are the seats of those who preside over the sitting, namely the President (Speaker) of the German Bundestag or one of his or her deputies and the two secretaries – one Member from a group in the governing coalition and the other from an opposition group. In front of them is the podium and the shorthand writers’ bench.
On the left of the President or Vice President, as seen from the visitors’ tribunes, are the government benches, while the benches to the right of the President are for the representatives of the Bundesrat. Between the Bundesrat benches and the President sits the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces. Facing the presidential rostrum are the Members’ seats, arranged by parliamentary group. From the President’s perspective, the first group on the right is the AfD, followed by the FDP and the CDU/CSU. To the left of them are Alliance 90/The Greens, then the members of the SPD parliamentary group. On the far left are the seats for the parliamentary group of The Left Party (see the graphic on page 5).
At the visitors’ level, recognisable by its dark-green doors, there are also lecture theatres and information rooms for talks between Members and their visitors.

The Presidium and the political groups
Above the visitors’ level, on the second floor with its burgundy doors, are the offices of the President of the Bundestag and his or her staff and the senior management of the Bundestag administration, as well as the meeting room of the Council of Elders. The third floor, which is distinguishable by its grey doors, is home to the parliamentary groups; their meeting rooms, the premises of the group executives and the press lobby, which can also be used for receptions, are all on this level.
The Reichstag dome: a magnet for visitors

Above the third floor, where the parliamentary groups have their rooms, stretches the extensive roof terrace. From here, visitors have access to the dome, which has a diameter of 40 metres at its base and offers a panoramic view of Berlin from a height of 47 metres. The cupola is open at the top and bottom, which makes it appear like a floating spatial shell with its vertex 54 metres above street level. From the base of the dome, visitors can also look down and see into the plenary chamber when light conditions permit.

Environmentalism on the sunny side

The Reichstag Building and the surrounding Bundestag edifices are equipped with environmentally sensitive low-energy technology. The energy-saving strategy formulated by the Bundestag and the Federal Government has been successfully incorporated into the construction and refurbishment of these buildings.

In the Reichstag Building, the cone-shaped light sculptor with its 360 mirrors at the core of the glass cupola funnels daylight into the plenary chamber. Concealed within this cone, a heat-recovery system operates, using energy from the spent air rising from the plenary chamber to heat the building. On the south-facing roof of the building, 300 square metres of solar panels serve as a clean source of electricity. Similar photovoltaic systems are fitted to the roofs of the Paul Löbe and Jakob Kaiser Buildings.

At the heart of the environmental strategy are the central combined heat and power (CHP) plants in the parliamentary quarter. Their generators run on biodiesel produced from rapeseed.

In accordance with the trigeneration principle, waste heat created by electricity generation is used to heat the parliament buildings. This technology enables the plants to generate about half of the electricity needed for the parliament buildings and meet all of their heating and cooling requirements. Unused waste heat can be used for cooling purposes in an absorption chiller or can be stored in summer in a layer of porous rock some 300 metres below the surface in the form of warm water and pumped up again in winter.

Getting on top of Parliament: every year some three million people visit the dome of the Reichstag Building.
Chronology of the Reichstag Building

5 December 1894
The Reichstag Building, which had taken ten years to build, was formally opened; the architect was Paul Wallot.

9 November 1918
Philipp Scheidemann (SPD) proclaimed the German Republic from a window of the Reichstag Building after Imperial Chancellor Prince Max of Baden, acting on his own authority, had announced the abdication of Emperor William II at noon on the same day.

27 February 1933
Shortly after Adolf Hitler came to power, the Reichstag fire signalled the end of parliamentary democracy in Germany and served as a pretext for the persecution of political opponents.

May 1945
At the end of the Second World War, the red flag of the Soviet army was flown above the Reichstag Building as a sign of victory over National Socialist Germany.

9 September 1948
More than 350,000 Berliners gathered for a demonstration in front of the Reichstag Building during the Soviet blockade of Berlin. Against the backdrop of the severely damaged edifice, Ernst Reuter, Mayor of Berlin, delivered his famous appeal: “Peoples of the world … look at this city”.

Traces of history: during the reconstruction, the graffiti left by Soviet troops was carefully conserved.
13 August 1961
The Berlin Wall was built, part of it running right next to the Reichstag Building. Nevertheless, the restoration of the building was completed on the basis of designs by Paul Baumgarten; from 1973, it served as the home of an exhibition on German history and provided meeting rooms for parliamentary groups and other parliamentary bodies.

4 October 1990
The first Bundestag elected by the whole of Germany held its inaugural sitting in the Reichstag Building.

20 June 1991
The Bundestag in Bonn decided by 338 votes to 320 to return the seat of the German Parliament to the Reichstag Building in Berlin. Following an architectural competition, Sir Norman Foster was commissioned to reconstruct the building.

May 1995
After some lively debates, the Council of Elders opted for the construction of a modern glass dome with integrated walkways.

June/July 1995
Artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the Reichstag Building in fabric. At the end of this art event, the reconstruction of the building began.

19 April 1999
The Bundestag took over the reconstructed Reichstag Building in Berlin. Sir Norman Foster presented Wolfgang Thierse, President of the Bundestag, with a symbolic key to the building.

The summer of 1999
The Bundestag moved from Bonn to Berlin. The first sitting week of the Bundestag in Berlin began on 6 September.

Reflections on parliamentary history: Jenny Holzer's Installation for the Reichstag Building, which displays the text of speeches delivered by Reichstag and Bundestag Members.
The Paul Löbe Building

Next to the Reichstag Building stands the Paul Löbe Building. Named after the last democratic President of the Reichstag in the Weimar Republic, the building forms part of the ribbon of federal buildings in the Spreebogen (a bend in the River Spree), a ribbon that stretches across the Spree and across the former division between East and West Berlin. The Paul Löbe Building, some 200 metres in length and 100 metres in breadth, houses the two-storeyed meeting rooms of the committees in eight rotundas. The Paul Löbe Building also has about 510 rooms for Members of the Bundestag and 450 offices for committee secretariats and administrative departments, such as the Public Relations Division and the Visitors’ Service.

Paul Löbe (1875–1967)

Social Democrat Paul Löbe became a member of the Weimar National Assembly in 1919. In 1920, he became a member of the Reichstag and President of the Reichstag – an office from which he was ousted in 1932 by Hermann Göring of the National Socialists. He was held in custody for six months on the pretext that, as editor of the SPD newspaper Vorwärts, he had allegedly embezzled party funds. He later established contact with the resistance group assembled by Carl Friedrich Goerdeler and was imprisoned again after the attempt on Hitler’s life on 20 July 1944.

Once the war was over, Löbe immediately resumed his SPD and editorial activities and in 1948/49, as a member of the Parliamentary Council, was instrumental in the formulation of the new constitution, the Basic Law. As President by age, he opened the constituent sitting of the first German Bundestag in 1949.
Invitingly spacious: the west entrance to the Paul Löbe Building
The Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building

The new Bundestag building bearing the name of Liberal politician Marie-Elisabeth Lüders serves as the parliamentary information and service centre, housing the large library, the archives and the Press Documentation Division. The library in the Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building, with more than 1.4 million volumes, is one of the largest parliamentary libraries in the world. Below the information and advice level of the library rotunda is a section of the Berlin Wall within an otherwise empty room. The piece of what was known as the hinterland wall follows the former course of that wall and is a reminder of the history of the site. The building also contains a large hearing room, which is chiefly used by study commissions and committees of inquiry. On completion of the construction of an extension to the Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building, the Bundestag Art Room, where exhibitions of contemporary art with a parliamentary and political flavour are held, will once more be open to the public.

Marie-Elisabeth Lüders (1878–1966)

Liberal politician Marie-Elisabeth Lüders is regarded as one of the most important social campaigners and one of the leading representatives of the women’s movement in Germany. In 1912 she became the first woman in Germany to obtain a doctorate in political science; in the period up to 1918 she performed several leading functions in the realm of social work and in the effort to improve conditions for women. In 1919 she became a member of the constituent National Assembly; from 1920 to 1921 and from 1924 to 1930 she was a Member of the Reichstag. In 1933 the National Socialists banned her from exercising her profession and from publishing her writings; in 1937 she had to endure four months of solitary confinement. From 1953 to 1961, she represented the FDP in the Bundestag and opened two of its constituent sittings as President by age.

Under construction: when the extension designed by architect Stephan Braunfels is completed, the Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building will boast a total floor area of 44,000 square metres.
A parliamentary treasure trove of knowledge: the Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building houses one of the world’s largest parliamentary libraries.
The Jakob Kaiser Building

The main purpose of the largest of the new parliamentary buildings, the Jakob Kaiser Building, is to provide office accommodation for the parliamentary groups and their staff. The Jakob Kaiser Building, in which more than 2,000 people work, integrates existing architecture and incorporates elements of the old street plan, thereby preserving the traditions of urban development in Berlin. Five teams of architects worked on the building, which is actually a complex of eight structures. Among the occupants of the Jakob Kaiser Building are the Vice-Presidents of the Bundestag, the parliamentary groups’ executive committees, the Bundestag’s Press Office and media services. Around 60% of the Members of the Bundestag have their offices here; all of them have three rooms with a floor area of about 18 square metres each for themselves and their staff. The allocation of office space to the parliamentary groups is determined afresh by a commission of the Council of Elders after each general election. As is the norm in the Bundestag, allocation is based strictly on the relative numerical strength of the groups.

Jakob Kaiser (1888–1961)

At a young age, Jakob Kaiser joined the Christian Trade Union Movement and entered politics. In 1912, he became a member of the Centre Party, which he represented in the last freely elected Reichstag. In 1934 he joined the resistance against the National Socialists and spent several months in the custody of the Gestapo in 1938 on suspicion of plotting high treason. He narrowly escaped capture in the wave of arrests that followed the abortive coup of 20 July 1944 and was the sole survivor from the inner circle of the trade unionists’ resistance movement in Berlin. After the war, he was involved in the establishment of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and became party chairman for Berlin and the Soviet occupation zone. Because of his opposition to the assimilation policy, however, the Soviet Military Administration stripped him of the chairmanship in 1947. Kaiser was a member of the Berlin City Parliament and participated in the drafting of the Basic Law as a member of the Parliamentary Council. From 1949, he was a Member of the Bundestag and Minister for All-German Affairs.

Vanishing lines: an impressive perspective in the Jakob Kaiser Building.
Eight buildings in one: five teams of architects created the parliamentary complex.
The Bundestag is one of the world’s most-visited parliaments. Every year some three million people from all parts of the world visit the Reichstag Building and the other Bundestag buildings in the parliamentary quarter. They are looked after by the Visitors’ Service of the German Bundestag. In addition to a tour of the dome on the Reichstag Building, the Visitors’ Service also offers guided tours focused, for example, on the architecture of the Bundestag buildings or their art works. During the periods when the Bundestag is not sitting there are lectures in the plenary chamber on the tasks, working practices and composition of the Bundestag as well as on the history and architecture of the Reichstag Building. There are special events for children and young people, such as children’s days, parliamentary seminars or role-playing games in which young people learn through experience about the workings of parliamentary democracy.

Information about attendance at a plenary sitting or lectures in the visitors’ gallery of the plenary chamber and about guided tours of the buildings can be obtained from the Visitors’ Service through the Bundestag website at www.bundestag.de > English > Visit the Bundestag, or by phone on +49 (0)30 227 32152.

More about the Bundestag
Dome visits and audio guides

The roof terrace and the dome are open from 8 a.m. to midnight daily (last admission at 9.45 p.m.). Advance registration is required. Visitors can register online at www.bundestag.de > English > Visit the Bundestag, by fax (+49 (0)30 227-36436), or by post (Deutscher Bundestag, Besucherdienst, Platz der Republik 1, 11011 Berlin).

An audio guide is available for your tour of the dome, providing 20 minutes of information about the Reichstag Building and its surroundings, the Bundestag, the work of Parliament and the sights you can see from the dome. The audio guide can be obtained on the roof terrace and is available in eleven languages.

There are also audio guides for children, in simple German and for blind visitors to the dome as well as a video guide for deaf visitors.

Information material

The Public Relations Division of the Bundestag provides information on the work of Parliament by means of brochures, DVDs, exhibitions and the Bundestag Infomobile. Publications explain how the legislative process functions and how Members work in the plenary chamber, in committee and in their constituencies. There is also information material on the history of the Bundestag and on the architecture and artwork in the parliamentary quarter, along with information in simple German and easy-read text. Many of the brochures have been translated into several languages. Information material on all aspects of the Bundestag can be found in the western entrance area and in the area outside the doors of the visitors’ gallery. Items can be ordered online at www.bundestag.de > English > Service, by phone (+49 (0)30 227-33300), fax (+49 (0)30 227-36200) or via email to infomaterial@bundestag.de.

At www.bundestag.de, you can also watch Bundestag debates live and download the text of legislative acts. For children there is the www.kuppelgucker.de website, while young people can inform themselves about the Bundestag by visiting www.mitmischen.de (both available in German only).
Exhibitions, Infomobile and communication stand

Temporary exhibitions in the Paul Löbe Building on political and parliamentary themes offer visitors the opportunity to engage with a wide range of issues relating to the work of the Bundestag.

By means of a touring exhibition entitled *Deutscher Bundestag – unsere Abgeordneten* (‘German Bundestag – our Members of Parliament’), Members inform the public in their constituencies about their parliamentary work.

The Bundestag Infomobile travels throughout the country, offering panel discussions, exhibitions and film screenings.

The Bundestag also has a communication stand at major consumer fairs.

More information is available at

Wall Memorial

The Marie-Elisabeth Lüders Building houses the Wall Memorial, parts of the inner or ‘hinterland’ Berlin Wall having been rebuilt there as a reminder of the former division of Germany.

Bundestag exhibition on German parliamentary history

The exhibition, entitled *Wege, Irrwege, Umwege* (Milestones, Setbacks, Side-tracks), is open Tuesday-Sunday (Mondays only on public holidays) from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a later closing time of 7 p.m. in the period from May to September.

It is located at the German Cathedral (Deutscher Dom), Gendarmenmarkt 1, 10117 Berlin.