

Handout

Introduction to the Weimar Republic

Directions: Write a **D** next to information about the Weimar Republic that represents characteristics of a democracy and an **X** next to information that describes problems or challenges for a democracy.

From Monarchy to Democracy

D **X**

After World War I, Germany's political leaders sought to transform Germany from a monarchy to a democracy, called the Weimar Republic (1918–1933). The Weimar Constitution divided power into three branches of government. Elections were held for the president and the Reichstag (the legislature), while the judicial branch was appointed.

The Weimar Constitution

D **X**

Adopted on August 11, 1919, the new Weimar Constitution spelled out the “basic rights and obligations” of government officials and the citizens they served. Most of those rights and obligations had not existed in Germany under the kaiser, including equality before the law, freedom of religion, and privacy. Despite the inclusion of these rights in the Weimar Constitution, individual freedom was not fully protected. Old laws that denied freedoms continued, including laws that discriminated against homosexual men and “Gypsies” (the name, considered derogatory today, used to describe two groups of people called the Sinti and Roma).

The Reichstag

D **X**

Germans voted for a party, rather than a candidate, to fill the Reichstag (the German legislature). The elections determined the percentage of seats each party received in the Reichstag, but the parties themselves selected the individuals who filled each allotted seat. For example, if a party received 36% of the vote, they would get 36% of the seats in the Reichstag.

The Roles of President and Chancellor

D **X**

As head of the government, the president controlled the nation's armed forces and had the power to dismiss the Reichstag, triggering new elections. The president also appointed the nation's chancellor. In a parliamentary system, the chancellor (or prime minister, in some countries) is in charge of the day-to-day operations of government. During the first ten years of the Weimar Republic, the president usually appointed a chancellor from the party that had the most seats in the Reichstag.

Forming a Majority

D X

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No single party ever held a majority in the Reichstag during the Weimar period. Thus, two or more parties often banded together to form a majority to run the legislature. But almost any disagreement between parties might break up such a coalition. When that occurred, a new election would be held, which happened 20 times during the Weimar period.

Article 48

D X

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Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution gave the president special emergency powers. If “public order and security are seriously disturbed or threatened,” the president was empowered to suspend civil liberties and enact laws without the consent of the Reichstag.

Article 48 was intended to be a safety valve to protect Germany during state emergencies by enabling leaders to act quickly. But the president alone was to decide whether an emergency existed, and the first president of the Weimar Republic, Friedrich Ebert, invoked Article 48 to issue decrees 136 times, only occasionally in times of actual emergency.

Violence in the Weimar Government

D X

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Dozens of political parties competed for the support of German citizens. In some elections, ballots listed more than 30 parties to choose from. Many political parties had their own private armies, or paramilitaries. As a result, political disagreements and arguments on the streets often turned violent.