

European
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

Frank-Walter Steinmeier to serve a second term as President of the Federal Republic of Germany

On 28 May 2021, the outgoing German head of state, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, declared himself candidate for the presidency of the Federal Republic so that he might "help to heal the wounds inflicted by the pandemic on the German population".

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the German Federal Assembly (Bundesversammlung), which elects the head of state, will meet on 13 February in the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament (Paul-Löbe-Haus). The German Federal Assembly comprises all the members of the Bundestag (736 deputies) and an equal number of delegates from the Länder, i.e. a total of 1 472 members.

Frank-Walter Steinmeier was elected German President on 12 February 2017 in the first round of voting. Supported by his Social Democratic Party (SPD), Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU), he won 931 of the 1,260 members of the Federal Assembly at the time.

This time he has the support of the main parties in the Bundestag and is therefore the favourite for the presidential election. The CDU announced its support for the incumbent on 5 January, the head of state's birthday. The Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) had done the same a few days earlier. "We have a tradition that a president of the Republic who aspires to a second term receives the support of all, including those who did not support him in his first election," said Armin Laschet (CDU), former leader of the CDU (2021-2022) and unsuccessful candidate to succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor in 2021, adding, "For us, it was not difficult because we had already supported Frank-Walter Steinmeier during his previous election.

The Greens/Alliance 90 (Bündnis 90, die Grünen) tried to present an alternative candidacy but this proved impossible, as Frank-Walter Steinmeier is very

popular: 70% of Germans questioned last October by the Forsa opinion institute said they were in favour of his re-election.

In addition to the outgoing head of state Frank-Walter Steinmeier, two other people have put themselves forward as candidates for the supreme office:

- Gerhard Trabert, an independent candidate, but supported by the Left Party (Die Linke), professor of medicine at the Rhine Main University of Applied Sciences;
- Max Otte, former president of the Werteunion, supported by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), economist, publicist and former professor of quantitative and qualitative analysis at the universities of Worms, Erfurt and Graz.

If Frank-Walter Steinmeier is re-elected for a second term, the SPD will hold the three most important political posts: the presidency, the chancellery (Olaf Scholz) and the presidency of the Bundestag (Bärbel Bas).

THE PRESIDENTIAL FUNCTION

The President of the Federal Republic of Germany is elected by the German Federal Assembly (Bundesversammlung), which this year has 1,472 members: the 736 members of the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, and an equal number of elected representatives from the country's sixteen Länder, members of regional parliaments or prominent members of civil society. The election is by secret ballot, with an absolute majority in the

Presidential elections in Germany

13th February 2022

first and second rounds. If no candidate obtains this majority (i.e. 737 votes), a third round is held in which the candidate with the highest number of votes on his/her name is elected.

The presidential office is essentially honorary: the Head of State is, however, a moral authority for his compatriots, with a role that goes beyond the prerogatives assigned to him by the Basic Law. The President of the Federal Republic of Germany is elected for a five-year term and represents his country on the international stage. He is the guardian of the law and the Constitution, appoints and dismisses federal judges and officials, officers and non-commissioned officers.

The head of state can refuse to sign a text that he considers contrary to the Basic Law (the Constitutional Court is then seized and if it gives the go-ahead, he is then forced to sign it). This happened with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) or the Lisbon Treaty (2007). The President can also dissolve the Bundestag

in two specific cases: if the Bundestag fails to elect a Chancellor (i.e. if no candidate can secure a majority of the votes of the members of the Bundestag after three days according to Article 63 of the Basic Law) or if a motion of confidence proposed by the Chancellor does not obtain the approval of the majority of the members (Article 68). Parliamentary elections must then be called within 60 days of the dissolution (Article 39). The Bundestag has been dissolved three times: on 23 September 1972, 6 January 1983 and 21 July 2005.

A candidate for the office of President must be at least 40 years old and can only be re-elected once. According to the Basic Law, the Head of State may not be a member of the government or a legislative body of the Federation (Bund) or of one of the 16 Länder. He or she may not hold any other paid public (or private) office and is not allowed to be a member of the management or board of directors of a profit-making enterprise.

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