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## explainity explained: Bundestagswahl

Do you remember Lukas from Puderbach? Last year his home state of Rhineland Palatinate held its state elections, or the “Landtagswahl” in German. This year he will be voting again in the most important elections in Germany – the parliamentary elections – or the ‘Bundestagswahl’ in German.

Every four years there is a ballot to decide on the seats in the Bundestag, the Members of Parliament, who represent the people. Like Lukas, every citizen of legal age has the right to cast their vote or stand for election. But how do the parliamentary elections actually work?

Lukas receives a polling card a few weeks before the parliamentary elections. He can cast an absentee ballot or go to the polling station. He uses his ballot to cast two votes, his first and second vote, or the ‘Erst- und Zweitstimme’ in German. Each of these votes decides on half of the seats in the German Bundestag. The system behind the parliamentary elections is known as personalised proportional representation, or ‘personalisierte Verhältniswahl’ in German.

Personalised representation means that Lukas casts his first vote for a person standing for election in his constituency. For instance Mr Wagner, whose election manifesto he supports. The direct candidates compete against each other in the 299 constituencies in Germany. They do not need to belong to a party, and can stand as independents, although many are nominated by their parties. The candidates receiving the most votes in each constituency win what is known as a direct mandate, or a ‘Direktmandat’ in German, and automatically become Members of Parliament.

Lukas casts his second vote for a particular party. This proportionate vote decides on the total number of seats that each party will receive. The second vote therefore decides on a party’s proportionate representation in parliament. But not every party listed on the ballot will make it into the Bundestag. Parties need to receive at least 5% of the second votes nationwide, or to win at least three constituencies as Direktmandate, in order to sit in parliament.

Before the elections, the parties in each federal state prepare a state list, or the ‘Landesliste’ in German, with the names of persons that the party would like to nominate as members of the Bundestag. Candidates who win a direct mandate automatically join parliament, and the remaining seats are then assigned to persons on the state list.

It is possible, though, that a party may receive 100 seats with the ‘Zweitstimme’, but win 110 ‘Direktmandate’ with the ‘Erststimme’. Then they would have ten seats more than their actual entitlement according to the ‘Verhältniswahl’ system. The direct candidates will nevertheless join Parliament, as the party receives ten so-called overhang seats, or ‘Überhangmandate’ in German. This means the party is handed ten additional seats in Parliament. But the other parties must not be placed at a disadvantage. So they are assigned so-called levelling seats, or ‘Ausgleichsmandate’ in German. This increases the number of parliamentary representatives for all other parties on a percentage basis – in our example by 10% of their election results. This restores balance to the share of seats relative to the overall results of the ‘Zweitstimmen’. Parties may therefore receive substantially more Members of Parliament due to ‘Überhang’ and ‘Ausgleichsmandate’.

Once all Members of Parliament are assembled, the next step is to form a government. Over half of the seats in the Bundestag are needed for a majority government – the absolute majority – or the ‘absolute Mehrheit’

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in German. Several parties will usually form an alliance if none of them hold over 50% of the seats. This is called a coalition, or a 'Koalition' in German. The procedure can take some time, as the parties need to agree on compromises for their political objectives and projects. The terms are defined in a coalition agreement, or a 'Koalitionsvertrag' in German. Finally, when the new parliament convenes, the members hold a secret ballot in which the Federal Chancellor is elected.

Lukas has now cast his two votes and in doing so has influenced the formation of government and political representation in his country. So voting is an important democratic right.