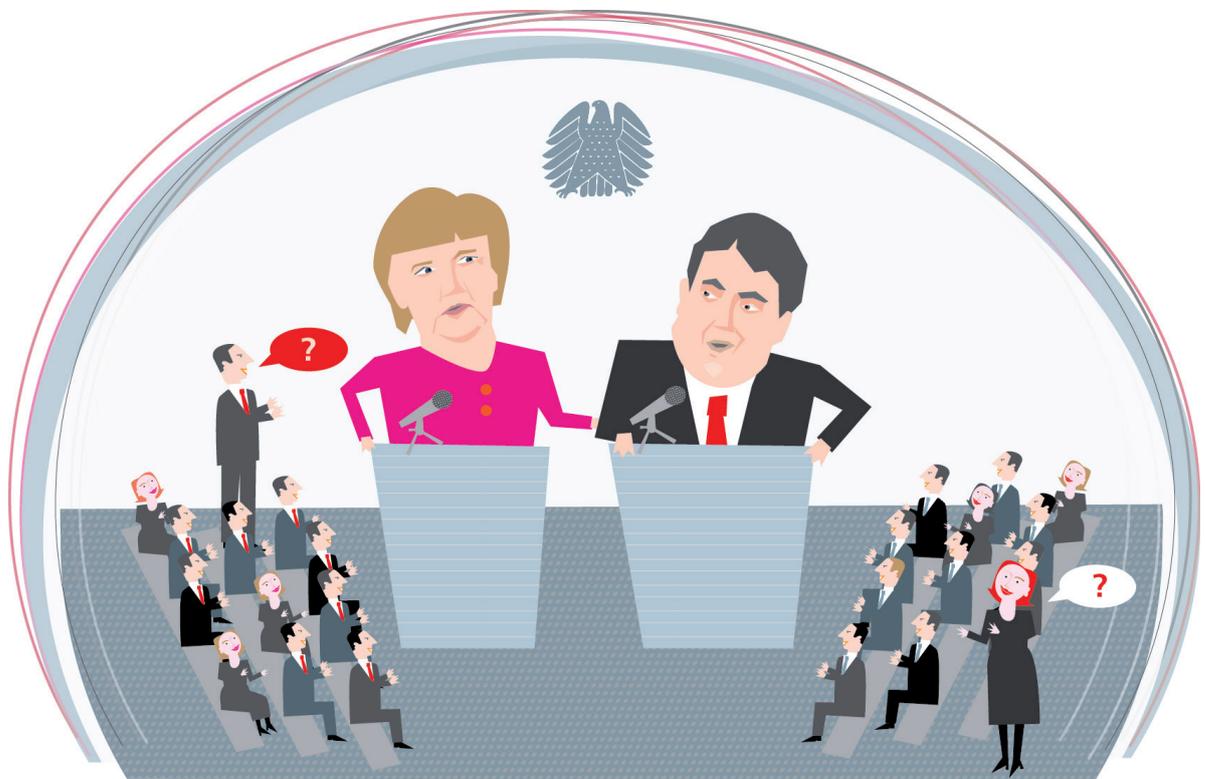


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Let citizens participate! An alternative model of question time in the German Bundestag

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Germans are paying less and less attention to debates in their federal parliament, and media coverage of them is rather limited. Introducing new systems of debate and inquiry could help strengthen the Bundestag as a key arena of political competition. The grand coalition has agreed to amend the system of putting questions to the Federal Government. But this is merely the first step! The questions need to be more topical and wide-ranging, all member of the Federal Cabinet should participate in Q&A sessions, and citizens should ask questions, too. Impossible? Absolutely not!

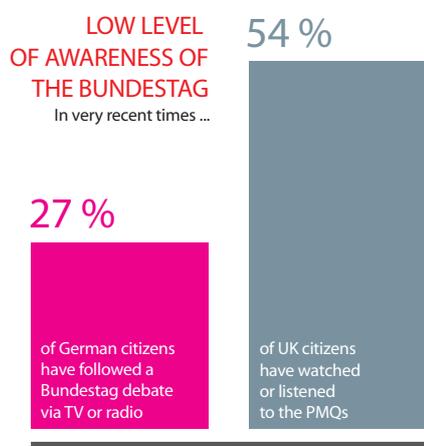
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All of the cited figures and survey data come from the recent Bertelsmann Stiftung study: Hierlemann, Sieberer. Sichtbare Demokratie – Debatten und Fragestunden im Bundestag. Gütersloh, 2014. There, readers can also find additional references to relevant writings by commentators and researchers.

Debates before an empty chamber

German's lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, has a problem: Citizens aren't very aware of the debates going on within it. Its members are very dedicated and take their jobs seriously – but the electorate hardly notices. In fact, only one in four German voters can recall concrete details about a recent debate in the Bundestag. In the 1970s and 1980s more than half of Germans could do so.

Media coverage of Bundestag debates is rather slim and has even decreased compared to earlier years. For example, in 14 leading German media outlets (eight weekly or daily newspapers and six online news portals), there were only 275 articles on Bundestag debates in the period from September 2013 to August 2014. Thus, Germans learn more about some of the 50 companies listed on the country's stock market index, the DAX, than about Bundestag debates. Likewise, UK-based media sources report on domestic parliamentary debates almost three times as much as their German counterparts. Since the Bundestag functions as a working parliament that performs most of its tasks in committees shielded from the public eye, one shouldn't expect that highly dramatic debates will happen all that often. The Bundestag is not the British House of Commons, and it doesn't conceive of itself as being primarily an arena for constant wrangling between the ruling and the opposition parties before the eyes of the electorate.



However, there is a widening gap between the key role the Bundestag plays in the political system and the public's meager awareness of its debates. If the parliament ceases to be the central arena of political competition or citizens do not perceive it as such, elections will be damaged as the most important mechanism linking voters and officeholders in representative democracies. As a result, the low visibility of Germany's Bundestag will become a problem for German democracy.

In their current form, political contests in the Bundestag are apparently unappealing to the media and the public. Thus, whoever wants to strengthen the Bundestag's role needs to come up with new formats for debating and inquiring about issues – formats that make it possible to have genuine political confrontation AND make it interesting for the media and the public.

The new questioning of the Federal Government.

A minimal consensus of the grand coalition

One potential first step toward reaching these goals would be reforming the way that questions are put to the Federal Government (Befragung der Bundesregierung). According to the Bundestag's Rules of Procedure, members (henceforth MPs) have a guaranteed right to demand information about government actions and to bring up issues for discussion independent of concrete legislative procedures.

The Befragung is followed by the Fragestunde (Question Time), a two-hour Q&A session using questions previously submitted in writing. In practice, these questioning sessions have had one crucial weakness: They lack any element of an exciting verbal exchange between the government and the opposition, leading political figures often

“The grand coalition’s new arrangement can only be the start of a comprehensive reform of putting questions to the Federal Government.”

skip them altogether. Although MPs are theoretically allowed to put “questions of topical interest within its competence” (Annex 7 of the Rules of Procedure of the Bundestag) to the Federal Government every Wednesday during weeks of sittings, in practice, the topics discussed in the questioning sessions have by and large already been predetermined by the Federal Government. What usually happens is that individual ministers – or, in roughly 30 percent of the cases, “only” parliamentary

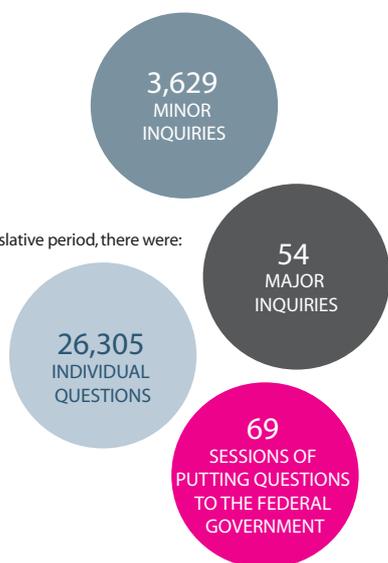
state secretaries, their deputies – will present an issue from the preceding cabinet meeting and answer some questions about related details. The result is a very small-picture discussion of narrowly defined issues without any note of drama held before a chamber of mostly empty seats.

Given these circumstances, the ruling “grand coalition” government – made up of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – agreed in November 2014 to amend the existing model of putting questions to the Federal Government. Plans now call for a system that would require all ministers to participate in at least one Q&A session with MPs each year. Another welcome change would be the planned opening up of the range of questions. However, the new model merely represents an agreement that embraces the lowest common denominator of two completely different approaches: The SPD had called for something strongly geared toward the British model, while the CDU and CSU had opposed any far-reaching changes.

The result of all this is that the reform proposal only goes halfway as far as it needs to. Since only one minister will have to attend every questioning session now, the discussion will be primarily limited to the competences of a single ministry. Chances are that this will hardly do anything to counter the trend toward narrowly focused debates on small-picture issues. There are no stipulations that top government officials (i.e., the chancellor and vice-chancellor) will play a prominent role or that the parliamentary groups will relax their control over deciding who will pose the questions. Indeed, this new arrangement can only be the start of a comprehensive reform of the parliamentary system of putting questions to the Federal Government.

ACTIVE MPS

During the last legislative period, there were:



Learn from the UK. But don't adopt its system wholesale

A glance inside the UK's House of Commons can be quite inspiring. There, the weekly Prime Minister's Questions is the climax of the parliamentary week and is intensively followed by both the media and the public. In recent months, more than half of British voters have watched or listened to the PMQs at least once, according to a study by the London-based Hansard Society. However, given that Germany's electoral system encourages the formation of coalition governments and that its parliament has a consensus-oriented culture, directly transferring the British format to Germany would be neither promising nor desirable. What's more, in the UK itself, there has been a recent flare-up of criticism that the PMQs have become rather dull and cookie-cutterish. For this reason, a reform of the system of putting questions to the Federal Government in Germany should focus on attracting a high degree of public attention, addressing a wide range of issues and allowing for spontaneity while at the same time making it possible to have the kind of genuine debate that citizens desire.

In what follows, we present an alternative model that retains positive elements of the current system while adopting appealing aspects of the British model as well as getting citizens directly involved. The core elements of the proposed model are: (1) holding regular sessions of questioning the chancellor, the vice-chancellor and a group of line ministers, respectively; (2) allowing for different types of questions that also incorporate citizens' input; (3) extending the duration of the period of putting questions to the Federal Government (*Befragung*) from roughly 30 minutes to an hour and shortening the duration of the subsequent Question Time (*Fragestunde*) from two hours to 90 minutes; (4) imposing strict time limits so as to encourage a lively exchange; and (5) opening up the range of issues that the questions can address.

An alternative model of putting questions to the Federal Government

This model would also call for the weekly session of putting questions to the government to continue being held at its fixed time and date: at 1 p.m. on Wednesdays in weeks of sittings. However, it would be extended to an hour, while the subsequent Question Time would be shortened by 30 minutes. The crucial new element here is that the chancellor, the vice-chancellor and the individual line ministers would be required to be regularly present at and participate in these *Befragung* Q&A sessions. The questioning would take place according to the following rotation:

Week 1: the chancellor

Week 2: a group of three to four ministers

Week 3: the vice-chancellor

Week 4: a group of three to four ministers

After four weeks, the rotation would start anew. Likewise, the various ministries would be combined in the following theme-based groups:

- (A) Foreign and security policies (Foreign Office; Ministry of Defense; Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development),
- (B) Labor, social and educational policies (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Family Affairs; Ministry of Education),
- (C) Domestic, environmental and infrastructure policies (Ministry of the Interior; Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection; Ministry for Environment; Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure) and
- (D) Financial and economic policies (Ministry of Finance; Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy; Ministry of Food and Agriculture).

Questions put to the chancellor and the vice-chancellor could concern all of the issues within the Federal Government's area of competence, while those put to the ministers would be related to their own portfolios. The questions themselves would not be made known beforehand. Likewise, to ensure a brisk exchange of arguments and viewpoints, the questions would have to be kept brief (max. 1 min.), and the same would hold true for the answers (max. 3 min.). Each MP asking questions would have the right to ask a brief follow-up question (max. 30 seconds), which in turn would be answered within 90 seconds. Moreover, members of the Federal Government would no longer be given leave to make an introductory statement.

One key issue related to making the German model of question time interesting and lively concerns who is allowed to ask questions. The procedure currently in place has proven a failure: Parliamentary groups choose which MPs will ask questions and what the questions will be. And since the latter are hardly ever surprising and only rarely confrontational, they are frequently voiced before a chamber of empty seats. The alternative model presented here would envision splitting the hour-long questioning sessions of the chancellor and vice-chancellor into three 20-minute blocks in which three different types of questioners would be given leave to speak. The first block would include opposition parliamentary groups. The second block would be made up of questions from rank-and-file Bundestag members, and all MPs would have an equal chance to contribute. And the third block would be devoted to answering questions that had been submitted online by average citizens and selected at random. However, this last block would not apply to the sessions of questioning groups of individual ministers. Instead, in these cases, the amount of time allotted for questions from rank-and-file MPs would be doubled, from 20 to 40 minutes.

Confrontation! Questions from the opposition

Opposition parties complain that they don't get enough chances to improve their standing in the public eye particularly under grand coalition governments. This alternative model would give them ample opportunity to do just that. In addition

to being able to freely decide which MPs would ask questions, the opposition parliamentary groups would be able to put questions on issues of their own choice to the chancellor and vice-chancellor without any limitations in terms of content and without having to submit their questions in advance. This would allow opposition politicians to directly touch upon current controversial issues and to ask leading government figures about them. Doing so increases the chances that the issues of the day will be discussed in the Bundestag itself rather than just on talk shows, in interviews or in skillfully drafted press statements.

With this system in place, one would anticipate that leading opposition figures would step forward themselves to ask questions and thereby directly engage in lively exchanges with top government figures. Likewise, in the sessions of questioning ministers, the respective specialists of the opposition parliamentary groups would take the floor, which would lead to interesting confrontations – particularly in the run-up to elections – between ministers and their potential successors.

Backbenchers to the front! Questions from rank-and-file MPs

This reformed system of putting questions to the government would offer an opportunity to all MPs, as each of them could ask questions about any topic within the area of competence of the Federal Government or the individual ministries. All MPs wishing to ask a question would notify the president of the sitting of his or her interest in doing so before the questioning session began. Those actually given a chance to speak would be chosen using a system of random selection. Moreover, the question could only be asked if the person who registered their desire to ask it is present in the plenary chamber. As a result, parliamentary groups with many members interested in asking questions as well as high attendance rates would have a greater chance to make themselves stand out with their questions. Likewise, this procedure would give both individual MPs and parliamentary groups as a whole incentives to be present during the question-putting sessions. In other words, instead of a monotone Q&A session in a virtually empty chamber, there would be a full – or at least fuller – parliament, spontaneity and lively exchanges.

Furthermore, since the leadership of parliamentary groups would no longer control the process of selecting which questions will be asked, this system would also give MPs who do not share the majority opinion of their parliamentary group on certain issues a tool with which they could voice their reservations. This, in turn, would inject much more variety into the range of issues discussed in the Bundestag, and voters would get a better glimpse of the diversity of opinion within individual parties.

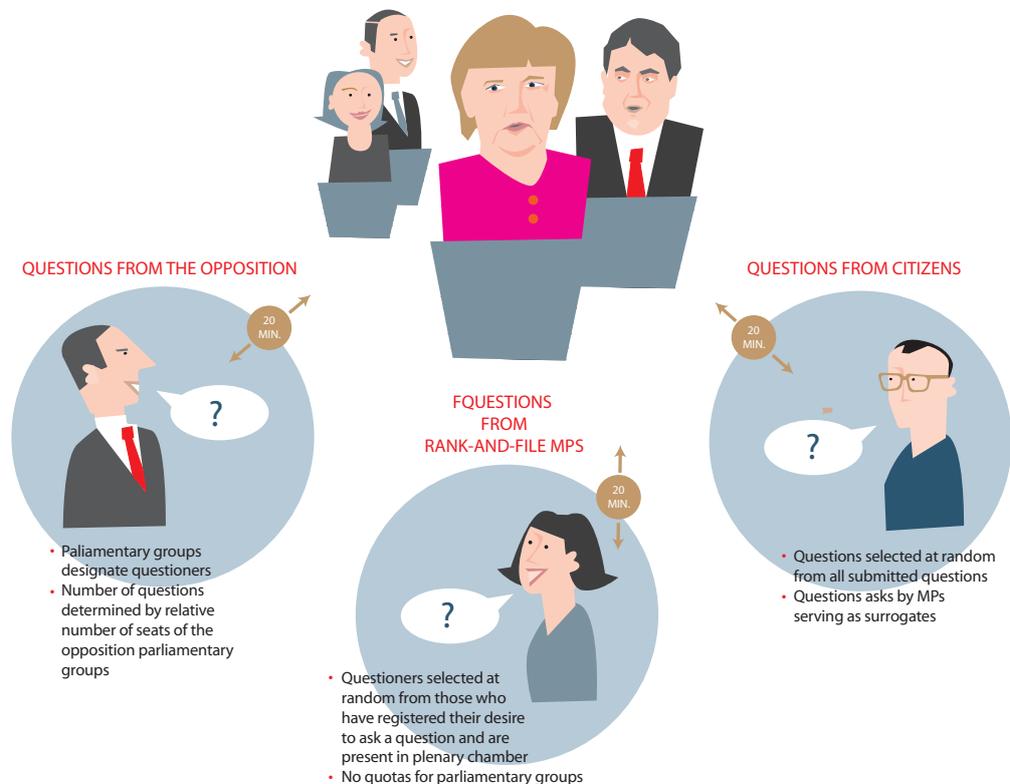
Openness! Questions from citizens

Asking questions in the Bundestag has traditionally been the sole prerogative of MPs. At the same time, there have been repeated demands for the Bundestag to become more

ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF PUTTING QUESTIONS TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

FEDERAL CHANCELLOR – GROUPS OF MINISTERS
VICE-CHANCELLOR – GROUPS OF MINISTERS

Weekly rotation of persons asked questions



open and to permit direct citizen involvement. This alternative model would grant citizens an opportunity to ask the chancellor and vice-chancellor questions that would subsequently be answered and discussed in the Bundestag chamber. To make this possible, an online platform could be set up on the Bundestag’s website that registered individuals in Germany as well as German citizens living abroad could use to submit one question each month to the chancellor and vice-chancellor, respectively. Alternatively, questions could also be submitted to the Bundestag by mail. The question itself would be limited to a maximum of 100 words and would have to relate to the Federal Government’s area of competence. On the day before the session for putting questions to the government, 20 questions would be selected at random from all of the submitted questions.

Since citizens would not have a right to speak in person inside the Bundestag, MPs would serve as their “question surrogates.” In general, this role would be played by the directly elected MP of the citizen’s voting district. The MP would then read aloud the citizen’s question and, following the answer of the chancellor or vice-chancellor, he or she could ask a follow-up question with a maximum duration of 30 seconds in a manner that remains faithful to the presumed intention of the citizen who drafted the question. As a result of this system of proxy question-asking, the ties between MPs and “their” constituencies would become closer – which is something that almost all voters have been calling for.

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Positive outcomes of this alternative model

This alternative model of putting questions to the Federal Government would have three positive outcomes. First, it would regularly lead to an open, spontaneous and interesting debating of current issues between the opposition and leading government figures. The chancellor, the vice-chancellor and the various line ministers would be required to respond to questions that they weren't already informed about, to defend their work and to directly respond to any criticism.

Second, this model would open up new opportunities for rank-and-file MPs to interact with leading government figures and thereby bring up citizens' concerns as well as stances that diverge from their parliamentary group's line. Though one can hardly expect that MPs will regularly exploit such opportunities to criticize the leadership of their parliamentary group, it will add some diversity and vibrancy to the range of opinions articulated in the Bundestag and allow for a more representative reflection of the true diversity of opinion within the parliamentary groups.

Third, this instrument would also give citizens for the first time the possibility to put their questions directly to figures in the top echelon of politics. The political system would take concrete steps toward fostering greater openness to citizens' concerns, demonstrate a desire and ability to reform itself, and show citizens that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously.

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