

The German presidential election: What does Joachim Gauck stand for?

By Johannes Stern and Peter Schwarz
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Today the Federal Convention, consisting of 622 deputies of the German parliament and 622 representatives of the German states, will elect the successor to President Horst Köhler, who resigned from his post on May 31.

The election was initially regarded as a formality. The chairpersons of the parties in the ruling coalition—the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Christian Social Union (CSU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP)—quickly agreed on a common candidate, Christian Wulff (CDU), the prime minister of the state of Lower Saxony. The government parties have a majority of 22 in the Federal Convention.

However, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens reacted by nominating as their own candidate Joachim Gauck, the former East German civil rights activist and long-time head of the agency investigating the files of the East German security police, Stasi. This placed a question mark over Wulff's election.

Gauck has considerable support within the camp of the governing coalition. In January of this year, German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) praised Gauck in a speech she gave on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

In 1999, the CSU considered nominating Gauck as its own presidential candidate. Gauck also has considerable support within the FDP in the east of the country. Since there is a secret vote for the new president, there is no guarantee that all members of the government camp will vote for Wulff.

In order for Gauck to be elected, however, he requires the support not only of 12 renegades from the government camp, but also the 124 votes of the Left Party. This party has nominated its own candidate, the 74-year-old journalist Luc Jochimsen, and has made clear that it has serious reservations about Gauck.

The German media has for the most part hailed Gauck's nomination as a brilliant move by the SPD and Greens, aimed at widening the already sharp divisions within the government. Some commentators have speculated that a victory for Gauck could mean the end of the Merkel government.

But it is not merely tactical considerations that lie behind the candidacy of Gauck. This is shown not only by Gauck's own right-wing political positions, but also by the enthusiastic support for him from a broad range of the media, ranging from *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* to *Die Welt*. His candidacy reveals much about the viewpoint of these media outlets concerning the role of the state and the politics of the SPD and Greens.

Unlike French and American presidents, the German president has little real power and plays a mainly symbolic role. Alongside his function as official representative of the state, the president is required to sign laws and international treaties, is responsible for the formal nomination of the chancellor, ministers, judges, senior officials and officers, and for the dissolution of the German parliament (Bundestag).

The president can play an important role in times of political crisis, but

he is not permitted to intervene in the actual work of the government.

In recent years, as popular support has waned for all of the establishment parties, the president has intervened in political life by making speeches on major issues. In this way, he has used his authority as a state institution standing above political parties to influence the direction of policy.

There is a growing body of support within the German ruling elite for the strengthening of such a "non-party" state institution. This was most clearly expressed by Josef Joffe, who wrote in the *Die Zeit* on behalf of the candidacy of Gauck: "We want someone who gives the nation a purpose, who tells us where to go, who cuts a moral path through small-mindedness and self-interest." Joffe sees some merits in Wulff, but what counts most for Gauck is that "this political independent really does stand above the parties, as behoves a president."

The media has sought to portray Gauck as a freedom fighter of great character and long experience who has unfalteringly pursued his own path. *Der Spiegel* dedicated a front page to him with the headline: "The Better President." *Bild* recalled Obama's election mantra, declaring, "Yes We Gauck." *FAZ* called him a "citizen hero."

A look at Gauck's campaign speeches reveals why his conception of liberty makes him so appealing to ruling circles at a time of economic crisis and austerity measures. In a speech he gave last week in the Deutsche Theater in Berlin, Gauck attacked the term "welfare state," which he claimed "emasculates" recipients, turns them into lackeys and robs them of their independence.

In an earlier interview with the *Tagesspiegel*, Gauck defended as "responsible" the austerity measures introduced by the government to shift the burden of the crisis onto the poor. He regards the current government's policy as a necessary continuation of the anti-welfare policies introduced by the SPD-led coalition under Gerhard Schröder.

"Such courageous efforts" are "required again today," he told *Die Welt*, and advised all those driven into poverty by the cuts in social programs "to look abroad" and ask themselves "where else they could find such a developed welfare state as we have."

Gauck evinces the same arrogance against immigrant workers. From the stage of the Deutsches Theater he said, "Listen, if you want your children to have the chance to work as attorneys or merchants or journalists, make sure they speak German." He said he had no reason to show benevolence to the "poor or outsiders," and advised them: "Go, use your right to vote, even if you are somewhat disadvantaged."

In the same speech, Gauck gave his unconditional support to the German military mission in Afghanistan. He said he had hoped for more popular support for the deployment, because it was correct and necessary. He commiserated with "the mourning of mothers who have lost their sons," but added it was not "irresponsible" to send them to Afghanistan. Rather, they were sent out of a sense of responsibility, and they went "in response to their sense of responsibility."

With tears in his eyes, Gauck then described his participation in what he

called his first free election—the election held March 18, 1990 for the last parliament in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic—GDR). At that moment, “all the freedom of Europe was concentrated in the heart of an individual,” he sobbed, drawing gasps of sympathy from the politicians in attendance.

Sitting in the first row at the Deutsches Theater were SPD leaders Sigmar Gabriel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Green politicians Cem Özdemir and Claudia Roth, Kurt Biedenkopf of the CDU, and Cornelia Schmalz Jacobsen of the FDP, all of whom warmly applauded Gauck.

Gauck’s conception of freedom is characterised first and foremost by vicious anti-communism, in the manner of Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. His reputation as a campaigner for civil rights and democracy is based on a myth.

In reality, Gauck is a typical representative of the layer of church officials who played an important role in the GDR in stabilizing the domination of the Stalinist bureaucracy, serving as a mediator between the population and the regime.

The church was the only sphere of society in the GDR where the Stalinist regime permitted a certain degree of dissenting opinion. This served to ensure that oppositional social elements could be assembled under the umbrella of the church, kept under control and rendered harmless.

The representatives of the church rejected a revolutionary, socialist opposition to the ruling bureaucracy, and cooperated directly or indirectly with the regime’s secret police—the notorious Stasi. The best known example is the figure of Manfred Stolpe, a prominent functionary of the protestant church in the GDR who maintained close contact with the Stasi, and after German reunification went on to become prime minister of the state of Brandenburg.

During the period of reunification, these representatives of the church placed themselves at the head of the oppositional movement in order to direct it—in collaboration with the last Stalinist government led by Hans Modrow—toward the restoration of capitalism.

Joachim Gauck was born on January 24, 1940 in Rostock, the son of a captain in the German navy. A major event in his youth was the arrest and deportation of his father to a Siberian prison camp under false accusations of espionage. This led to opposition to the East German regime on the part of the Gauck family, a stance maintained after the father was freed in 1955 following a visit to Moscow by the West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer.

As a 13-year-old, the young Gauck was strongly impressed by the East German workers’ uprising of June 17, 1953. Gauck describes it as an “electrifying experience.”

In Rostock, where he lived, 5,000 workers from the Neptune dockyard took to the streets and, as was the case throughout the GDR, were brutally repressed. In Gauck’s view, however, the revolt was not a workers’ rebellion against a privileged regime, but rather an uprising by the people against “communism.”

Not allowed to carry out his desired profession of journalism, Gauck studied theology in Rostock from 1958 to 1965. As he writes in his autobiography, his initial concern was not his training as a minister, but the development of philosophical and theological arguments against the Marxist-Leninist doctrine as it was propagated by the ruling Stalinist party. Following his studies he decided to become a minister, and in 1971 took over a post in Rostock Evershagen.

Between 1982 and 1990, Gauck was director of the church congress in the state of Mecklenburg—a highly public post. Due to his open criticism of the Stalinist regime, Gauck was monitored by the Ministry for Public Security (commonly known as the Stasi), which allegedly considered arresting him in 1985. At the same time, the ministry sought to enlist him as an informer, apparently without success.

Nevertheless, his family enjoyed privileges which were not available for

most citizens of the GDR. His children were allowed to emigrate to West Germany and return back for family visits.

During this period, Gauck became more cautious in his relations with the state, toning down his criticisms markedly after being appointed chief supervisor of a church congress in Rostock in 1988. Gauck says of this period: “I wanted the church congress to happen and had to make compromises—not, however, with the Stasi.”

Doubts emerge, however, when one examines Gauck’s Stasi file. In the period of preparation for the church congress, Gauck held many conversations with the adviser for church questions for the city of Rostock, Stasi informant Manfred Manteuffel, who then passed on the results of these discussions to his police bosses.

The aim of the Stasi was to obtain information via Gauck about dissidents close to the church. For his part, Manteuffel was evidently happy with the information he received. Following the church congress he wrote, “Afterwards it can be clearly stated that Gauck fulfilled the promises he had given.”

Another discussion took place on July 28, 1988 directly with the Stasi. From the record it emerges that Gauck complained to a certain captain Terpe that the security police represented “a state within the state.” At the same time, however, Gauck distanced himself from GDR citizens seeking to flee from the east to West Germany, and promised he would work in his community to ensure that those wanting to flee “remain in the GDR.”

In the autumn of 1989, shortly before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Gauck joined the organisation New Forum, became its leading figure in Rostock, and was elected to the last East German parliament in March 1990. While the broad masses in the GDR took to the streets to demonstrate against the SED regime, New Forum sought to enter a “dialogue” with the regime, and eventually joined the last East German government under Hans Modrow in order to ensure the country’s orderly transition to capitalism.

Gauck was appointed by the East German parliament to supervise the files of the Stasi and continued in this role for the next ten years after German reunification. Due to his work, the office in charge of evaluating the Stasi files became known as the “Gauck Agency.”

His work at the agency was contentious. According to one report in *Stern* magazine, “He carried out this difficult post in an extremely self-righteous manner against those citizens of the GDR who had failed to reject the system voluntarily or for opportunistic reasons.”

Since leaving the agency, Gauck has worked as a journalist and is a member of several right-wing organisations and think tanks. He is a member of the Atlantik-Brücke, a member of the German National Foundation, and chairman of the association “Against Forgetting—for Democracy.”

In 2008, he was one of the first signatories to the so-called “Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism,” which includes amongst its demands special laws “for the condemnation of communist criminals and the compensation of the victims of communism.” The conference which adopted the declaration received messages of greeting from Nicolas Sarkozy, Margaret Thatcher and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Gauck has often been accused of playing down the crimes of National Socialism because of his repeated efforts to equate “communist and National Socialist totalitarian regimes.”

The fact that SPD and the Greens have nominated this notorious anti-communist as their presidential candidate says a great deal about their future political role. They are pressing to return to government in order to suppress the growing opposition to social cuts and austerity measures. To this end, they need a president who combines the strengthening of the authority of the state with rabid anti-communism.

In this respect, they have nothing to fear from the Left Party, which is quite ready to support an SPD-Green government both at a state and federal level. Some leading members of the Left Party, including its

chairman in the state of Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow, and the deputy chairman of its Bundestag faction, Dietmar Bartsch, have already called for support for Gauck as the new federal president.

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