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PUBLIC ARCHIVES – SITES OF DEMOCRACY?

Abstract

Purpose: *The aim of the study was to examine the extent to which archives can be considered sites of democracy.*

Methodology: *The methodological approach of the study is to examine whether public archives meet these requirements based on the criteria for the initiatives active in Germany to designate Sites of Democracy. This will include examining the core tasks of public archives as well as outstanding projects for conveying relevant content on the history of democracy.*

Results: *There are many points indicating that Public Archives are sites of democracy.*

Conclusion: *Archives not only appraise, acquire and preserve the most important sources on the history of democracy in a broad sense, but also work towards comprehensible and compliant administrative action through their advisory role. Above all they make this data, from which facts can be derived, findable and accessible to all citizens and are involved in historical and political education through a wide variety of events. Archives thus help to create identity and promote an understanding of free, democratic development and the formation of political awareness in a democratic society. In addition, archivists are specialists who deal with very long- or deep-time spectra and develop expertise from their work that, through appropriate public awareness and educational programmes, can also have a positive influence on important sustainability issues in democratic society.*

Keywords: *sites of democracy, historical political education work, long-term archiving, social benefits of archives*

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ARCHIVI PUBBLICI – LUOGHI DELLA EMOCRAZIA?

Abstract

Scopo: *Lo scopo dello studio era quello di esaminare in che misura gli archivi possano essere considerati luoghi della democrazia.*

Metodologia: *l'approccio metodologico dello studio consiste nell'esaminare se gli archivi pubblici soddisfano tali requisiti sulla base dei criteri previsti dalle iniziative attive in Germania per la designazione dei Luoghi della democrazia. Ciò comprenderà l'esame dei compiti fondamentali degli archivi pubblici e dei progetti di rilievo volti a trasmettere contenuti rilevanti sulla storia della democrazia.*

Risultati: *Ci sono molti punti che indicano che gli archivi pubblici sono luoghi della democrazia.*

Conclusioni: *Gli archivi non solo valutano, acquisiscono e conservano le fonti più importanti sulla storia della democrazia in senso lato, ma contribuiscono anche a rendere comprensibile e conforme l'azione amministrativa attraverso il loro ruolo di consulenza. Soprattutto rendono questi dati, da cui è possibile ricavare fatti, reperibili e accessibili a tutti i cittadini e sono coinvolti nell'educazione storica e politica attraverso una vasta gamma di eventi. Gli archivi contribuiscono così a creare identità e a promuovere la comprensione dello sviluppo libero e democratico e la formazione della coscienza politica in una società democratica. Inoltre, gli archivisti sono specialisti che si occupano di spettri temporali molto lunghi o profondi e sviluppano competenze dal loro lavoro che, attraverso adeguati programmi di sensibilizzazione e di educazione del pubblico, possono anche avere un'influenza positiva su importanti questioni di sostenibilità nella democrazia.*

Parole chiave: *luoghi della democrazia, attività di educazione politica storica, archiviazione a lungo termine, benefici sociali degli archivi*

JAVNI ARHIVI – PROSTORI DEMOKRACIJE?

Izvleček

Namen: *Namen raziskave je bil preučiti, v kolikšni meri je mogoče arhive obravnavati kot prostore demokracije.*

Metoda: *Metodološki pristop raziskave je v tem, da se preveri, ali javni arhivi izpolnjujejo te zahteve na podlagi kriterijev pobud, ki so v Nemčiji aktivne pri označevanju prostorov demokracije. To vključuje preučitev temeljnih nalog javnih arhivov ter izpostavljenih projektov, ki posredujejo relevantne vsebine o zgodovini demokracije.*

Rezultati: *Obstaja veliko pokazateljev, da so javni arhivi prostori demokracije.*

Zaključki: *Arhivi ne samo vrednotijo, pridobivajo in hranijo najpomembnejše vire o zgodovini demokracije v širšem smislu, ampak tudi prispevajo k razumljivemu in skladnemu delovanju uprave preko svoje svetovalne vloge. Predvsem pa omogočajo, da so ti podatki – iz katerih je mogoče izpeljati dejstva – dostopni in najdljivi vsem državljanom ter so vključeni v zgodovinsko in politično izobraževanje z različnimi dogodki. Arhivi tako pomagajo ustvarjati identiteto in spodbujajo razumevanje svobodnega, demokratičnega razvoja ter oblikovanje politične zavesti v demokratični družbi. Poleg tega so arhivisti strokovnjaki, ki se ukvarjajo z zelo dolgimi ali globokimi časovnimi spektri ter iz svojega dela razvijajo znanje, ki lahko s primernimi programi za ozaveščanje javnosti in izobraževalnimi dejavnostmi pozitivno vpliva tudi na pomembna vprašanja trajnosti v demokratični družbi.*

Ključne besede: *prostori demokracije, zgodovinsko-politično izobraževanje, dolgoročno arhiviranje, družbene koristi arhivov*

INTRODUCTION

In Germany various initiatives at state and federal levels define “sites of democracy” as places that were scenes of democracy, where democracy was developed, lived, or defended, where heated debates and controversies about the right path took place, where popular initiatives or civic engagement originated, or where the municipality changed and developed to some extent (Kramer, 2018). In doing so, not only specific, geographically localizable places were and are considered, but also, in the sense of “lieux de memoire,” transposed sites such as important historical and still valid concepts of the liberal representative parliamentary democracy of the Federal Republic of Germany. References to local, regional, national and international and especially European History are therefore fundamental to these initiatives. But they also look to the future. Engaging with the history of democracy is intended to raise awareness of the value of our democracy (Stiftung Orte der Demokratieggeschichte, 2025a). For example, in Saxony, as part of the state project there, places for democratic negotiation processes are to be created and corresponding local projects are to be specifically supported (Saxonian Ministry for Justice, Democracy, Europe and Equality, 2025).

In Bavaria, following an impetus from Bavarian historians to promote a culture of remembrance, the Bavarian State Parliament named a total of 13 sites of democratic history in October 2020. These sites are intended to make visible and tangible how democracy has been shaped at these locations. The events commemorated stretching far back in time. They range from the seat of the Perpetual Reichstag in the Old Town Hall in Regensburg and the House of the Kramerzunft in Memmingen from the 16th century to the present day, with the Maximilianeum in Munich as the current parliamentary seat of the Bavarian State Parliament (Stiftung Orte der Demokratieggeschichte, 2025c).

A traveling exhibition and numerous social media offerings are intended to emphasize the importance of these sites for democracy in Bavaria and thus also various aspects of democratic coexistence. At the federal level in Germany, a law dated July 16, 2021, established a foundation called “Places of Democracy History” which, through its own activities and funding measures, aims to raise public awareness of places linked to this history of democracy and symbolizing the democratic tradition in Germany and internationally (Stiftung Orte

der Demokratiegeschichte, 2025a). Currently, the foundation's website lists more than 230 sites of democratic history nationwide. These include several archives, such as the Archive of the German Women's Movement in Kassel, the Archive of the Citizens' Movement in Leipzig, the State Archives of Freiburg, Ludwigsburg, Sigmaringen, and Wertheim, and the Kornwestheim Central Land Registry Archive (Stiftung Orte der Demokratiegeschichte, 2025b). In 2024, the foundation also honored a public archival institution—the Marburg Archives School—as a „Site of Democratic History“ for the first time in a ceremony. So, what makes archives sites of democracy and for the history of democracy, and how can they become such sites?

Public archives are known to have the task of registering, receiving, permanently securing, cataloging and describing the data of lasting value of the authorities and institutions within their area of responsibility. They advise and support the bodies for which they are responsible in managing this paper-based, and now primarily electronic, data, determine their archival value according to legal-administrative and historical-scientific criteria, securely and professionally receive and store data of archival value that is no longer needed on a regular basis, organize and describe it, and thus transform it into archival material. After weighing the interests of those affected and the public that deserve protection on the one hand, and scientific freedom and the public interest on the other, they make the archival materials, as findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (FAIR) as possible available for a variety of purposes, but they also participate in the proactive evaluation and dissemination of the archival material (Graf, 2004).

Public archives, like libraries and museums, are therefore considered important cultural institutions. They „preserve our cultural and historical memory and make it accessible to the public“ and, unlike other cultural institutions, they do this on the basis of their own archive laws (Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, 2024). The vast majority of archival material is unique and was not originally created for historiography, family research or other scientific analysis, but mostly for internal administrative purposes with no interest in publication. Archives are links between past, present and future. They contain an enormous treasure trove of information and knowledge (Mayer, 2024) and represent a „unique, irreplaceable cultural heritage. They make „every form of

human activity comprehensible“ and are considered houses of history and „memory“ of the respective institutions, regional authorities, municipalities or states for which they are responsible „ (Verband deutscher Archivarinnen und Archivare e.V., 2011). They are therefore often the „first port of call (...) for questions about history and the present, identity and home, in writing and images“ (Stadtarchiv Köln, 2025). Today, archives see themselves as open and modern information and service centers for the information society (Mayer, 2020) and as integrative pillars of data infrastructures for science (Grau, 2023). But to what extent are they therefore also important for preserving and strengthening democracy and a democratic consciousness?

ARCHIVES SECURE AND PRESERVE SOURCES ON THE HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Of course public archives secure, acquire, preserve and store the essential sources of the history of democracy: From the earliest forms of democratic structures and the observation and suppression of democratic efforts during times of monarchy and dictatorship to their implementation, the current negotiation processes of the various social forces and the achievements of the democratic constitutional state, and not least the legal review of state action by administrative, social, financial, and constitutional courts. These events and processes are documented in different public archives. This applies in particular to the archives of parliaments and political parties. In Bavaria, these include the archives of the Bavarian State Parliament, but also the Bavarian Main State Archive, which preserves the records of the Bavarian Parliament up to 1933 and of the Bavarian Senate, and the archive of the Hanns Seidel Foundation for Christian Social Politics.

Significant sources on the history of democracy, are, of course, also kept in state and municipal archives in Germany, not least because they also archive documents from associations and clubs, as well as private documents. The archives of churches and religious communities, business archives, and the numerous independent archives that preserve records for the enforcement of rights for disadvantaged social groups and minorities, such as the Archive of the Labor Movement in Bavaria or the Forum Queeres Archiv München, are important as well. The liberal representative democracy of Western style that has developed in Germany since 1945 allows for influences from a wide variety of social groups. A diverse

archival landscape ensures the preservation of these various strands of tradition, which contribute to the history of democracy in this country. At the same time, these archives form the foundation for diverse narratives, which in turn can form the basis of plurality in liberal democracy. The data on the history of democracy are constantly being expanded; they are being condensed in a comprehensible manner within the framework of appraisal processes, assigned to their contexts of origin in archival holdings through describing measures, enriched with meta-information and thus made findable and accessible.

ACCESS TO ARCHIVES

While totalitarian and autocratic states severely restrict or prevent the use of archived information for their own citizens, and even more so for interested parties from abroad, archived data in liberal democracies is largely freely accessible, provided that the rights of those affected or third parties and the protection of state institutions or the general public are not compromised. This mainly open and free access to data stored in public archives for all citizens promotes democracy, protects civil rights and improves the quality of life (Verband deutscher Archivarinnen und Archivare e.V., 2011). By enabling democratic participation in the cultural assets stored in public archives, public archives also contribute to the resilience of liberal democracies. This is because people who participate in cultural assets and cultural events show greater commitment to participating in and contributing to the democratic system (Europäische Kommission, 2023). Archives also create greater transparency in administrative and governmental action by enabling deferred control by the sovereign, namely the citizens.

In this context, sociologists have emphasized that archives, particularly by online provision of archived data, have a positive influence on democratization processes and processes that preserve democracy. This means that archives have a positive impact on the relationship between citizens and their government in the sense of having a stabilizing effect on democracy (Fujiyoshi, 2021).

These access options cannot be taken for granted in Germany either. Rather, they are the subject of a constant balancing process, as is particularly evident in the development of new archive laws. When accessing recent archives, a balance must always be struck between academic freedom on the one hand and the protection

of the personal rights of those affected or third parties on the other hand, and the justified protection needs of the state, also in the sense of a democracy capable of defending itself. This becomes clear, for example, in discussions about the need for a general retention period. In Bavaria, this is currently set at 30 years for all archive material. This means that from the last processing of the data or after it has been „filed“, the documents cannot be presented for 30 years, or only after a separate application for a reduction in the retention period and a review process in which the authority from which the data originated must be involved. This access restriction, which limits everyone's right to use archives and the constitutional right to information under Article 5 of the German Grundgesetz, has been criticized in some cases as being too long from the perspective of research freedom since the archive laws were passed at the end of the 1980s (Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestags, 2024).

A further obstacle to general, open, and low-threshold online access is the personnel and financial effort required to put archived data online. Smaller independent and municipal archives in particular, which are often managed solely by volunteers or semi-skilled staff working a limited number of hours, are often not in a position to manage these digitalisation projects. Due to the lack of financial and personnel resources, the comprehensive, local-based basic cultural provision with a functional archive at the municipal level exists in many places in Bavaria as well as in other regions in Germany only as a matter of pretense.

This makes the development of data infrastructures such as Archives Portal Europe or the Archivportal-D all the more important. More than 200 archives across Germany now use this portal to provide over 30 million digital copies and indexing information on archival materials. Through partnerships, even smaller institutions can participate in making archival materials online findable and accessible. The State Archives of Baden-Württemberg, for example, are working with the FIZ Karlsruhe to develop a simple archival information system for smaller archives that are often underfunded and understaffed. Also of great importance are national, state-specific, and international projects that help make archived data on the history of democracy available online, as will be illustrated by a few examples of flagship projects in Bavaria: The Bavarian State Archives, for example, have worked with the Bavarian State Library to develop several virtual

exhibitions on the history of the Bavarian constitution and the founding of the Free State of Bavaria. They are participating in the Federal Ministry of Finance's large-scale project „Transformation der Wiedergutmachung (=Transformation of Recompensation)“ which aims to make all of the more than 2 million individual case files relating to reparations for Nazi injustice findable and accessible for online research and analysis. This will not only make the fates of Nazi persecution biographically and prosopographically tangible but also make the decades-long achievements of the democratic constitutional state in compensating for Nazi injustice accessible to the general public online.

In another project scheduled to run over several years, the records of the Jewish communities in Bavaria, some of which are archived in Israel and some of which are still in Bavarian Archives, are being digitized and made findable and fully accessible available online. In a way, it ties in with a virtual exhibition by the General Directorate of the Bavarian State Archives on the history of the Jews in medieval Regensburg (Beauftragter der Bayerischen Staatsregierung für jüdisches Leben und gegen Antisemitismus, 2023). Both projects illustrate the centuries-long history of the Jews in Bavaria. The Bavarian State Archives are thus making an important contribution to combating the perpetuation of anti-Semitic views of history. For more than 15 years, the Bavarian State Archives have also been cooperating with partners from the Czech Republic. With funding from the European Union, they have been able to set up the joint archive portal *Porta Fontium* and gradually fill it with digitized archival materials from both states relating to the Bavarian-Czech border region (Schmalzl, 2022).

The declared goal of the joint initiative is to use the sources of the shared history of a region that has been closely linked in terms of events, economics, and culture over the past centuries to promote understanding and the value of European integration, which still represents perhaps the most significant peacemaking success story of Western-style liberal democracies. Therefore, the implementation of a „Virtual Reading Room,“ which was approved by Bavarian State Government in June 2024 and is to be completed at the Bavarian State Archives by 2026, is also of fundamental importance. This will enable significantly more archived information, and under certain conditions even sensitive information, to be made accessible digitally and much more easily to authorized users than before.

EXPERIENCE ARCHIVED DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

The importance of access to archives should also be understood literally and not merely in the sense of accessibility to archived data. In addition to the possibilities of accessing archival material through on-site research or online, evaluating it, and ascertain facts as described above, archives can also become places of democracy through active educational and discourse offerings. Guided tours and special events such as the in Germany meanwhile well-established „Archive Days“ offer all interested parties insights into the archives and explanations of questions relating to the formation of records and their description as historical foundation work. For decades, public archives have also been using the data they hold to develop historical exhibitions, including those on currently relevant topics and issues. In recent years, in addition to many other activities of local archives in Bavaria, the poster exhibition of the Bamberg State Archives on the super election year 1924 (Staatliche Archive Bayerns, 2024), the teaching exhibition of the Bavarian Archives School on anti-vaccination movements at the beginning of the 20th century (Staatliche Archive Bayerns, 2023) or the three virtual exhibitions of the General Directorate of the Bavarian State Archives, the Nuremberg City Archives and the Aschaffenburg City and Abbey Archives on the history of the Jews in medieval Regensburg (Bavarikon, 2018 and Bavarikon, 2019), on “People make city history” (Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, 2024) and on the international project “Image 4 Democracy” (Stadt- und Stiftsarchiv Aschaffenburg, 2024) should be mentioned.

In addition, archives have been offering a growing number of other programs for many years. These include, in particular, archival education workshops for school classes, university members, and, as in the Cologne City Archives, even kindergartens. In the Munich State Archives, for example, schoolchildren are given the opportunity to conduct biographical research on individual victims of the Nazi dictatorship as part of academic seminar papers, to publish the results, and thus actively engage in remembrance work. Larger archive administrations are also developing more far-reaching initiatives: The Baden-Württemberg State Archives, for example, has set up its own Documentation Center for Right-Wing Extremism in the Ludwigsburg State Archives and is participating in the “Long Night of Democracy” 2024 with its own panel discussions, lectures, and other events at four archive locations (Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg, 2024).

In Bavaria, the State Archives organized four exhibitions in Amberg, Bamberg, Munich, and Würzburg in 2023/24, as well as a lecture series, also available digitally (Grau, 2023),² with a total of twelve academic lectures on the crisis year of 1923, which examined the challenges facing democracy in Bavaria 100 years ago (Schmalzl, 2024). The thematically focused program was well received at all locations. An average of 200 people attended the lectures alone.

Nevertheless, the possibilities are certainly far from exhausted, as a look at the national archives of other liberal democracies shows. The National Archives in the USA, for example, until recently appealed to a broad audience with a wide range of on-site activities, from overnight stays for school groups to film premieres, and offer numerous prepared digital concepts for the use of archival materials in school lessons.³ The offerings of the Archives Nationales in Paris and the National Archives in London/Kew are similar, albeit somewhat less extensive⁴.

FROM RECORDS STORAGE PLANS TO SAFEGUARDING FUNDAMENTAL DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

Archives also influence the way in which data is managed in public administration. Advising data producers in this area is one of their core tasks. Archivists always point out requirements such as the use of records storage filing plans or orderly file management. In doing so, they not only support more efficient administrative processes, but also safeguard fundamental democratic rights by persistently insisting on compliance with minimum standards in file management. Only if administrative action is comprehensibly documented, citizens constitutionally protected right to take legal action against administrative decisions can be upheld (Weber, 2008). By enabling retrospective control of decision-making processes, archives also contribute to safeguarding fundamental democratic rights of citizens in Germany (Kleinfeld, 2018). Digitization and the introduction of electronic files, which require business processes to be reflected on and redefined, have sig-

2 The playlist of the lectures is available on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLChswfPEVw6w-51cId59IVDXe_Vj9b2bo1 (accessed on 25.08.2025).

3 See the teaching materials provided online via the DocsTeach tool and the options for digital distance learning via webinars. Retrieved at: <https://www.archives.gov/education> (accessed on November 30, 2024) as well as the event program available online at: <https://www.archives.gov/calendar> (accessed on November 30, 2024).

4 See, for example, the family-oriented offers of the Time Travel Club of the National Archives in London/Kew Retrieved at: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/visit-us/whats-on/the-time-travel-club-family-activities/> and the offers of the Archives Nationales. Available at: <https://www.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/fr/web/guest/agenda>(both last accessed on 25.08.2025).

nificantly increased the influence of archives on data management. Internationally, for example in Japan and the USA, archives sometimes occupy key positions in this area (Okada, 2021). But also in Germany, the state archives in particular play an important role in advising public bodies on data management, as is evident from the services offered by the State Archives of North Rhine-Westphalia but also from the wide range of activities of other state archive administrations (Schlemmer, 2025).

ACQUIRE INFORMATION LITERACY

Archives preserve an information pool of data for the general public from which historical facts can be drawn (Schenk, 2022). Archives are regarded worldwide as places where trustworthy and reliable sources of information are kept (ICA, 2010). This has been particularly important in recent decades when governments, authorities and administrations have experienced crises of confidence as a result of disasters and armed conflicts. Archives then enable evidence and transparency and guarantee the accountability and trustworthiness of authorities in the interests of democracy and democratic new beginnings for state communities and social reconciliation (Graf, 2004). This is because they not only preserve archival materials but also the facts they document, which without them might not be provable and perhaps not even known. Only through subsequent use of these data in new contexts does make it possible, for example, to legally investigate human rights violations (Schenk, 2022).

Especially in times when the claim to power over the truth is contested throughout society and facts appear to be increasingly fluid, archives are gaining importance as guardians of the sources from which historical facts can be derived. Developing and harnessing a sound knowledge base can therefore be particularly well trained using archived information (IDESSA, 2020). The information literacy acquired in this way enables one to formulate objective and targeted arguments and participate in public discourse in politics, society, and science (Schäfer, 2012). This is not the only reason why public and largely openly accessible archives are “systemrelevant” (Prantl, 2011), that means systemically relevant for liberal democracies. Rather, in archives and through the evaluation of archival material, facts can be researched and obtained for democratic discourse in politics, society,

and science, for self-assurance, for example in the context of family and local history research, and for identity formation. After all, the individual experiences, interests, and fates of individuals can be found in archival materials (Herzog, 2024). Historical research learning in the archive thus becomes a democracy education option for everyone, a priori democracy work, on a local, regional, national and international basis.

Are public archives sites of democracy? As has been shown, there are many points indicating that. Archives not only appraise, acquire and preserve the most important sources on the history of democracy in a broad sense, but also work towards comprehensible and compliant administrative action through their advisory role. Above all, however, they make this data, from which facts can be derived, findable and accessible to all citizens and are involved in historical and political education through a wide variety of events. Archives thus help to create identity and promote an understanding of free, democratic development and the formation of political awareness in a democratic society (Kleifeld, 2018). Archivists are entrusted with the task of archiving data permanently, i.e. forever. They develop expertise from their work, like other specialists who deal with very long or deep time spectra, that, through appropriate public awareness and educational programmes, can also have a positive influence on important sustainability issues in democratic society (Ialenti, 2020). However, the extent to which archives are able to exert a stabilizing effect on democracy in this way depends not least on the human and financial resources that are made available by their governments for the development and operation of infrastructures and educational services (Verband deutscher Archivarinnen und Archivare, 2025).

Collaborations between archives and other research and memory institutions with experiences in public awareness and educational programmes could help here, even in times of scarce resources, and create further options for action. The establishment of an archive education center for Bavarian archives, similar to the institution that has existed for Bavarian museums for more than fifty years, would also be a way to pool resources and communicate the potential of public archives for democracy to society. Another crucial factor will be the extent to which archive laws continue to be designed in such a way that, in principle, all documents and data that are no longer needed on a daily basis are offered for archiving and

that, after the relevant protection periods have expired, the archived data is made accessible again as openly and fairly as possible.⁵ Finally, the question arises as to the extent to which archives in Germany will in future see themselves as places of democracy, define this as part of their mission and role, and give greater consideration to corresponding educational offerings in their prioritization of tasks, as archives in other liberal democracies already do. The European Commission’s archive strategy points in this direction (vgl. European Commission, 2024)

The designation of committed archives as “sites of democracy” could positively support these processes.

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⁵ The acronym FAIR refers to requirements for research data that should be findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable.

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Summary

In Germany various initiatives at state and federal levels define “sites of democracy” as places that were historical scenes of democracy, where democracy was developed, lived, or defended, where heated debates and controversies about the right path took place, where popular initiatives or civic engagement originated, or where the municipality changed and developed to some extent. This applies to geographical locations as well as places in the figurative sense

The study examines the extent to which archives can be considered sites of democracy.

Typology: 1.02 review article