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0521023262 - The Kaiser's Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany

Jonathan Sperber

Excerpt

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Introduction

Posing the problem

When one thinks of democracy, Germany is generally not the first country that comes to mind. Yet as early as 1848 national elections with a broad, if indirect and not quite universal franchise, were held there. Universal and direct manhood suffrage was introduced with national unification in 1867–71, that is to say at the same time as in the United States. German women received the vote in 1919, another early date by international standards. A democratic franchise for national elections has thus characterized German politics for over a century and Germans have made vigorous use of this right to vote from the very beginning. About half the eligible voters cast their ballots in the first nationwide direct elections in 1871 and turnout reached the impressive figure of 85% of eligible voters in the general elections of 1907 and 1912, the last before the First World War. In some ways this is not surprising because, as a number of historical studies have reminded us, widespread and active political organization, vigorous electioneering, and a strong popular wish to participate in the process were typical of national elections in Germany for decades before 1914.¹

This explanation, however, points to the problem and the reason that Germany and democracy might seem like an odd combination. While the deputies to the national parliament of Imperial Germany, the Reichstag, were elected by a democratic franchise, the elaborate and peculiar constitutional system of the empire reduced to a bare minimum the powers and prerogatives of the democratically elected people's representatives.

¹ Two recent general works that have emphasized this point of view are Stanley Suvall, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) and Margaret Anderson, "Voter Junker, Landrat Priest: The Old Authorities and the New Franchise in Imperial Germany," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993): 1448–74. More generally, on the history of elections in Germany, see the excellent review article of Thomas Kühne, "Wahlrecht–Wahlverhalten–Wahlkultur: Tradition und Innovation in der historischen Wahlforschung," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 33 (1993): 481–547.

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Parliamentary government as understood in the usual sense, the election of the head of government and his/her fellow ministers by a majority of the deputies, did not exist. The chancellor, head of the Imperial government, along with his assistants, was chosen by the emperor, without formal or informal consultation of the Reichstag.

Even as a law-making body, the powers of the Reichstag were less than impressive. The parliament could not pass binding legislation of its own accord; all laws required the consent of the Bundesrat, the empire's federal executive organ, itself once again dominated by the representatives of the emperor, this time in his role as king of Prussia. Indeed the Reichstag did not even have the right of initiative; all proposed legislation had to come from the Bundesrat. The only real power the Reichstag possessed was a negative and obstructionist one: a majority of its members could refuse to agree to a law proposed by the executive, particularly legislation relating to Imperial finances, and use this refusal as a weapon to force concessions – a weapon blunted by the executive's right to dissolve an intransigent Reichstag and call for new elections.

Scholars have disagreed about just how much actual power this refusal to consent to legislation gave the people's representatives, with some asserting that the Imperial legislature remained little more than a rubber-stamp body throughout the peacetime years of the empire, while others note a gradual accumulation of political power in the hands of the elected parliamentarians, especially in the first decade of the twentieth century.² Yet there can be no doubt that compared to similar parliamentary bodies of the time, to say nothing of today's legislatures, the Reichstag was not a very powerful institution. In other words, the people could express their will but the government had considerable latitude in ignoring it. This conjunction of a broad, democratic franchise with an authoritarian or, in the twentieth century, dictatorial government has been characteristic of much of modern Germany's history.

It is the combination of democratic suffrage, energetic and massive political participation, and an authoritarian regime that marks the starting point for the problems posed in this book. What was all the electoral shouting about? Or, to put it differently, why were Germans so actively involved in choosing the members of a parliament that was, at best, not very powerful? In this book, I will try to provide a very partial answer to this question, by offering a rigorous, quantitative analysis of voting behavior in the formative years of the German electoral system, 1871–1912. Using sophisticated statistical methods, I will identify which Germans

² A brief but useful discussion of this controversy is in Volker R. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany 1871–1914: Economy, Society, Culture and Politics* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994), pp. 190–205.

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voted, which parties they chose, and how their choices – of one party or another, or of voting and not voting – differed from election to election. To make sense of such quantitative results and indeed to guide the statistical questions one might ask in the first place, one needs an intellectual framework, a model for understanding voting behavior.

Different approaches

Currently one of the most influential general theories of the electoral process is Anthony Downs's economic theory of democracy. Reducing the main idea to its simplest formulation, it is that elections are a sort of bargaining process between candidates and the electorate, directed by individual self-interest. Politicians desire the prerogatives and spoils of office so they promise voters that if they are elected, they will carry out policies profitable for those who vote for them.³

This approach seems singularly ill-suited to the study of elections in Imperial Germany. Since there was no parliamentary government and little parliamentary power, there were no spoils of office as goals of politicians' aspirations: office-holding and patronage were out; deputies drew no salaries and did not even receive a per diem expense allowance until 1906.⁴ Politicians could promise the voters all manner of things should they be elected, but it is hard to see why rationally minded voters – or even not so rationally minded ones – would have believed these promises in view of the parliamentarians' lack of power to formulate either government policy or new legislation.

Another approach is needed to understand voting behavior in Imperial Germany and the one adopted most often has been proposed by sociologist Rainer Lepsius. Lepsius asserted that the German political parties were an expression of what he called "sociomoral milieus," formed by the intersection of religious, cultural and regional traditions, economic circumstances, social structure, and forms of voluntary associations. Putting aside several smaller groups, such as the national and regional minorities, Lepsius identified four major milieus in Imperial Germany, three of which – the Catholic, the urban Protestant middle class and the rural Protestant – were formed in the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, predating German national unification and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage. Voting for a political party in Lepsius's model was not a means of asserting one's individual or collective self-interest, but an act

³ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harpers, 1957).

⁴ On the history of the question of compensation for deputies, see Elfi Pracht, *Parlamentarismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie 1867–1914* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), pp. 304–9.

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of affirming one's membership in such a milieu and the function of the major political parties was to represent their respective milieus. Indeed, Lepsius tends to take the stability of voting results for a party or group of parties as proof of the existence of a milieu, understanding the Center Party as the expression of the Catholic milieu, the liberal parties as the expression of the urban Protestant middle-class one, and the conservative parties as the expression of the rural Protestant milieu.

These three milieus did not just predate the national political system of universal manhood suffrage, they predated large-scale industrialization as well. With its progress in the last third of the nineteenth century, there developed a substantial proportion of the population – urban, at least nominally Protestant, working-class – that was outside the three major milieus. These were the voters of the Social Democratic Party, whose spectacular rise in support was the major long-term change in voter preferences throughout the history of the empire. Lepsius takes his thesis further and asserts that the relationship between the Social Democratic Party and its supporters developed into precisely the same sort of milieu that characterized the other major party groupings. By the early twentieth century the vast majority of the German electorate had been parcelled out among these four mutually impermeable, largely static voting blocs. The electoral system remained that way, Lepsius goes on to argue, surviving the First World War, the economic crises of the post-war era, the territorial changes of 1919, the introduction of a republican and parliamentary form of government, the expansion of the electorate to women and young adults, and the introduction of a system of proportional representation until the rise of the Nazis after 1928. The Nazi regime and the Second World War then destroyed the infrastructure of the sociomoral milieus, allowing for the emergence of an interest-based and so more flexible and more mobile electoral system in the Federal Republic of Germany.⁵

Lepsius's thesis has been enormously influential and a good deal of the scholarship in the last two decades on voting and elections in Imperial Germany, including the work of this author, has made use of his concept of sociomoral milieus.⁶ An understanding of the electoral process as centered around social identification rather than bargaining between politicians and voters is particularly well suited to the constitutional and political realities of the German Empire. However, there is a price to be

⁵ M. Rainer Lepsius, "Parteisystem und Sozialstruktur: zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft," in (among other places) Gerhard Albert Ritter (ed.) *Die deutschen Parteien vor 1918* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1973), pp. 56–80.

⁶ On Lepsius's milieu thesis and its importance for historical studies of elections, see Kühne, "Wahlrecht–Wahlverhalten–Wahlkultur," pp. 508–13.

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paid for this understanding, namely a static view of the electoral system. In Lepsius's explanation of past German politics, voters and their parties were tied together in a milieu constituted before the creation of the political system in which these milieus operated; there could be little or no movement between these milieus. Results at elections were basically fixed in advance; the only major changes that occurred were when non-voters not belonging to any milieu – and these two terms are identical in Lepsius's model – identified with a new party and created a new milieu of their own, as Lepsius argues occurred with the growth of the labor movement among urban Protestant workers. This summary is a bit unfair to the nuances of Lepsius's work, since he notes that movement took place between parties of the same milieu (between the left-wing liberal parties and the more moderate National Liberals, for instance) or that over time milieus gradually dissolved under the pressure of social and economic change, a process he notes in the decline in the proportion of Catholic voters supporting the Center Party. Nonetheless, stasis predominates over movement in Lepsius's view of German elections before 1914, and to some extent before 1928: all the sound and fury of election campaigns, all the massive organization and remarkable rates of voter turnout produce little change.

The political scientist Karl Rohe, in a series of recent studies, has developed a variation on Lepsius's work that allows for more change in the model. He introduces the concept of "camp" (*Lager*) that serves as an intermediary between milieu and political party or groups of parties. Camps were made up of one or more milieus, as well as individuals not within any milieu at all, and were characterized less by their internal homogeneity (as in Lepsius's milieu) than by their sharp delineation from other political camps. Rohe identifies three such camps in German politics – a socialist, a Catholic (both reasonably close to Lepsius's comparably named milieu) and a "national" camp, encompassing individuals from Lepsius's liberal and conservative milieus. Like Lepsius's milieus, Rohe's camps were characterized by strong internal cohesion: voters moved back and forth between different parties within their camp but were unlikely to choose a party outside of it.

This theoretical construction allows Rohe to explain the possibilities of movement in a political system structured around relatively static milieus. Milieus may become part of a camp, as Rohe asserts occurred with the Catholic milieu in the 1870s. Under the pressure of the government's persecution in the course of the *Kulturkampf*, voters from the Catholic milieu, who had previously supported several different political parties, became firmly loyal to an explicitly Catholic political party, the Center, thus creating a Catholic political camp. Groups of voters may also change

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camps, not fluctuating back and forth between them (this would go against the terms of the model), but moving over in one go. If seeing the rise of the Social Democratic Party primarily in terms of the mobilization of previous non-voters, as does Lepsius, Rohe also offers examples of whole groups of workers going over at one election from the national camp to the socialist one and then remaining there. Finally, whole camps may change the political party they support. While Lepsius sees the rise of Nazis as the result of the collapse of the milieus, Rohe sees it primarily as a consequence of voters in the national camp switching their loyalties from various parties of the center and the right to the NSDAP.

Both of these last two possibilities point to an unusual and explicitly delineated feature of Rohe's view on elections, the denial of the existence among voters of a political spectrum going from left to right, even if such a spectrum could be found through comparison of the parties' programs, or characterized the relations of the deputies' caucuses in the Reichstag. Voters in the different camps were identified by their mutual exclusion. There was no exchange of votes between, say, the left-liberal parties and the socialists, although the positions publicly taken by the two groups of parties were closest to each other. Conversely, there was nothing to be surprised about in the movement of voters from the liberal parties to the Nazis, in spite of the considerable ideological distance between them; it was part of a broader switch of loyalties among members of the national camp.

Rohe's model also allows for a continuity of political traditions between the pre- and post-1945 eras. Since party and milieu are not directly aligned in his model, but linked via the political camps, the rise of new political parties in the Federal Republic, particularly the CDU/CSU, does not imply a total revision of the social and political system but can be understood as a realignment of political camps, coupled with more gradual social changes affecting the existence of sociomoral milieus. The upshot is a political model that stresses both the elements of continuity and those of a new beginning in West German politics and also provides a way to understand the changes in voting behavior since the 1950s.⁷

This work is an impressive achievement, with a good deal of analytical power. At times, though, Rohe's incorporation of additional concepts to an existing model – besides milieu and camp, he also discusses “cleavages” or lines of division between social, regional or confessional groups, that may or may not be expressed politically – is reminiscent of those

⁷ Rohe has handily summarized his own work and that of his students in *Wahlen und Wählertraditionen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992). Kühne, in “Wahlrecht–Wahlverhalten–Wahlkultur,” pp. 517–22, has some very astute comments on Rohe's approach.

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medieval astronomers who added ever more epicycles to reconcile Aristotelian geocentric theories with their observations of the cosmos. A number of English-speaking historians, most prominently Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, have argued that the whole approach based on milieus is too static to capture the reality of a political process that was more mobile. Starting from the realignments of party organization, the changes in campaigning, participation and political style that they have observed and generally dated to the decade of the 1890s, they have gone on to argue that these both reflected and encouraged changes in voting behavior. Where Lepsius and, to a lesser extent Rohe, see stability and voter loyalty, they see fluctuation and swings in voter support. The main motif in this explanation of political behavior is protest, reaction to changing social and economic circumstances and to government policies. Voters responded to new and often unfavorable conditions by holding politicians responsible, even if they were not, and the latter had to respond to their constituents' anger if they were to be re-elected. The responses they found in turn rechanneled voter loyalties, thus further changing the electoral system.⁸

Ecological inference

Although this brief sketch does not enumerate exhaustively all the possible approaches to studying elections in Imperial Germany, it does suggest some of the main lines of interpretation, in particular the distinction between statically and dynamically oriented modes of explanation.⁹ The

⁸ In more general terms, see Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (Yale and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and David Blackbourn, *Class, Religion and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980). Specific formulations include David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.72–73, 93; Geoff Eley, “The German Right, 1860–1945: How It Changed,” in Geoff Eley (ed.) *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (Boston, London and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 231–53, esp. pp. 239–40; and Geoff Eley, “Notable Politics, the Crisis of German Liberalism, and the Electoral Transition of the 1890s,” in Konrad Jarausch and Larry Jones (eds.) *In Search of a Liberal Germany: Studies in the History of German Liberalism from 1789 to the Present* (New York, Oxford and Munich: Berg Publishers, 1990), pp. 187–216. As for other English-language historians, Stanley Suval’s work has more in common with Lepsius’s milieu thesis, while Margaret Anderson, although disagreeing with Blackbourn and Eley about almost everything else, does tend to share their notion of protest as a moving factor in German voter behavior.

⁹ For a discussion of additional interpretative models, see Peter Steinbach, “Reichstag Elections in the Kaiserreich: The Prospects for Electoral Research in the Interdisciplinary Context,” in Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack (eds.) *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 119–46.

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question inevitably arises as to which (if any) is right, and it is not an easy one to answer. In part, there are problems of interpretation of evidence. If, over some thirty-five years the share of votes cast for a given group of parties drops from 38% to 25%, is that proof of change or of stability?¹⁰ It is a decline of some 34%, a pretty substantial figure, but at a rate of only 1.1% per year, which could be seen as proof of the long-term stability of the political system. Similarly, studies of individual constituencies or of regions in given periods designed to demonstrate either change or stability suffer from the problem of typicality. They may neither represent what was happening elsewhere in Imperial Germany, a large and diverse country, nor what was happening at other times in the forty-one years between its first general election and its last.

There is a more basic problem confronting these interpretations: the gap between what they explain and the material available to explain it. All the explanations are at least implicitly about the voting of individuals or of social and confessional groups. Lepsius's model, for instance, suggests that all or at least the vast majority of individuals who voted for, say, the conservative parties at one election would be likely to do so at subsequent ones, that the large majority of Catholics supported the Center Party, or that Protestant, blue-collar voters generally cast their ballots for the Social Democrats. A more change-oriented explanation, on the other hand, would suggest that such stability of individual and group choice was not always present; for instance, that at some elections in the 1890s a significant proportion of liberal voters switched over to the anti-Semites and perhaps at a later election came back to the liberal parties or even went on to the Social Democrats, or that a significant number of Catholic industrial workers stopped voting for the Center and began to support the Social Democrats.

Answering these sorts of questions is the very staple of contemporary electoral analysis and political scientists have a simple way of finding out how voters cast their ballot: they ask them, or at least a random sample of them. Unfortunately, we can no longer do this for the voters of the German Empire. Since the voting age was twenty-five and the last prewar elections were in 1912, the very youngest voters in Imperial Germany were born in 1887 and are no longer with us to be surveyed. There were, to be sure, very extensive returns compiled for the general elections to the Imperial parliament, and carried out with the thoroughness and accuracy traditionally associated with German administration. Many of these returns are available in published form. The problem is that the returns,

¹⁰ These figures are the share of votes cast for the liberal parties at the general elections of 1874 and 1907.

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whether at the level of the precinct, the constituency, the larger administrative unit, or the entire nation, give the votes cast in specific areas, not the votes cast by individuals or social or religious groups. They are, in the jargon of electoral analysis, “ecological” or “aggregate” in nature.

A very simple example of the problems that arise in drawing inferences about individual behavior from information collected on an ecological basis can be seen in the pioneering essay of Rainer Lepsius that has informed so much of the study of elections in Germany before the First World War. Lepsius developed and supported his theory of the existence of sociomoral milieus by noting that the total percentages of votes cast for groups of parties across all of Germany remained reasonably stable for several decades.¹¹ This could have been the result from the same or similar (in terms of confession, region or social class) individuals casting votes for the same group of parties in these different elections, which is presumably what Lepsius had in mind, and which would support his idea of a basically static electoral system. Yet it is entirely possible for a party to receive a similar percentage of votes at different elections but to have very different individuals cast these votes. If this were the case, then there would have been a good deal of fluctuation among individual voters or groups of them; such a result would suggest a much more dynamic electoral system than could be reconciled with the theory of sociomoral milieus.

The basic issue in studying the national elections of Imperial Germany, or any other elections with a secret ballot and no polling data, is thus how to find out something about individual and group voting preferences from election returns consisting of individual votes aggregated together into geographical areas – the problem generally known as “ecological inference.” For a long time, this was thought to be impossible: the very idea of inferring individual or group characteristics from aggregate data was regarded as an example of statistically incorrect thinking, the celebrated “ecological fallacy.” Recent scholarship has demonstrated that such a sweeping assertion is incorrect and itself involved faulty statistical reasoning. Proceeding with caution and employing certain at least partially testable assumptions, ecological inference is indeed possible.¹²

There are a number of different approaches to ecological inference.¹³

¹¹ Lepsius, “Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur,” p. 63.

¹² E. A. Hanushek, J. E. Jackson, and J. F. Kain, “Model Specification, Use of Aggregate Data, and the Ecological Correlation Fallacy,” *Political Methodology* 1 (1974): 87–106; Søren Risbjerg Thomsen, *Danish Elections, 1920–1979 A Logit Approach to Ecological Analysis and Inference* (Århus: Politicia, 1987), pp. 37–38, 47–48, 64.

¹³ For a general introduction to these and other possible approaches, see Laura Irwin Langbein and Allan Lichtman, *Ecological Inference* (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1978).

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The simplest and technically least demanding involves the use of correlation coefficients, Pearson's r . If, for instance, one were interested in determining which voters supported a given political party, one would take for each aggregate unit (which could be a precinct, a constituency or a district) the vote for that party and the characteristic one wished to use to explain that party's vote – say the proportion of the voters in that unit belonging to a given religious confession or social class – and systematically compare the vote and the explanatory characteristic for all the units in the election returns. The result, the coefficient of correlation, ranges from -1 (which means that when one of these two characteristics – or variables, to use the technical term – increases, the other decreases in linear fashion) through zero (showing that the two have no linear relationship) to $+1$ (meaning that when one variable increases, the other also increases linearly). The general interpretation of these results would be that when r is close to 1 , the voters designated by the explanatory variable were supporters of the party; when r is close to -1 , they likely rejected it.

Unfortunately, there is a large gap between the value of Pearson's r and the explanatory power sometimes attributed to it. First of all, coefficients of correlation are often neither close to $+1$ nor to -1 , but lie somewhere in the middle. Karl Rohe, for instance, cites research showing that the coefficient of correlation between the proportion of voters in a given area casting ballots for the National Liberal party in the 1893 Reichstag elections and the proportion of Catholics in that area was -0.29 . Since the figure is negative, it means that an increase in Catholics went along with a decrease in National Liberal votes, but since the figure is not far from zero, it means that this relationship was not linear (not regular or steady in straight-line fashion). Did a lot of Catholics vote for the National Liberals, some, a few, or virtually none? The result does not really tell us. In fact, it tells us very little, since the explanatory power of Pearson's r is found by squaring it: -0.29 squared is 0.084 : in other words 8.4% of the change in the National Liberal vote from area to area is explained by the proportion of Catholics living in these areas. What about the other 91.6%?

Even when r is substantial (close to $+1$ or -1), it does not tell us as much as we might wish to know. For those same Reichstag elections in 1893, the coefficient of correlation between the proportion Catholic and the vote for the Catholic political party, the Center, is the very high figure of 0.85 : an increase in the proportion Catholic meant a linear increase in the proportion of Center voters. Linearity is not everything, though. Such a coefficient of correlation is compatible with two very different situations, one in which a large increase in the proportion of Catholic voters