“GET OUT THE VOTE!” ELECTIONS WITHOUT DEMOCRACY IN IMPERIAL GERMANY

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You can certainly tell small children that a ringing bell means the ice-cream truck is out of ice cream. But that’s about it, I think.

— Jeffrey Goldberg, advice columnist

I.

George Eliot's novel Felix Holt was published in 1866 — when Prussia’s victory in the German Civil War excluded Austria from the future Germany. Eighteen-sixty-six was also the year when Bismarck decided to use the “revolutionary” idea of universal manhood suffrage for a new, national parliament. He deployed it as a weapon against Austria and against Prussian liberals. Liberals saw universal suffrage in exactly these terms. As one of their newspapers put it in 1867, “Even the vote is a rifle, and ballots are also bullets.” (Abraham Lincoln made a similar remark a decade earlier.) George Eliot viewed the act of voting more cynically. In Felix Holt she wrote, “An election is coming. Universal peace is declared, and the foxes have a sincere interest in prolonging the lives of the poultry.”

Eliot’s bon mot prompts reflection on three open questions that characterize past scholarship on German elections. First, if barnyards and the familiar rhythms of country life had begun to disappear by the last third of the nineteenth century under the impact of modern industrial capitalism, how do we calibrate the speed and direction of socio-economic change, on the one hand, against the speed and direction of political change, on the other? Did social dislocation transform the German electorate more than any single

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1 The Atlantic 310, no. 1 (July/August 2012), 148.


3 Volks-Zeitung (Berlin), 30 August 1867.

4 “The ballot is stronger than the bullet.” Abraham Lincoln, speech of 19 May 1856.

event or decision? Assuming for a moment that it did, how best do we gauge the political manifestations of divisions, cleavages, conflicts, and exclusionary practices in rapidly changing societies? To what extent were people’s socioeconomic status and their everyday lives reflected in the choices they made at the polling place? And how do the X-factors of locality and region complicate things? More than three decades ago, when the history of everyday life (Alltagsgeschichte) was just beginning to be taken seriously, the political scientist Peter Steinbach offered a convincing argument about why students of German elections and democratic institutions need to address these questions head-on. “Whereas previously, histories of parties, associations, and elections would jump all too quickly from the social structure of a district to the articulation of politics, research on the history of everyday life offers the opportunity to ... describe more precisely the social structures that are considered primarily as statistical categories ... Even though the much-cited ‘linkage problem’ between social structure and political articulation can be resolved at the empirical level only in the rarest cases, this does not eliminate the [historian’s] duty to recognize that it is a new task of historical-sociological regional history to find a solution.”

Second, if the great questions of modern German history revolve around the Third Reich, Hitler, and the Holocaust, when voting was inconsequential to politics and democracy was on the mat, why should we care about “elections without democracy” in an earlier period? One fragile consensus holds that there are three institutional attributes of democracy: universal male suffrage, an autonomous legislature, and civil liberties. Did these attributes actually characterize Imperial Germany? Even if they did, such a view ignores important elements of Imperial Germany’s political culture, for example the role played by the state and political leaders in defining the choices among which voters had to choose. Historians have done a good job of charting the increasing levels of competition among German political parties during what has been called Europe’s “participation revolution” of the nineteenth century. But they have tended to over-emphasize the role of “populist” outsiders — rascals and others who wanted to get inside the party-political tent — in determining who profited from changes to the system. We need to know more about how anti-democratic leaders and representatives of the authoritarian state worked together at all three tiers of government (national, state, and municipal) to change the rules of the electoral game to their own


advantage. Was the “motor of change” in Germany’s electoral culture driven mainly by mendacious elites operating from above? Or was the “terror of the street” more important, for example when thousands of German citizens called for suffrage reform in mass demonstrations? The easy answer is that both kinds of pressure combined to favor change. But the easy answer does not get us very far.

Third: Did either the “red specter” or the “Jewish threat” determine how Germany’s electoral culture was transformed by the processes of democratization? Interrogating the fate of socialists and Jews together forces us to consider the longue durée stretching from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Germany’s Social Democratic Party (SPD) won more votes in Reichstag elections than any other party from 1890 onwards. By 1912 the SPD fielded the largest caucus in the Reichstag: 110 of 397 seats. It had clearly expanded its base of support beyond Germany’s working classes alone. Even though the party became more reformist and less revolutionary over this period, the SPD was poised to push Germany over the threshold to democracy on the eve of the First World War. Or was it?

Socialists were not the only ones in Germany who suffered persecution, defamation, and political isolation. Other alleged Reichsfeinde did not fit into the national community defined by Bismarck, Hitler, and other anti-democrats. Why consider socialists, Jews, and their enemies together when talking about democracy and efforts to mobilize a changing electorate? Because democracy and voting laws are fundamentally about inclusion and exclusion. In the late 1920s Hitler became the impresario of attacks on Marxists and the Jews that ascribed pariah status — and much worse — to both groups.

I am not suggesting here that Imperial Germany was Nazi Germany in embryonic form. Even though the Kaiser chose his own government ministers and had exclusive power to declare war and peace, the Second Reich was not a Fascist state or a dictatorship ruled by terror. It was not a state where you could line your enemies up against a wall and mow them down. It was a semi-parliamentary constitutional monarchy, where the rule of law still prevailed (with notable interruptions and exceptions). The Reichstag had the power of the purse and grew more important over time as a sounding board of public opinion. It became a forum for airing demands for participation and grievances against the authoritarian state — something that chancellors and the Kaiser ignored at their peril.


Nevertheless, Hitler was conspicuously unoriginal in targeting Marxists and Jews and profiting at the polls by doing so. The dystopia of a future Germany overrun by “Sozis” and “Semites” — as conservatives put it in the 1880s and as depicted in Max Bewer’s semi-pornographic *Politische Bilderbogen* in the 1890s — was a spectre made frighteningly real not *despite* universal manhood suffrage but because of it. That spectre was not born in 1933 or 1919. It had already become a German nightmare by 1900. This continuity from the nineteenth century to the twentieth is not unique to German history: the concept of Germany’s “special path” to modernity — its *Sonderweg* — cannot explain it. Democrats everywhere pay a terrible price when their enemies become responsive to the masses without wishing to be responsible to the people. However, historians have yet to explain the interconnectedness of three dimensions of German electoral culture before 1918: exclusionary strategies targeting socialists and Jews, efforts to hold back the tide of democracy, and mendacious campaign tactics that successfully turned the weapon of universal manhood suffrage against revolutionaries and reformers. We do not need to invoke the *Sonderweg* to sense that Imperial German elections hold important clues to what went so terribly wrong in the 1920s and 1930s.

II.

What partial answers have scholars provided to pry open these questions of social change, democratic institutions, and continuity? Good history is like a Swiss Army knife: it offers different tools for different situations, rather than only the sharp edge of a blade. Students of German elections have learned a great deal from political scientists and political sociologists in particular: one thinks of Stein Rokkan, M. Rainer Lepsius, Ralf Dahrendorf, and Karl Rohe. Rokkan wrote about the cleavages dividing societies on the cusp of modernity. These included conflicts between center and periphery, between agriculture and industry, between state and church, and between employers and employees. Lepsius asked why the main social-moral milieus that formed in Germany in the 1860s — at the moment that universal manhood suffrage (but not democracy) was introduced — persisted more or less in the same form until the Nazis broke the mold after 1930. Dahrendorf’s “German Question” is almost too familiar to bear repeating: “Why,” he asked, “is it that so few in Germany embraced the principle of liberal democracy?” And Rohe has developed the idea


of political camps (Lager), taking over Lepsius’s thesis about a socialist camp and a Catholic camp but lumping the other milieus into a “nationalist” camp.15

I cite Rohe’s camps as a “partial answer” because the nationalist camp is actually very difficult to find in the historical record. Nonetheless, political historians have always tried to incorporate factors like socioeconomic dislocation and cultural anxiety into their analyses. For example, the émigré historian Hans Rosenberg argued in the 1940s that the “Great Depression” from 1873 to 1896 drove up the anxiety level of the German lower-middle class (petit bourgeoisie or Mittelstand).16 Rosenberg’s thesis was not dissimilar to Richard Hofstadter’s thesis dating from the mid-1960s, about the Paranoid Style in American Politics.17 This lower-middle-class grouping was fractured, in flux, cut loose from its traditional political moorings and susceptible to the siren call of antisemitism. After 1930 its members flocked to the Nazis, who appealed to their real and imagined fears. But it is still not clear whether the idea of Panik im Mittelstand really helps explain Rohe’s nationalist camp or the first wave of racial antisemitism.

A second partial answer highlights the importance of democratization as a social process but remains ambivalent about democracy as a political institution. German and non-German scholars have focused mainly on the latter, as Daniel Ziblatt made clear when he asked, “How did Europe Democratize?”18 A notable ambivalence about these twin aspects of democratization is evident in the best work on Imperial German elections: The Kaiser’s Voters by Jonathan Sperber; Democracy in the Undemocratic State by Brett Fairbairn; and Practicing Democracy by Margaret Lavinia Anderson.19 Sperber is not speaking of citizen-voters, but subject-voters. Fairbairn’s paradoxical title acknowledges the power of social democratization but the persistence of undemocratic state institutions. And Anderson argues that Germans, by practicing democracy with such fervor and dedication before 1918, were actually more ready to make the Weimar Republic a political success than we previously believed.20 Each of these works

20 See also Stanley Suval, Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985).
provides a piece of the interpretive puzzle of Germany’s democratization. Yet that puzzle, even when it is assembled, remains slightly out of focus — rather like a 3-D movie viewed without the right glasses.

These studies have built on a mountain of previous research that tells us how unusual Imperial Germany was in having universal manhood suffrage without a liberal democracy based on the parliamentary system. The broad suffrage provided German Social Democrats the opportunity to develop a modern, mass-based party apparatus at a time when the Reichstag’s prerogatives and ambitions were still uncertain. And the gradual transition from a “politics of notables” (Honoratiorenpolitik) to a “political mass market” frightened those who wanted to protect (as they put it) the established social and political order. Germany in 1914 still did not possess a legislature that determined the make-up of the government or could rein in a powerful military and bureaucracy.

To be sure, one kind of democratization, the Fundamentalpolitisierung of German society, was far advanced. Civil liberties also protected a free vote — usually. But Germany was not a democracy just because the ballot was exercised and the secret ballot was defended. As Tom Stoppard once wrote, “It’s not the voting that’s democracy; it’s the counting.” I don’t mean that corruption precluded a “fair count” in the narrow sense. Instead I mean that the Reichstag, if it was an autonomous legislature, was too autonomous: it didn’t “count” for as much as optimistic historians of the Empire like to think.

Including herself among such optimists, Margaret Lavinia Anderson has argued that in 1866, when Bismarck tossed universal manhood suffrage into his “national omelet” — the one he didn’t want liberals or foreign powers poking their fingers into — only two other countries in Europe had a broader suffrage (Greece after 1844, France after 1852). Almost all other countries had to wait until after 1900 for an equitable franchise. The United States was encumbered by any number of racial and other barriers to fairness, based on states’ rights. And Britain could not boast of democracy after the First, Second, or Third Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, or 1884; it arrived only with the “Fourth” Reform Act of 1918. These assertions are not contentious. I’m much less sure, however, that we should sign on to Anderson’s more provocative claim. Implicitly alluding to Wilhelm Liebknecht’s famous pronouncement that the Reichstag was merely

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Anderson writes that Germany in 1914 was not just “a monarchy with democratic adornments”; rather, it was a “‘democratic’ monarchy” — full stop. The inverted commas around “democratic” preserve the modesty of her claim, though only just.

Anderson is the world’s leading scholar on Imperial German elections. She has studied the myriad rules, regulations, and election protests that protected the secret ballot. In the process she has exploded the myth that German voters were frog-marched to the polls by their agrarian landlords, urban employers, and Catholic priests. Anderson’s broader thesis is that those rules and regulations prepared Germans well for democracy after 1918. They ensured that Imperial Germany’s oppositional parties could mobilize their voters and get them to the polls, with little chicanery to prevent them from doing so. Those rules also ensured that every word spoken in the Reichstag could be published in any party’s newspaper the next day; hence even opposition deputies could declare their disdain for the monarchy — even their “hatred for the person of the Kaiser,” as the SPD leader August Bebel did in January 1903. During election campaigns, typically lasting eight weeks or so, there were (still according to Anderson) no restrictions on the media of modern elections: pamphlets, flyers, posters, placards, even the distribution of printed ballots before voting day. All parties had access to new technologies in their campaigning, from the rotary printing press to the slide show to mechanized transportation for party Schlepper who helped bring supporters to the polls. And German civil servants, the police, and the parties’ own scrutineers ensured that graft, bribery, and other forms of what the English call “treating” had no meaningful impact on German elections.

With this evidence Anderson concludes that strict adherence to elaborate rules of electoral procedure provided “the early handholds, the rough crevices in the smooth system of authority, which allowed some groups of voters as early as the 1870s to gain a purchase on the wall of authority.” Both the metaphor and Anderson’s analysis are illuminating. What both fail to convey is that the enemies of democracy did their utmost to fill in those handholds, smooth those crevices, and loosen the grasp of democrats trying to conquer the bastions of authority. They were aided in this task by the harsh political climate of authoritarianism. The many successes scored by democracy’s enemies cast doubt on Anderson’s central conclusion, namely, that...
advocates of democracy had successfully turned the weapons of the old order upon itself before 1918. Substantial intimidation and other barriers to a free vote persisted, for Social Democrats above all.

What about other successes scored by the enemies of democracy? Limits of space allow me to cite only one example: the rolling-back of “democratic” voting laws in countless municipal and regional parliaments after 1890. As I have argued elsewhere, in municipal councils and state Landtage across Germany, either unequal suffrage laws were retained or new ones were introduced in order to privilege income, property, education, military service, and age (this list is not exhaustive). Both retrenchment and experimentation with new suffrages were advertised — and accepted by German burghers — as a means to keep socialists out of these parliaments.30 Like a storm lashing our climber from all sides, such anti-democratic practices and strategies increased the slipperiness of the face of the authoritarian state. They weakened the resolve of all but the most resilient adventurers to continue the upward struggle. That this ascent continued at all is of profound historical significance. Without question it deserves our attention. But for precisely that reason, historians should not diminish the durability of obstacles that remained in the path of those for whom we — as small-“D” democrats ourselves — would like to reserve our most enthusiastic cheers.

III.

In this section I would like to offer a case study based on the Reichstag elections of June 1893 in order to make three points. First, democracy’s enemies in Germany hated the style of democratic politics at least as much as they hated its content. Yet, they could not entirely resist new pressures to get “up close and personal” with voters. Second, despite their distrust of “rabble-rousing” campaign tactics, many conservative insiders were just as willing to play the “Jewish card” in 1893 as were their more radical opponents, the independent antisemitic parties. Third, I hope to provide a hint of the look and feel of a contemporary election campaign.

By 1893, three years after Bismarck’s dismissal, the German party system was in upheaval. The right-wing parties Bismarck had successfully manipulated for two decades were in disarray, and “enemies of the Reich” were on the cusp of their remarkable period of growth in the 1890s. The successes of Social Democrats and radical antisemites showed that the older, informal style of politics was in

its death throes; a new, more “in-your-face” style of mass politics seemed to have arrived. “Rabble-rousing” election campaigns and their successes demonstrated how badly Bismarck had miscalculated in 1866 when he gambled that the German masses, peasants and workers, were pliable monarchists and likely to defer to their betters for decades to come. By the 1893 election, the Conservative Party leader Otto von Helldorff-Bedra expressed his disdain for the new, vulgar, racist antisemitism that was penetrating even his own party. Helldorff referred to “the frightful brutalization of public opinion” that was the hallmark of modern campaigning.31

Now, Conservative prejudice against unsavory mass politics and against the Jews was neither new nor exclusively German: Conservatives had long preferred to run in “Riviera constituencies,” where one might issue a short statement in the first week of the campaign and spend the rest of the “contest” relaxing on the south coast of France. Moreover, curmudgeons elsewhere have expressed disdain for the “unwashed” or “ineducated” masses who clamored for attention. One thinks here of the crusty American journalist H.L. Mencken, who liked to refer to the American middle classes as the “booboisie.” Mencken once observed that “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.”32

To look ahead for a moment to the outcome of the 1893 Reichstag elections, it seemed to be a case of grand larceny. At least that’s how it was seen by Conservative Junkers in the rural, backwoods provinces of Prussia. When the independent antisemites made off with a record high of sixteen Reichstag seats in that election (won with over 250,000 votes or 3.4 percent of the national total), the Junkers cried “foul!” These interlopers had stolen their safe seats. Yet when the Junkers claimed that the independent antisemites promised everything to everybody, the independent antisemites also cried “foul!”

A primer on How to Win an Election — actually a letter from Quintus Tullius Cicero to his famous brother Marcus, written in the summer of 64 BC when the latter was vying to become a Roman consul — tells us that the rules of the game had not changed much in two millennia. Quintus gave Marcus the following nuggets of advice: Don’t leave town; call in all favors; build a wide base of support; “promise everything to everybody”; know the weaknesses of your opponents — and exploit them; give people hope; and “flatter voters shamelessly.”33 In 1893, radical antisemites found a lot of traction with voters using the

same methods. They also won a hearing for themselves when they claimed that the “little man” in Germany was the victim of Jews and Junkers alike. Conversely, Junkers and other conservatives charged that the scatter-shot attacks of the antisemites were doing the dirty work of Social Democrats. “The frightful brutalization of public opinion,” they argued, was “plowing the furrows” in which socialists planted the seed of revolution.

One observer (Helmut von Gerlach) who had a foot in both the antisemitic and Conservative movements, described the rural campaigning that proved successful around this time for one of the loosest cannons in the antisemitic camp, Hermann Ahlwardt. Ahlwardt offered prospective voters in backwoods Pomerania electoral bait in the form of lies, flattery, and innuendo: “Along with his secretary, [Ahlwardt] systematically called on farms, asking each farmer how many acres of land and how much livestock he owned. Then he turned to the secretary, who flashed a gigantic notebook, and dictated to him: ‘Take this down! [Farmer] Gussow owns 30 acres, 5 cows, 4 pigs; he ought to own: 60 acres, 12 cows, and 10 pigs.’”

With their close ties to the state, the civil service, and the army, mainstream Conservatives objected to such dishonesty on the hustings. They liked the tenor — the noise and rough language — of antisemitic rallies even less. Consider what one high-born Conservative, Baron Heinrich von Friesen-Rötha, defined as “rowdyism” shortly after he and other Conservatives lost seats to the independent antisemitic parties in 1893. In Friesen’s pamphlet entitled Honor the Truth!, it was virtually impossible to distinguish between the “rabble-rousing” tactics used by Social Democrats and those used by radical antisemites. Even the beer-bench politics of Pan-Germans, student corps, and veterans’ associations loomed in his dystopia, which reflected all of Friesen’s class pretensions and political prejudices:

Rowdyism [der “Radau”] is a singular sport of the uneducated masses ... One shouts, one stamps one’s feet, and in this way one achieves a certain gymnastic exercise ... Rowdyism in meetings sets the mob into [a] kind of drunkenness ...

Whether one has announced that the meeting will exhibit a calf with six feet or the inevitable “Jew” is completely irrelevant ...
It is mandatory to greet the speaker with rowdy applause, and even here there is an opportunity to set lungs, hands, feet, and the lids of beer steins into the desired state of motion. A hired group of applauders has to make sure that this movement does not cease. The ... alcoholic atmosphere increase[es] the need to call out and rave. If the word “Jew” is mentioned, then the jubilation has no end ...

Rowdyism is infectious. Soon one demands these kinds of rabble-rousing meetings in every village ... Always new meetings ... The leaders [of the antisemitic movement] soon feel themselves to be the people’s representatives, from whom the governments, in sheer amazement, declare themselves obligated to seek counsel.

One could proclaim this “rowdyism,” in and of itself, to be benign. However, it is a big lie, it relies on deception and breeds deception, and therein resides a danger that cannot be underestimated.35

I have cited these attempts to define what Hitler (after Friesen) called the “big lie” to bring Conservatives and antisemites into the same picture. As David Blackbourn explained long ago, their competition for votes was not merely a challenge-and-response development.36 Rather, it was a spiral of escalating radicalism that continued from the 1890s right up to Hitler’s seizure of power. I cannot chart the longer path that transformed the “traditional” Right into the “radical” Right and then the fascist Right in Germany. But I hope I can illuminate the timing and the trajectory of that path with a few final remarks. I’ll do so with one last example of “demagogic” politics. I want to argue that antisemites did not steal the Conservative vote in 1893 at all. Rather, that election proved there’s no honor among thieves.

Another Conservative big-wig, Dr. Paul Mehnert, delivered a programmatic speech to the Dresden Conservative Association in February 1880 — that is, more than a decade before the Reichstag election I have been describing.37 This address was delivered at the height of the first wave of antisemitic excitement in Germany, after the nationalistic historian Heinrich von Treitschke had famously proclaimed “The Jews are our misfortune.”38 Mehnert made the following points: The French Revolution had helped German Jews begin their rise to influence and power. Sweden and Norway severely limited the rights of Jews, whereas Germany had allowed “Semitism” to become a “moneyed

35 Anon. [Heinrich Freiherr von Friesen-Rötha], Der Wahrheit die Ehre! (Leipzig, n.d. [1893]), 17-19 (emphasis added), Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Leipzig, Rittergut Rötha mit Trachenau, Nr. 1576, Mappe: Aufzeichnungen und Notizen.


37 Sächsischer Volksfreund, 21 Feb. 1880.

power” in its own right. It was wrong to speak of Jew-baiting any more: “one could better speak of Christian-baiting.” Next Mehnert drew his audience’s attention to an American group called the “Society for the Eradication of the Jews.” After claiming that this “society” sought to relocate all American Jews to Jerusalem, Mehnert cited a resolution it has passed, demanding “the complete extermination of the Jews.” Some gentle jabs at a local antisemitic club in Dresden followed, but Mehnert claimed that its policies merely repeated what the Conservatives had been demanding for years: a stock-exchange tax (meant to hit Jews hard), the demand for cash payments from Jews in business dealings, and other measures to address the “dysfunctional economy” that Bismarck and his liberal supporters — also identified as Jews — had put in place during the 1870s.

During the Reichstag election campaign of 1893, Conservatives in the Kingdom of Saxony offered only variations on this speech Mehnert had delivered thirteen years earlier.39 They acknowledged the “good kernel” in German antisemitism; they reworked age-old myths to sharpen the Conservative message; they coquetted with the specter of physical violence; they blamed the Jews for their “dominance” of the press and public opinion; and they reaffirmed the Conservative Party’s claim to have defended the “rights of Christians” longer and more diligently than any other party, old or new. Conservatives never conceded that their own party was insincere — mendacious. They never conceded that they were insufficiently engaged — unable to mobilize their troops — in the struggle against the Jews. Fresh recruits were needed in the Conservative army. Certainly, “genuine” antisemites were welcome. But “new regiments” were not. So: grand larceny? Stealing the vote? Not quite. From the beginning, the fix was in.

In later elections, German Conservatives drew to their side antisemites who grew disaffected with the rancor and confusion in the independent antisemitic parties. But Conservatives did not moderate their views on the “Jewish question” or scale back their rhetoric on the hustings. Quite the reverse: as Yeats would say, their innocence had been drowned: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”40 In the Reichstag election campaign of 1893, the independent antisemites won 93,364 votes in Saxony (15.8 percent) compared to just 4,788 votes in 1890. Six antisemites were elected in Saxony, compared to none in 1890. Over the same two elections the Saxon Conservatives saw their own Reichstag

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contingent decline from twelve to six. The exact congruency between these gains and losses was more apparent than real. Yet only slight differences of strategy separated the two groups. For “radical” antisemites, the “Jewish question” was one of beguiling simplicity. There was no harm in fighting elections as single-issue parties. For “moderate” Conservatives, the “Jewish question” was fraught with dangerous complexities. But there was no harm in playing the “Jewish card” either.

This example and countless other ones like it show that Conservatives preferred defiance over decorum in targeting German Jews at election time. Their rhetoric was belligerent and clangorous — certainly not aloof and measured, as Baron von Friesen-Rötha would have preferred. It really doesn’t matter when and where Conservatives learned this language. Recent scholarship suggests it was earlier than historians have believed, namely in the years 1855 to 1873. At that time another Conservative antisemite, Hermann Wagener, taught his party comrades to “get out the vote” — also to recruit new members and to sell newspapers — by making scapegoats of Jews, even though German liberalism was on the rise. Regional particularities determined the success of such strategies at the subnational level, as I have argued elsewhere. The more important point is that both groups, “radical” antisemites and “moderate” Conservatives, identified feckless liberalism and dysfunctional “democracy” as their chief enemies in the 1890s as in the 1860s. Jew-baiting provided the bridge that brought these two groups together — so closely together that they became virtually indistinguishable.

IV.

In conclusion, what is the benefit of posing open questions, reviewing tentative answers, and applying the case-study approach to elections in Imperial Germany? First, I have tried to suggest that as a transatlantic and a global phenomenon, democracy was not a single river that kept adding new tributaries through history as it flowed to the blue sea we call “modernity.” At the dawn of the twentieth century, democracy’s tributaries were still distinct. Some of them trickled into nothing or went over a cliff. But almost all of them were contentious — attacked or defended by statesmen, party leaders, functionaries, and ordinary voters who all had different views on the ultimate purpose of voting (and counting votes). Nevertheless, by

1914 most Europeans had accomplished a significant expansion of their national electorate. That expansion in turn was based on the premise that elections served a worthwhile transmissive function, funneling pressures upwards from society and downwards from the state. Those pressures were always ultimately about power, and as in military conflicts, power usually rested with those who had the biggest armies. If “ballots are also bullets,” democracy could not be resisted on a world-historical scale.

Second, I have argued that the secret ballot and a free vote did not necessarily mean a fair or equal vote. The principle of “one man, one vote” had a powerful appeal to contemporaries, as it has to historians. But that principle was always fraught with complexities, many of which favored democracy’s enemies. Contemporaries were aware of this. In 1900, the left-liberal politician Friedrich Naumann referred to the Conservatives as “authoritarian types with democratic gloves.” Conservatives and other opponents of democracy were not always imbued with a meanness of spirit or a willingness to pander to the lowest common denominator. However, often they were — particularly when they declared that socialists and Jews presented a clear and present danger to the homogenous, Christian, national community of their ideal.

Third, in Germany, as elsewhere, bumpy and potentially reversible transitions to democracy unfolded in the context of local, regional, national, and transnational conversations about inclusion, exclusion, and political fairness. Who belonged to the political nation? Which “cautionary measures” were compatible with what Thomas Jefferson called “the decent opinion of mankind”? What bulwarks against democracy could ensure that “enemies of the Reich” would not overturn the political status quo or overthrow the authoritarian state? (Tellingly, contemporary references to “revolution” often used the term Umsturz.) If the rules of the game could be changed, what oversight could be exerted, from below and from above, to make sure that neither side could game the system with unpredictable ramifications and irreversible consequences?

In this context — where a political culture was slowly abandoning ingrained traditions but accommodating new conflicts fitfully or reluctantly — Elmer Eric Schattschneider’s observations about a “semi-sovereign people” are germane. “Political conflict,” he wrote in 1960, “is not like a football game, played on a measured field by a fixed number of players in the presence of an audience scrupulously
excluded from the playing field. Politics is much more like the original primitive game of football in which everybody was free to join, a game in which the whole population of one town played the entire population of another town moving freely back and forth across the countryside.\textsuperscript{46} Politics is rough business, especially when players and the crowd come into such close proximity. The analogy is not water-tight, but Schattschneider’s idea of opposing teams (and their supporters) roaming freely back and forth across the political landscape calls to mind groups of people studied by historians of another era in German history. Electoral politics, too, has its victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. In the high-stakes contests that unfolded with mounting ferocity after 1890, mobilizing electoral support at whatever cost meant that fewer and fewer unsavory tactics were declared out of bounds.

In the decades before 1914, the advocates of reform and the advocates of retrenchment were not equally matched, but neither side was willing to cede the field to the other. We cannot say what would have lain in Germany’s future if the First World War had not intervened: a liberal democracy was only one of many possible outcomes. Germans before 1914 had many opportunities to undertake significant constitutional reform. In most cases they side-stepped them.\textsuperscript{47} In 1908 they refused to censor the impetuous Kaiser in any meaningful way, even after he called the British “mad, mad, mad as March hares.” In 1910 they refused to abolish the notorious three-class suffrage in Prussia. And they never significantly reformed the upper houses of parliament at the national and most state levels, even after the British showed the way by clipping the tail-feathers of the House of Lords.\textsuperscript{48}

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that conservative enemies of democracy could have inaugurated anything resembling the Third Reich absent the horror of the First World War. More plausibly they would have

\textsuperscript{46} Elmer Eric Schattschneider, \textit{The Semisovereign People: A Realist’s View of Democracy in America} (New York, 1960), 18. He also draws a distinction between “the idea that the people are involved in politics by the contagion of conflict” and the “classical definition of democracy as ‘government by the people’” (129).


embraced a kind of pragmatic, reformist conservatism — because no other option was available. G.K. Chesterton suggested as much in his work *Orthodoxy* (1908). His words underscore the ambiguities inherent in German transitions to democracy. They also suggest why the traditional Right’s prospects at the polls were growing dimmer in a democratizing age. In a chapter titled “The Eternal Revolution,” Chesterton wrote: “All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change.”

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