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Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy

DANIEL ZIBLATT

Harvard University



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Stalled Democratization in Germany Before 1914

On the spring evening of May 20, 1912, a fleet of black automobiles drove up the graveled side driveway of Berlin's Prussian House of Representatives, unloading a group of men clad in dark suits. Earlier in the evening, these Reichstag Conservative Party members had hurriedly left that body's chambers, located just down the street, in the middle of debate. They lined into the chambers of the Prussian House of Representatives because that evening their vote was required on a piece of legislation before the Prussian provincial parliament.¹ This exclusive group, composed mostly of landed notables representing rural east Prussian constituencies, all with dual mandates in both the Prussian state and Reichstag chambers, had been called away by their leaders in the Prussian state assembly to exercise their vote. The bill they faced would have altered the so-called "three-class" suffrage rules for elections to the state House of Representatives in Prussia, then Germany's largest state. They cast their vote to "rescue" the three-class voting system and then quickly returned to their idling cars. In that decisive vote, summarized in Table 7.1, the seemingly overwhelming coherence and power of late Imperial German conservatism appeared to be at work. The Conservative and *Reichspartei* votes, along with critical abstentions from the Center Party and National Liberal Party, killed the bill with a vote of 188 to 158, as in the sixteen previous reform efforts since 1869.

Given the Prussian Conservative Party's apparent near veto-like power in Prussia that evening, we might ask: does it really make sense to blame this outcome on *weakly organized* political parties representing old-regime interests, as described in the last chapter? After all, at least at first glance, landed elites appeared immensely powerful, not weak. This chapter will make a very different argument: Germany's old regime landed elites were represented by a weak political party, loosely coupled without national integrated structures to integrate diverse

¹ *Berliner Tageblatt*, May 21, 1912, 1.

TABLE 7.1: *Parliamentary Vote on Prussia's May 1912 Legislation on Reforming the Suffrage*

Party	Total Representatives	Yes	No	Abstain
Conservative (K)	152	0	139	13 (0)
National Lib (N)	65	45	0	20 (13)
Center (Z)	102	58	0	44 (33)
Reichspartei (R)	59	0	49	10 (0)
Left Liberals (F)	36	33	0	3 (0)
Polish Party (P)	15	14	0	1 (1)
Social Dem (S)	6	6	0	0 (0)
Danes (D)	2	2	0	0 (0)
All	437	158	188	91 (47)

Note: In the "abstain" column, the figures in parentheses refer to the number of delegates who "abstained without excuse." A discussion of this follows in the text.

Data Source: *Verhandlungen des Hauses der Abgeordneten* 77. Sitzung, 21. Legislative Period, May 20, 1912, 6428-32.

broad constituencies. As a result, these elites and their party *acutely* feared democracy more severely. Further, it was paradoxically the very weakness and fragmentation of party organization representing these groups that allowed a single, narrow socioeconomic interest – landed elites – to gain such exclusive control over the parties, thereby keeping the old regime in place. In Germany, the result was profound: between 1890 and 1914, despite promising conditions, a democratic transition in Prussia's key voting system did not take place. And, as we will see in the next two chapters, the long-run effect of weak party organization on the electoral right subverted a potential consolidation of German democracy after 1918.

THE PRUSSIA FACTOR

Long before the First World War, at the founding of Germany's Empire in 1871, a question was already present: was Imperial Germany's political system doomed to authoritarian institutional stasis, or was democratic reform possible?² A British journalist reportedly confronted Count Otto von Bismarck with precisely this question in the years after unification, when he asked, "How far do you regard the present constitutional system of the Empire as final?" Bismarck apocryphally is said to have answered, with his characteristic mix of foresight and equivocation,

² For a discussion of the complications of this framing of the problem, see James Retallack, "Meanings of Stasis," in *The German Right* (2006), 108-36.

Final it is not. Doubtless we shall pass through the stages which you in England have passed through. But it will be a slow, gradual process and we cannot foresee the direction which development will take.³

Whether or not Britain is a useful frame of reference, on the eve of the First World War, Germany's imperial constitutional order, forged during the 1871 national unification, indeed came under unprecedented agitation for change. Democratic reforms were put on the political agenda of the "commanding heights" of the German political state. The unusual hybrid political regime that Bismarck is chiefly credited with designing – comprising a powerful monarch and his appointed chancellor; a weak national parliament; universal male suffrage; a federated executive in the form of a second chamber (the *Bundesrat*); and powerful states with their own suffrage systems, public finance, and bureaucracies – was not static, but it did face serious pressure for change.⁴ Yet, in those last five years before the First World War, the grand ambition of democratic reformers met a disappointing fate.

On the one hand, the early-twentieth-century collision of three forces had generated very real impulses toward democratization in Germany, as they had in much of Europe at the time. These included (1) the transnational revolutionary turmoil emanating from Russia's 1905 Revolution; (2) an increasingly cohesive and self-confident center-left pro-democratic social coalition of German Left Liberals and Social Democrats, the latter of which was by 1903 the most electorally successful socialist party in Europe; and (3) state-led conservative efforts at "political modernization" to catch up with the global "leader" Great Britain and to head off more radical reform.⁵ But,

³ Cited by Walter Shepard, "Tendencies to Ministerial Responsibility in Germany," *American Political Science Review* 5, February (1911): 57.

⁴ Each of these institutions has spawned wide-ranging literatures unto themselves. On the question of universal male suffrage for the Reichstag, see Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (2000). On the power of the Reichstag, see Manfred Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1977); Dieter Grosser, *Vom monarchischen Konstitutionalismus zur parlamentarischen Demokratie* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); Christoph Schoenberger, "Die Überholte Parlamentarisierung. Einflussgewinn Und Fehlende Herrschaftsfähigkeit Des Reichstags Im Sich Demokratisierenden Kaiserreich," *Historische Zeitschrift* 272 (2001): 623–66; Kreuzer, *Institutions and Innovation* (2001). On variations in state suffrage systems, see Simone Lässig, "Wahlrechtsreformen in den deutschen Einzelstaaten: Indikatoren für Modernisierungstendenzen und Reformfähigkeit im Kaiserreich?" in *Modernisierung und Region im wilhelmschen Deutschland*, ed. Simone Lässig (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1998), 127–70; Retallack, *The German Right* (2006). On state bureaucracies and systems of public finance, see Peter-Christian Witt, *Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches von 1903 bis 1913: Eine Studie zur Innenpolitik des Wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Lübeck: Matthiesen, 1970); and D. E. Schremer, "Taxation and Public Finance: Britain, France and Germany," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe. Volume VIII. The Industrial Economies: The Development of Economic and Social Policies* ed. Peter Mathias and Sidney Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 315–494.

⁵ There are a number of older but still important works on these three subjects. On the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1905 on the German left, see Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy*

unlike the successful passage of analogous democratic reforms such as Britain's Parliament Act of 1911, or those of relative socioeconomic and geopolitical "laggards" such as Sweden (1907) and Denmark (1901), Germany's political experiences in this period of global tumult ended in timid "non-events." In these moments, to borrow A. J. P. Taylor's memorable phrase, history "failed to turn," not just once, but many times and with increasing frequency as Europe's statesmen tragically "sleepwalked" into the First World War.⁶

To make sense of the "German catastrophe" of the first third of the twentieth century, some have employed a misleading retrospective image of Imperial Germany as a static society, without significant democratizing forces at play.⁷ This account severely misconstrues the central puzzle of the political regime: in Germany, democratic reforms were vigorously, articulately, and passionately pursued by socialists like Karl Kautsky, Left Liberals such as Friedrich Naumann, and more tentatively before 1914 by Catholics such as Matthias Erzberger. German cities such as Berlin, Dresden, and Hamburg were scenes of hotly contentious and well-organized social unrest, strikes, "suffrage storms," and mass protest.⁸ Parliamentary showdowns over proposed democratic reforms of the ballot and parliamentary sovereignty in the halls of the Reichstag and the Prussian House of Deputies captivated public minds and reverberated in newspaper accounts.⁹ And even in what we normally think of as the reactionary Prussian State Ministry, moderate proposals at political reform were broached in the atmosphere of increasing panic after 1906.¹⁰ In all of these instances, despite political noise from the street and from a newly self-confident proto-coalition of Social Democracy and Left Liberals, bolstered by discussion buzzing in the pages of the popular press, the political system appeared to be stuck in what contemporary political scientists would call a "reform trap," in

1905–1917: *The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955). On the potential of a "Lib-Lab" coalition of Liberals and social democrats, see Beverly Heckart, *From Basserman to Bebel: The Grand Bloc's Quest for Reform in the Kaiserreich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁶ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Penguin Press, 2013).

⁷ Cf. Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (2000); James Retallack, "'Get out the Vote!' Elections without Democracy in Imperial Germany," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 51 (2012): 23–38.

⁸ See, e.g., Evans, "Red Wednesday" in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and Lumpenproletariat in the Suffrage Disturbances of 17 January 1906" (1979); Retallack, "Citadels against Democracy," in *The German Right* (2006).

⁹ See *Berliner Tageblatt* in particular. For an overview of heated academic debates about the constitution in this period, see Mark Hewitson, "The Kaiserreich in Question: Constitutional Crisis in Germany before the First World War," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001): 725–80.

¹⁰ A ten-volume record of German *Staatsministerium* minutes have recently been digitized and published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed., *Die Protokolle des Preussischen Staatsministeriums, 1817–1934/38*, 10 vols. (Hildesheim: Olms Weidmann, 1999).

which major reform appears extraordinarily ripe in its societal preconditions, but blocked in its political reality.¹¹

To be sure, it is a mistake to say that Germany experienced only political institutional stasis before the First World War: some significant and particular democratic reforms did occur.¹² Political reformers altered the electoral systems – via redistricting and changing the tax requirements for voting – for elections to the state parliaments of several of Germany's smaller southern states between 1899 and 1914;¹³ the secret ballot was given more institutional reality with a national reform of Reichstag voting procedures in 1903;¹⁴ and the profile and power of MPs in the Reichstag was altered when reform in 1906 gave them regular salaries for the first time.¹⁵ Yet, the two defining political institutions of the pre-1914 regime, those that had attracted the most passionate criticism from democratic activists of the day, stubbornly persisted, untouched by reform.

First, despite proposals in the Reichstag, the political system remained, in deeply undemocratic fashion, a dualistic constitutional structure in which *the executive remained formally unaccountable to the parliament or popular control*.¹⁶ Modeled after the 1814 French *Charte Constitutionnelle* and pre-1848 German constitutions, the king appointed the chancellor without requiring approval of a parliamentary majority, and the government formally

¹¹ Fritz Scharpf, "The Joint-decision Trap: Lessons from German Federalism and European Integration," *Public Administration* 66, no. 3 (1988): 239–78.

¹² Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (2000); Retallack, "Get out the Vote!" (2012).

¹³ Lässig, "Wahlrechtsreformen in den deutschen Einzelstaaten" (1998).

¹⁴ Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (2000) 250; Mares, *From Open Secrets to Secret Voting: Democratic Electoral Reforms and Voter Autonomy* (2015), 137.

¹⁵ Lässig, "Wahlrechtsreformen in den deutschen Einzelstaaten" (1998); Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (2000), 356.

¹⁶ For students of German political development, my label of an "unaccountable executive" or an absence of parliamentarization as "undemocratic" likely prompts some confusion requiring immediate clarification. Early twentieth-century German observers (e.g., Max Weber) and contemporary constitutional historians (e.g., Scherer and Kühne) very usefully distinguish between "parliamentarization" and "democratization," noting that an expanded suffrage and growing power of parliamentarization did *not* accompany each other but actually may have run at cross purposes. See Thomas Kühne, "Demokratisierung und Parlamentarisierung: Neue Forschungen zur politischen Entwicklungsfähigkeit Deutschlands vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 31, no. 2 (2005): 293–316. I also make this point in Daniel Ziblatt, "How Did Europe Democratize?" *World Politics* 58, no. 2 (2006): 311–38. Nonetheless for purposes of the discussion here, I follow common contemporary usage. See, for example, Charles Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). These works regard three institutional reforms under the broader normative umbrella category of "democratization": (1) increased constraints on executives, (2) expanded scope and equality of electoral participation, and (3) protections of civil liberties. Calling these reforms all democratic is not intended to suggest that there are not tensions between these institutions or that they always travel together empirically.

did not reflect the results of elections. This was not unlike the Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian systems before the early twentieth century; but, unlike in Sweden and Denmark, reform did not then come to Germany.¹⁷ In federal Germany, the chancellor's "cabinet," which was in reality a group of "state secretaries" and not cabinet ministers, was chosen not from the majority party of the Reichstag – as one typically finds in "fused" parliamentary systems such as those of the UK or France after the birth of the Third Republic – but instead by the chancellor and king. These secretaries often were career bureaucrats with no party affiliation; the parliament, in this sense, chiefly only had the power to approve and propose legislation.¹⁸ While by the early twentieth century the Reichstag had gained enough leverage, in at least one high-profile instance, to eject the Emperor's handpicked chancellor from office when Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow's 1909 Finance Bill failed, the Reichstag never possessed, before 1914, the ability to *form* governments and pick ministers.¹⁹ It is for this reason that while the German national parliament's power increased in the last years before 1914, the possibility of a "type-shift" from a dualistic constitution to a parliamentary system was limited by the very institutional tensions between the government and the Reichstag that have mistakenly been called a "silent" parliamentarization."²⁰

In addition to its unconstrained executive, the second major fortification of the nondemocratic Imperial German political system was the institution that I mentioned at the start of this chapter, one that had emerged before the founding the Reich: the three-class voting system for the Prussian state legislature, designed by Prussia Interior Ministry officials in the wake of the 1848 revolution.²¹ Although universal male suffrage had been formally adopted, members of the Berlin-based state assembly were elected indirectly via electors, no guarantees for a secret ballot existed, and the relative weight of the vote in each constituency was dramatically skewed by total tax contribution: wealthier citizens'

¹⁷ Denmark's parliamentarization is normally dated as 1901, while Sweden's formally came after 1915; elections in 1905 put Liberal party leaders at the head of government, in effect parliamentarizing the system. For a comparative overview, see Collier, *Paths Towards Democracy* (1999), 82–83.

¹⁸ A crucial constraint was Article 9 of the constitution, which forbade members of the Bundesrat to also be a MP in the Reichstag, thereby, in principle, blocking parliamentarization of a ministry.

¹⁹ See Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches* (1977).

²⁰ See Schoenberger, "Überholte Parlamentarisierung" (2001). For a useful intervention in this debate that distinguishes among three key dimensions of parliamentarization: (1) the ability to dismiss governments, (2) the ability to form governments, and (3) the ability to affect legislation, see Marcus Kreuzer, "Parliamentarization and the Question of German Exceptionalism: 1867–1918," *Central European History* 36, no. 3 (2003): 327–57. While on the first and third dimensions, the Reichstag was growing in strength, on the second dimension, it did not and looked more like the Swedish parliament.

²¹ Günther Grünthal, "Das preußische Dreiklassenwahlrecht. Ein Beitrag zur Genesis und Funktion des Wahlrechtsoktrois vom Mai 1849," *Historische Zeitschrift* 226, no. 1 (1978): 17–66.

TABLE 7.2: *German States: Suffrage Regimes, 1913*

	Criteria #1 Universal Male?	Criteria #2 Equal?	Criteria #3 Secret?	Criteria #4 Direct?	Criteria #5 Lower Chamber All Elected?
<i>Prussia</i>	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Saxony	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hamburg	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bavaria	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baden	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Württemberg	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lübeck	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hesse	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Saxony, Bavaria, Württemberg, Lübeck, and Hessen all also relied on census or direct tax requirements, which qualified universal male suffrage

Data Sources: for Prussia, Huber 1994, 351-82; for Saxony, Huber 1994, 401-410; for Hamburg, Eckardt 2001, 46; 51ff; for Bavaria, Huber 1994, 385-400; for all other states, Vogel, et al. 1971, 70ff; Schröder 1995, 825-59, Hallerberg 1996, 324-57

votes counted for more than poorer citizens' in each district. By the first decade of the twentieth century, this system became the main target of reformers who recognized its severe violations of basic democratic norms. They drew attention to the fact that, by 1903, the wealthiest 3 percent of the voters (who fell into the "first class") had the same electoral weight as the poorest 85 percent of voters (the "third class").²² If we compare Prussia to the other major German states in terms of the basic elements of democratic franchise, as Table 7.2 summarizes, we see Prussia was an outlier in the regressiveness of its rules. In only two other cases was the Prussian system imitated: in Hamburg and Saxony beginning in 1896 and 1906.

The significance of these rules and the differences between southern Germany and Prussia are evident, as they were to their contemporary critics and defenders. When liberalizing reforms were passed in Württemberg in 1906, for example, the Prussian Conservative newspaper *Kreuzzeitung* fearfully reported to its readers that "the reform mania is an epidemic illness of the southern states," but then reassuringly asserted, "It will not, however reach up north of the River Main [into Prussia]."²³ The Prussian system was not only uniquely regressive within Germany; in a cross-national perspective, as Stein Rokkan and Dieter Nohlen report in separate analyses, the Prussian case was an

²² Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 423.

²³ *Neue Preussische Kreuzzeitung*, Nr. 321, July 12, 1906 (Abendausgabe), 1

outlier in pre-1914 Europe, the only state within the twenty-two future OECD membership states still *without* a secret ballot and *with* indirect parliamentary elections.²⁴

But most important of all, the centrality of Prussia's particular electoral system within Germany's national political structure makes it worth closer attention. On the one hand, there has been a careless and frequent conflation of Prussia with Germany, leading some to erroneously think that the German Reichstag had a three-class voting system or to incomprehensibly assume that Prussia (approximately two-thirds of German territory) *was* in fact all of Germany before 1914. This has understandably produced ire among careful political historians, who in recent decades have explored and emphasized the importance of developments *outside* of Prussia as a way to counter the notion that Prussia is "identical" with Germany and as a strategy to stress the internal diversity of Germany's political and social developments.²⁵ As valuable as this corrective has been, it is equally crucial not to make the opposite mistake of diminishing the unusually important institutional linkages between the Prussian political system and the federal political system, chief among these the critical three-class voting system. Thus, it is crucial to carefully reconstruct the intricate and subtle institutional interconnections between Prussia's three-class voting system and national politics, which were decisive in shaping the political regime as a whole.²⁶

First, we note that these two institutions – parliamentarization (rules governing constraint over executive power at the national level) and the three-class voting system (rules governing the suffrage) – were not entirely discrete, as they are sometimes treated. Instead, they were tightly interlinked, a self-reinforcing bundle of authoritarian institutions that were tricky to unwind unless done so simultaneously, thereby defining the contours of the broader political regime. This nexus elevated Prussia's consequences for Germany and protected its broader "way of life" within the country.²⁷ When the First World

²⁴ Both authors are cited by Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 26. For the original sources see Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties* (1970); and Dieter Nohlen, *Wahlrecht und Parteiensystem* (Leverkusen: Leske & Budrich, 1986).

²⁵ See, e.g., Blackburn, *Religion, and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Centre Party in Württemberg before 1914* (1980); Lässig, *Wahlrechtskampf und Wahlreform in Sachsen, 1895–1909* (1996); Lässig, "Wahlrechtsreformen in den deutschen Einzelstaaten" (1998); Reinhold Weber, *Bürgerpartei und Bauernbund in Württemberg: konservative Parteien im Kaiserreich und in Weimar (1895–1933)* (Düsseldorf Droste, 2004).

²⁶ Kühne also makes this argument in a review essay. Kühne, "Demokratisierung und Parlamentarisierung" (2005).

²⁷ One clue of this elevated power is recounted by Reinhold von Sydow (Reich State Secretary of the Treasury), who is reported to have "recalled in his memoirs that one question was repeatedly asked... when a crucial question of domestic policy was discussed: 'What does Heydebrand [Conservative Party chair in the Prussian chamber of deputies] say about this?'" This quote is from Retallack (*The German Right* (2006), 387).

War neared its end, Max Weber provided a clue to how these institutional links operated in an important essay on the future of German constitutionalism.²⁸ He argued that even had constitutional reforms passed before 1914, leaving Germany's chancellor and his state secretaries' appointment reliant on a national Reichstag vote, the persistence of an unreformed three-class voting system in Prussia's state legislature would have resulted in majorities there for the Conservative Party, indirectly blocking national parliamentarization because of the distinctive structure of Germany's second chamber, the Bundesrat.²⁹

Without a reform of the three-class voting system, Prussia's seventeen delegates to the fifty-eight member Bundesrat would still have continued to reflect the deeply undemocratic Prussian electoral system that obstructed Social Democrats from representation in that body. The result would have been that conservative-minded Prussian ministers, as Prussian delegates in the Bundesrat, had maintained their virtual absolute veto over all Reichstag legislation, since only fourteen votes in the Bundesrat could stop any Reichstag legislation.³⁰ In this way, as Max Weber put it, the three-class voting system "poisoned the political system as a whole." Parliamentarization could only come to national politics in Germany through a democratization of Prussia, not merely through more parliamentary control at the national level over the chancellor.³¹

To better comprehend Prussia's institutional and national interconnections, it is useful to compare it to the U.S. South before the second half of the twentieth century, where a similar "subnational" authoritarian political system affected the character, extent, and outer limits of *national democratization* in important ways. There, like in Germany and in other federal systems such as those of Argentina and Mexico, a variety of elaborate institutional mechanisms exist by which powerful authoritarian subnational units, also governed by a restricted-suffrage regime generating near single-party rule, could exert disproportionate influence on national politics.³² For example,

²⁸ Max Weber, "Das Preussische Wahlrecht," in *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg*, ed. Wolfgang Mommsen and Gangolf Huebinger (Tuebingen: JCB Mohr, [1917] 1984).

²⁹ The Bundesrat consisted of fifty-eight seats, occupied by delegates of the member-states of the federation. The body had legislative and administrative functions and was occupied chiefly by ministers of the member states. The Prussian Minister President (typically also the Imperial Chancellor) was chair of the body.

³⁰ Important for understanding this is that Prussian Ministers, while formally not required by the constitution to be reflective of election results had themselves undergone a "parliamentarization," but in this instance a conservative parliamentarization that benefited the German Conservative Party. See Werner Frauendienst, "Demokratisierung des Deutschen Konstitutionalismus in der Zeit Wilhelms II," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 113, no. 4 (1957): 721-46.

³¹ The quote about the Prussian electoral system is from Weber, "Das Preussische Wahlrecht" [1917] (1984): 233.

³² See Edward L. Gibson, *Boundary Control: Subnational Authoritarianism in Federal Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

in the United States, Senate rules granted committee chairmanships, including those of the judiciary committee, which approved Supreme Court appointees, to the longest-serving members of the Senate. Low competitiveness in southern states had the effect of typically guaranteeing many of the powerful committee chairmanships to Senators from those states.³³ Also, in the United States, the "solidly" Democratic, effectively single-party South exerted disproportionate influence via the presidential candidate selection process, which required a three-fifths majority, thereby giving the South a de facto veto – not unlike the Prussian veto in the Bundesrat – on the selection of U.S. presidential candidates.³⁴ In short, democratizing the United States as a whole required democratizing its own "authoritarian enclaves."³⁵

Similarly, Prussia was the pivot of the broader German national political regime. As political scientist Walter J. Shepard vividly put it in 1911, the three-class voting system was the "citadel of the powers" of autocracy and bureaucracy in Germany. Shepard continued, "Its abandonment would give the enemy possession of the entire fortress."³⁶ It is sometimes argued that Germany's early universal male suffrage for the Reichstag and its failure to parliamentarize perniciously shaped its democratic trajectory. But even had there been national parliamentarization but no Prussian suffrage reform, a nondemocratic national political regime would have remained in place until war and revolution demolished *both* sets of institutions.³⁷ In sum, the three-class voting system was arguably the thread that held the whole political regime together, and, if tugged, would bring the whole regime down with it. Thus, we see why democratic activists ran under the slogan "Abolish the three-class voting system!" – a political catchphrase of the age – and why, at a DKP Party Congress in December 1907, Manteuffel ominously warned that any Prussian minister who would dare propose the Reichstag franchise for the Prussian House of Representatives *should be charged with treason!*³⁸

THE PUZZLE OF DURABLE AUTHORITARIANISM IN PRE-1914 GERMANY

The stakes of reform thus were especially high in Prussia. So, then, why did its system persist for so long? Some argue that authoritarian regimes survive because their rulers are lucky enough, or perhaps skilled enough, to rule over

³³ V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1949); Gibson, *Boundary Control* (2012), 64.

³⁴ For a classic discussion, see Key, *Southern Politics* (1949), 317.

³⁵ Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (2015).

³⁶ Shepard, "Tendencies to Ministerial Responsibility in Germany" (1911): 66.

³⁷ Schoenberger, "Überholte Parlamentarisierung" (2001).

³⁸ Cited by Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 163.

quiescent societies with fragmented, timid, and disorganized oppositions, thereby buying political stability for themselves. But the endurance, then, of authoritarianism in Prussia, and hence Germany, is puzzling.³⁹ German society, and especially Prussian society after 1905, was anything but quiescent; rather, the Germany state was under siege, facing what looked to be unstoppable societal challenges that took increasingly disruptive, organized, and visible forms. Further, even if "economic backwardness" had once been a barrier to democratization, by 1900 both Germany as a whole and the state of Prussia, with its transformative industrialization, had joined the ranks of the world's most capital-abundant advanced economies of the world.

Strictly in terms of socioeconomic development, it is of course correct that "economic backwardness" is normally a barrier to democratization.⁴⁰ In the German context, the antidemocratic dominance of the infamous industrialist-landlord "iron-rye" protectionist coalition has frequently been used to link relatively late industrialization to stalled political development.⁴¹ Landed elites and industrialists in this account share preferences for protectionism and antipathies to democracy. In his analysis of the impact of expanding global trade on political coalitions, Ronald Rogowski incisively links socioeconomic development to pro-democratic political coalitions.⁴² Building on core axioms of trade theory (e.g., the Stolper-Samuelson theorem) that identify which sectors benefit from trade protectionism in different types of economies, Rogowski argues that in developing "backward" or, more precisely, capital-poor societies, a labor-abundant but land scarce society's growing exposure to trade tends to generate a reactionary coalition of protectionist industrialists and rural landlords, a configuration that certainly matches traditional accounts of German political life until at least the 1890s.⁴³ This contrasts to the impact of growing trade in a "capital advanced" economy, in which both labor and capital are plentiful and only land is limited. In this latter scenario, a progressive pro-free trade alliance between labor and capital is

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³⁹ Accounts that emphasize the role of well-organized "working class" or "threat of unrest" as cause of democratization run from classic sociological accounts such as Rueschmeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992), to contemporary political economists (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, 2006; Acemoglu and Robinson, "Why Did the West Extend the Franchise?" 2000). It should be added, "threat of unrest" is of course not always treated entirely as "exogenous" – it can be suppressed, bought off, redirected, and otherwise suffocated.

⁴⁰ Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy" (1959); Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (2003).

⁴¹ Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy* (1948).

⁴² Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions* (1989), 9–10.

⁴³ Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions* (1989); Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy* (1948); Arthur Rosenberg, *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic 1871–1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

expected to form against the reactionary and protectionist interests of landed elites. Rogowski's account has eminent plausibility for the British context.⁴⁴

While these accounts may be correct about the mid to late nineteenth century, by 1890, Prussia was growing rapidly socioeconomically, even joining the ranks of the "capital abundant" advanced economies, and yet, the expected Lib-Lab coalition that followed to challenge the old Junker-and-industrialist-dominated political system did not bring democratic change to Germany, let alone to Prussia itself.⁴⁵ By 1913, Germany, with Prussia at its core, was among the leaders of Europe's industrializing economies, behind only the United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands – the only five countries on the entire continent with less than 35 percent of their working populations still employed in the agricultural sector. Meanwhile the remaining thirteen countries of eastern, southern, and northern peripheries of Europe lagged behind with over 40 percent and up to 80 percent of their working populations in the agricultural sector.⁴⁶ Further, Germany became a net exporter of capital after 1890, and the nature of its exports shifted away from low-capital-intensive products – such as textiles, leather, and silk – to the capital-intensive electrical, engineering, and chemical sectors.⁴⁷ By all accounts, Germany actually surpassed Britain in total industrial output before the First World War, and Prussia, with a shrinking proportion of agricultural workers, was at the forefront of these developments.⁴⁸ Yet, reform did not come to the most significant *national* barrier to democracy, the three-class voting system *within* Prussia.

If it is difficult to blame insufficient socioeconomic development, it is even more implausible to place the burden of Germany's stalled democratic transition on an *absence* of social contention, unrest, and working-class mobilization. Before 1914, Germany was not a quiescent authoritarian state; it was under

⁴⁴ See Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Rogowski, *Commerce and Coalitions* (1989).

⁴⁵ Gary Herrigel, *Industrial Constructions: The Sources of German Industrial Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Stephen Broadberry, Giovanni Federico, and Alexander Klein, "Sectoral Developments, 1870–1914," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Europe: 1870 to the Present*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Kevin H. O'Rourke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 59–83. Drawing on data from B. R. Mitchell, the authors (p. 61, Table 3.1) rank economies based on employment data, which demonstrate Germany was more industrialized in 1913 on average than cases of more stable democratization, including Sweden, France, and Denmark.

⁴⁷ Garst, "From Factor Endowments to Class Struggle" (1998); Herbert Feis, *Europe, the World's Banker, 1870–1914: An Account of European Foreign Investment and the Connection of World Finance with Diplomacy before World War I* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

⁴⁸ Rüdiger Hohls and Hartmut Kaelble, eds., *Die Regionale Erwerbsstruktur im Deutschen Reich und in der Bundesrepublik 1895–1970* (St. Katharinen: cipta Mercaturae Verlag, 1989).

assault on two related fronts: first, extra-parliamentary contention in the form of labor unrest, strikes, and protests; second, an irrepressibly rising Social Democratic Party that represented a major electoral challenge within the realm of formal parliamentary politics. A wide-ranging literature – from Dahl; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens; and Tilly to Acemoglu and Robinson – asserts that social conflict or the social “threats” of a disruptive and well-organized and mobilized opposition are essential to regime change.⁴⁹ This contention is typically thought to provoke acute fear among incumbent nondemocratic elites, who, in a classic democratic “transition game” may quickly become convinced they are stuck between a “rock” (i.e., growing unrest and contestation) and a “hard place” (i.e., democracy), leaving democratization increasingly preferable to an unsustainable *status quo*.⁵⁰ Real political change, it is thus often asserted, requires serious contestation and a robust opposition.

While this logic certainly captures a main ingredient of the process of dislodging powerful old-elite networks of power, it leaves one unexplained puzzle: protests, strikes, and opposition to the old regime were *more* well-organized, disruptive, and visible in Germany than in other European countries such as Sweden and Britain, yet the contention achieved far *fewer* substantive democratic concessions. In the years before 1914, chiefly in the peak years of 1899, 1905, and 1912, the dockyards of the major shipping ports such as Hamburg along the northern coast, the coal mines of the Ruhr Valley in Prussia’s west, and the streets of nearly all German cities became the sites of an unprecedented social mobilization that stood out even in the famously protest-filled days of *fin de siècle* Europe. With his eye on the reverberating effect of the Russian Revolution, Carl Schorske has called the year 1905 a “turning point in European history,” but notes its particularly ferocious edge in Germany:

Repercussions of the Russian Revolution were felt throughout the European labor movement, but above all in Germany, where indigenous sources of class antagonism were strengthened by the Russian example. Labor conflict of unprecedented scope dominated the economic scene in 1905–06. In politics there began a mass movement to democratize the discriminatory suffrage systems in the federal states. . . .⁵¹

To put Germany’s political environment in comparative context, Figure 7.1 reports national census data on the total number of industrial strike participants

⁴⁹ Dahl, *Polyarchy* (1971); Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992); and Tilly, *Democracy* (2007); Acemoglu and Robinson, “Why Did the West Extend the Franchise?” (2000). See Eley, *Forging Democracy* (2002).

⁵⁰ Social contention and protest alter the calculations of incumbents as they weigh the “costs of toleration” vs. the “costs of suppression” in Dahl’s classic formulation (*Polyarchy*, 1971). When the latter outweigh the former, democratic reform becomes a possibility. See also Guillermo A. O’Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

⁵¹ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 28.

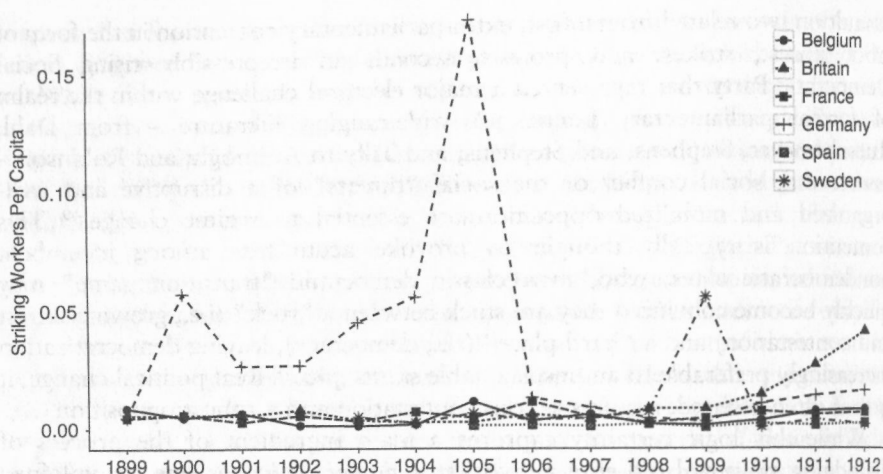


FIGURE 7.1: Annual Number of Striking Workers Per Capita, 1899-1912
Data Source: Mitchell 2003, 3-8, 172-85

annually (per capita) over the period before 1914 for the major European countries for which data are available. We see that over nearly the entire period, Germany did not lag behind but actually far outpaced the rest of Europe, only matched in the years 1910-1914 by Sweden and Britain.

Still, while suffrage was reformed in some German states, in its largest state, Prussia, where most of the strikes occurred, reform was nonexistent.⁵² To make sense of this oddity, we must identify the causes of the social unrest presented in Figure 7.1. First, we know the 1890 lapse of the Anti-Socialist Law catapulted rapid growth of "free" Social Democratic unions, which comprised 27 percent of all laborers by 1913, a level matched only by other advanced economies of the day.⁵³ Other increasingly well-organized unions played a similarly crucial though often underestimated role as well, including the Polish coal miners' union, *Zjednoczenie Zawodowe Polskie*, which represented the vast number of Polish-speaking miners in the Ruhr (in Prussia) and helped spearhead mass mobilization in the area in 1899 and 1905.⁵⁴ Responding to real injustices and pursuing real ambitions, the German working class, broadly understood,

⁵² It is worth noting that in my analysis of data that I discuss more fully below, between 1899 and 1906, half of all industrial strikes took place in Prussia. See "Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, Streiks und Aussperrung im Jahre 1909," in *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs* (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1910).

⁵³ Stefano Bartolini, *The Political Mobilization of the European Left, 1860-1980: The Class Cleavage*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 531; Garst, "From Factor Endowments to Class Struggle" (1998): 33.

⁵⁴ See John J. Kulczycki, *The Foreign Worker and the German Labor Movement: Xenophobia and Solidarity in the Coal Fields of the Ruhr, 1871-1914* (Providence: Berg, 1994).

became, in historian Mary Nolan's assessment, "the best organized workers' movement in the late nineteenth century."⁵⁵

A second factor contributing to unrest was that unions altered their main strategy of agitation, abandoning the older plant-by-plant, "one-off" strike (*Einzelabschlachtung*) to adopt, quite controversially, the coordinated strike and later the general strike, motivated largely by the example of the Belgian suffrage strike of 1902.⁵⁶ Even the moderate revisionist Eduard Bernstein embraced the new and remarkably effective "radical" strategy of mass mobilization with an explicitly political goal of securing universal and equal suffrage.⁵⁷ Finally, crucial for the broadening impact of the German labor movement was how union leaders linked political and institutional goals (e.g., suffrage reform) to everyday uncoordinated economic fights over pay, working conditions, and control of the shop floor – the more immediate concerns that had brought Ruhr Valley coal miners and Hamburg dockworkers onto the streets. The issue of how "private problems" become "public concerns" is of course a critical one, and no small part was played by the recalcitrant Prussian House of Representatives, which in reaction to the January 1905 coal miners' strike rejected a proposal to introduce state monitoring of Prussian mines. This move sparked renewed outrage against the three-class voting system, which blocked workplace reforms.

A third noteworthy development was the spectacular rise of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany. Indeed, this was a major front of the challenge to Germany's old regime. Though the SPD was restricted in its activities by Bismarck's anti-socialist laws until 1890, its organizational prowess allowed it to compete in nearly all electoral districts long before its competitors, contesting nearly all constituencies by 1898. Its official coordination with the German Free Trade Unions that began at the 1906 Mannheim Congress gave it an organizational apparatus that helped create a mass base (with associated "proletariat" civic associations), and provided it with a wide-ranging membership. These trends were most visible in Prussia. As the introduction of free and fair elections in Prussia after 1918 demonstrates, without restrictions on voting equality and because of the advanced level and nature of heavy industrialization, socialists would come to dominate the state's political life.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Mary Nolan, "Economic Crisis, State Policy and Working Class Formation in Germany, 1870–1900," in *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 352.

⁵⁶ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 33.

⁵⁷ See Eduard Bernstein, *Der politische Massenstreik und die politische Lage der Sozialdemokratie in Deutschland: Vortrag gehalten im Sozialdemokratischen Verein* (Breslau: Verlag der Volkswacht, 1906). For a discussion of Bernstein's place in the evolution of German social democracy, see Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 42–44.

⁵⁸ See Dietrich Orlow, *Weimar Prussia, 1918–1925: The Unlikely Rock of Democracy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986).

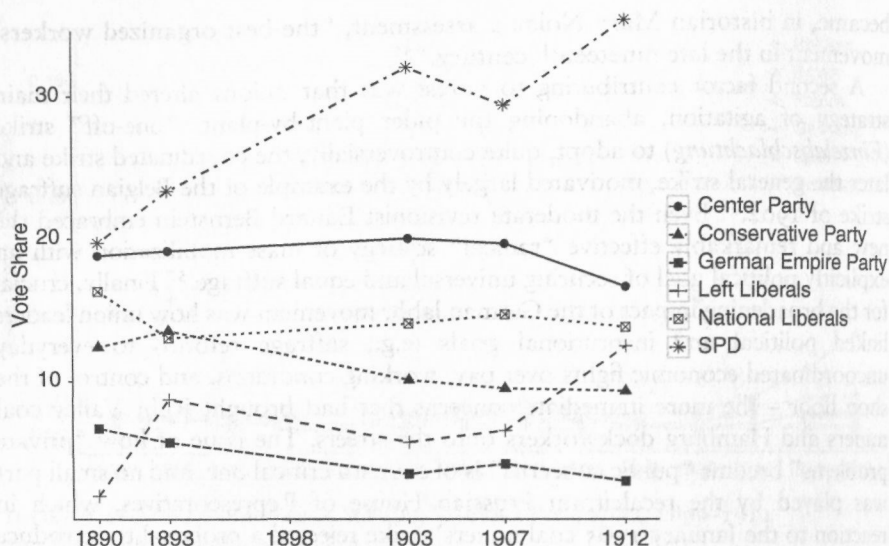


FIGURE 7.2: National Reichstag Vote Share of SPD and Other Parties, 1890–1912
Data Source: Vogel, et al. (1971), 290–92. Reichstag results under universal, equal, direct, and secret ballot. The SPD's performance in state elections varied enormously because of the variation in suffrage systems

But over the prewar period, the rise of the SPD at the national level was just as impressive. Figure 7.2 provides evidence of the SPD's soaring electoral dominance and outright plurality of Reichstag seats after 1890, outperforming socialist parties *anywhere* in Europe at the time.⁵⁹

The growing intensity of strikes in the international reverberations of the Russian Revolution, coupled with the threatening electoral rise of Social Democracy, caused panic, hasty action, and innovative efforts at founding new reactionary pressure groups, parties, and organizations as self-defense.⁶⁰ But, as creative as these responses were, democratic reform of the state was still not forthcoming.

Given the arguments of Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens; Eley; and Acemoglu and Robinson, we must ask: why didn't Germany undergo more far-reaching democratization?⁶¹ One intuitive but ultimately unsatisfactory argument is that the very strength of the strikers and the SPD backfired,

⁵⁹ See also Bartolini, *Political Mobilization of the European Left* (2000).

⁶⁰ On older work on the response of the right to the rise of socialism is Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks* (1970). More recently, see Heinz Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1997).

⁶¹ Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992); Eley, *Forging Democracy* (2002); Acemoglu and Robinson, "Why Did the West Extend the Franchise?" (2000).

rendering the goals of reform coalitions actually *more* difficult to achieve than in countries with a "tamed" reformist left, as the old regime in Germany stubbornly resisted democratization more than it might otherwise have.⁶² This claim is certainly appealing at first glance. However, it is deeply misleading in the German context for three main reasons, and hence suggests a general gap in the account of how contention, unrest, and democratization are connected. First, as the strike data from Figure 7.1 depict, the only other national cases in which industrial strike movements were as strong as Germany's (e.g., Sweden and Britain) are normally considered "settled" cases of democratization. In these countries, unrest did not bring de-democratization; in Sweden, for example, a massive general strike in 1909 occurred without derailing the Swedish Conservative Party's transformative bill, led by Arvid Lindman, for universal male suffrage that passed through the political system between 1907 and 1909, just in time for the 1911 parliamentary elections.⁶³ By contrast, Spain, a case of low strike participation in this period, experienced no equivalent democratization before 1914, suggesting it is a mistake to assume a direct link between strikes and de-democratization.

Second, faulting the ideological radicalism of the Prussian left reverses the actual historical sequence; it is the long-standing and repeated intransigence of the regime, particularly the terms of the Prussian government's three-class voting reform proposal released on February 4, 1910, which triggered the "final break" of Prussian Socialists, planting the seeds for the "Swing to the Left" or what Carl Schorske famously called "the Great Schism" between socialists and communists during the First World War.⁶⁴ The details are crucial: at their September 1909 national Leipzig Congress, the SPD agreed to a positive parliamentary agenda to collaborate with Liberals to push for a "joint offensive" for constitutional reform in Prussia, and even warned its rank and file "against excessive street demonstrations or demonstration strikes which might weaken the united front."⁶⁵

But the potential Lib-Lab coalition, already extremely fragile from diverging electoral interests between Left Liberals and Socialists and years of living under the three-class voting system, finally collapsed when the government released its reform proposal in February 1910. The socialist daily paper *Vorwärts* immediately criticized the bill proposal as a "brutal and contemptuous declaration of war."⁶⁶ Two days later, mass street protests erupted. Schorske describes the dynamic this way: "The proposed reforms were so inadequate that

⁶² This argument is implicit in Luebbert's analysis of what he calls "abortive Lib-Labism." Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy* (1991), 115. I discuss the cases of Saxony and Hamburg below.

⁶³ Lewin, *Ideology and Strategy: A Century of Swedish Politics* (1988), 53-86.

⁶⁴ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 171.

⁶⁵ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 173.

⁶⁶ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 177.

far from satisfying democratic opinion they only aroused it further.”⁶⁷ He also writes,

That the Prussian wing would have reversed the trend toward a reform coalition... was not unnatural. The Prussian comrades lived under the three-class suffrage system; they had had the spirit of compromise beaten out of them by years of petty persecution at the hands of the Prussian administration and courts. The ire of the rank and file... could not easily be converted into friendship for the Liberals.⁶⁸

In more general terms, in the most definitive cross-national study of the determinants of radicalism and reformism before the First World War, Gary Marks and his collaborators analyze the ideologies of socialist parties in eighteen countries before 1914 on a twelve-point scale, demonstrating that a prehistory of restricted or unequal suffrage, on average, radicalizes socialist parties.⁶⁹ Another recent cross-national study illustrates that repression of the organized working class more accurately predicts the radicalization than a range of other socioeconomic variables.⁷⁰ The point is this: to attribute stalled democratization in Germany to the radicalism or the strength of the German left is to reverse the causal arrow that underpins the relationship. Intransigent and repressive conservatives in power and blocking reform radicalized the left, leaving open the core question of why some pre-democratic regimes responded to threats with repression and others with democratic concessions.

A final, more general problem with the view that leftist strength triggered conservative repression and thus stalled democratization is theoretical: it requires an intricate, if not convoluted, causal logic, given the insights of Dahl and Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens.⁷¹ If both claims are correct – that democratization requires social unrest *and* that it can also lead to de-democratization – then one must argue that some contention is necessary for democratization but that too much stymies it. Indeed, this argument has been ingeniously proposed and elaborated in theoretical terms by recent formal work.⁷² But, *empirically* identifying the charmed middle ground without relying on *post hoc* “just-so stories” becomes, at best, a tricky business.

Such theoretical contortions, however, become unnecessary if we shift our analytical focus to a different agent: the political representative (party or group)

⁶⁷ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 177.

⁶⁸ Schorske, *German Social Democracy* (1955), 175.

⁶⁹ Gary Marks, Heather Mbye, and Hyung-min Kim, “Radicalism or Reformism: Socialist Parties before World War I,” *American Sociological Review* 74 (2009): 615–35.

⁷⁰ Konstantin Vössing, “Social Democratic Party Formation and National Variation in Labor Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 2 (2011): 167–86.

⁷¹ Dahl, *Polyarchy* (1971); Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992).

⁷² This is the innovative argument about a “U-shaped” relationship between inequality and democratization elaborated by Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2006).

of the main social elite in a nondemocratic system. We can concede that socioeconomic changes may alter coalitional dynamics, giving rise to a push for democratization. Also, mass unrest as well as election success of opposition groups may place democratic reform on the political agenda. But, in responding to such unrest, three options exist for old-regime incumbents and their allies: (1) democracy may simply be blocked, (2) an intensification of repression may follow, or (3) democratic reforms may be adopted. What, then, determines whether the third option, and not the first two, follows from social unrest and changed socioeconomic conditions?

As elaborated more fully in Chapter 2, democratization is usefully conceived as a "two-step" process, each step being analytically distinct. Demands for democratization may emerge from changing socioeconomic conditions, but how the political representatives of elites respond – through obstruction, repression, or democratization – hinges on the organizational resources of the incumbent elite at the moment they are challenged. First, *with* party organization, old-regime elites can concede with greater self-assurance that they can survive electorally, whereas *without* party organization, the dilemma of finding themselves stuck between a "rock" (i.e., unrest) and a "hard place" (i.e., democracy) is exacerbated, and democracy becomes much less appealing since the prospects of survival in free and fair democratic competition only worsen. Then, party weakness intervenes at a second step in the causal chain: even if party elites within an old regime perceive "democracy" as preferable, without tightly coupled party organization, they have a more difficult, potentially impossible, time containing the backlash of hardliners or reactionaries. This will thwart the strategies of more moderate conservative office seekers, blocking the faintest tendencies toward reform. In short, even facing propitious conditions, *without party organization, incumbents may be simply too weak to acquiesce.*⁷³

WEAK CONSERVATIVES AND THE DEFEAT OF SUFFRAGE REFORM IN PRUSSIA, 1910 AND 1912

The consequences of party organization becomes visible as we explore the details of two major moments of potential but *failed* democratic reform in

⁷³ The analysis that follows focuses on the decisive three-class voting system. A similar analysis could be made of the absence of "parliamentarization" in Germany in the same period. Indeed, it has been argued that a major hindrance to parliamentarization in Germany was that, aside from the Social Democrats who were in favor of parliamentarization, no party had sufficient electoral prowess to win an outright majority, thereby diminishing their enthusiasm for cabinet responsibility to a parliamentary majority (Grosser, *Vom monarchischen Konstitutionalismus*, 1970). Thus, in addition to the barrier of the three-class voting system, it was also precisely the fragmentation of parties due to the kinds of religious and confessional divides I have identified above that made parliamentarization difficult in Germany (cf. Rauh, *Die Parlamentarisierung des Deutschen Reiches*, 1977).

Prussia: 1910 and 1912. It is one task to show how party organization aided the navigation of successful democratic reform, as in our analysis of British Conservatives and the 1884 Reform Act in Chapter 4. But the challenge we take up here is the inverse: to analyze a case of a "dog that did not bark." – that is, to show how, even though Left-Liberal Party and Socialist Party agitation put suffrage reform on the Prussian political agenda after 1908, it was the organizational weakness of regime-defending conservative parties that stalled democratization. The inaction witnessed in Prussia can be explained through two dynamics: *electoral concerns* and *dynamics of organizational capture*.

TOO WEAK TO ACQUIESCE: THE ELECTORAL CONCERNS OF A WEAK CONSERVATIVE PARTY

In order to understand the electoral concerns of Prussian Conservative Party MPs, we must first ask: How was suffrage placed on the government agenda in the early 1900s, and was there ever a real possibility of reform?⁷⁴ The most serious efforts came before the First World War, but the 1910 Reform, the most likely to have succeeded in Prussia in that period, was originally introduced by Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg, the government's new and ambitious chancellor. Bethmann-Hollweg did not merely expect reform, but thought substantial suffrage reform was inevitable. Before taking up his chancellorship, he had previously broached the subject in 1906:

Our Prussian franchise is impossible to preserve in the long run... Its Conservative majority is so banal in spirit and so complacent in its feeling of inviolable power that it must be humiliating to any progressively minded man; we *must* find a new basis.⁷⁵

The perception that reform, even if modest and at the edges, was not only desirable but *necessary* reflected the very real structural dynamics of socioeconomic change and social unrest; it would be the political price paid to contain socialist electoral success. Further, Bethmann-Hollweg, like his predecessor Bernhard von Bülow, viewed suffrage reform as part of a broader package of "modernizing" institutional reforms, such as public finance reform and internal improvements (e.g., canal-building), that would allow Germany to compete on the international stage with Great Britain and other great powers.⁷⁶ But, the issue of suffrage reform initially forced itself onto the political agenda – in

⁷⁴ There were repeated efforts at reform from 1848 until the twentieth century, some from the government to bolster the three-class voting system, others as symbolic proposals to eliminate it altogether. Kühne (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur*, 1994, 377–574) provides the most thorough overview of all sixteen reform proposals to be discussed and voted on in the Prussian Chamber of Deputies.

⁷⁵ Emphasis in original. Cited by Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 163.

⁷⁶ There is an extensive literature on the connections of international politics to domestic but most recently, see Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, eds., *Das Kaiserreich transnational. Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

fact compelling the Prussian king himself to announce a commitment to suffrage reform at the opening session of the Prussian Chamber of Representatives in an October 1908 "Crown Speech" (*Thronrede*). State elites found suffrage reform essential to pursuing their project of political and institutional "modernization," while sustaining an anti-socialist governing coalition in the Reichstag. The Chancellor, as well as the government, thus regarded suffrage reform not just as possible, but also as a political imperative.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, the national government's need for parliamentary majorities was filled by cobbling together ever-shifting ad hoc coalitions – dubbed *Sammlungspolitik* – in the Reichstag to pass its legislative agenda through *without* the aid of the SPD. After Bismarck's fall and the Anti-Socialist Law's expiration in 1890, however, there arose a governing coalition of an increasing number of political parties, including National Liberals, Conservatives, Free Conservatives, and the Catholic Center Party, thereby only excluding Left Liberals, Social Democrats, and other smaller minority parties. Until 1906, the *Sammlung* governing grouping, as Kühne reports, maintained reasonable consensus on economic policy (e.g., protectionism) and on Prussian constitutional questions (e.g., antireform), but often disagreed on foreign policy (e.g., colonialism) and cultural questions (e.g., education) especially the pivot of the coalition, the Catholic Center Party.⁷⁷ By 1906, the coalition began to destabilize as the Crown and his chancellor unintentionally elevated suffrage reform as a key political issue in the process in their attempts to garner liberal support for a more expansive foreign and colonial policy.

With the Reichstag facing the prospect of an irrepressibly growing SPD plurality, multiple fissures began to develop with the national government's coalition. First, in 1905–06, the Catholic Center Party grew more critical of Germany's brutal response to uprisings in east Africa, making the government nervous about relying on these allies in the future. Second, socioeconomic development heightened tensions between National Liberals on the one hand and Conservatives on the other. These two groups increasingly clashed over trade policy, which disproportionately benefited agrarian interests at the cost of new industrial groups, and provided the nearly tax-exempt status to landed wealth in the countryside.⁷⁸ Thus, National Liberals started to collaborate with

⁷⁷ Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 494–95.

⁷⁸ Imperial Germany's system of fiscal federalism and public finance had long been notoriously defective since the national parliament (governed by universal male suffrage) only had access to tariffs and limited indirect taxes on consumption, while the states (with restricted suffrage rules) had access to potentially very substantial income taxes and land taxes. The result was a growing fiscal crisis that increased the risk premium on government bonds and resulted in insufficient resources to fund Germany's own ambitious military goals. See Schremmer, "Taxation and Public Finance: Britain, France and Germany" (1989); and Niall Ferguson, "Public Finance and National Security: The Domestic Origins of the First World War Revisited," *Past and Present* 142, no. 1 (1994): 141–68.

Left Liberals, both in campaigns and in parliamentary debates, through their shared critique of Germany's decentralized finances as well as the three-class Prussian voting system, the core institutional bulwark that prevented tax reform.⁷⁹ Further, the rise of socialists in urban districts and demands for suffrage reform in "suffrage strikes" pressured Liberals of all stripes, even in the Prussian State Assembly, for a non-socialist reform agenda.⁸⁰ Even the National Liberals, who were historically ambivalent if not outright reactionary vis-à-vis suffrage issues, also announced their support for the secret ballot at their October 1907 Wiesbaden Congress.⁸¹ With fractures separating its party allies in the parliament, the government sought a new coalitional foundation and a solid fiscal basis so that it could develop its much sought-after expansionist foreign policy (*Weltpolitik*).

The result was the 1907 Reichstag election, which marked a turning point in the evolution of Prussian suffrage.⁸² In this national election, the government's strategically crafted campaign invoked nationalism and patriotism that sought to remake, in a move of Rikerian heresthetics, the coalitional landscape by *excluding* Catholics and for the first time *including* Left Liberals, who had displayed growing support for colonies and the navy.⁸³ The new nationalist majority consisting of the *Reichspartei*, Conservatives, National Liberals, and now Left Liberals, together gained 216 of the Reichstag's nearly 400 seats. The coalition seemed prepared to support the government's agenda.⁸⁴

But, the majority came at a political price: like the Irish Party's role in the UK Parliament Act debate after 1910, the Left Liberals, the new swing-member of the coalition, elevated Prussian suffrage reform as a condition of cooperation.⁸⁵ Though criticism of "Empire" and cultural questions over education had

⁷⁹ This subtle shift of Left Liberals and even National Liberals, who represented urban and industrial interests along with Left Liberals, was decisive; they had historically supported the oligarchic three-class suffrage system for electoral reasons and had begun to shift on this issue because of their view that the growing SPD success that would result from suffrage reform was a reasonable price to pay for decreasing the wealth that the three-class voting system protected. Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 495.

⁸⁰ A further factor pushing for a convergence of Left Liberals, Liberals, and even Social Democrats was their increasingly reliance on each other in election campaigns in Prussia. For systematic data on the frequency of alliances over time, see Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 264–65.

⁸¹ Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 515.

⁸² On the 1907 election, see George Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

⁸³ On the Left Liberal support for expanded colonies and navy, see Alastair Thompson, *Left Liberals, the State, and Popular Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 161; Riker, *Art of Political Manipulation* (1986).

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Left Liberals, the State, and Popular Politics* (2000), 158.

⁸⁵ According to Kühne (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur*, 1994, p. 513), a key point came with the publication of Left Liberal MP Friedrich Naumann's agenda-setting article in *Berliner Tageblatt* on July 31, 1907, which asserted the critical importance of suffrage reform to the new governing bloc.

previously been the central cleavages dividing the Catholic Party and its conservative and National Liberal allies, after 1907, these issues were successfully submerged. Prussian suffrage reform now took center stage as the prerequisite for reforming public finances to support the government's colonial ambitions. In his memoirs, the future head of the German Conservative Party in the Reichstag, Count Kuno Westarp, reports that the precise wording of the King's throne-speech was fine-tuned by the chancellor to win-over Left Liberals for tax reform.⁸⁶

Yet, between 1908 and 1914, no reform was achieved, despite the combination of economic development, social unrest, SPD electoral success, and the new coalitional dynamics. In order for us to grasp how the Conservative Party's weakness was at the root of stalled reform, we must pose two separate questions: First, why did the sweeping alterations of the three-class voting system envisioned by Left Liberals and Social Democrats, which would have included *equal, direct, secret, and universal male suffrage*, repeatedly fail?⁸⁷ And, second, perhaps more realistically, why were even the government's own modest reforms, which included myriad institutional safeguards, political nonstarters? We know that nondemocratic monarchs under massive social pressure – for example in Britain in 1884 or Sweden in 1907 – could “buy off” initially reluctant Conservatives when such safeguards were included as part of a reform “package.” In Germany, however, under no conditions did Conservatives let down their resistance.

To answer the first question we can first demonstrate how the Conservative Party's weak organization shaped their electoral motivations in such a way that it increased Conservatives' *unwillingness* to support reform proposed by Left Liberals and Social Democrats. For example, the parliamentary record in the Prussian parliament includes two notable votes that occurred on bills that would have introduced sweeping reforms. The first was an amendment offered by Left Liberals to the government's own more modest bill, voted upon on March 11, 1910.⁸⁸ The second was a stand-alone bill offered by Left Liberals in May 20, 1912. By analyzing these two bills side by side – and setting aside the predicament that passing both through the *Herrenhaus* (upper

⁸⁶ Westarp quotes Bülow's explanation that the King's words were necessary so that “mood of the Liberals would not be damaged for the [upcoming] public finance reform.” Graf Westarp, *Konservative Politik im letzten Jahrzehnt des Kaiserreichs*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1935), 99–100.

⁸⁷ Left Liberals and Social Democrats were committed to a wholesale reform; National Liberals were advocates of secret and direct elections; Free Conservatives conceded to allow the elimination of indirect elections; and only the German Conservative Party remained stalwart against all reforms. See Joachim Bohlmann, “Die Deutschkonservative Partei am Ende des Kaiserreichs: Stillstand und Wandel einer untergehenden Organisation” (Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald, 2011), 87.

⁸⁸ Below we will discuss the fate of the modest yet nonetheless failed government bill, which initially passed the Chamber of Deputies on March 16, 1910.

chamber) would have been presented another barrier – we can cast light on the *sources* of opposition to major democratic reforms, ranging from more conservative structural attributes of particular districts to electoral challenges facing individual MPs. Both bills would have added the secret ballot and direct elections to the Prussian suffrage system, and this thereby provides a revealing window on barriers to far-reaching suffrage reform.⁸⁹

Following my argument in Chapter 2 and the general insights of Schattschneider and Llavador and Oxoby, I can test the hypothesis that electoral or “office-seeking” motivations, shaped by the strength of electoral organization at the disposal of old-regime political parties, determine willingness to embrace suffrage reform *above and beyond* the structural variables that the literature typically identifies.⁹⁰ With access to “stronger party organization,” we would expect more willingness to accept suffrage reform; with “weaker party organization,” we would expect less willingness to accept suffrage reform.

But how do we test whether “party organization” and its associated electoral benefits increased willingness to accept suffrage reform? While detailed constituency-level party organization data for this period is not available, the Imperial multilevel electoral system fortunately offers an unusual and revealing source of information that allows us to indirectly test this hypothesis. Since the candidates for the Prussian state assembly and the German Reichstag were elected from nearly matching (i.e., similar) geographical electoral districts, we can estimate how each sitting member of the Prussian Parliament, elected under Prussia’s restrictive suffrage system would have fared under the universal, direct, equal, and secret ballot already in place in national Reichstag elections by comparing his vote actual vote share in Prussian elections to Reichstag candidates’ vote share of his same party (in the corresponding election district) in the more democratic national Reichstag elections. In short, we can assess whether politicians of all parties who would have had *poorer* electoral prospects under these conditions (i.e., in Reichstag elections) were in fact *more* resistant to democratic reform; and whether those with *better* electoral prospects, were *more* supportive of reform.

⁸⁹ Part of this analysis (the analysis of the May 20, 1912 bill) draws on Ziblatt, “Does Landholding Inequality Block Democratization?” (2008). Mares has also reanalyzed these data but extended the analysis by examining the 1910 and 1912 bill with a different theoretical interest on the impact of “labor mobility” in a district on the willingness of MPs to vote for reform. See Mares, *From Open Secrets to Secret Voting: Democratic Electoral Reforms and Voter Autonomy* (2015), Chapter 7.

⁹⁰ We will control for these types of “structural variables” at the level of the electoral constituency: agrarian employment, landholding inequality, population, population density, and religious profile of district. See below for more details. Humberto Llavador and Robert Oxoby, “Partisan Competition, Growth and the Franchise,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 120, no. 3 (2005): 1155–89; and Schattschneider, *Party Government* (1942).

For the 1910 roll call vote, I match up electoral results from the most recent Prussian state elections (1908) with those of the candidate's same political party in the corresponding national district for most recent Reichstag elections (1907) to construct an "electoral incentive" variable for nearly every member of the Prussian state parliament. I also do the same for the 1912 vote, constructing an "electoral incentive" variable that contrasts the MPs' results from the 1908 Prussian elections with those of his co-partisan in the corresponding district in the 1912 Reichstag elections. This variable is built, in effect, by asking the following question: how much better or worse off would an individual legislator be, given the last national elections, if the national electoral system were adopted for state elections?

I also include three main control variables that measure different structural features of an MP's home constituency that might shape prospects of supporting reform. First, following a long-standing view that Junker landed wealth counteracted the democratizing impact of strong democratic oppositions, creating an unmovable political system, I include a measure of landholding inequality from the 1895 agricultural census for each district (discussed in Chapter 6), with the expectation that higher land inequality would make an MP less likely to support democratic reform.⁹¹ Second, following the basic assumption that socioeconomic modernization promotes democratization, I include a variable that measures the percentage of the population employed in the agricultural sector for each constituency, with the expectation that the higher the proportion of agricultural workers, the more likely an MP is to resist democratization. Third, I include a variable that measures the religious makeup of a constituency, measured by the percentage of the total population in each constituency that was Catholic in the same year, with the expectation that greater religious heterogeneity makes support for democratization less likely.⁹²

For the 1910 and 1912 votes, I code the dependent variable (support for democratic reform) in several ways for purposes of robustness. First, I code "yes" votes as 1 and all other votes (noes and abstentions) as 0. Second, I focus on "yes" and "no" votes only and exclude abstentions from the analysis. Finally, I also include an ordinal ranking where I code "yes" votes as 2, abstentions as 1 (since abstentions were used strategically), and "no" votes as 0.⁹³ The coding of dependent variables makes little difference. Table 7.3 summarizes the findings.

We see that across all specifications, even holding all other variables constant, that the more an MP is to lose out *electorally* with the new suffrage

⁹¹ See, e.g., Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992).

⁹² For more details on these control variables, measurement issues, and sources, see Ziblatt, "Does Landholding Inequality Block Democratization?" (2008): 629-30.

⁹³ See Ziblatt, "Does Landholding Inequality Block Democratization?" (2008): 623-24.

TABLE 7.3: Probit and Ordered Probit Analyses of Roll Call Vote on Prussian Suffrage Reform (March 1910 and May 1912)

	1910				1912			
	Yes vs. All Other Votes	Excluding Abstentions	Ordinal Ranking	Yes vs. All Other Votes	Excluding Abstentions	Ordinal Ranking	Yes vs. All Other Votes	Excluding Abstentions
Electoral Incentive	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Land Inequality (Gini)	0.06 (1.17)	0.16 (0.89)	0.08 (1.05)	-0.77 (1.08)	-3.11** (0.02)	-1.20 (0.20)	-0.77 (1.08)	-3.11** (0.02)
Agricultural Employment	-0.03*** (0.01)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.00)
% Catholics	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)
N	264	240	264	264	214	264	264	214

Notes: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01; robust standard error in parentheses.
Data Source: For a description of data sources, see Ziblatt (2008)

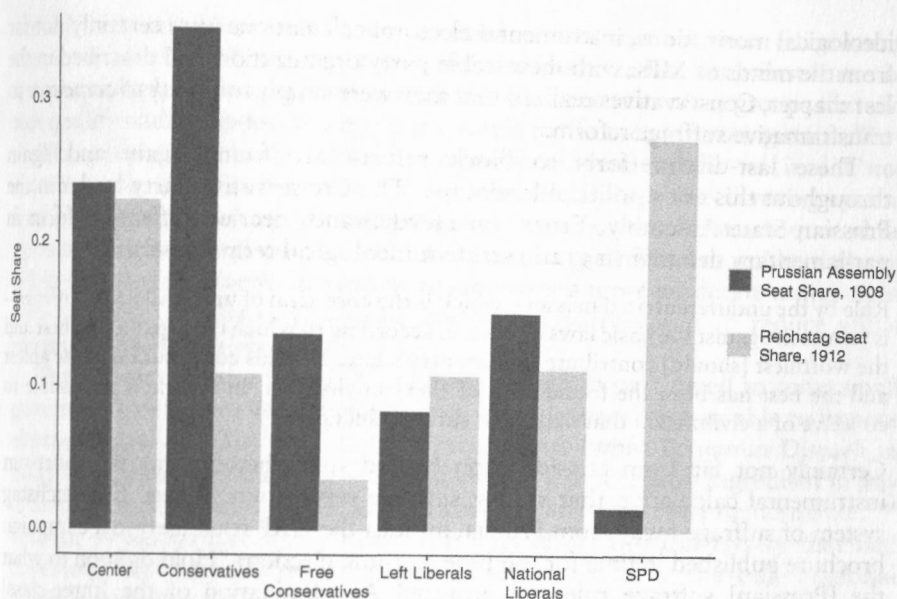


FIGURE 7.3: Seat Share by Each Party in Prussian State Elections and Federal Reichstag Elections, 1908/1912

Data Sources: Data on Federal election results from ICPSR (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research). 1984. "German Reichstag Election Data, 1871-1912." Data on Prussian state elections from Kühne (1994b)

rule, the likelier he is to oppose suffrage reform.⁹⁴ We also see, unsurprisingly, that many of the other control variables are also statistically significant: MPs from more rural regions are consistently more likely to oppose reform in all specifications, and landholding inequality makes MPs from such districts less likely to support reform in some specifications.⁹⁵ A similar logic, although not linear, holds for the traditional structural variable: increasing rural employment decreases likelihood of supporting reform.

Conservatives (both Free Conservatives and German Conservatives) had the most to lose electorally under Reichstag suffrage rules, as Figure 7.3 illustrates. And the Social Democrats, with their expansive and robust nationally integrated party organization, had the most to gain. We see, therefore, why, in addition to any

⁹⁴ The positive sign on the coefficient for the variable "electoral incentive" reflects how this variable was measured (an MP's party's vote share in Reichstag elections *minus* the same party's vote share in Prussian state elections). If a member of Prussian assembly's own political party would do better under rules more closely approximating the Reichstag rules, the MP was more likely to vote for reform. The worse the MP would do, the less likely he was to vote against the reform. For more elaborate discussion, see Ziblatt, "Does Landholding Inequality Block Democratization?" (2008).

⁹⁵ In several models not reported here, this variable is more important (e.g., when a broader sample of districts is included). But the electoral incentive variable remains important in *all* specifications.

ideological motivations, instrumental electoral calculations were certainly not far from the minds of MPs: with their feeble party organization, as I described in the last chapter, Conservatives realized that they were simply *too weak to acquiesce* to transformative suffrage reform.

These last-ditch efforts to block reform are found again and again throughout this era's political landscape. The Conservative Party leader in the Prussian State Assembly, Ernst von Heydebrand, decried suffrage reform in parliamentary debate in 1912 in strident ideological terms, asserting:

Rule by the undifferentiated masses – which is the core ideal of universal equal suffrage – is an attack against the basic laws of nature, according to which the capable, the best and the worthiest [should] contribute to a country's fate; and this contribution of the ablest and the best has been the foundation of every civilization. In fact, it is impossible to conceive of a civilization that makes no such distinctions.⁹⁶

Certainly not far from consideration behind such rhetoric was the short-run instrumental calculation that stifling suffrage reform would keep the Reichstag system of suffrage away from Prussia, an idea the DKP itself used in a campaign brochure published in time for the June 2, 1908, election: "Hold tight on to what the [Prussian] suffrage rule still protects! An elimination of the [three-class] suffrage and its substitution with the general Reichstag suffrage rule represents the final domination by the masses!"⁹⁷

THE SECOND FACE OF WEAKNESS: THE DYNAMICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPTURE

If comprehensive suffrage reform faced staunch opposition from conservatives, then what explains the failure of more modest government-sponsored proposals? Suffrage reform in Britain (1884) and Sweden (1907 and 1909) included safeguards that secured the interests of existing political parties. Was not the same possible in Prussia? Though unlikely to transform the political regime as a whole, the Prussian reform proposed in February 1910 by Bethmann-Hollweg himself and endorsed by the Crown, had a better chance of success. But, while the proposed reform disappointed Left Liberals and Social Democrats, this "top-down" route of gradual democratization was not so unusual when we consider British crown's interventions in the reform debate of House of Lords in 1910–1911 or the Swedish crown's parliamentary interventions in 1907 and 1909. Bethmann-Hollweg's proposal, like most democratic reforms by "elite negotiation," had ulterior and not strictly democratic motives.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, it

⁹⁶ Stenographische Berichte, Haus der Abgeordneten 77 Sitzung, 21 Legislative Period, May 20, 1912

⁹⁷ *Kreuzzeitung* 256, June 2, 1908 cited by Bohlmann, "Deutschkonservative Partei am Ende des Kaiserreichs" (2011), 88.

⁹⁸ On idea of 'elite negotiations in democratization', see Collier, *Paths Towards Democracy* (1999), 33ff.

would have (1) substituted direct elections for indirect elections (eliminating electors); (2) enlarged the size of electoral districts to reduce the worst forms of income malapportionment; and (3) granted educated and other groups that did not qualify under income qualifications access to "first-class" voting status.⁹⁹

The proposal was, however, admittedly modest insofar as it did *not* introduce the secret ballot; nor did it eliminate the three-tiered voting system itself. Though the reform was largely a move to bolster the status quo while appeasing Left Liberal democratic reformers, its goal was not unlike those of other democratic reforms in history: to empower a more moderate center-right collaboration of National Liberals and Conservatives and to reduce social unrest ("*Beruhigung im Land*").¹⁰⁰

The ultimate cause of the bill's failure, though in part owed to some small government missteps, was twofold: first, party leaders were unable to impose electoral losses on their own party's incumbents (what Benjamin Disraeli in 1867 had called his own party's "dying swans"), a necessary ingredient in any democratization reform, as British reforms in 1867 and 1884 demonstrate.¹⁰¹ Second, as Kühne has also argued, the intense urban-rural rivalry that had developed between the two partners expected to carry the bill, National Liberals and the German Conservative Party, made forging an alliance between the two more complicated than the crown had imagined.¹⁰² The potential center-right reform coalition was not forthcoming despite Bethmann-Hollweg's hope that the bill would "help the Conservatives make good the errors they had committed" and to "help them regain touch with the mood of the people."¹⁰³

Instead, the Conservative Party leadership in Prussia, under von Heydebrand, chose to resist the monarchy's own plans and so proposed its own, alternative initiative without National Liberals in March 1910.¹⁰⁴ But, while National Liberals supported the original bill, the gap between the two parties widened too far as the Conservative leadership employed a new, ultra-conservative strategy, criticized as "demagogic" by Bethmann-Hollweg. In particular, this strategy, best summed up in Retallack's words, as being "*plus royaliste que le roi*" ("more royalist than the king"), left German

⁹⁹ The results for reducing the worst income malapportionment of the existing system were modest, increasing the portion of voters in the first class from 3.8% of the electorate to 7%; voters in the second class from 13.8% to 17%; and reducing the portion of third class voters from 82.4% to 76%. The more significant reform would have been the introduction of direct elections. See Bohlmann, "Deutschkonservative Partei am Ende des Kaiserreichs" (2011), 89.

¹⁰⁰ "Sitzung des Staatsministeriums am 26 Februar 1910," in *Die Protokolle des Preussischen Staatsministeriums, 1817-1934/38* (1999), vol. 10, 54.

¹⁰¹ Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 568.

¹⁰² Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 567.

¹⁰³ Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 164.

¹⁰⁴ For an account of the bill's passage through the upper chamber, see Spenkuch, *Das Preussische Herrenhaus: Adel und Bürgertum in der ersten Kammer des Landtags 1854-1918* (1998), 542-48.

Conservatives increasingly antagonistic toward the king and isolated in the German political system, unable to forge alliances with any group except the Catholic Center Party.¹⁰⁵

The formerly "state loyal" Conservative Party now also contested the government's internal modernization and canal-building projects (1899, 1901, 1904) as well as the 1909 public finance bill that would have removed tax privileges of landed wealth, bills that both Left Liberals and National Liberals supported. More fundamentally, the irresolvable tensions between National Liberals and Conservatives were rooted in an important consequence of weak party organization: the *geographic isolation* of the party. Lacking nationally encompassing party organization, the German Conservative Party was increasingly concentrated in a smaller number of districts (as Figure 7.4 depicts) chiefly in eastern Prussia, which by any estimate had starkly different median preferences about suffrage than those of the liberal parties.

I follow Jones and Mainwaring in proposing a Party Nationalization Score (PNS) based on a Gini coefficient of electoral support, which assesses the degree to which a party wins equal vote shares across all subnational units (in this case electoral constituencies). Figure 7.4 reports electoral geography Gini coefficients for the traditional right or conservative party in parliamentary elections in four countries for which systematic over-time data are available.¹⁰⁶ In this case, the higher the value, the higher the geographical concentration of the votes. As Figure 7.4 shows, the German Conservative Party was unique among similar traditional right parties in Europe in gaining most of its Reichstag election votes in a concentrated set of districts.¹⁰⁷

If a political party's electoral support is spatially concentrated, the median voter of its median district is likely to be very ideologically distant from the median voter of the country as a whole.¹⁰⁸ Further, this suggests that MP incumbents had resisted efforts from party leadership to more efficiently distribute their electoral victories, further indicating party weakness. Figure 7.5 which plots agricultural employment as a share of total employment on the

¹⁰⁵ See Retallack, *The German Right* (2006), 347. In addition to the instability of parliamentary coalitions, Kühne's (*Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur*, 1994, 264) data on which parties formed electoral coalitions with other parties makes clear that Conservatives' electoral cooperation with Left and National Liberal Parties was in decline after 1890, but increasing only with the Catholic Center Party.

¹⁰⁶ For an elaboration of the method, see Mark Jones and Scott Mainwaring, "The Nationalization of Parties and Party Systems: An Empirical Measure and Application to the Americas," *Party Politics* 9, no. 2 (2003): 139–66. Data source is Caramani, *Elections in Western Europe* (2000).

¹⁰⁷ Equally intensive concentration was found also with the Prussian Assembly delegation where 126 MPs were from east of the Elbe River (the heartland of "eastern Prussia") and only seventeen were from west of the Elbe. Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 167.

¹⁰⁸ See Jonathan Rodden, "The Geographic Distribution of Political Preferences," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 321–40.

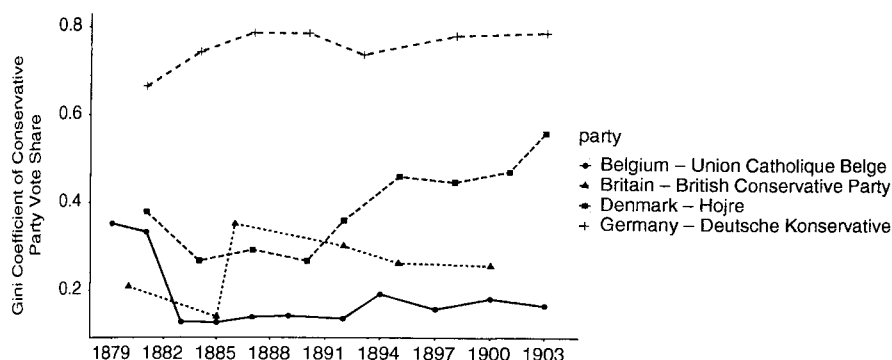


FIGURE 7.4: Geographic Concentration (Gini-Coefficient) of Conservative Party Vote Share, National Parliamentary Elections, 1881–1903

Note: The figure reports Gini coefficients in vote share across electoral districts for all national parliamentary elections between 1880 and 1903.

Data Source: Caramani 2000

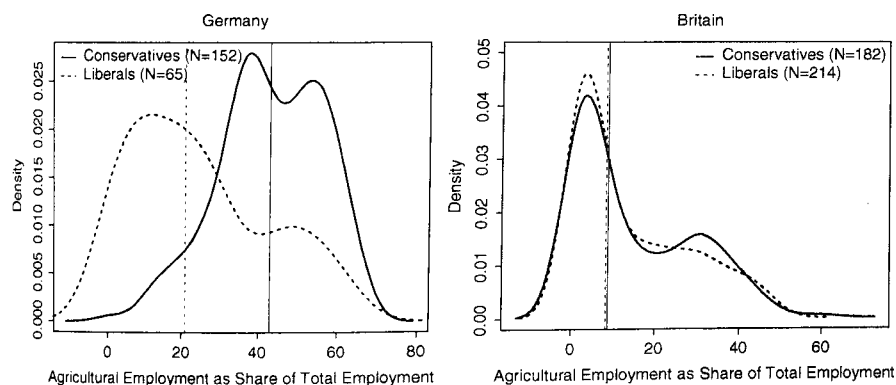


FIGURE 7.5: Median and Distribution of Conservative and Liberal Party Seats Across Varying Levels of Agricultural Districts in Germany and Britain in Years of Suffrage Reform (1910 and 1885)

Data Sources: Election data from Caramani (2000); Employment data for Britain's constituencies from Great Britain Historical GIS Project (2012) "Great Britain Historical GIS." University of Portsmouth; Employment data for German constituencies, see Ziblatt (2009), 9

x-axis (as a proxy of the type of district) against the density of seats won by Conservative and Liberal Parties, indicates that this was the case in Germany

We see greater overlap in Britain, suggesting that Conservatives and Liberals won very similar types of districts (strictly in terms of where agricultural employment predominated). By contrast, in Germany, Conservatives won in

much more rural districts, overlapping less with Liberals. Thus, unlike in Britain, where British Conservatives and Liberals competed over similar suburban districts, in Germany, the profile of Conservative districts was starkly different demographically – more rural and marked by low population density, a higher portion of Protestants, and high landholding inequality. This ensured that their constituencies' preferences were likely far from those of other parties.¹⁰⁹ The result was simple: lacking the necessary party organization to reach beyond safe seats *without losing their base*, the German Conservative Party's stances on highly ideological questions were constrained by the simple fact that its median voter was very distant from the center of the political space as well from other parties, which were necessary partners to negotiate suffrage reform.

The concept of "party weakness" also implies an *organizational logic* that unfolds in several ways: unlike Swedish Conservatives in 1907–09 or British Conservatives in 1884, German Conservative leadership, because of its weak party organization and resulting geographic isolation, was more dependent upon, more vulnerable to, and thus more easily "captured" by the narrowly focused and effectively organized Agrarian League (BdL) as described in Chapter 6.¹¹⁰ As I have noted earlier, between 1898 and 1912, all Conservative Party MPs in the Reichstag were endorsed by and took pledges to support the BdL; and the interpenetration of the interest groups' leadership and party leadership was extensive.¹¹¹ Further, Conservative MPs were disproportionately reliant on campaign financing and logistical support from the BdL. Because of the ever-present threat that the BdL might run its own candidates against disloyal DKP members, the interest group, which defined itself as exclusively defending agrarian interests, exerted enormous leverage over a Conservative Party consigned to rural districts. This was seen in stages: first, as the BdL incited internal factionalism in the party over infrastructure bills, tariff bills, and tax bills in the early years after 1900; and second, as it definitively shaped the party's stances on voting rights and suffrage in 1909 and 1910, entirely out of proportion to the importance of agriculture in the broader German economy.

With the BdL's influence giving the rural cast to their party, some conservatives began to try to gain back control of the party. In the years after

¹⁰⁹ See Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser's Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For parallel evidence on Prussia, see Ziblatt, "Does Landholding Inequality Block Democratization?" (2008).

¹¹⁰ The idea that interest groups can more effectively capture political parties when parties are spatially concentrated in their support is not one, as far as I know, that exists in the literature. However, there is good theoretical reason, building on basic theories of collective action as well as theories of regulatory capture to think spatially concentrated actors are more vulnerable to capture. See Olson, *Logic of Collective Action* (1965); Stigler, "The Theory of Economic Regulation" (1971).

¹¹¹ Also exerting influence in the Prussian Chamber of Deputies, 122 of 152 Conservative MPs in the Prussian Chamber of Deputies in 1908 declared themselves in favor of the BdL program and received campaign assistance in exchange. See Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 166.

1903, and especially after the rejection of the government's public finance bill in 1909, a movement within the Conservative Party developed to "step across the Elbe" and "ride to the west" by building local party associations (*Vereine*) and running campaigns outside of the East Elbian heartlands in a new "urban conservatism" modeled in part on British Toryism.¹¹² For example, the conservative mayor of Dresden, Dr. Gustav Otto Beutler, argued that Conservatives' anti-industrial views were limiting its prospects in Saxony. Dr. Beutler, at the Conservative Party Congress of December 1909, criticized his fellow delegates, asserting that "there is a widespread understanding that the party has become a complete dependent of the BdL."¹¹³ Also, in reaction to the failure of the government's public finance bill at the hands of the BdL-dominated DKP Reichstag caucus, disaffection emerged among a group of conservative *Vereine* from the leafy suburban districts outside of Berlin including Lichterfelde, Moabit, and Pankow, similar to the districts outside London that Conservatives thrived in beginning in the 1880s. In addition to policies that would benefit cities (i.e., tariff reform, public finance reform), local party activists from the suburban *Vereine* actually advocated more sweeping suffrage reform and a political program based around this revealing slogan:

More contact with the people!
Independence from the Agrarian League!
Equity between city and country!
Away from the Center Party!
Back to the Bloc concept [alliance with National Liberals]
against Social Democracy!
Then the Conservative Party will become a *Volkspartei*!¹¹⁴

However, these groups had little hope of influencing the party leadership, already comprised of agrarian BdL insiders – in the Reichstag, the Prussian Assembly, and *Herrenhaus* parliamentary groups – which, along with a single Saxon MP, constituted its central decision-making body, the so-called "Committee of Twelve."¹¹⁵ Facing a party leadership already dominated by well-organized agrarian interests, these new provincial groups could garner

¹¹² A prominent figure in this movement was led by Dr. Adolf Grabowsky, a prominent publicist and later political scientist whose 1911 article "Cultural Conservatism" explicitly compared British and German Conservatism, arguing the latter had been "deformed" and required fundamental organizational and ideological reform.

¹¹³ Deutsche Konservative Partei, ed., *Der Allgemeine Delegiertentag der Deutsch-Konservativen Partei. Stenographischer Bericht, 11 December 1909* (Berlin: Hauptverein der Deutsch-Konservativen, 1909), 27.

¹¹⁴ On this group's stance on suffrage reform, see Bohlmann, "Deutschkonservative Partei am Ende des Kaiserreichs" (2011), 92. On the group's program, Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 182–83.

¹¹⁵ Retallack, *Notables of the Right* (1988), 229. By 1912, the highest body in the party, the so-called "committee of twelve" consisted of Wedel, Heydebrand, Beutler, Buch, Erffa, Klassing, Kroecker, Limburg, Mehnert, Mirbach, Normann, Pappenheim, and Westarp.

little immediate influence, instead leaving a simmering grassroots factionalism in the provincial *Vereine* to reemerge after 1918.¹¹⁶ Thus, a powerful legacy of the past and internal party politics blocked a rational strategy to maximize votes.

How did this dynamic of “organizational capture” shape the party’s stance on democratization? And, why would an agricultural interest group have such a strong position on electoral reform? Though Ernst von Heydebrand, nicknamed the “uncrowned King of Prussia,” was said to have run the Conservative Party with an “iron fist” and was widely regarded as a brilliant politician, by 1910, the impact of the BdL’s influence was far-reaching. Indeed, part of von Heydebrand’s unusual political talent was precisely his ability to act on behalf of a narrow interest while simultaneously playing the role as commanding leader fully in charge of the party.¹¹⁷ However, illustrating one of the classic paradoxes of political power, the full scope of influence between the two organizations is difficult to identify empirically unless the analyst carefully traces *over time* how what at first might have been open conflicts was gradually muted and replaced with a subtle, quiet domination, with one group entirely limiting another group’s room for maneuver.¹¹⁸ In the earliest ultraconservative stances *contra* the chancellor over the canal bill (1899, 1902, and 1905), tariff bills (1902), and the public finance bill (1909), we see the BdL issuing overt threats and rewards to Conservative Party MPs, and we witness open power struggles between the two groups. But over time, these overt inner-party struggles were submerged, BdL members occupied a greater portion of leadership positions in the DKP, and the political positions and actions of the two groups became increasingly fused and difficult to disentangle.

The first great clash came in 1899 when the king’s government pushed for a “modernizing” canal to link western Prussia and eastern Prussia. The bill’s introduction into the Prussian Chamber of Deputies sparked a sharp split in Conservative Party. The BdL released propaganda materials decrying the destructive “incursion” into eastern Prussia that a canal would cause, and also warned that the massive infrastructure project would strengthen labor movements to the west (driving up the price of labor in the east) and decrease the price of grain by depressing the costs of foreign imports. Not unlike the Tariff League campaign launched in Britain in 1903 (described in Chapters 4 and 5), in Germany conservative-leaning pressure groups coerced sitting MPs. In a well-organized campaign in the summer of 1899, the BdL threatened to withdraw its endorsement from Conservative MPs who expressed support for

¹¹⁶ Retallack, *The German Right* (2006), 378–83.

¹¹⁷ A range of opponents, from National Liberal Eugen Schiffer to Left Liberal newspaper editor Theodor Wolff, express admiration. See Retallack, *The German Right* (2006), 387.

¹¹⁸ Paul Pierson, “Power and Path Dependence,” in *Advances in Comparative Historical Analysis*, ed. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, “Two Faces of Power,” *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962): 947–52.

the bill; following the wholesale adoption of the BdL's rhetoric by Conservative Party MPs, the bill was defeated.¹¹⁹ But the BdL's influence was by no means complete; in an ensuing backlash, the so-called "canal rebels" came under a major counterattack as the king's government announced no BdL members would be welcomed to the court, and, more importantly, all current and future officials in the government instantly had to drop their BdL membership.

Yet, the government's actions, while important, only heightened the stakes of the BdL-DKP battle. Three years later, conflicts again erupted over efforts to increase Caprivi's old low tariffs on grain. In 1902, though tariffs were ultimately raised, BdL chairman Wangenheim threatened to form his own party to run against the thirty-four Conservative MPs who had voted for the bill because the tariff rate increase was insufficiently *large*. While "governmentalist" Conservative MPs critiqued the power of the BdL, Wangenheim intervened in public debate, asserting that parties that supported the bill needed to be "destroyed."¹²⁰ The conflict exploded into the open: while some leaders such as Manteuffel called for the expulsion of Wangenheim from the party, Wangenheim himself and the BdL leadership ran fifty-five candidates of their own in the next Prussian elections of 1903. It is true that only five of the BdL candidates won seats. But, a message clearly had been sent, and by 1905, the balance of power had begun subtly to tilt in favor of the BdL. Oskar von Normann, the Reichstag caucus leader, favored Wangenheim during the 1903 conflict, and when a new party chairman of the Prussian Chamber, Ernst von Heydebrand, was elected, BdL chairman Wangenheim enthusiastically wrote that of all the candidates, Heydebrand was "the only one who would lead the cause energetically and along agrarian lines."¹²¹

Indeed, by 1908, when von Bülow's government introduced its major public finance bill that would have removed the tax privileges of landed wealth, the BdL and the party leadership now worked closely together to defeat it. On June 24, 1909, only six deputies from the entire DKP Reichstag caucus voted for the bill, which in turn led to the eventual fall of Chancellor von Bülow and the passage, with Center Party support, of an alternative bill written jointly by the BdL leadership and that taxed "mobile" wealth and not landed wealth. The future party leader, Count Kuno von Westarp recalled in his memoirs a revealing private moment in the heated public debate:

On April 20, 1909 as I was preparing to speak to a Conservative gathering in Charlottenburg... I received two letters from the two chairman of the Bund der Landwirte [including von Wentzel] in my home constituency... they had heard that I would make the case for the inheritance tax and they had to tell me that the Agrarian League had raised protest at constituency meetings and would not support my future

¹¹⁹ Bohlmann, "Deutschkonservative Partei am Ende des Kaiserreichs" (2011), 57.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60. ¹²¹ Cited by Retallack, *The German Right* (2006), 361.

candidacy and insisted I lay down my mandate. I telegraphed von Wentzel "Assumption of letter is false. Am astounded that that threat was even necessary."¹²²

Indeed, by the fall of 1908, when the king made his "throne speech" calling for reform of the three-class voting system, the alignment of the BdL and the DKP's main leadership on key issues was apparent. It was no longer necessary to threaten party leaders to implement the BdL agenda, though it is certainly true that subterranean resistance and criticism did persist, especially from western Vereine and disgruntled associations. In the case of the three-class voting system, the DKP and BdL shared a common interest. Not unlike the House of Lords in Britain until 1911, the Prussian suffrage system was a buffer that protected the immediate electoral interests of DKP MPs, while also blocking the passage of potentially damaging tax initiatives – since major direct taxes existed *only* at the state level – on rural property and land.

At their annual general gathering in 1909, BdL delegates raucously criticized suffrage reform plans. One Prussian BdL member and Reichstag Conservative MP, Herr von Oldenburg-Januschau, made clear the importance of the three-class voting system in Prussia, noting that three linked topics dominate the agenda: tax reform, suffrage reform, and the rising power of the parliament.¹²³ Addressing the liberalizing suffrage reform in southern German states, to the applause of his colleagues, he proclaimed, "We will defend the Prussian dam for you all to maintain the influence of the countryside and the strength of the monarchy!"¹²⁴ In a meandering speech, another BdL member, F. von Bodelschwingham-Schwarzenhasel, defended the three-class voting system in even more pernicious terms and with a warning to MPs who might defect:

Gentleman, I know that in some places people are shy to criticize Judaism or to name oneself as an opponent of Judaism. It is a weakness of our times to not want to call things by their proper name. . . With all emphasis, I would like to speak out against a changing of the suffrage/constituency boundaries which will reduce the influence of the countryside. And, I would like to add: from my view, any of the MPs from one of the parties that is close to us that have come out unconditionally for the redrawing of electoral districts, *should find no support and no contact from us.*¹²⁵

But, the BdL leaders, Roesicke and von Wangenheim, though just as firmly opposed to any suffrage reform, argued against taking an explicit stand. After all, von Heydebrand proved a reliable ally. Though von Heydebrand had initially proposed a secret ballot in 1910, proving his "loyalty" to the crown

¹²² Westarp, *Konservative Politik im letzten Jahrzehnt des Kaiserreichs* (1935), 64–65.

¹²³ "Stenographische Bericht über die 16 General-Versammlung des Bundes der Landwirte," *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte*, Nr. 15 February 23, 1909: 66.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ "Stenographische Bericht über die 16 General-Versammlung des Bundes der Landwirte," *Korrespondenz des Bundes der Landwirte*, Nr. 15 February 23, 1909: 70.

to the annoyance of many in his party, it is uncertain whether he was simply playing both sides of the issue. After all, the bill had little chance of surviving the *Herrenhaus*, and in 1910 he led a vote *against* the final version of the government bill, revealing his ultimate position.¹²⁶ In short, the BdL toned down. In his correspondence to von Wangenheim on November 2, 1908, Roesicke argues precisely against an overly "aggressive" and "open" stance and proposed an alternative strategy of resistance:

If we take up an *open* struggle against the suffrage plans of the King, this will lead to renewed tensions. These tensions will deeply annoy a large number of the members of the Conservative faction. Nonetheless, we can prevent a change in the suffrage rules that would run counter to our position while avoiding tensions and this break by furthering the enlightenment of the public that we began in the last campaign, a shaping of the public mood that von Bülow will take into consideration.¹²⁷

One can argue that open conflict was no longer necessary; and yet, following this subtle strategy, the right-wing "diehards" achieved their aim: the three-class voting system remained untouched until war and revolution destroyed the entire political regime in 1918. The king's own effort at suffrage reform was defeated despite the presence of mass unrest and widespread support from across the political spectrum, from Social Democrats all the way to National Liberals.

In short, given the importance of the three-class voting system to Germany's dualistic constitutional structure, we see that the repeated failure of suffrage reform before 1914 reveals a paradox: an organizationally weak old-regime party, arguably in decline, was vulnerable to takeover by a *radicalizing* narrow interest that constrained the party leadership's room for maneuver. The similarities to Britain's Unionist Party – constrained by its own die-hards – before 1914 are certainly striking. However, while similar battles between British Conservative Party right-wingers and moderating "party men" were common at pivotal points in the evolution of Britain's Conservative Party – as in fights over the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts, for example – the "party men" were then on the winning side. In Germany, by contrast, the victories ran the other way. It was the German Conservative Party's diehards who triumphed; and the party was incrementally swallowed by them. In sum, Conservative Party weakness ironically blocked the reform of what ultimately remained an unwieldy and nondemocratic political regime. The failures to innovate organizationally in 1848 haunted Germany until at least 1914 and beyond.

¹²⁶ Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur* (1994), 565–69.

¹²⁷ G. Roesicke to C von Wangenheim on November 2, 1908, "Briefwechsel Freiherr von Wangenheim/Dr. Roesicke im Jahre 1908" Nachlass Wangenheim, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde N 2323 Nr. 3 (1908).

EPILOGUE: WHY WE CAN'T JUST BLAME GERMANY'S AGRARIAN ELITES

We return now to our central claim: that it was the nature of the political parties representing Germany's socioeconomic elite that made any possibility of democratic transition in Prussia, and hence in Germany, so difficult before 1914. But, to lay the heavy burden of Germany's political development on highly depersonalized factors such as "political organizations," "political parties," and "interest groups" is to offer, one might contend, an acontextual view of political history – one that does not take seriously the deeply embedded character of the social structure, groups, and individuals being represented. After all, a long line of literature – from Gerschenkron, Rosenberg, and Wehler to Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens – notes that it was above all *agrarian elites* in Prussia, sitting atop highly concentrated landed wealth, who possessed deeply antidemocratic cultural orientations. They, thus, were the true culprits, doing all they could to thwart democratization whether or not they had effective political party organization.¹²⁸ Recent historiography has certainly not given us a more flattering picture of the political orientations of Germany's and Prussia's landed elites.¹²⁹ Also, there are good *theoretical reasons* to believe that the holders of immobile assets like land, such as east Prussian Junkers, no matter how they are organized politically, will be particularly formidable defenders of nondemocratic political regimes even in the face of great social unrest.¹³⁰

The Prussian case study I have presented above uses wide-ranging sources of quantitative and archival evidence to illustrate the importance of party organization. However, this account does not fully absolve agrarian elites of their direct responsibility for one simple reason: weakly organized political parties may have represented socioeconomic elites, but those socioeconomic elites were also chiefly *agrarian* elites. Indeed, the coexistence of *both* weak party structures on the one hand and an antidemocratic agrarian elite on the other, aggravates the challenge of disentangling the relative importance of each. Both factors were present, so to speak, at the scene of the crime. Indeed, the evidence we saw above of Prussian roll call votes on suffrage reform in 1910 and 1912 not only points to the importance of "electoral incentives" flowing from weak party organization, but also partially confirms the conventional account: MPs from more rural districts – typically those with higher land inequality and disproportionately located in eastern Prussia, the heartland of traditional

¹²⁸ Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy* (1948); Rosenberg, *Imperial Germany* (1964); Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Moderne deutsche Sozialgeschichte*. (Köln: Kiepenheuer u. Witsch 1966); and Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (1992).

¹²⁹ Sebastian Malinowski, *Vom König zum Führer. Sozialer Niedergang und politische Radikalisierung im deutschen Adel zwischen Kaiserreich und NS-Staat* (Berlin: 2003).

¹³⁰ Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (2003); Acemoglu and Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (2006).

agrarian power – were more likely to oppose democratic reform whether or not they had effective party organization.

To give us more *prima facie* confidence in the claim about the *independent* impact of party organization on democratization, it would be helpful to find a case with the following attributes: (a) intense social unrest and working-class mobilization demanding democratic reform; and (b) homogenously non-agrarian or *urban* "bourgeois" socioeconomic elites that are at the center of a nondemocratic regime; and which in turn (c) do *not* possess party organization. The case of nineteenth-century and prewar Britain (Chapters 3 and 4) is useful comparatively because landed elites were powerful into the twentieth century, but, because they were armed with political party organization, they *could* accommodate themselves to democracy.¹³¹ However, we still must ask: without the presence of an agrarian elite in Germany, would weak political parties have still blocked democratization before 1914? If so, we certainly would have greater confidence that weak party organization itself matters and is not simply an outgrowth of a particular type of rural social structure; and we could more self-assuredly assert the importance of party organizations representing the elites in a nondemocratic political regime, no matter its socioeconomic or sociocultural complexion.

THE LESSONS OF A "CRUCIAL" CASE

A case within pre-1914 Germany allows us to analyze precisely this scenario: Hamburg in 1906.¹³² A longtime self-governing republic and an economically vibrant commercial hub on Germany's North Sea, Hamburg, like Lübeck, the city portrayed in Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*, had roots in its distant past as a medieval trading port. But, unlike Lübeck, which went into relative decline, nineteenth-century Hamburg became Germany's second-largest city and also one of its wealthiest states. Initially dominated by a group of distinguished merchant family firms built on an expansive global trade across the Atlantic, Asia, and Africa, the city also became the site of a massive shipping and ship-building industry as well as growing financial and service sectors. Crucially for our purposes, this was a city-state that featured not only

¹³¹ For evidence on the persistence of landed elites in positions of dominance into the twentieth century, see Chapter 2 and Cannadine, *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1999), 28off.

¹³² The following brief case study builds on an extensive literature, but major works it relies on are Richard Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987a); Madeleine Hurd, *Public Spheres, Public Mores, and Democracy: Hamburg and Stockholm, 1870–1914* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Jennifer Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Hamburg* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); and Meike Schallert, "Why the Poor Organized and Lost Their Vote: Suffrage Robbery in Hamburg" (Harvard University, 2008).

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a strong bourgeois elite but a vibrant working class as well. Further, like all states in Germany's fiscally loose federation, Hamburg had jurisdiction not only over its own constitutional and suffrage rules but its own tax and fiscal systems as well, making its two representative groups – the Citizens' Assembly and the *Senat* – consequential elected bodies.

Beyond this, three factors are particularly telling. First, it was a state *without* an agrarian elite, and, thus, arguably the urban merchant-class bourgeoisie dominated to a degree unmatched by any European state at the time. If there is anything to Barrington Moore's famous insight "no bourgeoisie, no democracy," Hamburg, a city with a long republican tradition and a self-confident urban elite, certainly qualified as a promising case for democratization.¹³³ An almost entirely urban state in the German federation, by 1914 Hamburg had a greater share of world trade than any port in continental Europe and was moreover a national financial center, with a stock exchange equaled in activity only by Frankfurt.¹³⁴ The economic elite of the city, as Niall Ferguson notes in his case study of the city in the late Imperial and Weimar period, included "merchant houses like Shuback & Söhne; the shipping lines R. M. Sloman, Hapag, and the Woermanns; [and] the shipyards Blohm & Voß, Vulkan and Reiherstieg . . ." ¹³⁵ This ruling economic class was a close-knit group of bourgeois families with wealth primarily drawn from international trade, shipbuilding, and the trading houses. With no royal bureaucracy or agrarian elite, the Hamburg merchant classes were both politically and culturally hegemonic, sponsoring a rich urban culture of theaters, natural history museums, art museums, libraries, and public spaces.¹³⁶ The case appeared a promising one for theories that maintain the indispensability of a rising bourgeois class for democracy.

But more than this, Hamburg was then also arguably the "capital of the labor movement" in Germany, the home of a particularly strong working class aligned with the Social Democratic Party and increasingly organized trade unions. Thus, for theories that emphasize not the bourgeoisie but the role of the organized working class as "torchbearers of democracy," Hamburg is also clearly a case where conditions were ripe for democracy.¹³⁷ Hamburg was,

¹³³ Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966).

¹³⁴ R. Gömmel, "Entstehung und Entwicklung der Effektenbörsen im 19. Jahrhundert bis 1914," in *Deutsche Börsengeschichte*, ed. H. Pohl (Frankfurt a. M.: Fritz Knapp Verlag, 1992), 133–207.

¹³⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Paper and Iron: Hamburg Business and German Politics in the Era of Inflation, 1897–1927* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 47.

¹³⁶ Schallert, "Why the Poor Organized and Lost Their Vote" (2008), 6; Jenkins, *Provincial Modernity: Local Culture and Liberal Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Hamburg* (2003); Sven Beckert, "Die Kultur des Kapitals: Bürgerliche Kultur in New York und Hamburg im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Vorträge aus dem Warburg-Haus* 4, ed. Warburg Haus (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 143–75.

¹³⁷ Eley, *Forging Democracy* (2002).

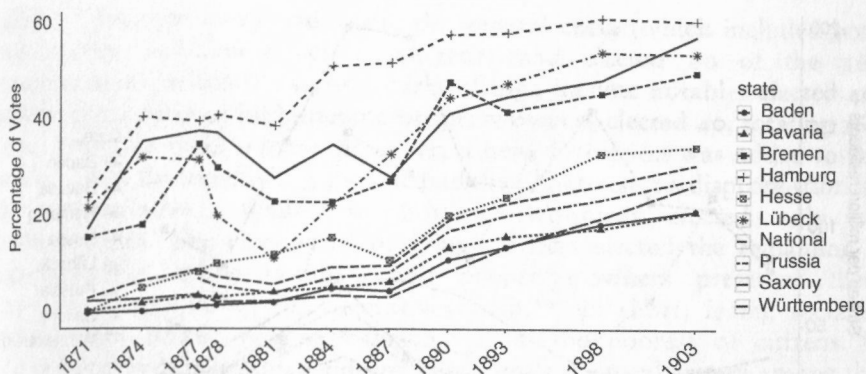


FIGURE 7.6: Electoral Support for SPD, by German State in Reichstag Elections
 Data Source: Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt. ed., *Streiks und Aussperrungen im Jahre 1909*, Statistik des Deutschen Reichs, Vol. 239 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1910), 49–58

electorally speaking, a socialist stronghold, even during the time of the anti-socialist laws.¹³⁸ After 1890, all three of Hamburg's Reichstag seats were in the hands of Social Democrats, thanks to the universal male suffrage system in place for national elections. As displayed in Figure 7.6, the SPD held a higher percentage of votes in Hamburg than in all other German states, including Bremen, Lübeck, and Saxony, similarly urban, industrialized states with sizeable labor movements. In 1871, Hamburg's SPD received four times as high a vote share as it did nationwide; and in 1903, its support was twice as high.

In addition to electoral politics, the working class increasingly exerted pressure through extra-parliamentary means. Hamburg, as historian Richard Evans explains, became the central site of massive labor strikes (e.g., in the dockyards) in the years before 1910, attracting attention across Europe. In response to a cholera outbreak in 1892 and the city's failed response to this crisis, social pressure grew to improve working and living conditions – and to alter the suffrage.¹³⁹ As summarized in Figure 7.7, we can draw upon German census industrial strike data, reported by state, to show that despite Hamburg's small size, the incidence of strikes there was matched only by the much larger states of Saxony and Bavaria.

¹³⁸ Helga Kutz-Bauer, "Arbeiterschaft und Sozialdemokratie in Hamburg vom Gründerkrach bis zum Ende des Sozialistengesetzes," in *Arbeiter in Hamburg. Unterschichten, Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung seit dem ausgehenden 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Arno Herzig, et al. (Hamburg: Verlag Erziehung und Wissenschaft, 1983), 179–92.

¹³⁹ Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830–1910* (1987a). Evans, "Red Wednesday' in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and Lumpenproletariat in the Suffrage Disturbances of 17 January 1906" (1979).

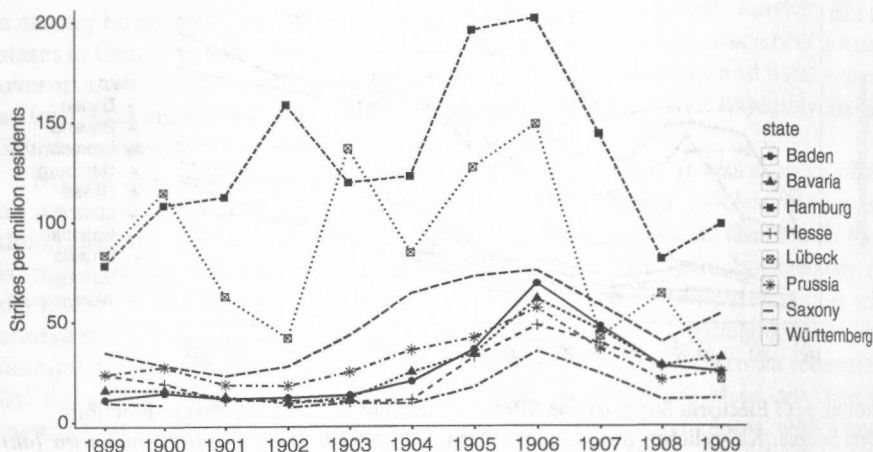


FIGURE 7.7: Incidence of Annual Strikes in German States, 1899–1909 (per Million Residents)

Data Source: Schröder, *Sozialdemokratische Parlamentarier in den Deutschen Reichs- und Landtagen, 1867–1933*, 825–889

Hamburg was a center of German bourgeois and working-class power. In short, few cases seemed as over-determined for democratic success. So, then, what was the outcome of a robust bourgeoisie coming face-to-face with a vocal working class demanding political representation? The result, ironically, was what historians and activists at the time called a “*Wahlraub*” (“suffrage robbery”). In 1906, facing massive social unrest, the political elite of Hamburg, already protected by a comparatively restrictive franchise, introduced a remarkable further *retraction* of political rights by reducing political equality through restrictions on voting rights.¹⁴⁰

Confronting similar unrest after 1900, many southern German states, including Baden (1904), Bavaria (1906), and Württemberg (1906), democratized their voting systems in important ways – institutionalizing the secret ballot, expanding who could vote, and weighing lower income voters more. Hamburg, however, followed Saxony (1896) and Lübeck (1902, 1905) by imposing new restrictions and, most importantly, decreasing the equality of the vote, modeling itself after Prussia. The Hamburg government, employing an elaborate system of income malapportionment divided up the general electorate into two income-based classes and gave them highly unequal voting

¹⁴⁰ See Wolfgang Schneider, “Die Begrenzungen des Wahlrechts in Deutschland, Preußen und Hamburg (im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert)” (Hamburg, 1955). According to Schneider’s data (p. 220–21), only 4 percent of Hamburg’s residents could vote in state elections: a remarkably low figure, lower than that found in Bavaria, Hesse, Baden, Württemberg, and Prussia.

rights.¹⁴¹ Between 1879 and 1906, the general curia (which included both high-income and lower-income citizens) had elected 80 of the 160 representatives, while the second curia of high-income notables elected 40, and the third curia of high-income property owners elected 40, totaling 160 seats. After the 1906 reform, however, a new distinction was added to the general curia: the top third by income had the right to elect a disproportionate 48 representatives, while the bottom two-thirds elected only 24 representatives. The citizens of outlying districts elected the remaining 8 representatives, while notables and property owners preserved their respective shares of 40 representatives each.¹⁴² In short, facing socialist mobilization, power was expropriated from the poorest of citizens.¹⁴³ The political redistribution rendered Hamburg's electoral system among the most unequal in Germany.

How was this possible? Given existing theory, why, with a well-organized bourgeoisie and working class, and no agrarian elite, was de-democratization the result of social contention? Why was there *not* the opposite, some movement toward democratization? A focus on the balance of social forces is clearly insufficient, and the puzzle persists unless we focus on the more complicated question of how the economic elite during this time of mass unrest *organized themselves politically*. Though an urban merchant class with mobile assets, Hamburg's economic elite was ineffective at organizing political parties.¹⁴⁴ In a revealing analysis, Meike Schallert argues that the groups that occupied Hamburg's governing institutions indeed were "party-precursors" and not political parties.¹⁴⁵ Though organized in Hamburg's Assembly as three groups, Right, Center, and Left, they were *not* political parties for three reasons. First, unlike their well-organized socialist opposition, the bourgeois "notable" politicians formed factions *after* elections, not before, and thus lacked party programs. Second, as a result, the "parties" failed to exert any party discipline in decision-making, a key hallmark of party organization, even regarding such measures as "distastefully" coercive.¹⁴⁶ Third, the groupings did not collect membership dues nor did they raise funds, hire staff, or print publications, leaving them extremely skeletal organizations.¹⁴⁷ In sum, with

¹⁴¹ Hans Wilhelm Eckardt, *Privilegien und Parlament: Die Auseinandersetzungen um das allgemeine und gleiche Wahlrecht in Hamburg* (Hamburg: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1980), 40–49. This account draws on Schallert, "Why the Poor Organized and Lost Their Vote" (2008).

¹⁴² In Hamburg, the result was a highly inequitable voting system: even within the third, general curia of the 1907 elections, one-third of Hamburg's citizens now elected twice as many representatives as the remaining two-thirds, a fact compounded by the continued privileges of notables and property owners, leaving lower income citizens electing 24 of 160 representatives.

¹⁴³ Analogous pressures for urban disenfranchisement, it should be added, were found in far-flung locations, including New York City, though these proposals foundered. See Beckert, "Democracy and Its Discontents" (2002).

¹⁴⁴ Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution* (2003).

¹⁴⁵ Schallert, "Why the Poor Organized and Lost Their Vote" (2008). ¹⁴⁶ Ibid. ¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

none of the core attributes of party organization, Hamburg's bourgeois elite was left wanting for the electoral machinery necessary to compete with its socialist rival, which thrived in national elections.

It thus comes as no surprise that leading figures in Hamburg politics such as Senator O'Swald, of a prominent merchant family, summarized the opposition he now faced with nervousness, calling out several of the opposition's attributes that the Hamburg's elites could learn from,

[Social Democratic] power is based on tight organization. . . such excellent organization as I would wish for other political parties. . . [The Social Democrats] are used to tight discipline, a type of discipline that one can hardly find in the military. . . the Social Democrat who as a worker cannot take care of political affairs betakes himself into the hands of the leaders of the SPD, and as such he must follow the leader's orders; he has no independent will. The Social Democratic leaders do not accept opposition, and if a Social Democrat fails to obey rules, he will simply be expelled or admonished. . . This is why Social Democracy won twelve seats in the last half-time renewal of the Assembly.¹⁴⁸

Confronting this political reality with a mix of acute fear and loathing, it is not surprising that Hamburg's bourgeois elite, like Prussia's agrarian elite – just as *any* economic elite without party organization likely would respond – repressed and *de-democratized*. It is possible that Hamburg's urban elite, like the prominent merchant family in Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*, was merely the victim of the diffusion of the Prussia's landed elites' pernicious political ethos, one that expressed admiration for aristocratic life and extreme distaste for competitive politics. However, even if correct, a more immediate and concrete factor in Hamburg was that economic elites, as in Prussia, were simply unwilling and unable to harness the “new” power of political party organization – a fact that might actually *explain* the origins of that political ethos. This organizational absence hindered these groups' ability strategically to defend their interests in a lasting way. And, the long-run result was, tragically, unhinged democratization for more than a century.

¹⁴⁸ William H. O'Swald, *Stenographische Berichte der Hamburger Bürgerschaft*, eighteenth session, May 24, 1905: 454, cited by Schallert, “Why the Poor Organized and Lost Their Vote” (2008).