



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

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## **Elections in the Empire** 1871-1918

The key statutory provisions governing the **right to vote** in Reichstag elections were derived from the Electoral Act adopted by the National Assembly in St Paul's Church, Frankfurt, on 12 April 1849 and had already applied to the North German Confederation. The Electoral Act of 31 May 1869, which regulated elections to the Reichstag of the North German Confederation, was adopted as an imperial law in 1871 and remained in force without significant amendment until the end of the monarchy in 1918. The Reichstag was **directly** elected by **universal manhood suffrage** on the basis of **one man, one vote**, the most progressive electoral system in Europe at that time. Subject to certain restrictions, all German men aged 25 or over who lived in one of the federal states could vote. Women, on the other hand, were not enfranchised until 1918. The Members of the Reichstag were elected directly rather than through delegates and had to obtain an absolute majority of the votes cast.

In 1871, the territory of the Empire was divided into 382 **constituencies**, and in 1873 a further 15 constituencies in Alsace-Lorraine were added. The population distribution was based on the 1864 census, each constituency containing about 100,000 inhabitants, and the constituency map remained unaltered until 1918. This meant that no consideration was given to movements of population in the Empire resulting from East-West migration, depopulation of rural areas, industrialisation and urbanisation, which resulted in widening disparities in the numbers of eligible voters in the various constituencies. For example, the constituency of Teltow, by Berlin, with 338 900 registered voters, elected one Member to the Reichstag, while Schaumburg-Lippe, with only 10,700 registered electors, enjoyed the same right. In general, cities and centres of industrial activity were at a disadvantage in relation to rural agricultural areas.

In the period of the Empire from 1871 to 1918, there were **12 general elections to the Reichstag** (1871, 1874, 1877, 1878, 1881, 1884, 1887, 1890, 1893, 1898, 1903, 1907 and 1912; there were no more elections thereafter because of the war).

During these years, the balance among the five political forces (the Conservatives, the National Liberals, the Liberal Left, the Centre Party and the Social Democrats<sup>1</sup>) swung considerably.

Liberalism, a powerful force in the initial stages, went into decline and lost its predominant role. The Conservatives also lost a certain amount of ground, despite occasional swings in their favour. The stablest political force in the Empire was the Centre, which could always count on the support of a quarter to a fifth of the electorate. The Social Democrats, on the other hand, grew from parliamentary insignificance to become the largest group in 1912.

**Voter turnout** rose in the course of the imperial period, from 50.7% in 1871 to 84.5% in 1912; the parties evidently succeeded in mobilising the electorate. Political developments during the time of the Empire resulted in a fundamental politicisation of the German population.

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, see the information sheet on 'Political parties in the Empire'.

**Results of Reichstag elections, 1871 to 1912**  
(Figures show percentages of total votes cast)

Year	National Liberals	Liberal Left	Conser-vatives	Centre Party	Social Democrats	Anti-Semites	Others	Turnout in %
1871	30.1	9.3	23.0	18.6	3.2	-	15.8	50.7
1874	29.7	9.0	14.1	27.9	6.8	-	12.4	60.8
1877	27.2	8.5	17.6	24.8	9.1	-	10.1	60.3
1878	23.1	7.8	26.6	23.1	7.6	-	9.0	63.1
1881	14.7	23.1	23.7	23.2	6.1	-	9.1	56.1
1884	17.6	19.3	22.1	22.6	9.7	-	8.7	60.3
1887	22.3	14.1	25.0	20.1	10.1	0.2	8.2	77.2
1890	16.3	18.0	19.1	18.6	19.8	0.7	8.6	71.2
1893	13.0	14.8	19.3	19.1	23.4	3.5	7.7	72.2
1898	12.5	11.1	15.5	18.8	27.2	3.3	10.6	67.7
1903	13.9	9.3	13.5	19.8	31.7	2.6	9.5	75.3
1907	14.5	10.9	13.6	19.4	28.9	3.9	8.8	84.3
1912	13.6	12.3	12.2	16.4	34.8	2.9	7.7	84.5

Source: Gerd Hohorst et al., *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch*, Vol. 2 - 1870-1914. Second revised edition, Beck, Munich, 1978, pp. 173-176.

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