



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

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### **Elections in the Weimar Republic**

The **elections to the constituent National Assembly on 19 January 1919** were the first free and democratic national elections after the fall of the monarchy. For the first time, women had the right to vote and to stand for election. The MSPD and the Centre Party, together with the German Democratic Party, which belonged to the Liberal Left, won an absolute majority of seats in the Reichstag; these three parties formed the government known as the Weimar Coalition under the chancellorship of Philipp Scheidemann of the SPD. The left-wing Socialist USPD, on the other hand, which had campaigned for sweeping collectivisation measures and radical economic changes, derived no benefit from the unrest that had persisted since the start of the November revolution and was well beaten by the MSPD and the other mainstream parties.

On **6 June 1920, the first Reichstag** of the Weimar democracy was elected. The governing Weimar Coalition suffered heavy losses at the polls, losing 124 seats and thus its parliamentary majority, and had to surrender the reins of government. The slightly weakened Centre Party, whose vote was down by 2.3 percentage points, the decimated German Democratic Party, whose vote slumped by 10.3 percentage points, and the rejuvenated German People's Party (DVP) of the Liberal Right, whose share of the vote increased by 9.5 percentage points, formed a minority government under the Centrist Konstantin Fehrenbach, a government tolerated by the severely weakened MSPD, which had seen its electoral support plummet by 16.2 percentage points. Disappointment with the performance of the MSPD in government, with its half-hearted satisfaction of workers' demands for nationalisations and social improvements, seems to have prompted many former MSPD voters to switch their allegiance to the USPD or KPD. The clear winner of the election was the USPD, which had seen its share of the vote increase by 10.3% to 17.9%; with 84 deputies, it was now the second-largest parliamentary group in the Reichstag. The far-right German National People's Party (DNVP), which opposed the prevailing political system, also made substantial gains, increasing its vote by 4.8 percentage points, and was now the third-strongest force, with 71 seats.

The victors in the **second Reichstag elections of 4 May 1924**, known as the 'inflation election', were the anti-republican parties of the extreme Left and Right, which received a considerable wave of support as a result of the dire economic situation and a widespread sense of insecurity. The greatest gains were made by the KPD, whose share of the vote rose from 10.5% to 12.6%. The right-wing conservative DNVP and the combined list of the German People's Freedom Party (*Deutsch-Völkische Freiheitspartei*) and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) profited from a wave of chauvinistic nationalist propaganda against the occupation of the Ruhr area and the Dawes Plan: the DNVP made further substantial gains to become the second-largest parliamentary group with a 19.5% share of the vote and 95 deputies. The combined list of the People's Freedom Party and the National Socialists polled 6.5%, thereby establishing the extreme Right of the political spectrum as a parliamentary force for the first time. The parties of the Weimar Coalition, namely the DDP (-2.6 percentage points), the Centre (-0.2) and the reunified SPD (-1.2) all lost ground, as did the 'pragmatic republicans' of the right-wing Liberal DVP, which had served in numerous cabinets since 1920 and whose vote fell by 4.5 percentage points.

Fresh elections were held on **7 December 1924**, because the minority coalition of DVP, Centre Party and DDP under Chancellor Wilhelm Marx (Centre) hoped that the intervening economic revival would help to secure them a working majority. The DDP, the DVP and the Centre did indeed make

slight gains (0.4, 0.9 and 0.2 percentage points respectively), and the Social Democrats even enjoyed a substantial upsurge in support, increasing their vote by 5.5 percentage points, whereas the vote for the far-right National Socialist/Freedom Party bloc fell by 3.5 percentage points and that for the Communists by 3.6. But the ruling coalition still failed to achieve a working majority, because the DNVP vote had risen to 20.5%, which made the support of the DNVP indispensable for any coalition of mainstream parties. In actual fact, the Centre-Right government of DDP, Centre, Bavarian People's Party (BVP), DVP and DNVP, led by Chancellor Hans Luther (non-attached), collapsed after only a year and was replaced by a new minority government.

An economic recovery in Germany was amply reflected in the outcome of the **Reichstag elections of 20 May 1928**, which strengthened the democratic segments of the political spectrum. The SPD was the clear winner with 29.8% of the vote, an increase of 3.8%. Although the other mainstream parties all sustained losses in the order of about 1.5 percentage points, the Social Democrats, together with the Centre (12.1%), the DDP (4.9%), the DVP (8.7%) and the BVP (3.1%), were able to form a Grand Coalition under the chancellorship of Hermann Müller (SPD) with a stable working majority in the Reichstag. While the KPD, with 10.6% of the vote (up by 1.6 percentage points) was able to consolidate its modest position, the DNVP suffered a bitter defeat, slumping to 14.2%, as 6.5% of the electorate defected from it to other parties on the right of the political spectrum, most of which were splinter parties with a sceptical or hostile attitude to democracy. The large number of votes polled by other parties, whose cumulative share amounted to 13.9%, was a sign of the fateful tendency for parties to splinter in the Weimar Republic. The National Socialists, which campaigned for the first time with their own separate list of candidates, remained an insignificant electoral force with a 2.6% share of the vote.

The **elections of 14 September 1930** were called early in the hope that they would provide parliamentary backing for the cabinet of Heinrich Brüning (Centre), which had been governing with the aid of emergency presidential decrees; these elections were entirely dominated by the Great Depression. The impoverishment and radicalisation of large sections of the population and increasing political violence chiefly benefited the extremist parties of the Left and Right. The Communists of the KPD gained 2.5 percentage points, bringing their share of the vote to 13.1%. Even more dramatic was the rise of the National Socialist NSDAP, which registered landslide successes and saw its share of the vote rocket from 2.6% to 18.3%. These two extremist parties now had a combined total of 184 seats in the Reichstag, in other words 32% of all seats. The heaviest losses were sustained by the SPD, whose share of only 24.5% was 5.3 percentage points lower than in 1928. The other mainstream parties also lost ground. The Centre obtained 11.8% of the vote (down by 0.3 of a percentage point), the German State Party (*Deutsche Staatspartei*), formerly the DDP, fell by 1.1% to 3.8%, and the DVP won only 4.7% of the vote, down by 4%. Since the government had not managed to obtain a working majority in Parliament, the Brüning cabinet remained dependent on presidential emergency decrees for the implementation of its policies.

The last two democratic elections on **31 July 1932 and 6 November 1932**, which were also called early with a view to securing a parliamentary majority for the presidential government headed by Franz von Papen (Centre), were held in a climate of economic depression and radicalisation. In both elections, the NSDAP emerged as the strongest party with 37.4% (230 seats) and 33.1% (196 seats) respectively. In the July election, it sent shock waves reverberating through the political landscape by more than doubling its number of votes; its relatively small loss of 4.3 percentage points in the November election did little to blunt the impact of the July vote. The KPD increased its share of the vote in both elections, achieving its best-ever result with 14.5% and 89 seats then topping it with 16.9% and 100 seats. With 319 out of 608 then 296 out of 584 seats, the Communists and National Socialists effectively had a joint power of veto in the Reichstag. The pro-Republic parties, by contrast, were further weakened. The SPD lost 3.9% of the vote in July and a further 1.2% in November, polling only 21.6% and 20.4%. In the July election, the two Liberal parties faded into political insignificance, the State Party falling by 1% to 2.8% and the DVP by 1.2% to 3.5%. The fact that the DVP rallied somewhat in November to win back 0.7 of a percentage point did not alter the overall picture. The Centre had held its ground since 1928, and made a small gain of 0.7% to poll 12.5% in the July election, but the trend was reversed in November, when the Centre obtained 11.9% of the vote

– almost exactly the same result as in 1930. The DNVP sustained a loss of 0.8% in the July election, obtaining 6.2% of the vote, but a gain of 2.7 percentage points in November brought its share of the vote to 8.9%, which was more than it had polled in 1930. The Reichstag election in November 1932 was the last democratic national election. By the time of the next elections to the Reichstag in March 1933, the electoral process was subject to the National Socialists' policy of repression and intimidation; in view of the numerous irregularities and infringements of rights that occurred, the election of 1933 cannot be regarded as truly democratic.

Bibliographical references:

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Administration of the German Bundestag, Research Section WD 1, March 2006.