

“What Is to Be Done?”
The Red Specter, Franchise Questions, and the
Crisis of Conservative Hegemony in Saxony,
1896–1909

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I

WE could be more liberal if we had no social democrats.” This was one axiom of German electoral politics with which the overwhelming mass of non-socialist (*bürgerlich*) German voters agreed unreservedly, wrote Lothar Schücking, a liberal critic of Prussian officialdom, in 1908. Nevertheless, continued Schücking, the aims and ideals of the social democratic movement were completely unfamiliar to most educated Germans. “One knows a few slogans,” wrote Schücking: “‘free love,’ ‘religion a private matter,’ ‘impoverishment of the masses,’ . . . ‘republic.’” Everything else was subsumed under the specter of the “red international.” Disapprovingly, Schücking concluded that “the *bürgerlich* parties have gradually come to recognize only ‘national questions.’”¹

Historians of German liberalism have generally agreed with Schücking’s analysis insofar as they recognize that in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the political options open to German liberals were constrained by the contemporaneity of the industrial revolution, national unification, and the introduction of the universal franchise.²

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1. Lothar Engelbert Schücking, *Die Reaktion in der inneren Verwaltung Preussens* (Berlin-Schöneberg, 1908), 16f., “Das rote Gespenst!”

2. James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1978), 152ff.; David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York and Oxford, 1984), 18f.; and G. Eley, “Liberalism, Europe, and the Bourgeoisie 1860–1914,” in David Blackbourn and Richard J. Evans, eds., *The German Bourgeoisie* (London and New York, 1991),

These developments gave rise to a powerful socialist movement before liberals had mounted an effective challenge to the political hegemony of conservatives. Most historians also agree that anti-socialism, nationalism, and government preferment combined in many ways in the later imperial period to preserve the disproportionate influence of conservative elites. To date, however, electoral politics has been considered only tangentially in debates about how anti-socialist strategies were actually formulated and invoked. Most marked of all is the neglect accorded to local and regional franchises and their impact on German political culture. When the subject is addressed at all, analysis has concentrated on the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).³ Although this research has been salutary, historians have rarely explored what the members of the *bürgerlich* parties themselves thought about franchise questions and elections. How, for instance, did the politics of notables (*Honoratiorenpolitik*), threatened with extinction as a viable political style nationally, operate at the local and regional levels? In what ways did it continue to reflect identifiably *provincial* political agendas?⁴ How did local notables and government ministers construe their long-term chances of overcoming the socialist threat through the ballot box, and under what circumstances did they lose faith in their own ability to mount effective election campaigns and resort instead to patently unfair voting regulations? This essay addresses these questions by examining the willingness and ability of the *bürgerlich* parties to implement their anti-socialist strategy in the realm of electoral politics. By asking "What is to be done?" in the historiographical as well as the rhetorical sense, it also seeks to identify the most promising avenues for future research.

The need to stem the "red tide" through electoral politics demanded the attention of liberals and conservatives alike.⁵ To be sure, these

300f.; cf. other essays in the latter collection, and also those in Konrad Jarausch and Larry Eugene Jones, eds., *In Search of a Liberal Germany* (New York, 1990).

3. See esp. Gerhard A. Ritter, ed., *Der Aufstieg der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Munich, 1990); and Karl Rohe, ed., *Elections, Parties and Political Traditions* (New York, 1990).

4. On this important question, see Celia Applegate's excellent monograph, *A Nation of Provincials* (Berkeley, 1990), 42.

5. See Walter Gagel, *Die Wahlrechtsfrage in der Geschichte der deutschen liberalen Parteien 1848–1918* (Düsseldorf, 1958), 63ff., 126ff.; Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, "The Liberal Power Monopoly in the Cities of Imperial Germany," forthcoming in Larry Eugene Jones and James Retallack, eds., *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives* (New York and Cambridge, 1992); James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: The Conservative Party and Political*

groups often enjoyed remarkable agreement among themselves and with government officials as to how to combat the socialist threat. However, in a multitude of political contexts, and particularly after 1900, they found themselves embroiled in highly acrimonious and mutually debilitating debates. Rarely were those debates more strident than when they concerned elections and electoral franchises. Although liberals and conservatives professed still to be able to identify the specter of revolution, the axiomatic anti-socialism they had previously embraced frequently became merely a rhetorical affirmation of by-gone political constellations. Gradually other "endorsements" became more compelling, especially as the influence of economic interest groups increased and as the self-confidence of liberal leaders grew.

In the past fifteen years, scholars have documented conflicts between liberals and conservatives at the level of Reich politics with enough evidence to dispel the notion that a nationalist "rallying together" or *Sammlung* of anti-socialist parties provides a unifying thread running through the history of the *Kaiserreich* from the era of unification to the First World War. In some older views, this *Sammlung* extended from the so-called "second founding of the Reich" on a protectionist and anti-socialist basis in 1878–79, through the decisive triplet of nationally oriented Reichstag campaigns in 1887, 1898, and 1907, to the debacle of the "red elections" in 1912.⁶ Since Geoff Eley drew attention in the mid-1970s to the ineffectiveness of the *Sammlung* as a political strategy in 1898, historians have become more skeptical about the successes registered by anti-socialist forces before and after 1898 as well.⁷ Recently taking the lead among such scholars, Brett Fairbairn

Mobilization in Germany, 1876–1918 (Boston and London, 1988), esp. 153–66; and Peter Steinbach, *Die Zähmung des politischen Massenmarktes*, 3 vols. (Passau, 1990).

6. For a variety of perspectives critical of this view, see inter alia Margaret Lavinia Anderson and Kenneth Barkin, "The Myth of the Puttkamer Purge and the Reality of the *Kulturkampf*: Some Reflections on the Historiography of Imperial Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 54 (1982): 647–86; Otto Pflanze, "Sammlungspolitik" 1875–1886: Kritische Bemerkungen zu einem Modell," in Otto Pflanze, ed., *Innenpolitische Probleme des Bismarck-Reiches* (Munich and Vienna, 1983), 155–93; and J. Retallack, "The Road to Philippi: The Conservative Party and Bethmann Hollweg's 'Politics of the Diagonal,' 1909–1914," forthcoming in John C. Fout, ed., *Politics, Parties and the Authoritarian State* (New York, 1992). For the broader historiographical context, see Retallack, "Social History with a Vengeance? Some Reactions to H.-U. Wehler's *Das Deutsche Kaiserreich*," *German Studies Review* 7, no. 3 (1984): 423–50, and idem, "Wilhelmine Germany," in Gordon Martel, ed., *Modern Germany Reconsidered* (London, 1991), 33–53.

7. Geoff Eley, "Sammlungspolitik, Social Imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898," reprinted in Eley, *From Unification to Nazism* (Boston, 1986), 110–53.

has studied the Reichstag elections of 1898 and 1903 and drawn some remarkable conclusions. He has identified the *unwillingness* of entrenched elites to set aside their differences at election time, the government's *refusal* to associate itself with any concrete election manifesto, its *disinterest* in supporting extreme right-wing factions in parliament, and the *inability* of Conservatives and National Liberals to deflect attention from such "fairness issues" as food prices, taxation, and electoral franchises.⁸ More comprehensively still, both Fairbairn and the recently deceased historian Stanley Suval have stressed not how terribly wrong things went in the Weimar Republic but how well the system actually functioned during the Wilhelmine era. The sense of "pessimism and gloom, bafflement and indignancy" occasioned by Wilhelmine elections, Fairbairn has written, was real enough—but these terms describe the mood of government ministers and right-wing politicians, *not* socialists, facing the challenge of mass politics around the turn of the century.⁹

Nevertheless, the perspective championed by Suval and Fairbairn, for all its merits, concentrates on the universal Reichstag franchise so exclusively, and stresses the positive or "affirming" habits of voters so vehemently, that it may be skewing our understanding of local and regional political cultures. As a result, Wilhelmine Germany's electoral system may appear structurally more coherent than it was in practice and politically more equitable than it was ever intended to be. This essay, based on a case study of the Kingdom of Saxony, offers a different approach and suggests a number of alternative conclusions. As I have argued elsewhere, the notion that members of the German *Bürgertum* practiced unanimous discrimination against the SPD tends to evaporate when the worlds of local and regional politics are viewed in their full complexity.¹⁰ Having examined the role of anti-socialism

8. Brett Fairbairn, "The German Elections of 1898 and 1903" (D. Phil. thesis, Univ. of Oxford, 1987), esp. chaps. 3 and 4; idem, "The Limits of Nationalist Politics: Electoral Culture and Mobilization in Germany, 1890–1903," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (New Series), 1 (1990): 145–69, esp. 163ff.; idem, "Authority vs. Democracy: Prussian Officials in the German Elections of 1898 and 1903," *Historical Journal* 34, no. 4 (1990): 811–38, esp. 825ff.; and idem, "Interpreting Wilhelmine Elections: National Issues, Fairness Issues, and Electoral Mobilization," forthcoming in Jones and Retallack, eds., *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change*, 1992.

9. Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 9; Fairbairn, "The Limits of Nationalist Politics," 167.

10. J. Retallack, "Anti-Socialism and Electoral Politics in Regional Perspective: The Kingdom of Saxony," forthcoming in Jones and Retallack, eds., *Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change*,

and anti-Semitism in the rapid mobilization of the Saxon electorate during the 1880s and early 1890s, and having studied the campaign that led in March 1896 to a new and highly reactionary three-class Landtag franchise, in this essay I turn to the protracted struggle between 1896 and 1909 to find a workable electoral law for Saxony. By examining the reactions of Saxon ministers and parliamentarians as they were forced to consider a dizzying range of constitutional options, my aim is to penetrate beneath their rhetorical claims to be seeking the most fair franchise in order to examine the inner working—or non-working—of anti-socialist strategies in a regional context.

This perspective also makes it possible to consider the determination of National Liberals in Saxony to break with Conservatives as paradigmatic of a broader resurgence of liberalism in the Reich after 1900. Saxony was just one among a number of federal states in Imperial Germany where liberals, largely frustrated in national politics by the temporizing efforts of Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow (1900–1909), challenged the political hegemony of conservatives in individual Landtage.¹¹ To be sure, Saxony represents a special case: not only was it highly industrialized and the bastion of German socialism; it also had a long history of particularly reactionary ministries. But these circumstances make the liberals' achievement only more remarkable. After 1900, as new men and new ideas entered the liberal caucuses in the Saxon Landtag and as popular pressure mounted in the streets, key policy-makers in the Saxon bureaucracy suddenly (albeit ambivalently) embraced the cause of reform.¹² Eventually liberal parliamentarians and government leaders recognized their mutual interest in displacing the Conservatives' disproportionate influence on state pol-

1992; cf. Retallack, "Anti-Semitism, Conservative Propaganda, and Regional Politics in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany," *German Studies Review* 11, no. 3 (1988): 377–403.

11. Limits of space prevent me from citing the large body of literature on this subject; see the works cited in nn. 2 and 3 above for further references. To date, the reports sent to Berlin by the Prussian envoy in Dresden have never been tapped to illuminate this problem, though similar reports from Munich, Stuttgart, and Karlsruhe have been: see Irmgard Barton, *Die preussische Gesandtschaft in München als Instrument der Reichspolitik in Bayern* (Munich, 1967); Hans Philippi, *Das Königreich Württemberg im Spiegel der preussischen Gesandtschaftsberichte 1871–1914* (Stuttgart, 1972); and Hans-Jürgen Kremer, *Das Grossherzogtum Baden in der politischen Berichterstattung der preussischen Gesandten 1871–1918, Teil I: 1871–1899* (Frankfurt a.M., 1990), *Teil II: 1900–1918*, forthcoming 1991.

12. Crucial biographical information on Saxon ministers can be found in Karlheinz Blaschke, "Das Königreich Sachsen 1815–1918," and idem, "Minister des Königreichs Sachsen 1815–1918," in Klaus Schwabe, ed., *Die Regierungen der deutschen Mittel- und Kleinstaaten 1815–1933* (Boppard a.R., 1983), 81–102, 285–94.

icy, and they chose to begin by transforming a Landtag that one observer described in 1901 as "the most conservative of German parliaments."¹³ Although some liberals were disappointed that the Saxon franchise inaugurated in 1909 was not as progressive as those that had recently passed into law in Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden, others pointed out that far more was accomplished in Saxony than in Prussia. Because a kind of "middle path" was chosen both in Saxony and in the Reich by governments that refused to endorse either radical liberalism or reactionary conservatism, a study of Saxony's constitutional *Sonderweg* offers insight into the crisis of conservative hegemony at the national level as well.

By 1909, after National Liberals had been vying for a decade to gain the upper hand in the Saxon Landtag, little was left of their electoral *Kartell* with the Conservatives. Both parties—the so-called *Ordnungsparteien* (parties of order) in Saxony—eventually had to acknowledge that their internal feuding, as much as the campaign against socialism, threatened their own political survival. As the final component of this analysis, the significance of these antagonisms is tested in the laboratory of the Saxon Landtag elections of October 1909. The only convincing conclusion here is that disagreements over franchise questions so eroded the common ground between the *Ordnungsparteien* in Saxony that they were rendered incapable of mounting an effective anti-socialist campaign. A number of criteria are proposed through which the breakdown of anti-socialist solidarity in the 1909 Saxon Landtag elections can be quantified, in the hope that such analysis may fruitfully be applied to other state and national elections in the *Kaiserreich*.

II

Although their state had a relatively equitable Landtag franchise until 1896, Saxon Conservatives more thoroughly dominated affairs in both houses of the Landtag than did their party comrades anywhere else in the Reich. Under the Saxon franchise law of 3 December 1868, all male citizens over the age of twenty-five who owned property or who paid at least 3 Marks in state taxes annually were eligible to cast

13. See the report of the Prussian envoy in Saxony, Count E. A. Karl von Dönhoff, to Bülow, 17 Oct. 1901, in the Political Archive of the German Foreign Ministry in Bonn (hereafter cited as PA AA Bonn), I A Sachsen (Königreich) (hereafter cited as Sachsen), Nr. 60 ("Parlamentarische Angelegenheiten des Königreichs Sachsen"), Bd. 5. All Foreign Ministry files were consulted either in Bonn or on microfilm from the U.S. National Archives.

ballots in direct, equal, and secret elections. Every two years, voters chose new deputies in one-third of the Landtag's 82 constituencies.¹⁴ Beginning in the mid-1880s, this electoral system yielded a permanent Conservative majority (between 40 and 50 seats) in the Landtag that seemed unassailable. The National Liberal Party (NLP), organizationally weaker and ideologically more pliant than most other National Liberal organizations, typically fielded between 20 and 25 deputies in association with the two left-liberal groups, the Progressives and the Radicals.

Conservative hegemony appeared to be eroding from the late 1880s onward as more low-income Saxons became eligible to vote in Landtag elections and as voter turnout increased rapidly.¹⁵ The SPD's caucus in the Landtag grew from 5 members in 1887 to 15 in early 1896, while in the same period the Saxon SPD registered steady gains in Reichstag elections. By November 1895 these developments had led Conservatives, National Liberals, and Progressives in Saxony to fear for the future of their parliamentary *Kartell*. They therefore asked the government to prepare a franchise reform bill that would not only preclude the introduction of the universal Reichstag franchise, as the Saxon SPD advocated, but also prevent a further "flood" of SPD deputies into the chamber. Organized by the de facto leader of the Conservative Party, *Geheimer Hofrat* Dr. Paul Mehnert, this campaign achieved its goal when a new three-class franchise was passed into law on 28 March 1896. Immediately labelled "Mehnert's law," the new Landtag franchise was modelled on the Prussian three-class system; only minor attempts were made to diminish the latter's reactionary reputation and plutocratic effects. As a result, with each partial (one-third) election of

14. These and other details below concerning the Saxon franchise laws of 1868, 1896, and 1909 are taken from Victor Camillo Diersch, "Die geschichtliche Entwicklung des Landtagswahlrechts im Königreich Sachsen" (Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Leipzig, 1918); Alfred Pache, *Geschichte des sächsischen Landtagswahlrechts von 1831-1907*, 2d ed. (Leipzig, 1919); E. Oppe, "Die Reform des Wahlrechts für die II. Kammer der Ständeversammlung im Königreich Sachsen," *Jahrbuch des öffentlichen Rechts der Gegenwart* 4 (1910): 374-409. Further details and analysis are found in G. A. Ritter with Merith Niehuss, *Wahlgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch* (Munich, 1980), 163-82; and Ritter, "Das Wahlrecht und die Wählerschaft der Sozialdemokratie im Königreich Sachsen 1867-1914," in Ritter, ed., *Aufstieg*, 49-101.

15. Dönhoff to Chancellor Leo von Caprivi, 14 and 16 Oct. 1891, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 3; Eugen Würzburger, "Die Wahlen für die Zweite Kammer der Ständeversammlung von 1869 bis 1896," *Zeitschrift des K. Sächsischen Statistischen Landesamtes* (Dresden) 51, no. 1 (1905): 2.

the Landtag, the 15 SPD deputies gradually disappeared until none were left in 1901.

Against this patently unfair franchise, the Saxon SPD initially mounted only mute protests. Although contemporaries were fully aware of the futility of voting in the third class, Saxon socialists were hamstrung by deep disagreements over whether Landtag deputies should resign their seats in protest and whether their party should boycott the new system.¹⁶ It was not until 1900 that participation was formally recommended for SPD voters in *all* states with three-class franchises, and not until Landtag elections in the autumn of 1903 that this policy was fully implemented in Prussia and Saxony. In the meantime, national attention had been focused on Saxony when the Reichstag elections of June 1903 produced socialist victories in 22 of 23 Saxon constituencies, with 59 percent of the popular vote cast for socialist candidates.¹⁷

How did the Saxon *Ordnungsparteien* react to the initial disarray in socialist ranks? Certainly no one could have predicted that it would be the National Liberals, not the SPD, who would begin the process leading to a second revision of the Landtag franchise. Conservatives, National Liberals, and government officials all expressed considerable relief when the Landtag election campaigns of 1897 and 1899 provoked no mass demonstrations against the new franchise. They agreed that the new electoral law was doing exactly what it had been designed to do: prevent the entry of socialists into the lower house and thereby allow Saxon parliamentary life to continue in an "orderly" and "objective" fashion. Indeed, things were going so well that by 1899 the Saxon interior minister actually hoped that the SPD would retain "a few" seats in the Landtag, so that the new franchise would not appear too reactionary.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the Prussian envoy to Saxony, Count Karl von Dönhoff, entertained serious doubts about how well anti-socialism

16. See the articles on "Landtagswahlbeteiligung" and "Sächsisches Wahlrecht" in Wilhelm Schröder, ed., *Handbuch der sozialdemokratischen Parteitage von 1863 bis 1909* (Munich, 1910), 257–71 and 506–8; Dieter Fricke, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung 1869 bis 1917*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1987), 2:765f.; and Eduard Bernstein, "Die Sozialdemokratie und das neue Landtagswahlssystem in Sachsen," *Neue Zeit* 14 (1895–96), Bd. ii, no. 32: 181–88.

17. These and other percentages in this paper have been rounded.

18. Dönhoff to Chancellor Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 25 Oct. 1897, PA AA Bonn, Deutschland Nr. 125 ("Reichstagswahlen"), Nr. 3, Bd. 14, referring to Interior Minister Georg von Metzsch-Reichenbach; see also Dönhoff to Hohenlohe, 10 Apr., 22 and 30 Sept., 9 and 13 Oct., 8, 11, and 22 Nov. 1897; and Count Georg von Wedel (Kgl. Pr. Legations-Sekretär in Dresden) to Hohenlohe, 28 Sept. 1899, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 5.

would play in individual Saxon constituencies during Reichstag elections. Contributing to his skepticism was the acrimonious Landtag session of 1897–98, when party antagonisms became more strident than at any time in the previous twenty years.¹⁹ Even a month before the Reichstag elections of June 1898, the *bürgerlich* parties in Saxony—as elsewhere in the Reich—lacked a clear election slogan. Instead, their effort was being undermined by internal bickering, as Dönhoff reported to Chancellor Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst:

As if there existed no common enemy . . . , the *bürgerlich* parties are losing precious time in fruitless squabbles. The peculiarity of the German character, perversely insisting on exceptional positions and independent opinions, is coming to the fore here with ultimately dangerous consequences. Groups are breaking away from the *Kartell* . . . in order to represent their special views and to nominate their own candidates.

Thus the National Liberal *Reichsverein* in Dresden refused to endorse the *Kartell*; it nominated a counter-candidate in Dresden-Neustadt, which eventually fell to the SPD. Catholic clerics at the royal court allegedly helped organize the nomination of six Center Party “test candidates.” And the National Socials affiliated with Friedrich Naumann—like the anti-Semites and members of the Agrarian League (BdL)—were launching independent candidates of their own.

After the elections, the opponents of socialism tried to interpret the results positively. Those who worried about the long-term mobilization of Saxon voters could be pleased that the turnout at the polls dipped significantly from the elections of 1890 and 1893. The proportion of votes cast for German Radicals and anti-Semites also dropped sharply. But the SPD’s share of the overall vote rose, and its Saxon contingent in the Reichstag increased from 7 to 11 deputies. Moreover, it was clear that the Radicals and the anti-Semites—who were shut out from the *Kartell*—had paved the way for decisive SPD victories in a number of constituencies, even where the *Ordnungsparteien* had been able to agree on a joint candidate. Dönhoff concurred with the Conservatives that “the anti-Semites, with their demagogic intrigues, are ploughing the furrows in which social democracy casts its seed.”²⁰

19. Dönhoff to Hohenlohe, 21 Mar. 1898, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 5; Dönhoff to Hohenlohe, 26 May 1898, PA AA Bonn, Deutschland Nr. 125, Nr. 3, Bd. 15.

20. See Eugen Würzburger, “Die Wahlen zum Deutschen Reichstag im Königreich Sachsen von 1871 bis 1907,” *Zeitschrift des K. Sächsischen Statistischen Landesamtes* 54, no. 2 (1908): 171–80; Dönhoff to Hohenlohe, 10 July 1898, PA AA Bonn, Deutschland Nr. 125, Nr. 3, Bd. 15.

Perhaps the most noteworthy change of all was the beginning of a National Liberal renaissance. Having polled just 8 percent of the popular vote in 1893, the National Liberals now registered almost 15 percent, and they elected four deputies in place of their previous two. Nonetheless, the NLP was hardly likely to be satisfied with this result. Many of the votes it received were cast for *Kartell* candidates in constituencies where there was little hope of unseating an SPD incumbent, and this likely contributed to the National Liberals' sense of frustration on other issues.

In the half-decade between the Reichstag elections of 1898 and 1903, a complex web of factors further splintered the Saxon *Kartell*, partially freeing the National Liberals from their client relationship with the Conservatives and transforming them into serious contenders for power. The worsening economic climate in Saxony was perhaps the most important of these factors. Even though many National Liberal supporters suffered acutely—the financial community was largely discredited in 1901, and small businesses suffered heavy tax burdens²¹—it was their lack of political influence that grated most. When National Liberals complained about the government's finance policy, this reflected their deeper thirst for social acceptance and political power concomitant with their economic *Leistung*. Some National Liberals with ties to small-scale industry ascribed the sharp economic downturn after 1900 to the influence of large industrial cartels. But agrarian Conservatives soon became the principal target. If there was little about the protectionist and fanatically anti-labor stance of the Central Association of German Industrialists (Cvdl) that elicited admiration from Saxony's National Liberals, they saw nothing at all auspicious in the rise of the agrarian movement. They objected to the Agrarian League's anti-governmental demagoguery—frequently written by Georg Oertel, editor of the BdL's *Deutsche Tageszeitung* and a close associate of Mehnert's—and they were repelled by the BdL's Prussian orientation

21. Arthur Schulze, *Die Bankkatastrophen in Sachsen im Jahre 1901* (Tübingen, 1903), 126ff.; Karl Vogel, "Die Besteuerung des Grossbetriebs im Kleinhandel im Königreich Sachsen" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Giessen, 1903), esp. 22ff.; Otto Richter, *Geschichte der Stadt Dresden in den Jahren 1871 bis 1902*, 2d ed. (Dresden, 1904), 164ff.; *Mittheilungen für die Vertrauensmänner der National-liberale Partei* 14, no. 2 (Sonderbeilage) [1902], "Generalversammlung des Nationalliberalen Vereins für das Königreich Sachsen" (I am grateful to Larry Eugene Jones for providing me with a copy of this report); and Dönhoff's reports to Bülow in 1901–1903 in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 53 ("Die Finanzen des Königreichs Sachsen"), Bd. 4.

and its refusal to endorse navalism or imperialism.²² Compounding this sense of antagonism were five full years of intense public debate about agricultural and industrial tariffs. From the resolution of this issue by national leaders who supported the so-called Bülow tariffs in December 1902, most adherents of the Saxon NLP expected no benefit whatsoever.

Around the same time but for less explicable reasons, Saxon Conservatives also went on the warpath. Certainly the temptation was great to flex their muscle in the Landtag, for with each successive election the Conservative Party moved closer to achieving the two-thirds majority necessary to implement constitutional change. Yet this ascendancy also exposed the gap that had long existed between the agrarian and industrial wings of the Conservative *Landesverein*. Saxon Conservatives became hypersensitive to charges that they represented one-sided economic interests: in 1899, for example, they hurriedly disavowed their Prussian comrades who, under pressure from the Agrarian League, refused to bow to the will of the Kaiser and permit construction of the *Mittelland* canal.²³ Protesting too much, wrote Dönhoff, the Saxon Conservatives were merely trying to paper over deep cleavages within their party, adding that Conservative industrialists might defect if they realized that the NLP better represented their economic interests.²⁴

The Conservative leader, Paul Mehnert, also seemed determined to seek confrontation with the government at every turn. As early as November 1899, shortly after Mehnert was elected president of the Saxon lower house, the Prussian envoy marked a change in his manner. Dönhoff wondered whether “parliamentary success has gone to the head of this relatively young man”; on the other hand, since Mehnert’s campaign against the socialists had gone so well since 1896, “perhaps he feels the need to satisfy his lust for battle in other ways.”

22. Donald Warren, Jr., *The Red Kingdom of Saxony* (The Hague, 1964), 13ff., 33ff.; Dönhoff to Hohenlohe, 31 Jan. 1897, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 48 (“Allgemeine Angelegenheiten des Königreichs Sachsen”), Bd. 18; and Wedel to Bülow, 19 Sept. 1902, *ibid.*, Bd. 19.

23. Cf. J. Retallack, “Conservatives *contra* Chancellor: Official Responses to the Spectre of Conservative Demagoguery from Bismarck to Bülow,” *Canadian Journal of History* 20, no. 2 (1985): 218ff.

24. Dönhoff to Bülow, 29 Oct. 1904, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 7; Hugo Opitz-Treuen, “Soll die Industrie konservativ oder liberal sein,” *Konservative Monatschrift* 63 (1906): 1125–34; and the Saxon NLP’s broadside, *Die “Industriefreundlichkeit” der Konservativen* (Leipzig, 1914), 3–13.

In any case, since the elections of 1901 had brought the Conservatives their two-thirds majority in the Landtag,²⁵ when Mehnert focused his attack on the fiscal mismanagement of Saxon railroads in early 1902, he provoked a ministerial crisis and toppled Saxon Finance Minister Werner von Watzdorf. The timing was especially critical, not only because King Albert died in June 1902 but also because Mehnert chaired a Joint Committee on Administration of the State Debt which the following month inaugurated a discriminatory income tax favorable to landowners. Although meant to pull the state from the brink of bankruptcy, this bill included a highly controversial clause exempting the working capital invested in agricultural enterprises from an income tax that encompassed other forms of property. This legislation finally convinced the majority of National Liberals that industry, trade, and commerce were being unfairly taxed, and further poisoned their relations with the Conservatives.²⁶

It was in this critical conjuncture of 1902–3, then — when the Saxon economy bottomed out, when tariff debates were drawing attention to the political representation of economic interests, and when anti-socialist solidarity was about to face the acid test of Reichstag elections — that National Liberals in Saxony first began to consider seriously how they would overcome their traditional political subservience. For a time they were inadvertently aided by Conservatives who refused to be stirred from their complacent assumptions that socialists would never again invade the lower house and that industrialists should remain underrepresented in the upper. Residues of complacency in both the National Liberal and Conservative camps evaporated briefly in June 1903 when the Saxon SPD scored its stunning Reichstag victory. But now, as the contest grew earnest, the rules of the game had become more contentious than ever.

III

The course of franchise reform in Saxony after June 1903 was in part determined by the very different conclusions the Conservatives, the National Liberals, and the government drew from the SPD's near-

25. It was at this point that Dönhoff labelled the Saxon Landtag "the most conservative of all German parliaments." See n. 13, above.

26. Warren, *Red Kingdom*, 35f.; Dönhoff to Bülow, 22 and 31 May 1902, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 53, Bd. 4; Nationalliberale Partei, *Mittheilungen* [1902], "Generalversammlung," E–F.

sweep of Saxon constituencies.²⁷ Mehnert and the Conservatives blamed everyone but themselves for the rout. They refused to acknowledge the agitational benefits the new Landtag franchise had provided the reinigorated SPD, and they dismissed the impact of other concrete economic and political issues on the election outcome.²⁸ Too few suitable candidates had agreed to be nominated, Mehnert claimed, because men of education and breeding did not wish to subject themselves to the sort of abuse hurled by SPD Reichstag deputies during the final phase of the 1902 tariff debates. Competing *bürgerlich* candidacies were dismissed by Mehnert as inconsequential to the result. Instead he pointed to the government's recent cooperation with the Catholic Center Party in the Reichstag; this, he believed, had created much bad feeling in Saxony because anti-Catholic sentiment had reached a fever pitch in 1902 when the Saxon crown princess eloped under alleged papal involvement. That affair, Mehnert added, had severely damaged the reputation of the monarchy in Saxony. Mehnert claimed, lastly, that the new Saxon finance minister²⁹ had committed a grievous political error by announcing an unpopular 25 percent surtax on incomes shortly before the elections.

Considered together, these factors helped to assuage the political conscience of a man who wanted to believe that the SPD's victory was merely an expression of the voters' bad temper and, thus, could be ascribed to economic, not political, grievances. With this logic Mehnert convinced himself that no change in Conservative Party policy was required—though he also took the prudent step of applying immediately to the Saxon government for funds to establish a new

27. Nationally, Chancellor Bülow had wished to conduct the Reichstag campaign against *both* the SPD and the Agrarian League, whom he described in a secret circular as "the two extreme parties." When Dönhoff explained why a campaign against the BdL in Saxony would destroy the *Kartell* agreement, Bülow concurred that Saxony was a special case. Nonetheless, Saxon ministers operated at cross-purposes with Bülow when they worked "behind the scenes" to undermine support for BdL candidates. See Bülow's circular ("Ganz geheim!") to Prussian envoys dated 18 May 1903; Dönhoff's reply ("Geheim!") of 25 May 1903; and Bülow's reply ("Geheim") of 26 May 1903, in PA AA Bonn, Deutschland Nr. 125, Nr. 8, Bd. 16.

28. The following is based on Mehnert to Bülow, 17 June 1903, and reply, n.d. [June 1903], in Bundesarchiv Koblenz (hereafter BAK), R43F (Reichskanzleiakten), Nr. 1792 (I am grateful to Brett Fairbairn for providing me with notes taken from this correspondence); Dönhoff to Bülow, 1 Mar., 25 and 31 May, 3, 9, 11, 15, and 18 June 1903, in PA AA Bonn, Deutschland Nr. 125, Nr. 3, Bd. 16; Dönhoff to Bülow, 7 June, 2 July, 19 Sept. 1903, and Wedel to Bülow, 15 July 1903, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6.

29. Konrad Wilhelm von Rümer was much hated by the National Liberals during his tenure as finance minister (1902–10) and as chairman of the Saxon ministry (1906–10).

Conservative newspaper in case public opinion shifted further to the left in the future.³⁰ In this Mehnert was merely anticipating his national party colleagues, who later in the year secretly petitioned Bülow to take the initiative to “stem the tide” of socialism.³¹ But the Reichstag debacle in June 1903 convinced Mehnert more firmly than ever that the 1896 Landtag franchise should be retained. Without the three-class franchise, he wrote to Bülow, the Landtag elections scheduled for the autumn of 1903 would yield an SPD majority that could never again be overcome through constitutional means.

Although Mehnert had little trouble finding scapegoats, he did not mention some other important factors that were identified in the post-election analysis of the Prussian envoy. Dönhoff emphasized in his report to Bülow that, as in 1898, the Saxon *Ordnungsparteien* were largely responsible for their own defeat. The outdated practices of *Honoratiorenpolitik* lived on in Saxony, he noted, in the form of an “internally divided [*zerrissene*], loosely organized group of *bürgerlich* parties who are occasionally brought together for the purposes of elections.” The inability of local party bosses to forge constituency-level alliances was one important consequence of this. Indeed, the search for candidates became so desperate that the election agreement among the *Ordnungsparteien* had often been abandoned and fresh faces rushed into threatened constituencies, even though recourse to this solution almost invariably elicited mutual recriminations from constituency *Vereine* and diminished support for the eventual nominee. And of course the SPD’s determination to highlight the disparities between the Reichstag and Landtag franchises produced a supreme effort that could not be matched by the *bürgerlich* parties. While the SPD had a firm agitational plan, healthy finances, suitable candidates, and efficient organization, Dönhoff reported that among the *bürgerlich* parties “one finds insufficient candidates, indecisiveness, indifference, unwillingness to sacrifice with regard to campaign contributions, [and] insubordination and obstinacy among small party groups.” To this could be added the continued arrogance and lack of popular appeal of *Kartell*

30. Wedel to Bülow, 13 Aug. 1903, and other correspondence in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 50 (“Die sächsische Presse”), Bd. 4.

31. Count Udo zu Stolberg-Wernigerode to Bülow, 27 Dec. 1903, in BAK, NL Bülow, Nr. 107, Bl. 97ff.; reply, 7 Jan. 1904, in BAK, R43F, Nr. 2005 (“Mittellandkanal”), Bl. 127ff. (excerpt), and BAK, R43F, Nr. 1391/5 (“Konservative Parteien”), Bl. 41ff.

candidates themselves, and the Conservatives' miscalculation that they could rely on their own newspapers to rebut SPD propaganda.

While Mehnert and the Conservatives were blind to the lessons to be learned from June 1903, the Saxon government reacted quite differently. At this time Saxony's state ministry was firmly under the control of Georg von Metzsch-Reichenbach. Metzsch was already well known for his staunchly conservative views: coming from old Vogtland nobility, it was once said that he wished to rule Saxony as a large *Rittergut*.³² As minister of the interior after 1891, Metzsch had willingly acceded to the wishes of Mehnert's *Kartell* in implementing the three-class franchise in 1896, and as foreign minister (1891–1906) he rarely opposed Prussian wishes in the Bundesrat. Yet on 10 July 1903, as chairman of the Saxon state ministry (1901–6), Metzsch presided over a meeting that approved franchise reform in principle. Four days later—Metzsch's sixty-seventh birthday and Bastille Day in France—the government made a stunning announcement. The franchise law of March 1896, it declared, had had “the unintended effect of reducing the influence of those delegates elected by the third voting class on the selection of deputies, in a manner not in accordance with the principles of fairness.”³³ To begin the process of reform, the government declared that it would solicit the views of a forum of “experts,” due to convene in late August.

The furor caused by this announcement was entirely predictable. More interesting is the vehemence with which the government claimed that its initiative of 14 July was *not* a consequence of the Reichstag elections barely a month earlier. Metzsch asserted both publicly and privately that the government had begun its preparations in 1902. This point became a bone of contention between the government and the Conservatives, for three reasons. First, while the Conservatives continued to believe that the Landtag franchise was an essential bulwark against the socialist threat, the government was now willing to go on record to say that it had *always* regarded the 1896 three-class franchise as neither perfect nor immutable. Although Metzsch had provided

32. Blaschke, “Königreich Sachsen,” 98, 289. Saxony did not have a Minister-President; the governmental leader was designated Vorsitzender des Gesamtministeriums. Metzsch was given the title Count in 1916.

33. Dönhoff to Bülow, 2 July and 19 Sept. 1903, and Wedel to Bülow, 15 July 1903, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6; see also Oppe, “Reform,” 378; Diersche, “Landtagswahlrecht,” 213ff.

few hints that he was contemplating such a dramatic reversal of policy before July 1903, he appears to have recognized the need for reform well before that date. Retrospectively, in recounting for Dönhoff his first audience with King Georg after his ascension to the throne in June 1902, Metzsch provided what is probably the best explanation we have for the government's change of heart on the franchise question:³⁴

After [I] told him that statistics gathered under the present franchise indicated that 80 percent of voters have no influence on the choice of deputies and are therefore unrepresented in the Landtag—which contravenes principles of fairness—also that among this 80 percent are found not only social democrats but also many clergy, teachers, lower and middle-ranking officials, etc., who are embittered because of this disadvantage [*Zurücksetzung*]; and finally, that as a result of these circumstances, the Reichstag has been made into a forum for discussing the domestic political affairs of Saxony, which properly belong only in the Landtag—the king agreed that the government should proceed with electoral reform.

Secondly, Mehnert believed Metzsch had been politically negligent in not declaring his intentions before the Reichstag vote. On the one hand, the timing of reform made it appear that the SPD victory in June 1903 had been instrumental in initiating change. Thus the Conservative press heaped scorn on the Saxon ministry which it claimed had been moved to action only through “fear” and “weakness.” On the other hand, Mehnert believed that the outcome of the elections would have been much more favorable if the Saxon electorate had known beforehand that a revision of the Landtag franchise was already being prepared in government circles. Metzsch discounted this argument, though Bülow appears to have been less certain. In any case, the third point of conflict was the wish of both Conservatives and the government to be seen as the first to concede the need for franchise reform. Metzsch was very deliberate in refusing to inform Mehnert about the government's plans until just a few days before the announcement of 14 July, fearing that Mehnert would “steal his thunder.” He thereby illustrated his determination to undermine the Conservatives' dominant position in the Landtag, in order, as he put it, to address the “galling unfairness” of the Landtag franchise. But then Metzsch told a surprised Dönhoff that he intended to resign, for two reasons. First, the current domestic situation in Saxony evoked what

34. Dönhoff to Bülow, 19 Sept. 1903, PA AA Bohn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6.

Metzsch referred to as “deep disgust” (*tiefen degout*). Second, he had wearied of doing battle with a man, Mehnert, who was “demagogically inclined,” whose tactics were “shrewd and ruthless,” and who followed “the dictates of his personal vanity.” When Dönhoff conveyed these remarks to Bülow, he predicted sadly but with insight that Mehnert would emerge victorious from this “power struggle” with Metzsch.

What of the National Liberals? Where did they stand in this test of wills between the man contemporaries called “Paul I, the uncrowned king of Saxony” and the legitimate first servant of the crown? With some oversimplification one can say that their political reasoning ran remarkably parallel to that of the Saxon government. Just as the technocrats who were busy drawing up franchise reform proposals in the Saxon interior ministry believed that the representation of economic interests belonged in any blueprint for Saxony’s future electoral system, important members of the Saxon NLP now recognized that political power and economic power devolved jointly toward those who could mount effective lobbies at the locus of decision-making in the state. Thus 1902 witnessed the first concrete action of a handful of Saxon businessmen, mainly in Dresden and Leipzig, who recruited Gustav Stresemann—the later National Liberal leader and Weimar statesman—to form the Association of Saxon Industrialists (*Verband Sächsischer Industrieller* or VSI) in order to press their special economic interests. As another symptom of these men’s impatience, the Saxon wing of the NLP disavowed the national party’s accommodation with Bülow and the Conservatives over tariffs in late 1902.³⁵ Within only a couple of years, Stresemann and the 4,000 businessmen organized in his new lobby exercised direct influence over the left (and younger) wing of the Saxon National Liberal Party.³⁶ Concentrating every effort on disengaging the National Liberal Landtag caucus from Mehnert and the Conservatives, they tried to convince their party leaders, first, that a new system of selecting members to both houses of parliament was the *conditio sine qua non* for the further blossoming of industry in Saxony; and second, that a ruthlessly anti-labor and anti-reform policy was no longer viable in the “red kingdom.”

Between 1896 and 1903, National Liberals had discussed franchise

35. Warren, *Red Kingdom*, 38.

36. See Dönhoff to Bülow, 1 July 1905, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 48, Bd. 20; Warren, *Red Kingdom*, 36ff., 52ff., and passim.

reform for the lower house only occasionally. Those deputies interested in the question at all preferred to snipe away at the inequitable electoral balance between Saxony's 37 urban and 45 rural constituencies. But immediately after the Reichstag elections of 1903, National Liberal newspapers began to echo the sentiments of Hans Delbrück, who wrote in his influential *Preussische Jahrbücher* that the reentry of social democrats into the Saxon Landtag would provide crucial "relief" in future Reichstag elections.³⁷ In a general assembly of the Saxon NLP in early September, the party leadership accepted an anti-*Kartell* platform which included demands for a redistribution of rural and urban Landtag seats and for a new franchise based on a system of plural voting (whereby certain privileged voters would be given extra ballots). Metzsch, for one, was not convinced that the National Liberals wanted a genuine reform. Shortly thereafter, however, in the final days of the autumn Landtag campaign, Dönhoff noted "a turning-away of liberals of all shades from the Conservatives," adding that they were attacking Conservative candidates in Dresden and Leipzig with "special vehemence." Although Dönhoff's fear that one of these constituencies would go "red" proved unfounded, the political trickery used by the National Liberals to win the Dresden seat from the Conservatives did nothing to ease tensions between them.³⁸ On the opening day of the new session, the Conservatives excluded liberal deputies from the five standing committees of the lower house.

IV

The forum of "experts" that met to discuss franchise reform did not convene, perhaps wisely, until after the Landtag campaign was completed in October 1903. Among this group the government precirculated a draft *Denkschrift* which found virtually no support. However, the contradictory views expressed by the participants offered no opportunity for consensus either, so in the end the government simply published its *Denkschrift* in slightly revised form on 31 December 1903.³⁹

In a long preamble to this document and in Metzsch's defense of his

37. *Preussische Jahrbücher* (hereafter *Pr Jbb*) 113, no. 3 (1903): 374.

38. Dönhoff to Bülow, 19 and 26 Sept. 1903, 2, 17, 21, 23 and 30 Oct., PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6.

39. Dönhoff to Bülow, 30 Oct. 1903, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6; "Dekret vom 31. Dezember 1903," excerpted in Pache, *Geschichte*, 30f.

proposals in the Landtag the following February, the government reiterated its view that the franchise law of 1896 had had many unanticipated and undesirable consequences. The most compelling arguments for reform, it claimed, included the need to address recent changes in Saxony's tax structure, the unfair distribution of rural and urban seats, the devaluation of votes cast in the third voting class, and the invidious system of indirect balloting (first for delegates, then for Landtag candidates themselves). The *Denkschrift* addressed various proposals for reform that had already been put forward, and noted that virtually none of these had recommended either the preservation of the old franchise or the introduction of public (i.e., non-secret) balloting. The government rejected the universal, equal franchise, because it would surrender the lower house to the SPD. But neither did it favor a franchise wherein the principle of universality was mitigated by an electoral *Zensus*: a low tax threshold for enfranchisement, it argued, would not prevent the entry of social democrats into parliament, while a high one would exclude many Saxons who were currently enfranchised, possibly including a large proportion of the *Mittelstand*. Similar doubts were expressed about raising the age of enfranchisement from 25 to 30. Mandatory voting was rejected on two grounds: the bureaucracy necessary to enforce it would be unwieldy and costly, and if the government punished all citizens who failed to vote, it would drive many supporters of the state into the arms of the SPD. Proportional representation was rejected with the argument that it served only to augment the negative influence of "party interests" in parliament. So was the selection of deputies exclusively through local councils, in part because municipalities allegedly still retained a "non-partisan" style of politics and in part because this would retain the undesirable system of two-tier balloting.⁴⁰ Much the same arguments were used against a system whereby all Landtag deputies would be elected on the basis of occupational estates (*Berufsstände*). A similar system had led to difficulties for local elections in Chemnitz, and the government argued that it would be impossible to divide a much larger population fairly or logically into occupational

40. Discriminatory franchises introduced in Leipzig (1894), Chemnitz (1898), and Dresden (1905), together with the growing influence of parties and interest groups in municipal elections, showed the hollowness of the first claim. See *Verein für Socialpolitik*, ed., *Verfassung und Verwaltungsorganisation der Städte*, 4/1, *Königreich Sachsen* (Leipzig, 1905); and the special supplements to *Kommunale Praxis*, entitled *Sächsische Gemeinde-Politik*, which appeared in 1905.

estates. Lastly, a system of plural voting was rejected, whereby certain voters would receive extra ballots on the basis of education, military service, ownership of property, age, and other criteria. Referring to academic studies and to a similar system recently introduced in Belgium, the *Denkschrift* noted that the provision of only one or two extra ballots would not have the desired effect of preventing socialists from dominating the Landtag, while a large number of extra ballots would—like a high tax threshold—continue to make the electoral influence of the lower classes “illusory.”

In sum, although Metzsch’s ministry rejected universal, equal, direct, and secret voting, and thereby amply illustrated its continuing opposition to the principle of democracy, its proposals nonetheless made a number of tangible concessions to the cause of electoral fairness. In fact, the draft *Denkschrift* it had circulated in October included other “obeisances” (*Verbeugungen*) to the SPD. But these were omitted from the published document when Mehnert intervened and demanded their deletion.⁴¹

How did the government intend to eliminate the worst features of the 1896 franchise and yet avoid the pitfalls inherent in these alternatives? It proposed a hybrid electoral system, according to which 48 deputies would be elected through direct three-class voting (*Abteilungswahlen*) with slight preferment for those possessing a certain level of education and those possessing taxable property; another 35 deputies would be elected by voting according to occupational estates (*berufsständige Wahlen*). For the election of the 48 deputies through class-based elections, the state would be divided into 16 constituencies for each of the three voting divisions, eliminating the former distinction between urban and rural constituencies. The estate-bound election of 35 deputies, on the other hand, foresaw the selection of 15 representatives of agriculture, 10 representatives of trade and industry, and 10 representatives of small business and crafts (*Kleinhandel, Handwerk, Kleingewerb*).

The proposals included in the *Denkschrift* of December 1903 bore so little resemblance to the franchise actually enacted in 1909 that there is no need to chronicle the reactions to them or the parliamentary battle that ensued in any detail.⁴² The left-liberal *Dresdner Zeitung* was fairly

41. Dönhoff to Bülow, 10 Jan. 1904, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60. Bd. 6.

42. See Pache, *Geschichte*, 16ff. and 30ff.; Oppe, “Reform,” 380–82; Diersch, “Landtagswahlrecht,” 220ff. and 230ff.; on motions for reform of the upper house in December 1903, see Dönhoff to Bülow, 21 Dec. 1903 and attachments; on his discussion with Mehnert, Dönhoff

typical in calling this reform “the weakest and worst concoction that the government could possibly have proposed.” The Conservative onslaught was led by Hugo Opitz-Treuen, a leading industrialist in the Conservative *Landesverein* and Mehnert’s right-hand man in the Landtag caucus. Opitz complained that the full renewal of the Landtag in each election promised only to heat up, not cool down, passions aroused by “demagogues” and “professionals” in the age of mass politics. Conservatives believed as well that in addition to the social democrats who were expected to win all 16 constituencies allocated to the third voting class, more would be elected either through the occupational elections or in the second voting class, where, Opitz claimed, elements of the *Mittelstand* would not be able to withstand SPD “terrorism.” The National Liberals made the same argument, estimating that the government’s proposal would result in socialists winning 25 seats (roughly one-third of the total) in the new Landtag. Curiously, neither they nor the Conservatives asked the government directly whether it had made the same calculations itself. In any case the National Liberals were most interested in pushing for plural voting, since they believed that their roots in the *Bildungs- und Besitzbürgertum* would be conducive to electoral victories under such a system. The Radicals preferred either the universal franchise or a return to the franchise of 1868 with a higher tax threshold, and an anti-Semitic deputy spoke in favor of mandatory voting.

From lengthy discussions in committee—described by Metzsch as a “comedy”—emerged consensus on only two points. First, it became clear that an electoral system based on occupational estates would never win majority approval in the Landtag. Second, both the National Liberal minority and the Conservative majority favored plural voting in principle, though the government continued to reject it. The problem was, of course, that each political group wanted a different ranking of the criteria according to which extra ballots would be allocated. Some wanted preferment to be calculated on the basis of taxes paid to the state, while others favored such criteria as age, education, ownership of property, military duty (with distinctions between ranks), other “practical experience,” family situation (single, married, widower, number of children), number of employees, and service in

to Bülow, 10 Jan. 1904; on press reactions to the *Denkschrift* of 31 Dec. 1903, Dönhoff to Bülow, 8, 11, 17, 31 Jan. 1904; and on the legislative battle, Dönhoff to Bülow, 5 Feb. 1904, all in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 6. See also Dönhoff to Bülow, 29 Apr., 21 May 1904, *ibid.*, Bd. 7.

public or voluntary office. To complicate matters further, while some foresaw as many as seven supplementary ballots, others insisted on designing the new system on the basis of full, half, one-third, and one-quarter votes. It is not difficult to imagine the fruitless debates to which such proposals gave rise. Partly because so little was accomplished, when the government's *Denkschrift* was rejected by the Landtag on 28 April 1904 Mehnert crowed to Dönhoff that he had carried the day (Metzsch was "not in a rosy mood"). But there was good reason to describe this Conservative victory as Pyrrhic, for two positive signs indicated that the issue of electoral reform was anything but dead. The first was the defection of about 20 pro-business Conservatives from their caucus leaders on this and a number of other issues debated during the session. The second was a resolution, passed by a vote of 43 to 30 and based on the National Liberals' minority committee report, requesting the government to submit new proposals for consideration in the next session. The deputies also charged the government—and for this historians can be thankful—with the task of gathering more comprehensive and reliable statistics to permit the expert consideration of future proposals.

Under Saxony's constitution, new Landtag sessions convened only every second autumn, that is, shortly after each election. Therefore there was a forced hiatus in discussion of franchise reform between May 1904 and November 1905. Nevertheless, a full year before the Landtag elections scheduled for October 1905, Dönhoff noted that businessmen within the Saxon NLP were more alienated than ever from the Conservatives, despite the continuing efforts of Opitz and other industrialists to solicit their support.⁴³ Around the same time, the Saxon NLP announced that its electoral *Kartell* with the Conservatives was dead. Thus in March 1905 all the parties had selected most of their candidates—far earlier than usual—and instead of one or two *bürgerlich* candidates, three, four, and sometimes more were contesting each seat. As Dönhoff followed the campaign, it became clear that the two main *bürgerlich* parties were now bitter rivals in most of the 29 constituencies being contested.

Yet conflicts seething *within* National Liberal ranks continued to confuse the situation through 1905—so much so that one must be

43. For this and the following, see Dönhoff to Bülow, 29 Oct. and 25 Nov. 1904, and 13 Mar., 23 May, 3 June, 19 Sept., and 3, 4, 26 Oct. 1905, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 7.

careful not to overestimate either the speed or the completeness of the National Liberal rejuvenation. During the Landtag campaign, three astute observers—Dönhoff, Mehnert, and the editor of the *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung*, Hans Block—all believed that the National Liberals were a long way from being the defenders of political principle to which they laid claim. According to Dönhoff, Stresemann and the Young National Liberals in Saxony had brought to a halt a fundamental convergence of interests between National Liberals and Conservatives over the previous twenty years. During that time the National Liberals had become more and more inclined to defend their political and economic accomplishments in the Landtag, while the Conservatives had been willing to accommodate liberal interests, especially in the purely economic sphere.⁴⁴ Yet the Young National Liberals, Dönhoff claimed, were uncertain of their own goals. Even the Association of Saxon Industrialists did not seem to be following an entirely consistent line—for example, in endorsing candidates from all parties as long as they pledged to support business interests. This lack of consistency could be ascribed in part to Mehnert's secret machinations: the Conservative leader confided to Dönhoff that a conservative mole had been infiltrated into the VSI's leadership group, managing to attain the position of second vice-president.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Dönhoff doubted whether the NLP's election manifesto would succeed in winning over the "old-National Liberal" faction within the party, for these men continued to regard cooperation with the Conservatives as preferable to a "general middle-party liberalism."

Exactly the same doubts were voiced a few weeks before the autumn 1905 elections by Hans Block, writing in the socialist *Neue Zeit*.⁴⁶ Block claimed that the National Liberals' "pompously announced challenge" to the Conservatives had so far amounted to nothing, because constituency *Vereine* had been unable to mount independent campaigns. The "murderous slaughter of Saxon agrarianism," Block wrote sarcastically, was nothing more than a "gentle scuffle" for a few Landtag seats; in this contest, he added, liberal principles played no part, only the threatened interests of Saxon industry. Block predicted

44. Cf. "Saxonica. III," von einem sächsischen Konservativen, *Grenzboten* 64, no. 1 (1905): 362–64.

45. Dönhoff to Bülow, 13 Mar. 1905, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 7.

46. Hans Block, "Die 'Wiedergeburt' des Liberalismus in Sachsen," *Neue Zeit* 23 (1904–1905), Bd. ii, no. 48: 693–99, and no. 49: 730–35, esp. 697.

that economic self-interest and the continued fear of socialism would eventually bring National Liberals back to Mehnert's *Kartell*, even though purely political demands and the issue of franchise reform might detour them for a time. This prediction was in line with Mehnert's assessment of the situation. He believed that even the Young National Liberals in the Landtag would soon see the value of the *Kartell*—once they discovered that their independence served the interests only of Radicals and social democrats, once the economic climate improved, and once they learned that “positive work” in parliament was possible only in cooperation with the Conservatives.

These assessments were not entirely off the mark. The Landtag elections in October 1905 produced a complete rout of Young National Liberal candidates. While the Conservative caucus dropped by 4 members to 54, the NLP's increased by only 2 members to 24. The anti-Semitic Reform Party and the Radicals each elected 2 deputies, and a single SPD deputy, Hermann Goldstein, reentered the Landtag. As chairman of the Saxon state ministry, Metzsch was happy with this outcome on three counts: Stresemann's group had fallen short of its goal, the Conservative caucus had failed to renew its two-thirds majority, and the election of a social democrat (he hoped) would reduce public pressure for franchise reform. His hopes for a quieter session were also fuelled by a significant improvement in the Saxon economy in 1905. But members of the new Landtag were aware that the SPD's national congress in Jena had recently endorsed the mass strike as a weapon against disfranchisement. And just as the session of 1905/6 opened, they turned one eye to the brewing storm in Russia, where the Tsar's October Manifesto had established a four-class franchise.

v

A number of studies, mainly from a Marxist perspective, have been devoted to the demonstrations by tens of thousands of workers in favor of franchise reform that took place in the streets of Dresden, Leipzig, Chemnitz, and Plauen in November and December 1905.⁴⁷

47. Horst Dörner, “Die ersten Wahlrechtskämpfe der Dresdner Arbeiter unter dem Einfluss der ersten russischen Revolution von 1905 bis 1907,” in *Wissenschaftliche Annalen zur Verbreitung neuer Forschungsergebnisse* 5 (1956): 383–400; Ursula Herrmann, “Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie gegen das Dreiklassenwahlrecht in Sachsen in den Jahren 1905/06,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 3 (1955): 856–83; Dieter Fricke, “Der Aufschwung der Massenkämpfe der deutschen Arbeiterklasse unter dem Einfluss der russischen Revolution von 1905,” *ibid.* 5 (1957): 771–90; Richard W. Reichard, “The German Working Class and the Russian Revolution of

This episode has been discussed in the light of franchise struggles in other parts of Germany and Europe at this time—in Russia, Vienna, Prague, Hamburg, Braunschweig, Lippe, Lübeck, and elsewhere. To date, however, the reasons for the Saxon ministry's dilatory handling of franchise reform at this critical juncture and its excessive response to the socialist challenge in the streets have never been adequately explained.

Acrimony from the election campaign carried over to the new session of the Saxon Landtag that began in late October 1905. Shortly before parliament opened, Stresemann was warned by one of his like-minded colleagues in the NLP's Landtag caucus, Wilhelm Vogel, that many old National Liberals intended to reconcile their differences with Conservatives and abandon franchise reform. The Conservative leaders hoped to speed this process when they invited NLP deputies back onto the Landtag's standing committees, when they accused National Liberals of fomenting revolution through their own reform proposals, and when they charged that National Liberals in Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden—where direct, equal, and secret franchises had been granted recently—were guilty of forming political alliances with the “party of revolution.”⁴⁸

Although Stresemann's estimate that only half of the 24 National Liberal deputies were committed to reform did not promise favorable results, both the Radicals and the NLP interpellated the government on 25 October 1905, asking whether it planned to introduce franchise legislation in the current session. A week after the first large socialist demonstrations, on 27 November, Metzsch blandly told the house that he had no new plan. He claimed that statistical studies had not yet been completed—even though the director of Saxony's statistical office had actually presented him with scenarios based on a variety of franchise laws almost eighteen months earlier.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Metzsch declared that the government saw no greater merit now than

1905,” *Journal of Central European Affairs* 13, no. 2 (1953): 136–53; Leo Stern, ed., *Die Auswirkungen der ersten russischen Revolution von 1905–1907 auf Deutschland* (Berlin, 1956), 2/II:261–67.

48. Dönhoff to Bülow, 29 Nov. 1905, PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 7, also for parts of the following two paragraphs; Warren, *Red Kingdom*, 65ff.; and Diersch, “Landtagswahlrecht,” 244f.

49. Dr. Würzburger to the Saxon interior ministry, 29 Aug. 1904, copy in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 7. This analysis was based on twelve selected Prussian Landtag constituencies deemed to bear a close resemblance to Saxon constituencies in terms of social and occupational structure.

it had two years earlier in electoral systems based on plural voting, mandatory voting, or proportional representation. Here, too, he based his remarks on confidential statistical analysis which indicated that none of these electoral systems would reduce the proportion of votes cast for socialists by more than about one-fifth or one-sixth over a system based on the universal franchise. Although National Liberals and Conservatives had fastened on plural voting as the most feasible basis for franchise reform, Metzsch declared that extra ballots for older voters would not significantly assist the *bürgerlich* parties at the polls. Neither would a system whereby wealthier voters received one or two extra ballots, while extra ballots awarded on the basis of educational achievement would affect only 41,000 voters.

Metzsch confided to Dönhoff after the day's proceedings on 27 November that his speech, though unavoidable, would probably "bring the blood of the German worker to the boil." On the evening of 3 December he witnessed the truth of his remarks in person, as angry mobs marched through the streets of Dresden to the steps of his official residence. Metzsch must have been sorely tempted to resign, but even that option evaporated when Chancellor Bülow sent frantic dispatches urging him to remain at his post. The Dresden violence, Bülow felt, was not of only local importance: it was "the touchstone for the entire Reich." Therefore Bülow urged Metzsch to repress the demonstrators with all means at his disposal, adding that the Kaiser had suggested that troops, if required, should be instructed to fire on the mob before women and children were pushed to the front lines. Politically it would be an even greater mistake, Bülow added, if the Saxon ministry were to make "even the slightest" concession on franchise reform, at least until complete calm had been restored.⁵⁰ Bülow needn't have worried. By the time the socialist Goldstein launched another interpellation of the government on 14 December, on the grounds of police brutality against the demonstrators, the National Liberals and other *bürgerlich* deputies agreed that debate had to be cut short. Subsequently the Saxon police were commended, not censured, for their decisive (and bloody) intervention. By the end of January 1906, thanks in large measure to the calls for calm issued by the Saxon SPD leaders themselves, the crisis had passed.

50. Count Hohenthal und Bergen to Metzsch, 19 and 22 Dec. 1905, printed in Stern, ed., *Auswirkungen*, 261-63.

It became apparent during the debates of 27 November and 14 December 1905 that many National Liberals were still uncertain where the real enemy lay: out in the streets or on the Conservative benches in the Landtag? Despite vigorous efforts, Stresemann could not sway the majority of NLP deputies to support franchise reform unreservedly. As a sympathetic editor put it in a note to Stresemann on 7 December, the persistent threat of social democracy proved once again that “in Saxony it is not considered fair [*sic*] to be truly liberal.”⁵¹ In light of this comment it is perhaps moot whether the National Liberals or the socialists bear the greatest blame for the missed opportunity of 1905–6. But Hans Delbrück, writing in his *Preussische Jahrbücher* in early 1906, pressed the point. Noting that the National Liberals had lost precious time since 1903 in not pushing harder for franchise reform, Delbrück reported that many Germans from the best circles now believed that neither the Prussian nor the Saxon government could have a clear conscience over the blood that had been spilled because of their dilatory handling of franchise reform. The only solution, Delbrück believed, was the introduction of plural voting for Landtag elections in both states as soon as possible.⁵² But the Saxon Landtag session of 1905–6 ended with no positive result. Soon after parliament closed, Metzsch resigned from the Saxon ministry of state. He was replaced as interior and foreign minister—and as de facto government leader—by Count Wilhelm von Hohenthal und Bergen. Hohenthal sprang from the ranks of Leipzig’s upper bourgeoisie and, widely respected personally, had served as Saxon envoy in Berlin for over twenty years. Around the same time the Prussian envoy Dönhoff died. He was replaced by a more distinguished but, unfortunately, less perceptive observer, Prince Hans zu Hohenlohe-Oehringen.⁵³

A reinvigoration of the Saxon government coincided with socialist setbacks both in the Reichstag elections of January 1907 and in Landtag elections the following October. In January, special attention was again focused on Saxony as the *Ordnungsparteien* sought to reverse the verdict of June 1903. This time anti-Catholic sentiment was actually whipped up by the *bürgerlich* parties as a means of exciting Saxon voters against the SPD as well. More importantly, in the middle of the campaign

51. Warren, *Red Kingdom*, 69f.

52. *Pr Jbb* 123, no. 1 (Jan. 1906): 193–95 and 402–6.

53. Blaschke, “Königreich Sachsen,” 99; *Wer ist’s*, H. Degener, ed. (Leipzig, 1906), 359; Finance Minister Rüger was formally chairman of the state ministry from 1906 to 1910.

Saxon newspapers announced “upon reliable authority” that the government had a new franchise reform proposal ready to present to the Landtag. Clearly the government wished to avoid the alleged “mistake” of 1903, when it had failed to provide Saxon voters with any hint that it did not share the Conservatives’ “do-nothing” stance on franchise reform. When the polls closed, the SPD’s vote had shrunk from 441,000 in 1903 (59 percent) to just 418,000 (48 percent) in 1907, and they had lost 14 of their 22 seats. In the Landtag elections, too, the verdict of 1905 was reversed insofar as no new socialists were elected. National Liberal gains also showed that Conservative hegemony—in the lower house at least—was finally vulnerable. The Conservatives’ loss of 8 seats, Hohenthal hoped, would compel them not to risk a dissolution of the Landtag by digging in their heels on the franchise question.⁵⁴

The last obstacle to decisive action in 1907 was cleared when reports from Berlin indicated that Chancellor Bülow was not opposed in principle to Saxon franchise reform. Despite the worries of Prussian Conservatives that they were being “encircled” by other states with a “radical franchise,” and despite Mehnert’s own intensive lobbying efforts at Bülow’s doorstep, the Saxon ministry knew that Prussian officials were preparing their own reform proposals. Because Bülow had told the Conservatives repeatedly that three-class voting was untenable in the long run—and because “moderate” Conservatives allegedly agreed—Saxon ministers expected the Prussians to look benignly on whatever formula for reform seemed most appropriate to Saxon circumstances. Thus, when the Reich state secretary for foreign affairs observed to the Saxon envoy in Berlin that Prussia and Saxony must proceed hand in hand if either state’s franchise were not to become a mere *Provisorium*, he was told bluntly that Hohenthal, due to the pressure of public opinion, simply did not have the luxury of waiting for Prussia to act.⁵⁵

Hohenthal’s announcement of the government’s new plan for

54. See George Crothers, *The German Elections of 1907* (New York, 1968), 147 and 176–78; Hohenlohe to Bülow, 27 Sept. and 18 Oct. 1907, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8.

55. On his discussion with Heinrich von Tschirschky and Bögendorff, see the letter of 13 May 1907 to Hohenthal by Count Christoph Vitzthum von Eckstädt, Hohenthal’s successor as Saxon envoy to Prussia (1906–1909), interior and foreign minister (1909–18), and de facto government leader; printed in Stern, ed., *Auswirkungen*, 263–65; on Bülow’s alleged preference for plural voting, see Tschirschky to Bülow, 29 Oct. 1908, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8.

franchise reform on 5 July 1907 began a political contest that completely dominated the extraordinarily long Landtag session stretching from November 1907 to January 1909.⁵⁶ This campaign, also too complex to chronicle here, can be summarized by concentrating on three of its most important features: (1) the extreme pressure on all parties to enact reform before the next scheduled elections; (2) the government's wide-ranging rationale for, and defense of, a unique combination of proportional, communal, and plural voting systems that was clearly intended to undercut Conservative influence in the Landtag; and (3) the gradual elimination of all viable options for legislating franchise reform except on the exclusive principle of plural voting.

Despite the favorable results of January 1907, *bürgerlich* deputies did not wish to face their electors again without some tangible achievement on the franchise question. Conservative attacks on the Reichstag franchise published during the campaign only made Saxon voters more sensitive on the issue. Parliamentarians from the *Ordnungsparteien* also recognized that the Bloc experiment in the Reichstag, labelled by Bülow as a "marriage of liberal and conservative spirits," was at best a marriage of convenience. That the Reichstag voting had created strange bedfellows was even more apparent in Saxony than in many other parts of the Reich. In Meissen, for example, the votes of German Radicals, normally the staunchest defenders of the rights of Jews, were decisive in bringing an anti-Semite to victory. Animosities between Conservatives and National Liberals in other constituencies fuelled predictions from national leaders that the coupling of liberals and conservatives would produce only weak offspring or the occasional liaison before both partners sought divorce. No wonder that during the campaign the Saxon socialists had ridiculed Bloc candidates as "long-sighed-for, Semitic-anti-Semitic, agrarian-industrial, conservative-radical, bigoted-liberal, mish-mash candidates."⁵⁷

Hohenthal also sought to use public pressure to force compromise upon the two principal parties by repeatedly hinting that he would resign and allow the king to appoint a stronger-willed successor, or

56. The plan was finally presented to the Landtag in the "Dekret vom 15. Oktober 1907." See Hohenlohe to Bülow, 7 and 20 July 1907, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8. The following is based on Diersch, "Landtagswahlrecht," 247-333; Pache, *Geschichte*, 35-120; and Oppe, "Reform," 383-409.

57. Crothers, *German Elections*, 148, 154-66, and 174.

that he would dissolve the Landtag and call new elections. As he told the Prussian envoy Hohenlohe at one point, members of the *bürgerlich* parties feared to undertake an election campaign "with empty hands." On another occasion he declared to the Landtag that a bill passed by a slim margin was not acceptable to the government: a much broader consensus was required.⁵⁸ This was more than simply a gesture of political goodwill toward the minority National Liberals, because a formal constitutional amendment with the assent of two-thirds of the lower house was required if certain features of the existing franchise were to be revised. Even the young King Friedrich August III (1904–18), whose personal quest for popularity among his citizens bordered on the burlesque, was determined not to agree to a franchise reform unless it promised to quell the political unrest among his people.⁵⁹

Pressures of another sort induced members of the *Ordnungsparteien* to shroud their deliberations in secrecy. They were unwilling to allow voters to learn how seriously they were considering various reactionary options for the new franchise. But when it became known in April 1908, after more than three months of committee deliberations, that no progress had been made, liberals compelled the committee to issue regular reports. Then, when even the committee met an impasse, the leaders of the Conservatives and National Liberals began to meet secretly outside parliament in order to hammer out an agreement. Those deliberations continued through much of the parliamentary recess from early June until late October 1908. While such backroom politics alienated even *bürgerlich* observers not privy to these discussions, the socialists kept up a constant barrage of newspaper articles in favor of the universal franchise, and in late 1908 they also began to organize large demonstrations. The most noteworthy of these took place on 1 November in Dresden, Leipzig, and Chemnitz. The rallies were all well organized, the crowds remained calm, and no police action was necessary. However, in the middle of January 1909, on the first Sunday after franchise reform legislation was finally passed, a socialist rally in Dresden demonstrated that the king's wish for a "popular" reform was illusory. This time the throng attempted to reach both Hohenthal's residence and the royal palace, and about

58. See Hohenlohe to Bülow, 20 July, 27 Sept. 1907; 13 Mar., 13 Apr., 6 June, 19 Nov., 4 Dec. 1908; in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8.

59. Friedrich Kracke, *Friedrich August III.: Sachsens volkstümlichster König* (Munich, 1964), cited in Blaschke, "Königreich Sachsen," 85.

twenty demonstrators were injured. It was with mixed motives, therefore—combining concern for their personal careers, for their own party faction, for the integrity of the Saxon parliament, and for the security of the state—that *bürgerlich* deputies debated how to transform the Landtag into a “representative” political institution.

If the government resisted what it regarded as inopportune and extreme National Liberal demands, it was also clearly prepared to endorse franchise proposals that foresaw a permanent end to Conservative domination of the lower house. This was amply demonstrated when Hermann von Nostitz-Wallwitz addressed a meeting of the Dresden Conservative *Verein* on 11 July 1907. Because Nostitz had been responsible for the Landtag franchise law of 1868, and because he had directed the government’s campaign against socialism during his twenty-five years (1866–91) as interior minister, his opinion on franchise issues was neither uninformed nor inconsequential. In trying to rally support for Hohenthal’s reform proposal, Nostitz unofficially but accurately represented government opinion when he warned the Conservatives to face reality and concede some of their overwhelming influence before it was too late. Electoral appeals based on “the struggle against revolution,” Nostitz declared to the assembled Conservatives, no longer sufficed to keep the wolf from the door. Instead, law-abiding citizens were being driven to the SPD by the unfair franchise of 1896. Therefore, socialists had to be not only readmitted to the Landtag but also invited onto its committees, for a parliamentary majority that could not cope with “15 or 20” social democrats did not deserve to hold power. Moreover, Nostitz continued, the time had come to eliminate the “one-sided, artificial dominance of a single party” in the Landtag. Without mentioning Mehnert’s name specifically, Nostitz declared that in Saxony political leaders had recently come to prominence whose influence was not properly circumscribed by the responsibilities of public office. This brought him to the most celebrated passage in his speech:⁶⁰

It is known generally that this backstairs government [*Nebenregierung*] has brought to a head the rancor and bitterness felt in the best circles of the people, from the very highest notables to the simplest *Bürger*. . . . The Conservative Party will gain in inner strength in the same measure that it voluntarily relinquishes its artificial and illegitimate dominance [*Übergewicht*].

60. Pache, *Geschichte*, 100 and 101–32.

Nostitz's barely concealed attack on Mehnert, and his use of the word *Nebenregierung* in particular, provoked a storm of controversy in the Saxon political press that lasted for weeks. On the one hand, these remarks again revealed how bad relations were between the Saxon ministry and the Conservatives. More significantly, they linked worries about the outcome of Saxon franchise reform to wider (but no less impassioned) debates about illegitimate influence in the Kaiser's court, since at this time popular attention was being focused on the alleged *Nebenregierung* of Philipp Eulenburg and others implicated in the Moltke-Harden trials. As the Conservatives' opponents picked up on this theme, the National Liberals took the opportunity to itemize the many abuses of power since 1896 perpetrated in the name of "Paul & Co., G.m.b.H." and under the "System Mehnert-Opitz-Oertel." At last it seemed to Saxon businessmen that their challenge to the Conservatives' hegemony might be supported by a government which acknowledged its own decisive interest in setting Saxon parliamentary affairs on a new footing.

How was the viewpoint expressed by Nostitz reflected in Hohenthal's franchise reform proposal of July 1907? Previously, the Saxon government had argued that plural voting was unworkable and unfair, and it had made clear its preference for voting based on occupational estates. Now, however, it reversed itself and proposed the election of 42 deputies by secret and direct voting, incorporating proportional representation and with a moderate system of plural balloting, whereby no voter would be accorded more than two ballots. It also proposed the election of 40 other deputies through the assemblies of local government, namely the district councils (*Bezirksverbände*) in rural areas and a joint assembly of municipal councilors and senators in the cities. In linking this system with only the most modest increase in the number of urban constituencies, the government cited the arguments of Professor Albert Schäffle, a noted sociologist and political observer, who had argued in 1890 that the representation of local interests provided a "counterweight" to other features of an electoral system based on direct and equal voting.⁶¹ It also claimed that its previous criticism of indirect voting was not relevant in this case: although the delegates elected in the first round of balloting under the three-class franchise had been criticized as mere "ballot carriers" (*Zettelträger*) by some,

61. A. Schäffle, "Die Bekämpfung der Sozialdemokratie ohne Ausnahmegesetz," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 46 (1890): 201-87, esp. 255-73.

the government noted that local councilors had other functions to fulfill and were sufficiently high-minded not to be overly partisan. Although its motives cannot be determined with certainty, the government appears to have been trying to convince National Liberals that their continued strength in the *Rathaus* might translate into power in the Landtag. The National Liberals, after all, had done very well in local elections since plutocratic franchises had been introduced in Saxony's major cities. Nonetheless, the government chose to ignore the fact that even in 1899, 805 socialists already sat on local councils in Saxony; by 1909 that number had grown to about 1,600, and the SPD's interest in *Kommunalpolitik* showed no signs of waning.⁶²

As a gesture to the Conservatives, the government echoed their rather specious argument that the distribution of seats in the reformed Landtag should not be determined solely by population (*Rechte des Menschen*) but should also reflect the geographical expanse of the state (*Rechte der Fläche*). The government rejected the normal system of proportional representation based on party lists as well, for in this instance it conceded that voters would be corrupted by having to vote for a party rather than a particular candidate. Instead it proposed a much more complicated proportional system whereby candidates would run in individual constituencies and each party would elect only the number of deputies — those with the highest vote totals — accorded it under calculations completed after the voting. Lastly, it was not without irony that the novelty of proportional representation was defended with the argument that, under the simple majority formula, a large number of *bürgerlich* voters had been deprived of representation in the Reichstag in 1903 because the socialists had won 22 of 23 Saxon seats.

While these features of the government's proposal may have been intended to bring the Conservatives on board, other elements of the plan clearly ran contrary to Conservative wishes. Until the very last moment, the government refused either to abandon its hybrid electoral system or to sanction other schemes proposed by the Legislative Committee. Plural voting based on income and property, it continued to insist, would merely retain the worst plutocratic features of the three-class franchise. It also refused a committee proposal whereby permanent residence of not less than two years would be required of

62. Figures from Fricke, *Handbuch*, 2:777, and Hohenlohe to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, 22 Aug. 1909, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8.

enfranchised voters. This stipulation was aimed, of course, not at vagabonds—as the Conservatives claimed—but at the more mobile ranks of younger workers. Under government pressure this residency requirement was reduced to six months. Similarly, the government refused to compromise on the issue of a wholesale election of the Landtag every six years, even though Conservatives were adamant that Landtag elections would thereby become as “passionate” and “demagogic” as Reichstag elections. Lastly, it argued strenuously against two criteria for awarding extra votes: age and economic “independence.” The latter criterion was advocated by National Liberals and Conservatives as a means to give greater influence to state officials, clergy, teachers, academics, doctors, and lawyers—though only those with a yearly income of at least 1,800 Marks. The government, however, believed that neither age nor economic independence provided any guarantee whatsoever that a voter would not cast both his basic and his extra ballot for a socialist. With the same logic the government forced the *Ordnungsparteien* to abandon plans to introduce a 30-Mark tax threshold for those who wished to stand for election.

Despite this evidence that some aspects of Hohenthal’s ideal voting system were less reactionary than *either* National Liberal or Conservative schemes, it would be mistaken to imagine that the government was consistently high-minded or even sensible with its own proposals. For instance, at a very late date in the reform process—and after nothing was left of its original proposals—it outlined a system of plural voting whereby each voter would have *either* one or four ballots, but no one would have two or three. This system, Hohenthal claimed, would not only be technically much simpler but would also be fairer to members of the lower bourgeoisie and the *Mittelstand*. To this patently *unfair* proposal the government wished to graft a system of proportional representation applying only to the large cities. Presumably this scheme, too, was intended to attract National Liberal support, since a high proportion of National Liberal votes were cast in cities where socialist victories resulted from the simple majority system. As it happened, this proposal found a positive response from neither the Conservatives nor the National Liberals.

Lastly, there were some remarkable agreements, as well as many disagreements, about what the socialists’ “legitimate” share of the popular vote should be under a new franchise and—not at all the same question—how many seats should be “conceded” to the SPD in a

reformed Landtag. In its proposal of July 1907, the government forecast that socialists would win about 15 of the 42 seats to be contested under plural voting and proportional representation. This estimate coincided roughly with its earlier estimate in 1903 that 16 socialist deputies would likely be elected in the third voting class. To these estimates the Conservatives replied in 1907 that the government's latest plan would actually produce a *majority* of social democratic seats. According to their logic, one had to assume that about 30 percent of *bürgerlich* voters would fail to turn out at the polls in any given election. At other stages of the debate, the government and the National Liberals proved willing to accept plural voting schemes under which socialists would win roughly 38–41 percent of the vote. The vexing thing about these proposals, of course, is the difficulty in distinguishing between disagreements that resulted from differing assessments of the technical or political feasibility of various franchises—including what the Saxon citizenry would tolerate—and those that resulted from rivalries between the anti-socialist groups themselves. Though limited sources inevitably evoke frustration on this point, historians can take heart that contemporaries found it just as difficult to disentangle the implications of so many complex and untried franchise schemes.

Conservatives and National Liberals eventually compromised on plural voting with a maximum of four ballots. Under the final agreement worked out in January 1909, the Saxon Landtag franchise became direct, and remained secret, for all males over the age of twenty-five. But it was not equal. In addition to a basic ballot, one, two, or three supplementary ballots were awarded if voters met certain criteria (which can be presented here only in shorthand). Entitled to two, three, or four ballots were those Saxons who had yearly incomes of over 1,600, 2,200, and 2,800 Marks respectively (with lower thresholds for certain professions), as well as those who held property assessed at 100, 150, or 200 tax units or comprising more than 2, 4, or 8 hectares. Extra ballots were also awarded to those voters who qualified for one-year voluntary military service on the basis of education. Upon reaching the age of 50 a voter automatically received one supplementary ballot, but no voter could have more than four ballots in total. This new franchise became law on 5 May 1909.⁶³

None of the parties to this compromise was entirely satisfied. The

63. "Wahlgesetz für die zweite Kammer der Ständeversammlung vom 5. Mai 1909," reprinted in Oppe, "Reform," Appendix G.

Saxon government had probably conceded the most. Its proposals of 1903 and 1907 had been swept aside by parties determined to steer their own course, and its wish to calm the public outcry in the land had also been frustrated.⁶⁴ To be sure, most Landtag deputies proclaimed the introduction of a law that was vastly more fair to the little man in society than the previous three-class franchise. More than one observer noted that even the most lowly citizen, once he reached the age of 50 and qualified for a second ballot, would have at least half the electoral influence of the most privileged member of society. Yet neither the government nor the *bürgerlich* parties were sanguine as the first test of the new system approached.

VI

And with good reason. When elections were held on 21 October 1909 for all 91 seats in the reformed legislature, voter turnout approached 83 percent, double that under the old system. Everyone knew that the SPD stood to gain the most from the elimination of three-class voting. But whereas Hohenthal's government apparently expected that the socialists would win no more than 13 seats, the SPD increased its caucus from 1 to 25 members. One cause of this victory soon became apparent: many more Saxons had cast multiple ballots on behalf of socialist candidates than even the finest calculations of government officials or party experts had anticipated. Over 26 percent of those with three ballots chose socialist candidates, and over 8 percent of those with four ballots did as well. The Radicals also did very well under the new franchise, increasing their caucus from 3 to 8 members. To no one's surprise, the Conservative caucus shrank dramatically, from 46 to 29 deputies, while the National Liberals saw their caucus reduced from 31 to 29 members also. These losses were all the more galling because the new, plural voting system had provided obvious advantages to the *Ordnungsparteien*. If victory had required only a relative rather than an absolute majority in each constituency, and if the Reichstag franchise had been in effect, the SPD would have won 80 of 91 seats.⁶⁵ However, since the social democrats won almost half of their votes from Saxons entitled to only one ballot, they won only

64. On continued expansion of the Saxon SPD and its agitation, see Hohenlohe to Bethmann Hollweg, 22 Aug. 1909, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8, also for some of the following details.

65. See Ritter, *Wahlgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch*, 180.

about 39 percent of the popular vote and only 28 percent of Landtag seats in the parliament they immediately dubbed the “four-class Landtag.” The National Liberals were supported by only 20 percent of Saxon voters; but over half of those voters were entitled to four ballots, so the NLP won about 26 percent of the total vote and 31 percent of Landtag seats. Conservatives reaped similar benefits from the new system, not least because rural constituencies were still grossly overrepresented.

Each party offered a different interpretation of how the “fairness” of the new franchise had contributed to this outcome. Socialist newspapers conceded that the party’s victory had not been entirely its own doing. Just as in 1903, these elections registered the outrage of Saxon citizens—and not only workers—who were still subjected to unfair voting laws. But it was not the franchise alone that was responsible for individual socialist victories, as other observers attested. Immediately after the elections the Prussian envoy wrote to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg with an analysis that was uncannily similar to others he and his predecessor, Dönhoff, had sent over the previous twenty years. Hohenlohe concluded that “many runoff elections could have been avoided if the *bürgerlich* parties had cooperated more against the socialists and if they had not squandered their votes on rival candidacies.” When parliament opened, Hohenlohe ascribed the new, pivotal position of the National Liberals to four factors: the new franchise, the Reich finance reform (see below), the “unpinning” of the *bürgerlich* parties, and the “unbounded demagogy” against Conservatives unleashed by National Liberals. A Saxon government official came to the same conclusion. After discussing the bitter disagreements between Conservatives and National Liberals over plural voting and constituency boundaries, he remarked that disunity among the *bürgerlich* parties had led them to conduct a campaign “more passionate” than any previous one. In fact, he added, *bürgerlich* opponents in various constituencies had furthered the socialist cause in a “spectacular” way.⁶⁶

Still, the question remains: to what degree did acrimony among the Saxon *Ordnungsparteien* actually contribute to their poor showing in individual Landtag constituencies in October 1909? Part of the answer, but only part, lies in the legislative battle over franchise reform de-

66. Hohenlohe to Bethmann Hollweg, 23 Oct. and 2 Dec. 1909, in PA AA Bonn, Sachsen Nr. 60, Bd. 8; Oppe, “Reform,” 394.

scribed above. Another part lies in the political fiasco of Chancellor Bülow's finance reform, which wrecked the national Bloc in late June 1909. As I have argued elsewhere, the political estrangement of Conservatives and National Liberals in Reich politics began months before the final collapse of the Bloc, and persisted for years thereafter.⁶⁷ But a third component lies in the statistical record itself.

Statistics can tell many stories.⁶⁸ Anti-socialist solidarity *seemed* to be well maintained in October 1909, in that the SPD participated in 54 of 58 runoff elections, and won only 10. Yet one must also take seriously the complaints of the Prussian envoy that the *bürgerlich* parties contributed to their own defeat by refusing to withdraw competing candidacies. Therefore, in order to investigate this question further and keeping in mind the potential usefulness of similar analysis for Reichstag elections, it seemed a valuable exercise to draw up a set of criteria to judge when Conservatives and the National Liberals were in "serious" competition for parliamentary seats, and when this appears to have directly benefited the social democrats.

Five circumstances or "cases" were chosen which could be applied objectively to each constituency race in October 1909. For the purposes of this analysis alone, only National Liberal, Conservative, Free Conservative, and Agrarian League candidates were designated as *bürgerlich*, while anti-Semitic, *mittelständisch*, Progressive, and Radical candidates were not. This was decided because the latter would very likely have held ambiguous or ambivalent views on the socialist "threat." *Case One* occurred when two *bürgerlich* parties fielded candidates and received enough votes that, had they been able to agree on a common candidate, they would have won the seat in the first ballot (*Hauptwahl*) with an absolute majority. In this case they would have been relieved of the odium (and unpredictability) of a runoff election. As the reports of the Prussian envoy make clear, rival candidacies during the campaign frequently resulted in tangible residues of animosity among *bürgerlich* voters. This in turn contributed to low morale, low voter turnout for the runoff ballot, and even explicit defections and abstentions—all factors that could easily transform a *bürgerlich* majority on the first ballot into a socialist majority in the runoff. In this case,

67. See Retallack, "The Road to Philippi."

68. See Eugen Würzburger, "Die Wahlen für die Zweite Kammer der Ständeversammlung vom Oktober und November 1909," *Zeitschrift des K. Sächsischen Statistischen Landesamtes* 55 (1909): 220-43; 57, no. 1 (1911): 1-168; and 58, no. 2 (1912): 259-331.

the *bürgerlich* parties were deemed to be responsible for their own defeat.

Case Two occurred when more than one of the *bürgerlich* parties fielded candidates and, although neither of them reached the runoff ballot, they together received enough votes that one of them would have done so if they had agreed on a common candidate. Put another way, under *Case Two*, lack of right-wing unity prevented even one *bürgerlich* candidate from reaching the runoff. *Case Three* occurred when one of the *bürgerlich* parties reached a runoff ballot and when more than 50 percent of an eliminated *bürgerlich* party's voters *appeared* to defect to a non-*bürgerlich* candidate in a runoff election. Given that turnouts varied from the first ballot to the runoff ballot and that the political choices were entirely different, it is impossible to say with certainty how many times this case occurred. However, there are a number of instances when defections of this sort are very clear from the statistical record and from newspaper accounts of individual campaigns. *Case Four* occurred when two *bürgerlich* parties fielded "serious" candidates—that is, when one received at least half the number of votes received by another.⁶⁹ *Case Five* occurred when two *bürgerlich* candidates faced each other in a runoff ballot.⁷⁰

Overall, these criteria can serve as a kind of "minimum" test for anti-socialist unity. The temptation is great to include in one case or another constituencies where contextual evidence shows that the *bürgerlich* parties withdrew rival candidacies at the last minute. However, the results of applying these minimal criteria rigorously are startling enough.

First to be considered are the so-called "large city" constituencies, which represented 20 of 91 Saxon constituencies. Serious competition between the establishment parties occurred in exactly half of these 20 constituencies in 1909. In one instance a left liberal profited from *bürgerlich* disunity; in six instances a *bürgerlich* candidate prevailed; and in two instances an SPD candidate won. A further 23 constituencies were classed as "urban" constituencies. Here a breakdown of anti-

69. Here, however, two caveats are necessary. Competition in hopelessly unwinnable seats—where the *bürgerlich* parties together won less than 10 percent of the vote—cannot realistically be deemed to have been "serious." The same is true of competition in "bomb-proof" constituencies, where the establishment parties controlled over 75 percent of the vote.

70. In this case, too, it seemed worth distinguishing between instances where the two parties together controlled more than 75 percent of the vote on the first ballot and where they did not. The possibility that right-wing disunity would permit a socialist victory was far more immediate in the second instance.

socialist solidarity occurred in 7 of 23 races, or about 30 percent. In two instances a left liberal eventually won the seat, and in one a socialist won. Lastly, of 48 "rural" constituencies, serious competition occurred in 21 (roughly 44 percent) of these constituencies. A slight bending of the rules would have permitted the inclusion of 4 more constituencies. Nonetheless, in these 21 instances alone, 7 resulted in socialist victories.

Overall, serious competition between Conservatives and National Liberals occurred in no fewer than 38 of 91 Saxon constituencies—42 percent of the total. Arguably it is difficult to conceive of any more tangible evidence than this to support the hypothesis that anti-socialist solidarity in electoral politics had largely evaporated by the time Bethmann Hollweg became chancellor. If more evidence were required, it was fated not to come from Saxony, for the election of 1909 proved the first, and last, test of the new franchise.

VII

An essay of this scope could never hope to cover more than a fraction of the terrain on which questions about anti-socialism and electoral politics in Imperial Germany can be addressed. A closer examination of statistics from the Saxon elections of 1909, for example, can reveal a great deal more about the social standing and political preferences of voters with multiple ballots than has been attempted here. Similarly, there is much more to the story of anti-socialism, even in Saxony, than can be conveyed by focusing on election campaigns and "high politics." And considerable research is needed to integrate the history of franchise struggles elsewhere in the Reich into a broader picture of liberal successes after 1900. Nevertheless, this essay has tried to suggest the range of possible perspectives from which historians can consider these issues and the interrelationships among them.

Questions about the Saxon franchise may appear more problematic—and perhaps also more interesting—than similar questions about the Prussian and Reichstag franchises because the latter were never overturned or even fundamentally revised in the imperial era. Although Conservatives grumbled on about the Reichstag franchise, and although left liberals unsuccessfully railed against three-class voting in Prussia until the last days of the empire, it was in Saxony (and in other states and cities too) that legislators were compelled to take the bull by the horns and devise new voting laws which could be put into

operation immediately. As in Saxony, legislators everywhere operated under circumstances that limited their insight and effectiveness, even though they may have been only dimly aware of such constraints. For this reason, particular attention has been focused not only on the process of franchise reform itself, but also on the personal reflections of individuals who determined its outcome. Some of these figures welcomed the opportunity to conceive and implement radically new franchise schemes. But many of them, as we have seen, shrank from such responsibility.

As Suval and Fairbairn have shown so clearly with reference to the Reichstag franchise, it is how individuals understood, defended, and exercised their right to vote that filled the empty vessel of Wilhelmine Germany's electoral system with meaning. Any reasonably educated Saxon who had followed the course of franchise reform in his or her homeland could have made sense of the various voting schemes in place in German cities and states in 1909—whether based on direct or indirect voting, secret or public voting, mandatory voting, plural voting, tax thresholds, class-based franchises, occupational estates, or proportional representation. But as these terms became common currency in Saxony after 1900, supporters of the *bürgerlich* parties were forced to reexamine their political allegiances and, as part of that process, to reconsider the scope of the socialist threat both in theory and in practice. As this essay has shown, Conservatives continued to espouse a relatively unproblematic brand of anti-socialism, but liberals in Saxony—as elsewhere in the Reich—found the issue much more perplexing and divisive.

This study, finally, has tried to illustrate why political designations like “liberal” and “conservative” can be misleading when incautiously ascribed to regional party groupings and government bureaucracies. On balance it is clear that the Saxon National Liberals were neither wholly progressive nor wholly reactionary. But were they principled, or opportunistic? Were they devoutly anti-socialist—or merely “national,” as Lothar Schücking seemed to imply in the passage quoted at the outset? There is no unequivocal answer to these questions. Conversely, Prussian Conservatives have too long been villainized as the quintessential *Herrenmenschen* of the *Kaiserreich*, leaving their party comrades in Saxony and other non-Prussian regions in historical obscurity. While it is generally agreed that the leader of Prussian Conservatives, Ernst von Heydebrand und der Lasa, eminently deserved his

reputation as “the uncrowned king of Prussia,” perhaps the time has come to find a place in our picture of the *Kaiserreich* for “the uncrowned king of Saxony.” Lastly, it remains difficult to draw conclusions about the general political orientation of a Saxon state ministry whose members have been (rightly) described as “conservative” (Metzsch), “moderate conservative” (Nostitz), and “conservative-liberal” (Hohenthal).⁷¹ It may be true, as Karlheinz Blaschke has written, that Saxon officials enjoyed relative political autonomy in a land where there was “no court camarilla, no gray eminences, no shadow cabinet behind the scenes, and no company of favorites.” But did the *Nebenregierung* of “Paul & Co., G.m.b.H.,” with such palpable successes behind it, manage to perpetuate itself in more covert form after 1909? Moreover, when we consider them collectively, did Saxon ministers act as an anchor on the ship of state, as the wartime interior minister claimed? Or did they function instead as a rudder, seeking to avoid dangerous shoals but determined to steer a positive course? Simple answers do not present themselves here either. Perhaps all that can be said is that the Saxon ministries headed by Metzsch and Hohenthal deserve our attention—if not necessarily our applause—by virtue of their determination to push the cause of franchise reform after 1903, their willingness to implement significant parts of the liberals’ political agenda, and their strategic contribution to the demise of Conservative hegemony in the third largest state of Imperial Germany.

One aim of this essay has been to provide new impetus to those already working on these and related questions through regional studies. By fusing regional history and electoral history, future scholars may be able to penetrate more deeply, and probe more widely, beneath the rhetoric of anti-socialism that has for so long confounded our understanding of mass politics in the *Kaiserreich*.

71. For this and the following, see Blaschke, “Königreich Sachsen,” 97–102, including the citation from the unpublished papers of Interior Minister Dr. Walter Koch, Staatsarchiv Dresden, Bd. 1, 160–67.