

The »Non-Voter«: Rethinking the Category

Introduction

A large literature by political scientists and sociologists demonstrates that the non-voter has fascinated scholars, politicians, and members of the lay public for decades. The conclusions reached in this literature are far from static, as we will suggest in the first section of this chapter. New options have arisen in recent years, created by technology and mass culture, that complicate the binary division between the voter and the non-voter. Voting by internet or »flash-mobbing« by Twitter raise thorny questions: What if a voter's ballot cast on the web goes astray? What if someone votes with his feet and runs *away* from a demonstration? Citizenship is not acted out only in legislatures or polling booths: it is ubiquitous in the media and on the streets. Social scientists must thus consider a wide palette of institutional, individual, and psychological reasons for choosing to »do one's duty« or joining the unjustly maligned ranks of the non-voter.

In the second section of this chapter, we employ a *historical* approach based on German electoral culture between 1867 and 1918 to suggest that the authoritarian German state – and the increasingly influential bourgeoisie that dominated it – ensured that the votes cast by millions of Germans were reduced in their electoral weight either to zero or close to it. Although many Germans were still eligible voters *de jure*, their impact on elections was reduced *de facto* to a virtual vote.

The non-voter has been maligned in many ways. One can portray him or her as a malingeringer, or a »political privateer«, or as someone who is too clever by half: withholding a vote for tactical reasons may backfire if the big picture is lost from view. But non-voters can also practice democratic abstinence – rather like a responsible drinker stepping away from the bar. Turning this metaphor of »democratic abstinence« on its head, we want to suggest three alternative points of view. First, mass politics and its commodification after 1871 increased the thirst of the »little man« in Germany to be heard. That thirst remains to be quenched in 2015, though perhaps less so in Germany than in other parts of the world. Second, millions of voters who were sidelined from mainstream politics in the Germany's Second Reich – the working class, above all – had no desire to abstain from full participation in the legislative and constitutional life of their nation: the cup of democracy was held from their grasp by others. Third, *Mittelständler* called most loudly for mandatory voting, but they were not the only ones drinking from the reactionary punchbowl that held a potent brew of anti-socialist, anti-liberal, and antisemitic ingredients. Some claimed that the »red threat« could be eliminated if »apathetic« non-voters from the non-socialist (*bürgerlich*) camp turned out at the polls in the same proportion as »well-drilled« socialist voters. This fantasy

took on more ominous forms when the Reichstag elections of January 1912 dealt a heavy blow to the Wilhelmine Right. Soon these »red« elections were also known as Germany's »Jewish elections«. The Pan-German leader Heinrich Claß wanted to see Jews deprived of their right to vote or run for parliament – two things that even Bismarck had not dared to impose on Social Democrats under the Anti-Socialist Law of 1878–90.¹ In these contexts, rethinking the category of the non-voter gives back to excluded groups in German society some of the historical agency the undemocratic state took from them.

In the last section of this chapter, we consider how scholars have tried to integrate the non-voter into their analyses of medium- and long-term trends in German electoral culture from 1919 to the present. We leave it to political scientists and others to analyze these trends in detail. Instead we offer reflections about integration, exclusion, alienation, habituation, and other factors that have played important roles in determining turnout levels in Germany. Like other scholars, we are disinclined to see signs of political and social crisis in recent years. As Michael Eilfort wrote as long ago as 1995, the »done-to-death term *Politikverdrossenheit*« itself contributes to alienating voters. Yet, often this phrase masks more tangible factors – each with its own long history – that contribute to low voter turnout at the polls.²

1. Non-voting in modern democracies

Social scientists who try to explain turnout rates have tended to focus on 1. the socio-economic environment, 2. the institutional set-up, and 3. the party system.

1. The pioneering work of the American political scientist Sydney Verba revolved around citizen participation in political life.³ For Verba and those scholars who follow his lead, citizen participation is not limited to the simple act of casting a ballot when an election rolls around. »Good« citizens also initiate contact with local politicians, take part in electoral campaigns, and join activist clubs and associations.⁴ In political cultures where participation is valued, these activities increase turnout rates and shrink the number of non-voters. The opposite is also true: if more passive citizenship values are promoted, then more non-voters turn up – or rather stay home.⁵ Following Verba, other political scientists came up with criteria to assess the socio-economic environment and determine the likelihood that citizens will abstain from voting. The two most significant of these were education and age. Non-voters are found less of-

¹ D. FRYMANN [pseudonym for HEINRICH CLASS], Wenn ich der Kaiser wär', 31912, pp. 38, 76.

² M. EILFORT, Politikverdrossenheit, 1995, p. 118.

³ L. W. PYE/S. VERBA (eds.), Political Culture, 1965; S. VERBA/N. H. NIE/J.-O. KIM (eds.), Modes of Democratic Participation, 1971; S. VERBA/N. H. NIE/J. KIM, Participation and Political Equality, 1978; S. VERBA/K. L. SCHLOZMAN/H. BRADY, Voice and Equality, 1995.

⁴ S. VERBA/N. H. NIE/J. KIM (eds.), Modes of Democratic Participation, 1971, pp. 8 f.

⁵ R. W. JACKMAN/R. A. MILLER, Voter turnout, 1995, pp. 467–92.

ten among well-educated and older citizens. Other criteria include religious belief, affluence, and marital status.⁶

2. Since the 1960s and 1970s, scholars have stressed institutional factors affecting turnout. One such factor is compulsory voting, known as »the Australian ballot« because of where it was first introduced. We will leave this one aside because its influence on the non-voter is fairly obvious.⁷ The second factor is the nature of the electoral system.⁸ Electoral laws define who is eligible to vote according to age, gender, residency, citizenship, and a great deal besides. Turnout is also influenced by the nature of the political system: two-party *versus* multi-party systems, for example; or first-past-the-post single-member constituencies *versus* proportional representation (PR); or ranked ballots.⁹ Proportional representation usually translates into higher voter turnout (except in Latin America). However, competition among »too many« parties can have the opposite effect. In a multi-party system, there is usually a good chance that a coalition government will be formed: abstention rates increase when the casting of a ballot in such systems becomes less »decisive« (because usually a coalition will be formed through negotiations between parties). Multi-party systems, PR, and ranked ballots also make the voter work harder: he or she must choose the best party and yet also vote strategically. Less committed citizens will simply not make the effort.¹⁰

3. The third set of factors is the development of modern party systems in conjunction with the step-by-step expansion of national electorates since the middle of the nineteenth century. These factors are too well-known to need elaboration here.¹¹ Nevertheless, two points are not too obvious to mention. First, as states and bureaucracies and party apparatuses grew and became more centralized, power and influence became more concentrated too. This was a disincentive to many voters 150 years ago, and it still is today. Nevertheless, as the politics of notables (*Honoratiorenpolitik*) gave way to mass politics, Tip O'Neill's famous dictum did not fly out the door: »All politics is local« still rings true. In Germany after the introduction of universal manhood suffrage for Reichstag elections in 1867, the gradual development of electoral machines required that candidates get »up close and personal« with their would-be electors.¹² And when known supporters proved insufficient in number to get one elected, new voters had to be found. Long before the turn of the twentieth century, the non-voter from the previous election was identified as the new voter who had to be mobilized the next time around.¹³ The second point is that, in the last third of the nine-

⁶ A. BLAIS, Turnout, 2007, pp. 630 f.

⁷ Cf. J. BRENNAN/L. HILL, Compulsory Voting, 2014; A. MALKOPOULOU, Democracy's Duty, 2011.

⁸ A. BLAIS, Turnout, 2007, p. 625.

⁹ P. NORRIS, Political Activism, 2009, pp. 631 f.; EDWARD KEENAN, »Ranked ballots: how democracy should work«, in: THE TORONTO STAR, 25.3.2015, p. GT2 [in the context of Toronto municipal elections].

¹⁰ A. BLAIS, Turnout in Elections, 2007, pp. 625–7.

¹¹ C. BOIX, Emergence of Parties, 2009, pp. 511 f.

¹² J. RETALLACK, Obrigkeitsstaat und politischer Massenmarkt, 2009.

¹³ J. RETALLACK, 'Get Out the Vote!', 2012.

teenth century, the traditional dividing line between liberals and conservative, Whigs and Tories, became complicated by the creation of new parties. The most important examples were Catholic and socialist parties. Even the Americans had their Know-Nothing Party and other so-called demagogic interlopers. From Andrew Jackson to Ross Perot to Donald Trump, such types have been defined as »demagogues«, with or without reference to Richard Hofstadter's path-breaking book, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. In general, demagogues find ways to frighten or flatter non-voters and increase turnout rates. They use the alienating effects of modern party systems and a mass electorate to their advantage.¹⁴ But often their influence is fleeting.

What does the non-voter look like?

No »typical« profile for the non-voter, no uniform set of characteristics, can encompass all possible manifestations of the type. Yet the non-voter was recognized long ago as integral not only to the health of political cultures over the *longue durée* but also to the outcome of elections in particular years. In Germany, the Reichstag elections of 1887 saw a spike in turnout rates and a victory of Bismarck's Kartell of nationalist parties: a war scare with France frightened previous non-voters out of their wits and out of their homes. Then in 1907, an important article was published by Dr. Eugen Würzburger, director of the Royal Saxon Statistical Office.¹⁵ In it, the »party of non-voters« (*Partei der Nichtwähler*) was exposed as a myth. Würzburger wanted to address the right-wing complaint that three million German voters had failed to cast a ballot in the Reichstag elections of 1903 out of »laziness« and »complacency«, contributing to a major increase in SPD Reichstag seats. But the empire struck back in 1907, or so it seemed. According to the consensus of the day, when Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow made a defence of German colonial rule the central election issue four years later, those non-voters in 1903 turned into »new voters« in 1907. This tactic led, as in 1887, to victories for the Right and a setback for Social Democracy. *Not true!* argued Würzburger. The details of his argument need not concern us. But he concluded that completely normal reasons for failing to turn out – for instance, severe illness – would almost always transform between 8 and 10 percent of eligible electors into non-voters.

Thanks to much more sophisticated calculations by Jürgen Falter and others, the same sort of argument has been made about the Nazi Party breakthrough at the polls in 1930 and then again in 1932. It was not a sudden rush of new voters, let alone a *Partei der Nichtwähler*, who suddenly produced unexpected Nazi gains; instead it was the defection of experienced voters from the parties of the middle – who we might call »tried and not-so-true« voters – who swelled the ranks of Hitler's followers.¹⁶

¹⁴ C. BOIX, *Emergence of Parties*, 2009, p. 513. Cf. I. MCALLISTER, *Personalization of Politics*, 2007; J. RETALLACK, *Demagogentum, Populismus, Volkstümlichkeit*, 2000.

¹⁵ E. WÜRZBURGER, *Die Partei der Nichtwähler*, 1907, pp. 381–389.

¹⁶ J. FALTER, *Hitlers Wähler*, 1991; J. FALTER/T. LINDENBERGER/S. SCHUMANN, *Wahlen und Abstimmungen*, 1986; S. WASMEIER, *Wer wählte Hitler?*, 2009. Cf. *Who Voted for Hitler?*, special

Even in stable and prosperous eras, some citizens decide to stay away from the ballot box. Let us list just two reasons they might do so before we take stock of the more comprehensive models of political behavior social scientists have devised to analyse and explain non-voting. The first – historically very significant – factor is whether the vote is public or private. Some voters are very happy, even eager, to declare their political allegiance in a system of public voting. They feel this way despite the general notion that democracy requires the secret ballot. In the nineteenth century, before ballot envelopes and voting booths were introduced, there were plenty of reasons why non-voters in Germany wanted to conceal their party allegiance. Many of them decided it was better to stay away from the polls rather than risk drawing the ire of an industrial employer, an landed estate owner, or a priest.¹⁷ At the same time, in Prussia, a three-class, two-stage system of public voting relegated Social Democratic candidates to almost certain defeat. There, many working-class citizens had little option but to use abstention – election boycotts – to register their protest.¹⁸

Second, it is worth reminding ourselves that in modern political systems too, non-voters often believe that an election has already been decided before they have the chance to cast their vote, so they simply do not bother. Although state authorities who demonstrate and want to cultivate »good« citizenship sometimes try to counter-act such beliefs, they don't always succeed. There was an era in Canada, with its six time zones, when television stations in the west were not allowed to report election results already announced in the eastern time zones. This was meant to prevent the non-voter from using the »foregone conclusion« argument to reinforce his or her laziness. But as technology advanced, such media blackouts became unworkable and were abandoned.¹⁹

Political scientists have developed five more-or-less discrete models of electoral behavior to explain why certain people do not vote.

The first »resource« model considers the capacity of people to vote. What distinguishes a voter from a non-voter is the resources at his or her disposal. They may include time, money, and civic skills.

The second is the »psychological engagement« model. Some people care a great deal about politics and can be counted on to vote come hell or high water; others are not very interested but vote anyway; still others abstain for some of the reasons already mentioned. In this model, early education and parental influence are crucial: exposure to politics at a young age and the acquisition of a skill set for good citizenship – for example, the appropriate vocabulary – are important factors.²⁰ The relevance of

issue of *Central European History* 17 (1984), and selected essays in L. E. JONES/J. RETALLACK (eds.), *Elections*, 1992.

¹⁷ See M. L. ANDERSON, *Practicing Democracy*, 2000, especially chapters 4–7 on priests and »bread lords«.

¹⁸ See T. KÜHNE, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867–1914*, 1994, pp. 165–203.

¹⁹ C. LEGGEWIE, *Non-Voters*, 1993, pp. 43 f.

²⁰ A. BLAIS, *Turnout*, 2007, p. 631.

this model is obvious when one considers that when the voting age is lowered, turnout rates almost always decline. Again to use the Canadian example, in the summer of 2015, the youthful, handsome, »hip« Justin Trudeau faced an uphill battle getting a younger cohort of eligible voters to the polls. But the example of Barack Obama's victories in 2008 and 2012 gave his party reason to hope. In October 2015 Trudeau's Liberal Party won a parliamentary majority and took over the reins of government. Now, at the time of writing, the new Canadian prime minister remains »hip« but for more tangible reasons. He has followed through on campaign promises to appoint a cabinet with equal numbers of men and women, to reverse Stephen Harper's head-in-the-sand position on climate change, and to have the House of Commons debate alternatives to the first-past-the-post system.²¹ Canadians are psychologically engaged with Trudeau's new government in a way they obviously were not after ten years of Harper. The typically short honeymoon period after taking office is already being described in Trudeau's case as a longer »romance«.

The third model focuses on electoral »mobilization.« When voters are canvassed aggressively during a campaign, not simply to vote for one party or the other, but to vote at all, this has a measurable effect.

Fourth is the »rational choice« model. According to this theory, the decision-making processes engaged in by rational citizens include estimating the costs and benefits of casting a ballot. If the benefits do not outweigh the costs, eligible voters join the ranks of the non-voter. According to this theory, in elections with a very high number of eligible voters or a predictable outcome, the rational decision would be to abstain. Each vote is »worth« less. But the countervailing influence still exists: the sense of doing one's democratic duty by casting a ballot is hardly without value, at least in the opinion of a sizable proportion of citizens in most countries.²²

Fifth and last, scholars are increasingly considering the »ethics« of voting. The focus here is not on the decision to vote or not vote *per se*, but rather on the ethical dimensions of this choice. If someone is personally indifferent to the outcome of an election, should this person vote or abstain? When citizens do vote, should they always vote for the candidate they consider will serve their own interests? Or is it better to vote according to whatever they deem to be the »common good«? Some scholars argue that although individual choices do not matter much if considered individually, collectively they have a crucial impact on the health of a society, its political culture, and the prospects of liberal democracy in uncertain times.²³

²¹ Whether parliament or »the people« (via referendum) should decide among reform alternatives is already highly contentious among Canadian parties seeking their own advantage: see *inter alia* GLORIA GALLOWAY, »Ottawa rules out referendum on electoral reform«, in: THE GLOBE AND MAIL (Toronto), 28.12.15, A1–2.

²² A. BLAIS, Turnout, 2007, pp. 632 f.; see also A. BLAIS, To Vote or Not to Vote?, 2000.

²³ J. BRENNAN, The Ethics of Voting, 2001, pp. 1 f.

2. The non-voter and the authoritarian state in Imperial Germany

Up to this point we have been rethinking the category of the non-voter in fairly conventional terms. Now we would like to become more speculative and ask whether older approaches should be supplemented by strategies that look for non-voters in unfamiliar places. To do so we want to draw on Retallack's forthcoming monograph, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918*.²⁴

Long before 1914, Germany's social militarization had made the question of voter turnout a battleground issue. To be sure, turnout rates had made Reichstag voting a national habit. According to Margaret Lavinia Anderson, the habitual act of casting a ballot in national elections meant that Germans were »practicing democracy«.²⁵ Indeed, they were practicing it so earnestly and with such conviction that – still according to Anderson – they were well-prepared for the »experiment in democracy« in the 1920s: the Weimar Republic. Yet a study of elections in Germany's third largest federal state, the Kingdom of Saxony, throws a dash of cold water on Anderson's thesis. When Saxon archives were opened up to western historians after 1989, the study of Imperial Germany's electoral culture began to overcome what Thomas Kühne has referred to as a »west-bias«, also a »democratic bias«.²⁶ By this Kühne meant that the relatively liberal and SPD-friendly political cultures in southwest Germany, and the historical literature their study produced, skewed our idea of how politics operated in such middle- and eastern-German states as Saxony, Mecklenburg, and east-Elbian Prussia. By 2000 new historical literature was focusing on Saxony, which was heavily industrialized and urbanized and had Germany's best-organized regional Social Democratic party.²⁷ There, German citizens with impeccable bourgeois credentials were even more terrified by the »red threat« than were their Junker counterparts in east-Elbia. There, bourgeois Germans were unwilling – again, in the name of an impeccably modern, liberal code of ethics – to consider Social Democrats as legitimate representatives of working-class voters in their own Landtag and their municipal councils. This set them distinctly apart from liberals in southwest Germany.

Gerhard A. Ritter once described Saxony as a *Brennspiegel* for the study of Germany's electoral culture. We suggest that it can also help us rethink the category of the non-voter. One reason Saxony serves this purpose is that its Landtag suffrage was fundamentally changed three times, in 1868, 1896, and 1909. Each time, right-wing parties and the Saxon government did everything they could to stress that they were

²⁴ To be published by Oxford University Press. For early sketches of the argument that follows, including further references, see J. RETALLACK, *Anti-Socialism and Electoral Politics in Regional Perspective*, 1992; J. RETALLACK, 'What is to Be Done?', 1990; J. RETALLACK, *Wahlrechtskämpfe in Sachsen nach 1896*, 2004.

²⁵ M. L. ANDERSON, *Practicing Democracy*, 2000.

²⁶ T. KÜHNE, *Wahlrecht – Wahlverhalten – Wahlkultur*, 1993; cf. Kühne's and other contributions to S. LÄSSIG/K. H. POHL/J. RETALLACK (eds.), *Modernisierung und Region im wilhelminischen Deutschland*, 21998.

²⁷ J. RETALLACK (ed.), *Sachsen in Deutschland*, 2000.

keeping eligibility to vote in Landtag elections as nearly universal (*allgemein*) as the suffrage for the national Reichstag. But each time they had the non-voter very much in mind. On the first occasion they wanted to exclude about one-half of Reichstag voters. On the second and third occasions they wanted to exclude or disadvantage as many Social Democratic supporters as they could. Here's how:

The 1868 Landtag suffrage reform came two years after Saxony escaped being swallowed up by Prussia during the »German civil war« and one year after Bismarck introduced universal manhood suffrage for the North German Reichstag. In what was rightly described as a relatively liberal suffrage, the Saxons imposed a threshold (*Zensus*) of 1 Thaler, or 3 Marks, of annual state taxes for eligibility: that corresponded to an income of 500–600 Marks. The result was a massive disparity between voters at the national and state levels. Among a total Saxon population of over 2.5 million at the time, about 475,000 adult men were eligible to vote in Reichstag elections. That was about 19 percent of Saxony's total population. But the 1-Thaler threshold meant that less than 10 percent of the population was eligible to vote in Landtag elections. So almost one of every two Reichstag voters was a »non-voter« for the Landtag.

The framers of the 1868 suffrage did not stop there. Just as the Reichstag constituencies were never redrawn during the Kaiserreich, the unrelenting urbanization of Saxony gradually increased the political weight of each vote cast in rural constituencies and decreased the weight of those cast in the big cities, towns, and *Industriedörfer*. But rendering urban workers *de facto* non-voters was just one part of the puzzle. Every two years, only one-third of Saxony's 80 Landtag seats came up for election. The 26 or 27 constituencies where an election might be held in any given year were scattered throughout the kingdom. Moreover, the urban constituencies were completely separated from the rural constituencies. They floated like islands in an electoral sea of geographically disconnected rural constituencies. Like the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, they were actually a string of islands, where up to 15 towns and villages were artificially grouped together to represent one urban constituency.

In other ways, too, Saxony's 1868 suffrage was intended to produce as many non-voters as possible. First, because only one-third of eligible voters were called to the polls every two years, two thirds of them sat at home, every time. No great political upheaval, no electoral landslide, could suddenly change the political complexion of the lower house in one election. No oppositional movement that might endanger the security of the state or its mainly bourgeois backers could change the make-up of the entire legislature unless it prevailed for three partial elections, or six years. Second, because those 26 or 27 constituencies were dabbled throughout the kingdom, and because one candidate might have to appeal to the residents of five to fifteen different localities – not an easy matter given the exigencies of transportation and communication in the 1870s and 1880s – the prospect was slim that a really energetic campaign would get off the ground. In short, the government and all parties to the right of the Social Democrats wanted to *dampen* election excitement, not encourage it.

Turnout rates for Reichstag and Landtag elections reflected the different political equations at play. For the Reichstag, turnout rose from 50 percent in 1871 to over

80 percent in the plebiscitary elections of 1887.²⁸ For the Landtag, turnout barely exceeded 25 percent in 1871. It did not break the 50 percent mark until 1891. But the lack of *political* democracy in Saxony and the Reich could not stop the *social* democratization of public life over these same decades. What Karl Mannheim referred to as the »fundamental politicization« of German society continued and accelerated. So did the prosperity and ambition of Saxony's working classes. As more and more workers exceeded the tax threshold of 3 Marks for the vote, and as the SPD encouraged more of them to seek the necessary citizenship requirements for enfranchisement, the Social Democrats started winning Landtag seats, just as they were doing in biannual elections to Leipzig's city council. Leipzig's city fathers met this challenge in 1894 by inaugurating a new municipal suffrage regime which privileged higher incomes, property ownership, and education.²⁹ Chemnitz and Dresden followed suit in 1899 and 1905. The *Verein für Sozialpolitik* found these examples of municipal suffrage reform praiseworthy, and the liberal civil servants and statisticians who assessed these reforms for the *Verein* applauded the principle of rewarding achievement (*Leistung*) with extra votes. They never admitted that these reforms amounted to suffrage robbery, as the Social Democrats claimed. If we expand our definition of the non-voter, we might conclude that the socialists had the better argument.

In the Saxon Landtag of 1895, the SPD held 15 of 82 seats. It appeared poised to win more soon. Suddenly a national emergency was at hand, or so the story went.³⁰ The non-voters of 1868 had become the Social Democratic voters of the 1890s. As a result, the three parties in Saxony's own Kartell – which included the left-liberal Progressives – rammed through a second suffrage reform in early 1896. It inaugurated a three-class suffrage that differed only slightly from Prussia's more notorious suffrage dating from 1850. As in Prussia, any pro-SPD delegate that might be elected in the third voting class (80 percent of eligible voters) was outvoted in the second stage of the indirect voting process by the delegates (*Wahlmänner*) elected by more affluent burghers in the first and second voting classes. Workers' votes were devalued almost to nil, and turnout sank accordingly: it reverted to about 30 percent by 1899. Moreover, all the mechanisms to dampen electoral mobilization in 1868 were retained in the new suffrage. As a result, with each partial election, those 15 sitting Socialists were thrown out of the house one by one. In 1901 not a single Social Democrat was left in the Saxon Landtag. The Conservatives held a two-thirds majority, which was enough to block any further constitutional reform.

Or so they thought. But public opinion could not be silenced in the same way that socialists could be disadvantaged. The turning point came in 1903, when public outrage over this suffrage robbery, combined with an economic downturn and a royal scandal, resulted in the SPD winning 22 of 23 Saxon seats in the Reichstag. »Red Sax-

²⁸ J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, p. 294.

²⁹ J. RETALLACK/T. ADAM, *Philanthropy und politische Macht*, 2001.

³⁰ On the broader political context of 1894–1896, see J. RETALLACK, *Democracy in Disappearing Ink*, 2015.

ony« was born overnight. For the next six years, arguably the most vigorous suffrage discourse Germany had ever known tore at the seams of Saxon political culture. The outcome was a third, plural suffrage, legislated in January 1909 and tested for the first and only time the following October. Again the advocates of this reform insisted that the vote remained universal – *allgemein*. Again they were (pedantically) correct. But now every eligible voter received a different color envelope into which he stuffed his ballot. The color depended on whether he met a multitude of criteria based on income, property, education, and now also age. These criteria determined how many times that envelope would be »counted.« In effect, electors were given up to three extra »votes«, for a maximum of four. Many working-class Saxons were entitled to only one »vote«, whereas many wealthy industrialists, prosperous businessmen, independent shopkeepers, and even holders of small and middle-sized agricultural enterprises were entitled to two, three, or four. Broadly speaking, one of every two Saxon voters in 1909 voted for a Social Democratic candidate. But when the differently colored envelopes were piled into different stacks and the weighted ballots were counted, only about 38 percent of them had been cast for SPD candidates. Social Democrats did much better than expected, winning 25 of 91 Landtag constituencies, in part because turnout rocketed back up to 83 percent. But once again, for adherents of the *Ordnungsparteien*, the sky was falling.

Like Eugen Würzburger and like higher civil servants in Saxony's ministry of the interior, these »right-thinking« Saxon burghers felt a nasty trick had been played on them. Instead of restricting the number of SPD deputies in the new house to 15 or 16, as predicted, the gerrymander designed to increase the ranks of the non-voter had failed. To be on the safe side, part of that 1909 suffrage reform had decreed that elections needed to be held only every six years. Thus the election skirmish of 1909, which turned out so badly, would not escalate into an election war again until 1915. Saxon political life would not be »disrupted« by the brutal techniques of modern election campaigns in the intervening years: Social Democrats and other *de facto* non-voters would remain marginalized. But war came anyway.

3. The non-voter in Germany since 1919

Any attempt to understand voting (and non-voting) trends in Germany since 1919 faces problems that are unusual for modern democracies. The most obvious is the many regime changes that occurred in this period: Kaiserreich, Weimar Republic, Nazi dictatorship, two separate states, and a reunified country. All these changes involved major transformations of society, politics, economics, and culture, and turnout rates for German elections did not escape any of these influences. Consider just the age requirement for enfranchisement: the Kaiserreich boasted universal manhood suffrage for those over the age of 25; the Weimar Republic introduced male and female suffrage and lowered the voting age from 25 to 20 years; after 1949 in the Bundesrepublik, the voting age was raised to 21 but lowered to 18 in 1972. In addition to

the suffrage, the actual boundaries of Germany were transformed through the century and the German population suffered huge casualties in both wars. From the perspective of the »non-voter«, such loss of life and territory was hardly inconsequential. Millions of formerly eligible voters were now living outside Germany or lying in graves: they all became, in a way, non-voters. Voter turnout in German federal elections rose dramatically from 1949 to 1972, albeit with a plateau in the 1960s. Thereafter turnout rates went down, slowly at first and then rapidly after 1983. Political abstinence famously reached a new high – or low, depending on your definition – around 1990. Then the »super election year« (*Superwahljahr*) of 1994 started to reverse this trend, refuting democracy's doomsayers.

To make sense of the available electoral data, scholars usually divide voters into categories based on party preferences, confessions, or other social groupings. Using such categories certainly helps, but the same problem noted earlier persists: how do we divide up and analyze the electorate over a 100-year time span? In the literature, there is no unanimity about how to do this. In 1966, the sociologist M. Rainer Lepsius presented his theory of four socio-moral milieux (Catholic, socialist, conservative, and liberal) to understand Imperial Germany's political culture. This theory influenced later scholars, who adapted it as best they could. Jürgen Falter, in his studies of voting in the Weimar Republic, preferred the term »political subcultures« to Lepsius's socio-moral milieux: he divided the German electorate into five political subcultures.³¹ Jonathan Sperber's focus was on »the Kaiser's voters«, but he also attempted to create categories to accommodate the post-1918 electorate. He proposed six »party groups«, of which the last, significantly, was non-voters.³² Naturally these different ways of dividing up the German electorate complicate the problem of discovering where the non-voter fits into each of them. But these and other scholars have reached partial consensus in many areas.

The German electorate in 1919 differed fundamentally from the one that last went to the polls in 1912. Two years before the First World War, the SPD won close to 35 percent of the popular vote and 110 of 397 Reichstag seats. Seven years later, Germany had lost millions of eligible voters. However, by granting voting rights to women and lowering the age of eligibility from 25 to 20 in 1919, the Weimar Republic also gained a huge cohort of new voters. During the fourteen years of its existence, the new German republic maintained turnout levels similar to those in the late Kaiserreich. Between 1919 and 1928, turnout decreased from 83 percent to 76 percent, but the trend was reversed from 1930 to the last »free« election of 1933, when participation increased from 82 percent to 88 percent.³³

In general, the Weimar period saw a steady decline of the liberal parties (mainly the German Democratic Party and the German People's Party) – a process that continued after the Second World War with the liberal Free Democratic Party. The Chris-

³¹ J. FALTER, *Social Bases of Political Cleavages*, 1992, p. 375.

³² J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, p. 296.

³³ M. EILFORT, *Nichtwähler*, 1994, pp. 45–7; S. WASMEIER, *Wer wählte Hitler?*, 2009, p. 19.

tian parties (Center and Bavarian People's Party) also faced a slight decline during the Weimar period; but their capacity to attract newly enfranchised women voters helped them avoid a worse fate. The socialist camp more or less maintained its share of voters, but the distribution between the SPD and the KPD changed along the way. On the Right, the German National People's Party (DNVP) had ups and downs during a period of overall decline, while the Nazi Party (NSDAP) went from political insignificance to the strongest party in 1932–33.³⁴

Something that must be kept in mind when analyzing election results from the Weimar period is the rapid expansion of the electorate. There were 10 million more eligible voters in 1933 than in 1919. Thus, approximately 40 percent of all voters in the elections of 1932 and 1933 had not had the right to vote in 1919. These new voters had grown up and matured during the war and the early years of the Republic.³⁵ But were they responsible for Hitler's electoral successes? The question »Who voted for Hitler?« has been one of the most controversial questions scholars have asked when dealing with electoral politics during the Weimar Republic. The literature is large, complicated, and contentious.

One of the first studies to examine the Nazis' remarkable success at the polls after 1930 was authored by the sociologist Rudolf Heberle. In his 1945 regional study of Schleswig-Holstein, Heberle highlighted the affinities between rural populations and Nazism, especially for Protestant farmers. Although it was not possible to extrapolate from such a regional study to explain the situation on the national stage, this study is still justly regarded as pioneering.³⁶ In the 1960s, two political sociologists, Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, used similar methods of data analysis to study other groups of German electors during the Weimar period. Bendix argued that Nazi voters came from previous DNVP supporters, from first-time voters, and from previous abstainers. For his part, Lipset came to the conclusion that Hitler's voters came mainly from the liberal middle classes.³⁷ For Jürgen Falter, writing in the 1980s, the NSDAP constituted the first *Volkspartei* (often too loosely described as a »catch-all party«). Falter and his colleagues showed that the Nazis were able to attract many voters who had either abstained or supported liberal and conservative parties earlier. New supporters came from other political constituencies too. But according to Falter, in the elections of March 1933, half of the Nazi voters had previously supported a party of the bourgeois-Protestant bloc, whereas only one-third came from the ranks of non-voters. Less than 10 percent – still a significant number – were former socialists. The Nazi electorate was considerably more heterogeneous than most scholars thought at the time.³⁸

³⁴ J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, pp. 297 f.; J. FALTER/T. LINDENBERGER/S. SCHUMANN, *Wahlen und Abstimmungen*, 1986, p. 119.

³⁵ J. FALTER/T. LINDENBERGER/S. SCHUMANN, *Wahlen und Abstimmungen*, 1986, p. 119.

³⁶ S. WASMEIER, *Wer wählte Hitler*, 2009, pp. 147 f.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁸ J. FALTER, *Social Bases of Political Cleavages*, 1992, pp. 393 f.

Falter's theory of the NSDAP as the first German *Volkspartei* has been criticized in recent years, but its relevance has not been diminished. Jonathan Sperber agrees with Falter that the NSDAP was a political coalition of voters with different backgrounds. However, it was not the first German party to reach voters from different milieus or party groups in this way. In the Reichstag elections of January 1912, the SPD had also successfully appealed to voters outside its traditional clientele of working-class Protestants.³⁹ (Indeed, the SPD's so-called *Mitläufer* were indispensable to its victory in those twenty-two Saxon constituencies in 1903.) A group of historians around Gary King has recently added new comparative and economic aspects to the research on Nazi voters. Although they agree with the idea of the Nazi party as a political coalition, they do not consider it an exceptional phenomenon: the dramatic swing of voters from many different social groups to a party suddenly seen to be »on the rise« (or even »unstoppable«) happens regularly in modern democracies. These scholars have focused particularly on the economic incentives that pushed electors to vote for the Nazis. Their conclusion is that, in the crisis years of Weimar, those who were most hurt by the Depression but were still employed gave disproportionate support to the Nazis, particularly in Protestant areas. These voters included self-employed shopkeepers, artisans, small farmers, lawyers, professionals, domestic employees, and those helping family members.⁴⁰

After 1949, the Federal Republic implemented a five-percent voting threshold for every political party seeking representation in the Bundestag. The aim was to avoid the chronic instability that characterized the Weimar Republic during its short existence. As a result of this measure, the number of parties with national standing oscillated between three and four from the 1950s to 1990: the SPD, the FDP, and the CDU/CSU. The fourth party was the national-conservative German Party, though only into the early 1960s, and then the Green Party, which first entered the Bundestag in 1983.⁴¹

As in the late Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic, voter turnout in the Federal Republic initially remained very high. From 79 percent in August 1949, it reached the high point of 90 percent during the elections of 1972 and 1976. It then receded slowly to 84 percent in 1987 and 78 percent in 1990.⁴² Over this period the different parties' fortunes diverged considerably. The decline of the liberal parties, already visible during Weimar, continued under the Federal Republic. The FDP was present in many governmental coalitions but it always struggled to reach the five-percent threshold. The right-wing parties never regained their pre-1945 following in the Federal Republic. The German Party was part of Konrad Adenauer's government coalition until the early 1960s, but it did not garner more than five to six percent of the popular vote and disappeared in 1961. On the left, the Communist Party was banned in 1956, leaving

³⁹ J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, pp. 315–317.

⁴⁰ G. KING *et al.*, *Ordinary Economic Voting Behavior*, 2008, pp. 951–962.

⁴¹ G. ROBERTS, *German Electoral Politics*, 2006, pp. 73–89.

⁴² M. EILFORT, *Politikverdrossenheit*, 1995, p. 48.

the SPD as sole representative of working-class voters. The SPD's share of the vote rose in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and it declined during the years when Adenauer and the Helmut Kohl were chancellor. The SPD also lost votes to the Green Party after its founding; but it always remained one of the two major parties.⁴³ The CDU/CSU grouping constituted the dominant force during the forty years of the Federal Republic. It won a majority of votes and a majority of seats in the 1957 elections.

A few observations can help explain this domination. The first points to the confessional make-up of West Germany. Until the Second World War, the German population was about one-third Catholic and two-thirds Protestant. However, with the division into two states, the regions forming West Germany were close to half-Catholic and half-Protestant. Also, unlike the Center Party and the Bavarian People's Party, the CDU/CSU succeeded in attracting Protestant voters, thus broadening its base without alienating its core Catholic support. By doing so, it was considered as the epitome of a new *Volkspartei*, winning support from different voting groups. Significantly, women voters migrated with a relatively high degree of loyalty from the Center to the CDU/CSU. This transference took on considerable importance given the number of former male voters who had been killed in the war or remained in Soviet POW camps after 1945.⁴⁴ The history of the German non-voter is a highly gendered history.

Despite the high turnout rates in the Federal Republic, the question of non-voting remained a constant concern.⁴⁵ One explanation for low voter turnout is common across modern democracies, but it is difficult to prove or disprove. This is the alleged apathy toward politics – and voting in particular – among youth. In their study of the relationship between age and turnout in Bundestag elections, Simone Abend-schön and Sigrid Roßteutscher were able to establish voting trends for different age groups.⁴⁶ Using what they called the »life cycles« theory, they divided the electorate⁴⁷ into four different groups: first-time voters (18–21 year olds); those 22–30 years old; those voting in their »middle years«; and the elderly. According to their results, first-time voters go to the polls more often than those who are 21–25 years old. Then there is a slow but constant increase in turnout rates among voters until they are about 60 years old, when we see the beginning of a gradual decline. Whether the overall turnout is around 90 percent (as in the mid-1970s) or closer to 70 percent (as in the early twenty-first century), the curves remain constant.⁴⁸

How do we interpret these findings? Abend-schön and Roßteutscher argue that 18–21 year olds turn out to vote because they are curious about the process and/or proud

⁴³ J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, pp. 297 f.; G. ROBERTS, *German Electoral Politics*, 2006, pp. 73–89.

⁴⁴ J. SPERBER, *Kaiser's Voters*, 1997, pp. 299–302; G. ROBERTS, *German Electoral Politics*, 2006, pp. 76 f.; K. BAKER/R. J. DALTON/K. HILDEBRANDT, *Germany Transformed*, 1981, pp. 164 f.

⁴⁵ See M. EILFORT, *Politikverdrossenheit*, 1995, pp. 111–119; C. LEGGEWIE, *Non-Voters*, 1993, pp. 43–53.

⁴⁶ S. ABENDSCHÖN/S. ROSSTEUTSCHER, *Jugend und Politik*, 2011, pp. 59–80, especially pp. 63–79.

⁴⁷ After 1972, when the voting age was lowered to 18 years.

⁴⁸ S. ABENDSCHÖN/S. ROSSTEUTSCHER, *Jugend und Politik*, 2011, 63–67.

to have the chance to use their newly acquired right to vote. By contrast, those aged 21 to 25 have non-political commitments that are more important or more meaningful. For their part, Gerhard A. Ritter and Merith Niehuss put the emphasis on the surroundings of these young voters. The first-time voters are more likely to vote than the 21–25 year olds (and sometimes the 25–30 year olds) because they have closer ties to the family home and their parents, who are in age groups more prone to vote. The 21–25 year-olds, on the other hand, are more mobile and surrounded by peers from the same age group. They have fewer social incentives to cast their ballot.⁴⁹

Abendschön and Roßteutscher also identify a dividing line within Germany's electoral culture in the twentieth century. They argue that the generation born in the 1950s constitutes a »transition« generation. Previous generations tended to make greater use of their right to vote, whereas subsequent generations voted less often – no matter to which age group they belong. These scholars affirm that Germans born in the first half of the twentieth century, with the socialization typical of this era, were much more likely to go to the polls: Voting was presented as a civic duty and part of a social norm.⁵⁰ If the »myth« of the lack of political interest among young people were true, they conclude, then those early twentieth-century decades are where we should have found proof. However, the post-1950s cohorts, in general, show similar degrees of disinterest in politics. Because these tendencies have remained more or less constant for the last forty-five years, one should not indulge in lamentations about political frustration and electoral disenchantment among young voters: these are not particularly recent phenomena.⁵¹

4. Conclusion

For over a century, the non-voter has been an important element of German political culture. Over the same period, discussions about the non-voter's motives and his or her impact on the outcome of elections has raged among scholars. Different methods have been put forward for integrating the non-voter into models of political and electoral behavior. Such models are addressed principally toward explaining other, larger questions about voter attitudes, election outcomes, and the ability of parties to motivate new or habitual supporters.

In this vast body of literature, there is still room for case studies that consider how, through history, willing electors have become *de facto* non-voters. As the example of three suffrage reforms in the former Kingdom of Saxony demonstrates, important questions remain about how parties and governments who professed staunchly liberal

⁴⁹ Ibid., S. 63; G. A. RITTER/M. NIEHUSS, *Wahlen*, 1991, p. 216.

⁵⁰ S. ABENDSCHÖN/S. ROSSTEUTSCHER, *Jugend und Politik*, 2011, p. 72; M. EILFORT, *Politikverdrossenheit*, 1995, p. 117.

⁵¹ S. ABENDSCHÖN/S. ROSSTEUTSCHER, *Jugend und Politik*, 2011, pp. 63–72; G. A. RITTER/M. NIEHUSS, *Wahlen*, 1991, p. 216.

views were able to find ways to keep their opponents from entering the polling place. In doing so, they rarely suffered a bad conscience.

The possibilities for comparing such anti-democratic strategies across countries, across suffrage regimes, across decades, and across generations call out for further scholarly attention. Such attention holds the risk that evidence (for example) about politically apathetic youth becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If young people are told they lack commitment to the democratic ideals of a previous generation, they are unlikely to respond in ways that encourage civic courage or foster constitutional reform when it is needed. If, on the other hand, scholars muster historical evidence to demonstrate that ways of driving unwelcome voters away from the polls have existed since before liberal democracies even existed, there is a good possibility that civic engagement will continue to rise in Germany and elsewhere. That in turn could promote healthier forms of political discourse and greater tolerance for diversity than exist today.

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