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Author

Anderson, Margaret Lavinia

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Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Review of

Democracy in the Undemocratic State: The German Reichstag Elections of 1898 and 1903. By

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With his title, Democracy in the Undemocratic State, Brett Fairbairn both summarizes the results of his investigation into the 1898 and 1903 German elections and brilliantly captures the ambiguities of Imperial Germany. For alongside a government serving at the pleasure of a military-and-bureaucratic monarchy, Germans enjoyed a suffrage that was as broad and egalitarian as any in the world. The fact that this democratic national franchise existed in tandem with restrictive state franchises and within a whole nexus of authoritarian relationships only increased its power as a political symbol. Voters turned out in huge numbers. The stakes in these elections were high: not the composition of the government, but certainly its legislation--and its legitimacy.

Fairbairn devotes fine chapters to the Right-wing, Catholic, liberal, and Social Democratic camps, but the high-point of his book is the chapter on the state's role in elections, the best treatment of this subject that I know. The undemocratic state, although not responsible to the electorate, was nevertheless vitally interested in election outcomes: its bureaucracy brokered deals between friendly parties; it influenced the press even more systematically than critics (and historians) suspected; it had a designated publishing house, Mittler and Son in Berlin, producing propaganda on a massive scale. It issued secret guidelines to political Beamten, telling them which parties they could support. But what were these officials to do when governmental parties ran against each other (in 1903, in thirty-seven districts)? How was the government to favor one without discrediting itself among supporters of the other? Even worse, as Chancellor Hohenlohe pointed out, "If the government intervened decisively for the Conservative party, it would take its possible defeat upon itself, and equally with a National Liberal..." (87). The greatest obstacles

to the state's ability to influence elections, however, were its own commitment to legal norms (which inhibited it from manipulating, for example, polling dates) and its sense of what constitutional propriety--and its own image as "above parties"--required. In the last analysis, the chief election instrument of Europe's most powerful state was--"talk" (85).

The book is studded with pithy generalizations ("Left liberals," Fairbairn points out [156], "united best where their cause was hopeless, and continued to quarrel where their share of the vote was large enough for winning to be within sight.") It is also full of challenges to what only two decades ago counted as axioms: that interest group politics are a threat to democratization (on the contrary, he insists, they are a driving force behind it); that parties in a multi-party system are unable to perform the function of interest aggregation; that Germany's failure to re-district resulted in disparities in voting power that became increasingly invidious. (No, by 1912 "the SPD was hardly disadvantaged at all" [p. 19]). And in a chapter on "The Context of Campaigns" he rounds up the usual suspects (social imperialism, Sammlungspolitik, Staatsstreich-threats, nationalist Verbände, plebiscitarian caesarism) in a frontal assault on the generation of scholars which, using these concepts, made its mark in the sixties and seventies: Stegmann, Puhle, Winkler, Nipperdey, Saul, Wehler, and less explicitly but certainly by extension--Berghahn, Röhl, and Pogge von Strandmann. These revisions will not be new to those who have read Fairbairn's excellent 1987 Oxford dissertation. New is his conclusion and a stimulating introduction that forcefully deploys the recent political science literature on developing countries; multiple regression analyses (present in graphs and clearly explained in appendices, but--so far as I can see--not affecting the argument, which is unchanged); and material from the Schleswig-Holstein Landesarchiv, added to what was already an impressive archival base.

Fairbairn says so many smart and wise things in this book, and says them so well, that the Schönheitsfehler seem particularly regrettable. The worst, the howler that the Empire had the "first-past-the-post" voting system (259), must be the printer's fault--since elsewhere he gets this right. Fairbairn follows a hoary (but still wrong) tradition in asserting (18) that the Reichstag could not initiate bills. Article 23 of the Constitution and the history of imperial legislation prove

otherwise. He states that the BdL's "core of strength" lay in the north and east (130), when by 1900 it had more members in the west than in the east; that "in Bavaria, the Centre was the 'established' party, seen as tied to the elites, to state government" (188), when the liberals were the establishment until the early twentieth century--which explains Center-SPD cooperation until that time; that the socialist law had lapsed by the elections of March 1890 (224), although the law expired only in September. He thinks that the government was "anxious" (!) for the Reichstag to pass its measures to ensure the secret ballot in 1903 (97), when the government deliberately denied the Reichstag a chance to pass (and shape) these measures by issuing a Bekanntmachung. Dismissing complaints that Wilhelmine votes were often not freely given, he wrongly assumes that even before 1903 voters had ballot envelopes to conceal their choices (16). To contemporary arguments that many election "urns" allowed panels to keep track of who voted for whom, he responds that "by 1903" such concerns were becoming "a quaint anachronism....The government was actively encouraging large, slit-topped ballot boxes...." (119). A look in the Reichsamt des Innern's archives beyond the year 1903 (folders 14474, 14476, and 14496) would have demonstrated the contrary. The imperial government, fearful that any effort to protect the secret ballot in Reichstag elections would legitimate demands to end open voting in Prussian Landtag elections, repeatedly resisted introducing ballot boxes designed to ensure secrecy until 1913--after the Empire's last election.

The decision to end his analysis in 1903 affects what is most new, and potentially most fruitful, in this book: the use of the concept of populism--an ensemble of behaviors, issues, and values, linked by their celebration of the virtues of the ordinary citizen--to understand developments in electoral politics. Refreshingly, Fairbairn detoxifies the concept. To assume that populism is "inherently and always bad...implies the most pessimistic possible view about the character of the population and the most optimistic possible view of government by elites" (24). This perspective allows him to extend the concept, beyond the usual agrarians and antisemites, to cover the Center, the Left Liberals (although he wobbles somewhat here), and even the SPD: a move that brings considerable analytical clarity into what was going on in this period. Populism was reflected in changing campaign styles, mass organizations, moves towards "identity" criteria

in the choice of candidates, the demand for "imperative mandates," as well as in the choice of issues: fairness in taxation, opposition to privilege (although free traders and farmers defined privilege differently), and support for popular rights, especially the empire's democratic franchise and the demand that it be extended to the state elections.

So far, so good. But if populism was what now distinguished winners from losers, why did the liberal camp, "ebbing" in the nineties, rebound to a third of the popular vote in 1903--not much more than one percentage point below its 1890 level? And why did the antisemites--the group, after all, that populism was initially designed to explain--decline? Astonishingly, Fairbairn does not ask, remarking only that antisemitic protest "ran its course." (123)

I suspect that the answer to these queries cannot be found by looking at 1898 and 1903 alone--which raises a central methodological question: why choose precisely these elections? Aside from their being "a significant moment" (33) in the lives of several parties, Fairbairn's only rationale is that they were "normal." Successive normal elections, however, are less likely to reveal their secrets than a pair that offered greater contrasts. Fairbairn's choice makes it difficult to test his populism argument against his book's most startling finding: that at the very moment that Germany was embarking upon the search for a place in the sun, when conditions seem ideal for exploiting navalism, colonialism, and nationalism, these issues "were conspicuous by their absence from electoral politics" (246). Are we to conclude that Germans were not susceptible to nationalist appeals? A revolutionary thought! But, Fairbairn asks, "how effective can social imperialism have been if it did not much affect elections?" (247) Indeed. But what then explains the hugely nationalist outcomes in the "Hottentot" elections, a mere four years later? 1907 is mentioned only in passing, with little explanation for the success of the government's campaign--based, he says, on "old-fashioned, top-level coalitions and 'national' issues" (240). Those, like me, inclined to buy Fairbairn's argument that "the SPD's success can be understood as one expression of the 'populist' drift of the times" (243) for 1903, may think he owes us an explanation for the SPD's defeats in 1907.

University of California at Berkeley

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