

Elections to the German Reichstag (1871–1890): A Statistical Overview

Abstract

The Reichstag was elected by universal, equal, direct, and secret male suffrage. For most of the imperial period, 397 deputies sat in the Reichstag, each one representing a single constituency. In 1871, each Reichstag constituency included about 100,000 people. But because the government and the right-wing parties refused to redraw the constituency boundaries to reflect major population shifts, some districts soon had many more voters than the national average and others far fewer. To be elected to the Reichstag a candidate needed an absolute majority. Since more than two candidates usually vied for a given constituency, it was often the case that none secured an absolute majority. When this occurred, a second or “run-off” ballot between the two leading vote recipients was held a week or two after the main election. Over the years, voter turnout increased substantially, as the following table indicates. There was an early peak in turnout in 1887, when 77 percent of eligible voters tramped to the polls—a remarkable participation rate compared with that of many democracies today. Here, one can measure the main political parties’ gains and losses as they tried to cope with the demands of mobilizing voters in the age of mass politics, though these statistics provide only a starting point. The most important trend is the gradual erosion of support for the two conservative parties, the relatively stable support enjoyed by the Catholic Center Party, and the rise of the Social Democratic Party, which won more votes than any other party from 1890 onwards and which fielded the largest single caucus in the Reichstag after the elections of January 1912.

Source

Election Results in Overview

1st Reichstag 1871⁷

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 7,656,000				
Total votes cast: 3,907,000				
Voter turnout: 51.0 %				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ :19.4 %				
Conservatives	0.549	14.1	57	14.9
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.346	8.9	37	9.7
National Liberals	1.171	30.1	125	32.7
Liberals	0.281	7.2	30	7.9
Liberal Union ²	–	–	–	–
German Progressive Party ³	0.342	8.8	46	12.0
German People’s Party	0.019	0.5	1	0.3
Center	0.724	18.6	63	16.5
Guelphs	0.052	1.4	6	1.6
Social Democrats	0.124	3.2	2	0.5

Poles	0.176	4.5	13	3.4
Danes ⁴	0.025	0.7	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	–	–	–	–
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.079	2.0	1	0.3
Total	3.888	–	382	–

2nd Reichstag 1874

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 8,523,000				
Total votes cast: 5,220,000				
Voter turnout: 61.2 %				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 21.6%				
Conservatives	0.360	6.9	22	5.5
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.376	7.2	33	8.3
National Liberals	1.543	29.7	155	39.0
Liberals	0.054	1.0	3	0.8
Liberal Union ²	–	–	–	–
German Progressive Party ³	0.448	8.6	49	12.3
German People's Party	0.022	0.4	1	0.3
Center	1.446	27.9	91	22.9
Guelphs	0.073	1.4	4	1.0
Social Democrats	0.352	6.8	9	2.3
Poles	0.198	3.8	14	3.5
Danes ⁴	0.034	0.7	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.235	4.5	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.051	1.0	–	–
Total	5.190	–	397	–

3rd Reichstag 1877

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 8,943,000				
Total votes cast: 5,423,000				
Voter turnout: 60.6%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 20.9%				
Conservatives	0.526	9.7	40	10.1
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.427	7.9	38	9.6
National Liberals	1.470	27.2	128	32.2
Liberals	0.135	2.5	13	3.3

Liberal Union ²	–	–	–	–
German Progressive Party ³	0.418	7.7	35	8.8
German People's Party	0.045	0.8	4	1.0
Center	1.341	24.8	93	23.4
Guelphs	0.085	1.6	4	1.0
Social Democrats	0.493	9.1	12	3.0
Poles	0.216	4.0	14	3.5
Danes ⁴	0.023	0.4	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.200	3.7	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.022	0.4	–	–
Total	5.401	–	397	–

4th Reichstag 1878

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 9,124,000				
Total votes cast: 5,781,000				
Voter turnout: 63.4%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 21.4				
Conservatives	–	–	–	–
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.786	13.6	57	14.4
National Liberals	1.331	23.1	99	24.9
Liberals	0.156	2.7	10	2.5
Liberal Union ²	–	–	–	–
German Progressive Party ³	0.385	6.7	26	6.6
German People's Party	0.066	1.1	3	0.8
Center	1.328	23.1	94	23.7
Guelphs	0.100	1.7	10	2.5
Social Democrats	0.437	7.6	9	2.3
Poles	0.210	3.6	14	3.5
Danes ⁴	0.018	0.3	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.179	3.1	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.015	0.3	–	–
Total	5.761	–	397	–

5th Reichstag 1881⁸

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 9,090,000				
Total votes cast: 5,118,000				
Voter turnout: 56.3%				

Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 20.1%				
Conservatives	0.831	16.3	50	12.6
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.379	7.4	28	7.1
National Liberals	0.747	14.7	47	11.8
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ²	0.429	8.4	46	11.6
German Progressive Party ³	0.649	12.7	60	15.1
German People's Party	0.103	2.0	9	2.3
Center	1.183	23.2	100	25.2
Guelphs	0.087	1.7	10	2.5
Social Democrats	0.312	6.1	12	3.0
Poles	0.195	3.8	18	4.5
Danes ⁴	0.014	0.3	2	0.5
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.153	3.0	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.015	0.3	–	–
Total	5.097	–	397	–

6th Reichstag 1884

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 9,383,000				
Total votes cast: 5,682,000				
Voter turnout: 60.6%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 20.7%				
Conservatives	0.861	15.2	78	19.6
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.388	6.9	28	7.1
National Liberals	0.997	17.6	51	12.8
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ² together with German Progressive Party ³	0.997	17.6	67	16.9
German People's Party	0.096	1.7	7	1.8
Center	1.282	22.6	99	24.9
Guelphs	0.096	1.7	11	2.8
Social Democrats	0.550	9.7	24	6.0
Poles	0.203	3.6	16	4.0
Danes ⁴	0.014	0.3	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.166	2.9	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	–	–	–	–
Others	0.013	0.2	–	–

Total	5.663	–	397	–
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7th Reichstag 1887

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 9,770,000				
Total votes cast: 7,570,000				
Voter turnout: 77.5%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 20.9%				
Conservatives	1.147	15.2	80	20.2
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.736	9.8	41	10.3
National Liberals	1.678	22.2	99	24.9
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ² together with German Progressive Party ³	0.973	12.9	32	8.1
German People's Party	0.089	1.2	–	–
Center	1.516	20.1	98	24.7
Guelphs	0.113	1.5	4	1.0
Social Democrats	0.763	10.1	11	2.8
Poles	0.220	2.9	13	3.3
Danes ⁴	0.012	0.2	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.234	3.1	15	3.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.012 ⁹	0.2	1	0.3
Others	0.048	0.6	2	0.5
Total	7.541	–	397	–

8th Reichstag 1890

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 10,146,000				
Total votes cast: 7,262,000				
Voter turnout: 71.6%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 21.7%				
Conservatives	0.895	12.4	73	18.4
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.482	6.7	20	5.0
National Liberals	1.178	16.3	42	10.6
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ² together with German Progressive Party ³	1.160	16.0	66	16.6
German People's Party	0.148	2.0	10	2.5
Center	1.342	18.6	106	26.7
Guelphs	0.113	1.6	11	2.8
Social Democrats	1.427	19.7	35	8.8

Poles	0.247	3.4	16	4.0
Danes ⁴	0.014	0.2	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.101	1.4	10	2.5
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.048	0.7	5	1.3
Others	0.075	1.0	2	0.5
Total	7.229	–	397	–

9th Reichstag 1893

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 10,628,000				
Total votes cast: 7,702,000				
Voter turnout: 72.5%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 21.5%				
Conservatives	1.038	13.5	72	18.1
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.438	5.7	28	7.1
National Liberals	0.997	13.0	53	13.4
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ²	0.258	3.9	13	3.3
German Progressive Party ³	0.666	8.7	24	6.0
German People's Party	0.167	2.2	11	2.8
Center	1.469	19.1	96	24.2
Guelphs	0.102	1.3	7	1.8
Social Democrats	1.787	23.3	44	11.1
Poles	0.230	3.0	19	4.9
Danes ⁴	0.014	0.2	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.115	1.5	8	2.0
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.264	3.4	16	4.0
Others	0.129	1.7	5	1.3
Total	7.674	–	397	–

10th Reichstag 1898

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 11,441,000				
Total votes cast: 7,787,000				
Voter turnout: 68.1%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 21.9				
Conservatives	0.859	11.1	56	14.1
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.344	4.4	23	5.8
National Liberals	0.971	12.5	46	11.6
Liberals	–	–	–	–

Liberal Union ²	0.196	2.5	12	3.0
German Progressive Party ³	0.558	7.2	29	7.4
German People's Party	0.109	1.4	8	2.0
Center	1.455	18.8	102	25.7
Guelphs	0.105	1.4	9	2.3
Social Democrats	2.107	27.2	56	14.1
Poles	0.244	3.1	14	3.5
Danes ⁴	0.015	0.2	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.107	1.4	10	2.5
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.284	3.7	13	3.3
Others	0.397	5.1	18	4.5
Total	7.752	–	397	–

11th Reichstag 1903

	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Persons eligible to vote: 12,531,000				
Total votes cast: 9,534,000				
Voter turnout: 76.1%				
Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 22.2%				
Conservatives	0.948	10.0	54	13.6
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.333	3.5	21	5.3
National Liberals	1.313	13.8	51	12.8
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ²	0.243	2.6	9	2.3
German Progressive Party ³	0.543	5.7	21	5.3
German People's Party	0.091	1.0	6	1.5
Center	1.875	19.7	100	25.2
Guelphs	0.094	1.0	6	1.5
Social Democrats	3.011	31.7	81	20.4
Poles	0.348	3.7	16	4.0
Danes ⁴	0.015	0.2	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.102	1.1	9	2.3
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.245	2.6	11	2.8
Others	0.334	3.5	11	2.8
Total	9.495	–	397	–

12th Reichstag 1907

Persons eligible to vote: 13,351,000 Total votes cast: 11,303,000 Voter turnout: 84.7% Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 22.0	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Conservatives	1.060	9.4	60	15.1
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.472	4.2	24	6.0
National Liberals	1.637	14.5	54	13.6
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ²	0.359	3.2	14	3.5
German Progressive Party ³	0.736	6.5	28	7.1
German People's Party	0.139	1.2	7	1.8
Center	2.180	19.4	105	26.4
Guelphs	0.078	0.7	1	0.3
Social Democrats	3.259	29.0	43	10.8
Poles	0.454	4.0	20	5.0
Danes ⁴	0.015	0.1	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.104	0.9	7	1.8
Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.249	2.2	22	5.5
Others	0.528	4.7	11	2.8
Total	11.263	–	397	–

13th Reichstag 1912

Persons eligible to vote: 14,442,000 Total votes cast: 12,261,000 Voter turnout: 84.9% Persons eligible to vote in % of the population ¹ : 22.2%	Number of votes (millions)	Share of the vote (in %)	Number of seats	Share of seats (in %)
Conservatives	1.126	9.2	43	10.8
Reich Party (Free Conservatives)	0.367	3.0	14	3.5
National Liberals	1.663	13.6	45	11.3
Liberals	–	–	–	–
Liberal Union ² together with German Progressive Party ³ and the German People's Party	1.497	12.3	42	10.6
Center	1.997	16.4	91	22.8
Guelphs	0.085	0.7	5	1.3
Social Democrats	4.250	34.8	110	27.7
Poles	0.442	3.6	18	4.5
Danes ⁴	0.017	0.1	1	0.3
Alsace-Lorrainers ⁵	0.162	1.3	9	2.3

Antisemites, Economic Union ⁶	0.300	2.5	10	2.5
Others	0.301	2.5	9	2.3
Total	12.207	–	397	–

1) According to the most recent census in each case. The following should be considered: in elections occurring some time after the preceding census (such as the 1890 election, which used the census from 1885—not the one from 1890—as a basis), the percentage of persons eligible to vote among the total population appears slightly higher than it actually was. The lower percentage in 1871 can be attributed in part to poorly maintained electoral registers.

2) From 1893 onward: *Freisinnige* (instead of *Liberale*—different term, same meaning) Vereinigung; as of 1910: incorporated into the Progressive People’s Party.

3) From 1884 onward: German Liberal Party; from 1893 onward: Liberal People’s Party; as of 1910: incorporated into the Progressive People’s Party.

4) In Schleswig-Holstein, votes cast for both the Particularists and the Protest Party were here applied to the Danes, provided that no additional data was included in the official statistics.

5) According to convention, votes cast in Alsace-Lorraine for the Center Party were applied to the Alsace-Lorrainers until 1878, as were votes of those Reichstag deputies listed in official statistics from 1874 to 1878 as counting toward the Center Party although they were classified as “not belonging to the parliamentary party.”

6) Antisemites participated in the Reichstag elections from 1887 to 1903 as splinter groups under the names: Christian-Socialist Party, German Reform Party, German-Socialist Reform Party, and German-Socialist Party. As of 1907, this category also includes the Economic Union, into which the Antisemites incorporated themselves as the dominant group.

7) As yet without the Alsace-Lorrainers. These figures are the corrected ones from vol. 250 of *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs* [Statistics of the German Reich], 1912. The data was corrected because the figures supplied for the 10th constituency in Frankfurt and the 12th constituency in Breslau in the election statistics of 1871/74 did not reflect the results of the first regular elections but, by mistake, those of the by-elections.

8) Based on subsequent communications, a total of 120,501 votes classified as liberal were attributed to other parties. The results were taken from vol. 250 of *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, loc. cit., and they differ slightly from those listed in the election statistics of 1881.

9) Data from vol. 250 of *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, loc. cit. In the 1887 election statistics, the votes cast for the Antisemites were included under the category “undetermined.”

Sources: Part of the data was taken from *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, vol. 250, 1912–1913, appendix without page number, “Zusammenstellung der Zahlengrundlagen für die Tafel 2.” The data for the parties of the Guelphs, Danes, Alsace-Lorrainers, as well as the breakdown for the liberal parties was calculated according to: *Vierteljahreshefte zur Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, first series, 3rd year 1875, pp. 2–51; *Monatshefte zur Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, 1879, June issue, pp. 4–35, 40–71; 1882, issue III, pp. 2–33; 1884, issue IV, pp. 2–33; 1885, issue I, pp. 106–137; 1890, issue IV, pp. 24–59; *Vierteljahreshefte zur Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, new issue, 2nd year, 1893, issue IV, pp. 4–55; 12th year, 1903, issue III, pp. 100–107; supplement for 1903, issue IV, pp. 6–7; supplement for 1907, issue I, pp. 62–69; issue III, pp. 8–9; *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, vol. 250, 1912–1913, issue II, pp. 4–9. Original data compiled and presented in tabular form in Gerhard A. Ritter with Merith Niehuss, *Wahlgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch. Materialien zur Statistik des Kaiserreich 1871–1918*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980, pp. 38–43.

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Recommended Citation: Elections to the German Reichstag (1871–1890): A Statistical Overview, published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1850>> [January 22, 2025].