

Carl Karsten, “Election Day“ (June 6, 1920)

Abstract

The first regular Reichstag elections of the Weimar Republic took place on June 6, 1920. They were held in the wake of the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, the Ruhr Uprising of March 1920, a tax reform and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles the previous year. This article, which appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* on election day and is reproduced here in excerpts, was written by Carl Karsten, who was the political editor responsible for the domestic politics section at the time. Although the *DAZ* was a conservative newspaper that had acted as an unofficial mouthpiece for the government during the Bismarck era, Karsten is not speaking out for or against any particular party or policy. Instead, his article exhorts voters and politicians alike to preserve and strengthen parliamentary democracy. After the *DAZ* was bought by the influential industrialist and DVP Reichstag deputy Hugo Stinnes in 1920, its political reporting and opinion pieces would take on an increasingly national-conservative tone in the following years.

Source

Election Day

[...]

The election signals a critique of how the state has been run thus far. This critique is necessary. That is the deeper meaning underlying the election. But it must not be purely negative, clinging to existing conditions, addressing them alone and deriving its conclusions from them. It must go further and ask whether it was even possible under the existing circumstances to create the preconditions for the existence of the state and its individual members beyond what had already been achieved in a way that would have meant significantly greater progress. It compels the voter to clarify whether a differently oriented form of government, or one that proceeds from contrary standpoints, could have created something different and improved; whether, had it been stronger and more life-affirming, it could have better and more successfully mastered the perils and difficulties confronting the transformation and reorganization of the state. And with this, the reflective voter will need to extend his critique beyond an assessment of the conduct of the governing parties to what the parties forming the opposition have achieved, or claim they are capable of achieving. Only when he also realizes this can he give his vote without running the risk of later accusing himself of a sin of omission.

[...]

In some circles of voters, people frequently identify current conditions, to the degree that they oppress the individual, with the present form of government and contrast such considerations as a criterion with the conditions under which the people and the state existed under the former imperial regime. This criterion is naturally incorrect. No other form of government, not even monarchy, could have altered or abolished all the consequences of the lost war. When nationalist agitators make such claims, they are deliberately making false assertions—just as it is absolutely wrong and deceptive to voters when a certain side repeatedly attempts to equate national sentiment with the concept of the necessity of monarchy. National sentiment is a notion that cannot be strictly attached to a specific form of government. There are surely enough Germans who inwardly regard the monarchy as the most fitting and advantageous form of government for Germany, and who nevertheless cannot and will not close their eyes to the idea that, under present-day conditions, it would be a crime to insist upon restoring the monarchy. Those truly inspired by the idea of nationalism will set up the following principle as their first

guideline for action: To do and aspire to whatever offers the best prospects of better times for the state and people under existing conditions. This precludes constantly looking backward and yearning for what once was, though. It demands that we look ahead and work towards the future energetically, freeing ourselves from all tradition. And one would think that partisan interests and moods must take a back seat to such necessity. That they, too, must not burden the election campaign by tossing in fruitless comparisons with past times, whose return is impossible.

Elections are the legislative means that provide every party with the opportunity to test how far the principles they promote have found favor among the population. If there is a majority for particular guidelines set by one side or the other, these will be decisive in future for state policy. And the opponents of the principles that enjoyed a majority have to make peace with this outcome. They are not, however, now condemned to step aside, on the contrary: they still have a right to promote their position within the framework provided by the parliament and, as far as they are successful, to assert themselves. But they must accept this framework and recognize that it limits their scope of action. If they fail to do so, they deny the nature of elections and turn them into a meaningless farce. Part of the fragmented Communist Party intends to act accordingly; it rejects the constitutional foundations of the election and only wishes to participate to exploit any mandates it may win in order to disrupt parliamentary life. This is a contradiction in terms, a contradiction tantamount to violating the principles of our constitution. It would be wrong to deny the validity of the opposition as such. A parliamentary opposition is even desirable and necessary. But it, too, must regard its purpose as participating positively in the development of legislation by offering suggestions and expressing misgivings. The opposition often fails to recognize this. The national assembly also suffered because the opposition, both right and left, acted not to cooperate but to obstruct, wasting the parliament's time and effort in days-long debates that surely could have been put to better use.

[...]

The peculiarity of the new voting process makes it difficult for voters who are not party stalwarts—and many nowadays cannot choose a particular partisan position—to assign their votes to the existing lists according to their political opinions. And yet, to decide to dispense with exercising this principal right guaranteed to them by citizenship would be irresponsible. If they support the state's right to exist as such and wish to secure our people's place in the history of the future, it would be a sin of omission for them to stand on the sidelines when it comes to laying the groundwork for these tasks. The election determines the shape of Germany's future, it decides on the manner of its development and the paths that are to lead there. It is not party doctrine in detail that the voter needs to support in all cases, but he will be able to find among the guidelines set by the individual parties a path that brings him closer to his goals. If he eschews voting, he must realize that he is indirectly promoting efforts that stand in opposition to his own wishes.

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