

Interactive Map: Reichstag Elections in the Weimar Republic (1919-1933)

Abstract

These nine interactive maps show the results within each electoral district [*Wahlkreis*] for every national legislative election from 1919 to 1933 and provide a useful measure of Germany's dramatically shifting political landscape over the course of the Weimar Republic. The last map shows the results from March 1933, an election that took place under repressive conditions five weeks after Hitler had come to power and that enabled the Nazi regime three weeks later to suspend the constitution altogether. Users might find it illuminating to follow a single district over time. The district of East Düsseldorf, for instance, not far from the Dutch border, registered particularly striking electoral swings as its voters cast the plurality of their votes for four different parties in a span of just 13 years, from the far left to the far right.

The last eight maps—starting with the June 1920 elections—reflect the postwar borders imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty and the boundaries of the 35 electoral districts created under the Federal Election Law [*Reichswahlgesetz*] in April 1920. The first map, divided into 38 districts, reflects Germany's more expansive boundaries as they existed for the elections to the National Assembly in January 1919, prior to the territorial losses imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. One of those districts, comprising the disputed western region of Alsace-Lorraine, did not participate at all, however, because French occupation forces prohibited it, and two other regions on Germany's eastern border faced an extensive boycott from voters of Polish background who longed to become part of an independent Polish state.

Source

Voting:

The provisional government in November 1918 lowered the voting age from 25 to 20 and extended the vote to women and soldiers for the very first time, all of which added 20 million more eligible voters to the German pollbooks for the January 1919 election. The April 1920 Election Law once again barred active soldiers from voting, but, because the Versailles Treaty had so severely restricted the size of the German military, this provision only affected about 100,000 men per election.

For the first five years of the Weimar Republic, the parties had to print their own ballots—which naturally listed only their candidates—and then either send them to potential voters by mail, hand them out at campaign rallies, or press them into voters' hands as they walked into the polling places. The voters then dropped the party ballot of their choice into the ballot box. Smaller parties balked at the expense and logistics of such an undertaking, though, and Germans across the spectrum bemoaned the huge waste of paper. In December 1923, the Reichstag passed a law that mandated government-issued ballots for federal elections, with voters marking their preference from a list of all of the parties. The introduction of these ballots not only eased the actual practice of voting, but it also encouraged citizens to see voting as an official function—perhaps even a patriotic duty—rather than simply an extension of party activism.

German voters turned out in remarkably high numbers throughout the Weimar Republic. Over 80% of eligible voters cast a ballot in 1919, after which voter turnout fluctuated in the mid- to high 70s during the 1920s, before rising again to well over 80% of eligible voters going to the polls for the Reichstag and presidential elections in the early 1930s. In addition to national legislative elections, German voters also

cast ballots in elections for their regional legislatures (*Landtage*) and for the German president, as well as in two nationwide referenda. The fact that Germany has always held its elections on a Sunday certainly helped to boost voter turnout by enabling people to find time to go to the polls.

The Political Parties:

Because Germany's national legislature, the *Reichstag*, reflected proportional representation, voters cast their ballots for a party, not for an individual candidate, and they paid close attention to party platforms. The largest party throughout most of the Weimar Republic, until July 1932, was the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany, represented in pink on the interactive map), which disproportionately represented skilled workers and supported policies on the political left, including workplace regulation, a public safety net, and city planning. Just to its right, the slightly left-of-center DDP (German Democratic Party) drew significant support from educated professionals, including many German Jews, and stood for constitutional rights, a secular state, and social tolerance (because it never won a plurality of votes in any district, the DDP does not have a color on the interactive map). In the middle of the political spectrum, the Zentrum/BVP (Center Party/Bavarian People's Party, represented in brownish-black on the interactive map) focused on protecting the rights of Germany's Catholic minority and generally leaned left on economic issues and right on questions of moral regulation. These three parties together—the SPD, DDP, and Zentrum/BVP—expressed the strongest support for Germany's 1919 constitution and democratic republic and came to be known as the “Weimar Coalition,” a term that had begun to circulate by 1925. It should be noted, however, that the Zentrum's Bavarian sister party, the BVP, leaned much further right than the other three parties, and its focus on preserving a degree of Bavarian autonomy sometimes put it at odds with the coalition's national agenda.

The political parties to the right of the “Weimar Coalition” expressed ambivalence or outright hostility toward republican democracy and tended to draw their support from the self-consciously nationalistic middle classes, particularly business owners and landholders in rural Protestant communities in northern and eastern Germany. The center-right DVP (German People's Party, represented in lavender on the interactive map) expressed deep misgivings about the republic at its founding, but the party gradually softened its position and began to back the new constitutional order. Indeed, its longtime leader, Gustav Stresemann, came to exemplify a political type known as the *Vernunftrepublikaner*, someone who recognized that the virtues of the democratic system outweighed its shortcomings and thus merited defending. To the right of the DVP, the DNVP (Germany National People's Party, represented in purple on the interactive map) vehemently and, in its early years, even violently opposed the republic. Its stance shifted only subtly over the course of the 1920s, as schisms and leadership changes alternately inched the party a bit closer to the center and then lurched it even further to the extreme right. A whole series of smaller far-right and right-leaning parties also began attracting support in mid-1920s, one of which was the revolutionary ethno-nationalist and antisemitic NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party, represented in brown on the interactive map), also known as “Nazis,” who achieved their big electoral breakthrough in 1930.

The parties to the left of the “Weimar Coalition” also expressed antipathy toward the republic, and even tried to violently overthrow it, but ultimately did not pose the same threat to German democracy that the far right did, and they struggled to expand their voter base beyond a core of mostly unskilled workers and sympathetic intellectuals, even during the height of the Great Depression. The USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, represented in yellow on the interactive map) emerged out of an antiwar faction within the SPD and then formed its own party in 1917 when it defied the SPD leadership by refusing to endorse additional funding for the war. The USPD envisioned a postwar economy marked by collective ownership and a postwar government guided by local workplace councils, rather than an elected parliament. It briefly joined forces with the SPD to guide Germany's transition during the November Revolution in 1918, but the two erstwhile comrades differed over the revolution's direction

and fell out once again in late December. A subsequent schism within the USPD itself led to its demise in 1922, when most of its remaining members voted to reunite with the SPD after having already lost substantial numbers to the Communists. That party, the KPD (Communist Party of Germany, represented in red on the interactive map), meanwhile, boycotted the 1919 National Assembly election, but then competed in the June 1920 *Reichstag* election and everyone thereafter, despite its reservations about the merits of representative democracy.

The apportionment of seats in the Reichstag:

The nine above-mentioned parties comprised just the largest and most important of the dozens of political parties that competed for seats at some point during the Weimar Republic, and lots of parties never gained representation at all. In the May 1928 elections, for instance, 37 parties appeared on a ballot somewhere in Germany, but only 15 of them managed to win at least one seat in the *Reichstag*.

Each party got one seat in the *Reichstag* for every 60,000 votes that it received in a given electoral district, in accord with the April 1920 Federal Election Law. Election officials then gathered the leftover votes for the party (*Reststimmen*) from several districts and lumped them together for a regional apportionment, using the same formula of one seat per 60,000 votes, and they did this one more time at the national level. Given that the number of voters varied from election to election, so did the resulting number of seats in the Reichstag, which reached a peak of 608 seats after the 84% turnout in the election of July 1932.

Once an election had determined how many seats each party would have in the *Reichstag*, the parties filled those seats with political stalwarts from a predetermined list. The first four names on that list usually appeared on the ballot, underneath the party's name, so that voters had at least some idea of who would represent them. Anyone 25 years of age or older could hold a seat in the legislature.

Coalition Governments:

Because so many parties participated in each election, no single party ever won a majority of the seats. Two or more parties therefore had to join together in a coalition and agree on a common policy agenda in order to form a government and pass legislation, a delicate process that often demanded more compromises than the parties were prepared to make. In those situations, a minority coalition governed with the "toleration" of an additional party or two whose added seats gave that coalition a majority. Most national governments during the Weimar Republic were minority coalitions, usually comprised of the DDP, Zentrum/BVP, and DVP, with the toleration of either the SPD on the left or the DNVP on the right. The Zentrum, in particular, played an outsized role in governing the Weimar Republic, participating in every coalition until late summer 1932 and providing half of the republic's chancellors.

Source: Design: Gabriel Moss (MossMaps) in collaboration with Erik Jensen, 2024.

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