

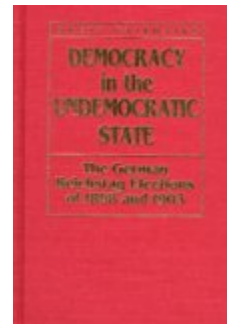
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Brett Fairbairn. *Democracy in the Undemocratic State: The German Reichstag Elections of 1898 and 1903.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. xiv + 408 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8020-7154-5; \$61.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-0795-7.

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Brett Fairbairn's important and well-argued work draws on close analysis of the Reichstag elections of 1898 and 1903 to analyze the emergence of modern democratic politics in late imperial Germany. The book's main title is accurate in that it does far more than investigate two elections. Fairbairn combines electoral analysis with a broad survey of politics. Building on the work of Stanley Suval, he investigates the political opportunities and challenges created by a transition toward democratic politics. [1]

>From the outset, Fairbairn demonstrates a refreshing readiness to investigate and define the modernity of democratic and populist politics in turn of the century Germany. This proves to be a useful exercise, but it might be helpful to assure those readers likely to raise an eyebrow at any attempt to define democracy as modern that this is one important form of modern politics rather than the only modern political form.

Tariffs and naval politics play a prominent role in many accounts of late imperial Germany. These were, after all, the years when the Reichstag began to fund Admiral Tirpitz's plans to expand the German fleet. However, Fairbairn stresses the political failures of social imperialism. Backing tariffs and naval expansion did not guarantee electoral success. The National Liberals, enthusiastic supporters of the fleet, fared badly in 1898's election (pp. 32-33, 62).

Detailing the weakness of the coalition favored by the German government, Fairbairn demonstrates the fluidity of boundaries between liberals and conservatives (pp. 43-44, 84). The Free Conservatives, the smaller of the major conservative parties, came to function as little more than an "option exercised at local discretion within the loose

government coalition (pp. 115-16)." Fairbairn makes an important point, and this fluidity should be recognized in any attempt to analyze liberals and conservatives in the party system of late imperial Germany.

Conservatives, liberals, and indeed all parties faced the challenge of new mass politics manifested most clearly to contemporaries by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as well as by agrarian populism (pp. 44-52). This new mass politics included permanent party organizations, mass membership parties, an emphasis on economic issues, and appeals to the people (p. 68).

Fairbairn makes an insightful argument in outlining the transition toward new forms of politics and appeals to the people, but how far did such a transition proceed? On the political right, the German Conservative Party (DKP) made populist overtures, but ultimately declined to become a people's party (pp. 122, 142). Both National Liberals and left liberals, remained vulnerable with vague bases, despite some left liberal success in appealing to working-class voters after 1903 (pp. 150, 162, 172-73). The predominantly Catholic Center Party remained stable in its base of support (pp. 179, 186-86).

Even the Social Democrats showed both the success and the incomplete transition to the new politics. In a sophisticated summary of the SPD's base, Fairbairn explains that the SPD and its affiliated organizations worked to create a new milieu. The SPD "did not represent a homogeneous class of proletarians." However, it won strong support from the "Protestant urban working classes (pp. 214-16, 226)." More consistent than its competitors in presenting itself as a *Volkspartei* or people's party, the SPD still remained most successful "within the emerging social-cultural environment of the urban work-

ing classes (pp. 222-23).”

Making important contributions to the study of Wilhelmine politics, this book is also part of a growing body of research on imperial elections. Fairbairn’s statistical analysis of elections and patterns of electoral support broadly matches that of Juergen Schmaedeke. [2] And unlike Jonathan Sperber, neither Schmaedeke nor Fairbairn suggests that the Social Democrats became the party of the Protestant middle class. [3] This discrepancy suggests cause for extreme caution in using occupational statistics as a measure of class identity.

In this authoritative and insightful book, Fairbairn convincingly demonstrates that late imperial Germany witnessed a shift in balance from the politics of notables to mass politics (p. 242). However, the parties, even the SPD, remained at an early state in their efforts to be-

come people’s parties with broad support across social and confessional boundaries.

Notes

[1]. Stanley Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

[2]. Juergen Schmaedeke, *Wahlerbewegung im Wilhelminischen Deutschland, Erster Band* (Berlin, 1995).

[3]. Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser’s Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 64, 306.

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