

## The Limits of Nationalist Politics: Electoral Culture and Mobilization in Germany, 1890-1903

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Volume 1, Number 1, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031014ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031014ar>

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### Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (print)

1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Fairbairn, B. (1990). The Limits of Nationalist Politics: Electoral Culture and Mobilization in Germany, 1890-1903. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 1(1), 145–169. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031014ar>

### Article abstract

With Germany's unification, nationalism became an entrenched part of the political culture, until its role was challenged by the rise of social "fairness" issues in the 1890s. In the first decades of the Reich, campaigns against minorities like Catholics, Poles, and Social Democrats helped cement the progovernmental forces, especially in intense "national" elections. The *Kartell* elections of 1887, in particular, created a patriotic coalition that remained a significant factor in electoral politics for over twenty years. But in the 1890s, nationalist coalition-building became increasingly difficult as the *Kartell* parties lost support, drifted apart, and competed more and more with one another. The government made efforts to shore up its allies, but these efforts failed to halt the disintegration. Significantly, while some argued the government should use the naval issue or the tariff issue (*Sammlungspolitik*) to influence the elections of 1898 and 1903, the government was unable to do so. Instead, increasing electoral support went to the parties that were perceived as "mass" parties, especially the Catholic Centre and Social Democrats. These parties organized social-interest constituencies by appealing to "fairness" issues like suffrage, civil liberties, and fair taxation.

# The Limits of Nationalist Politics: Electoral Culture and Mobilization in Germany, 1890-1903

BRETT FAIRBAIRN

## Résumé

*With Germany's unification, nationalism became an entrenched part of the political culture, until its role was challenged by the rise of social "fairness" issues in the 1890s. In the first decades of the Reich, campaigns against minorities like Catholics, Poles, and Social Democrats helped cement the progovernmental forces, especially in intense "national" elections. The Kartell elections of 1887, in particular, created a patriotic coalition that remained a significant factor in electoral politics for over twenty years. But in the 1890s, nationalist coalition-building became increasingly difficult as the Kartell parties lost support, drifted apart, and competed more and more with one another. The government made efforts to shore up its allies, but these efforts failed to halt the disintegration. Significantly, while some argued the government should use the naval issue or the tariff issue (Sammlungspolitik) to influence the elections of 1898 and 1903, the government was unable to do so. Instead, increasing electoral support went to the parties that were perceived as "mass" parties, especially the Catholic Centre and Social Democrats. These parties organized social-interest constituencies by appealing to "fairness" issues like suffrage, civil liberties, and fair taxation.*

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*Avec l'unification de l'Allemagne, le nationalisme devient une partie intégrante de la vie politique jusqu'à ce que son rôle soit remis en cause par les revendications sociales dans les années 1890. Durant les premières décennies du Reich, les campagnes de harcèlement contre les minorités, comme les catholiques, les Polonais et les socio-démocrates aident à resserrer les liens des forces gouvernementales, particulièrement lors des élections nationales. Le cartel électoral de 1887, en particulier, a créé une coalition patriotique qui saura jouer un rôle important dans la vie politique durant plus de vingt ans. Cependant, l'union de la coalition nationaliste devient de plus en plus difficile à maintenir durant les années 1890, alors que les partis du cartel perdent leur soutien, se dispersent et se font concurrence. Le gouvernement tente de soutenir ses alliés, mais ses efforts ne peuvent empêcher la désintégration du cartel. Fait révélateur, il est incapable de se servir des questions navale et tarifaire (Sammlungspolitik) lors des campagnes électorales de 1898 et de 1903. Le soutien électoral du peuple va aux partis de masse, notamment le Centre et le parti social-démocrate. Ces partis font vibrer*

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The research upon which this article is based was funded in part by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada doctoral fellowship. Some of the material, notably Table 1 and Figure 3, will also appear in a forthcoming volume edited by James Retallack and Larry Eugene Jones, *Elections, Mass Politics and Social Change in Modern Germany: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, forthcoming). I would like to give special thanks to Professor Retallack for his helpful comments and suggestions.

*la conscience sociale de leur clientèle électorale en faisant porter leurs revendications sur le suffrage, les libertés civiles et sur des impôts équitables.*

The unification of Germany in 1871 was not the last act of German nationalism but, in many respects, rather the beginning of a new kind of nationalism: a "state-supporting" (*staatserhaltende*) nationalism which sought to defend and enhance the power and unity of the new empire. From its earliest years, the nationalist cause of defending the empire was linked inextricably to attacking regional, ethnic, social, and political minorities and particularists. In election campaigns, this kind of nationalism helped initially to mobilize and polarize a growing electorate. Nationalist politics became a part of German electoral culture, and lingered in many ways even after new kinds of politics developed. But with the 1890s, nationalist politics and the parties which, with the help of the government, practised it, also encountered its limits. Instead politics came to be dominated by new social groupings, organized in new ways around social or "fairness" issues, reflecting the dramatic social change and politicization of the new era.

#### **"NATIONAL" ISSUES AND ELECTORAL MOBILIZATION IN GERMANY, 1871-1912**

There were two distinctly different kinds of Reichstag elections in imperial Germany: "national" campaigns, and all the rest. The "national" elections stand out as those in which the government set the tone of the campaign with a rousing patriotic or nationalistic cause. The pattern was set in some respects with the *Kulturkampf*, which involved an assault on the Catholic minority in Germany and a powerful defensive response by political Catholicism, as evidenced in the Catholic Centre Party's strong showing in the 1874 Reichstag campaign.

With the end of the *Kulturkampf* and changes in party alignments, however, the pattern of "national" elections becomes clearest for the period between 1878 and 1907. In several cases during this period, the Reichstag was dissolved over the failure of a piece of legislation considered essential by the government, which then took the initiative in a campaign against the Reichstag majority. These were one-issue, government-led campaigns. In this category clearly belong the elections of 1878, based on the government's proposed antisocialist legislation; those of 1887 and 1893, both concerned with failed military bills; and those of 1907, which were occasioned by a dispute concerning colonial policy. In each case there was increased turnout from the preceding election (with a drop in turnout in the following election, to create a kind of peak), together usually with increased seat totals for the right-wing parties, due both to increases in their combined percentage of votes and to firmer tactical alliances among them (Table 1). The losers in such campaigns, before 1907, were generally the left liberals;<sup>1</sup> and in 1907 it was the Social Democratic Party (SPD) which suffered while the left liberals actually benefitted in the final results.

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1. The term "left liberal" is used in this paper as a shorthand for the groups who referred to themselves at various times as *fortschrittlich* (progressive), as *freisinnig* (a term which has also been rendered as "free-thinking," "independent," or "Radical"), or as *demokratisch*. It also includes the *Deutsche Volkspartei* ([South] German People's Party).

THE LIMITS OF NATIONALIST POLITICS

**Table 1**  
**“National” Elections, 1871-1912**

	1871	1874	1877	1878	1881	1884	1887	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
dissolutions		D		D			D		D			D	D
% turnout	51.0	61.2	60.6	63.4	56.3	60.6	77.5	71.6	72.5	68.1	76.1	84.7	84.9
change		+10.2	-0.6	+2.8	-7.1	+4.3	+16.9	-5.9	+0.9	-4.4	+8.0	+8.6	+0.2
“Kartell” seats	219	210	206	215	125	157	220	135	153	125	126	138	100
change		-9	-4	+9	-90	+32	+63	-85	+18	-28	+1	+13	-38
“Kartell” %	52.9	43.7	44.7	49.6	38.2	39.5	47.0	35.2	32.1	27.9	27.2	28.0	25.7
change		-9.2	+1.0	+4.9	-11.4	+1.3	+7.5	-11.8	-3.1	-4.2	-0.7	+0.8	-2.3

Note: The elections of 1878, 1887, 1893, and 1907 share a number of features: all resulted from dissolutions, all involved some kind of nationalist or patriotic issue promoted by the government, all saw an increase in turnout followed by a decrease in the subsequent elections (except 1907), and all saw an increase in the number of seats won by the right-wing (Kartell) parties. Note that the dissolution of 1874, following the beginning of the *Kulturkampf*, went together with a similar increase in voter turnout.

Source: Calculated from figures given in G. A. Ritter with M. Niehuss, *Wahlgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch: Materialien zur Statistik des Kaiserreichs 1871-1918* (Munich, 1980), 38-42

Each of these dramatic, polarized campaigns reinforced perennial issues and party alignments in German politics: attacks on “enemies of the Reich”; militarism vs. antimilitarism; imperialism vs. antiimperialism.

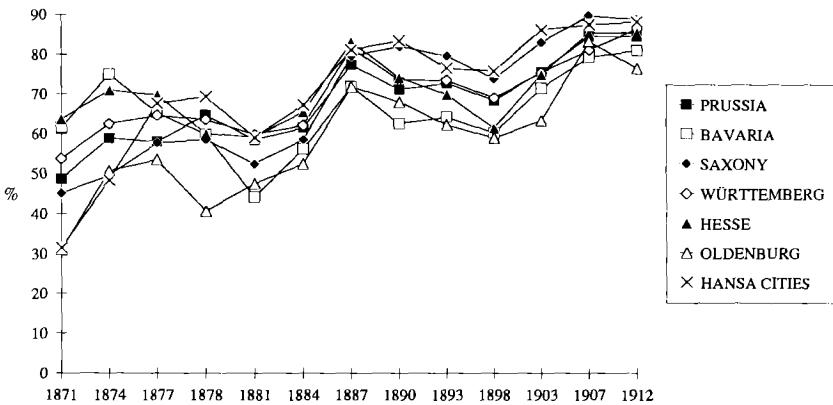
The cooperation among the right-wing (conservative and National Liberal) parties was formalized in the *Kartell* elections of 1887, which were the definitive “national” elections in imperial Germany. In these elections Bismarck achieved the combination of conservatives and right-wing liberals in a systematic first-ballot alliance, cemented in this case by a military bill and a war scare against France, and he created thereby a configuration which persisted in electoral politics until 1907, long after the *Kartell* as a firm coalition within the Reichstag itself was dead. The *Kartell* parties saw their combined share of the vote increase from 39.5 per cent in 1884 (already a good performance) to 47.0 per cent in 1887, and their seat total from 157 to 220, a firm Reichstag majority. The 1887 elections were the only ones between 1878 and 1918 in which these parties won a majority, and this success provided an inspiration and a hope (as it turned out, a forlorn one) for those parties in subsequent elections.

In some respects the great *Kartell* victory of 1887, and all the “national” campaigns by the government, carried within them the seeds of their own negation, for they whipped voter participation up to record levels. The 1887 election saw turnout leap to 77.5 per cent, compared with the previous high of 63.4 per cent in 1878. Voter participation did not dip back below 70 per cent except, after the first five-year rather than three-year interval between elections, in 1898. It appears that many new voters first mobilized by “national” campaigns remained mobilized even when the campaigns changed. This increasing overall level of mobilization helped provide the fertile ground for recruitment by Social Democrats, agrarians, and anti-Semites in the 1890s. One can echo Theodore

Hamerow's comment that "[b]y initiating the age of mass politics in Germany, Bismarck unwittingly strengthened those civic forces which in time undermined the system of authority he had spent his lifetime defending."<sup>2</sup>

There is also some evidence that these campaigns tended to "nationalize" German politics in the sense of introducing issues common to all regions, and reducing regional disparities in electoral behaviour. This is illustrated by Figure 1 below, which indicates that voter participation in the different German states varied widely in the 1870s – as tabulated here, from less than 30 per cent in the duchy of Oldenburg to nearly 70 per cent in the two Mecklenburg duchies — but that participation in different regions converged toward the national average as it tended upwards. The "national" campaigns of 1878, 1887, and 1907 stand out as peaks where participation curves from different regions pinched together.

**Figure 1**  
**Voter Participation in Selected German States, 1871-1912**

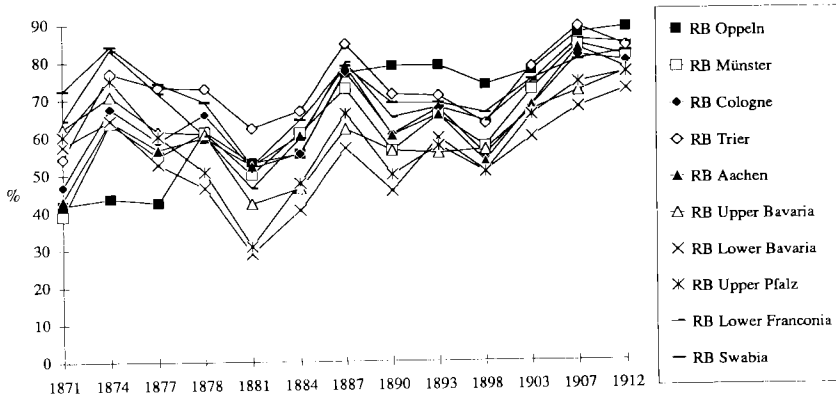


These trends are clearer if we separate two-thirds Catholic regions, which achieved high levels of mobilization during the *Kulturkampf*, from two-thirds Protestant ones, which started significantly lower but by 1912 ended up at similar or higher levels. This is illustrated in Figures 2 and 2b.

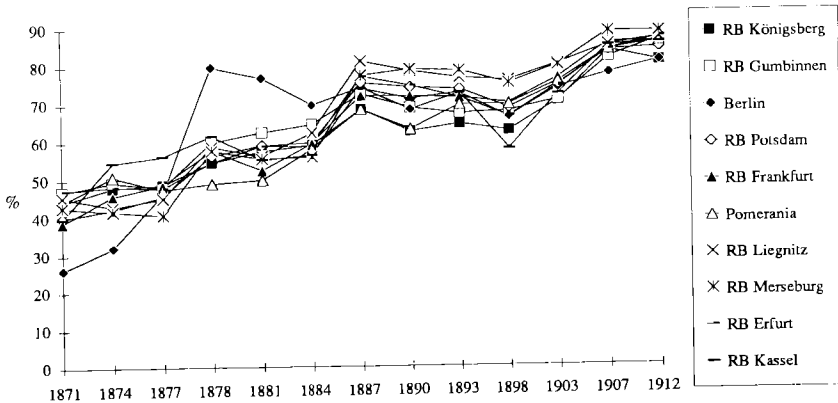
In spite of the importance of "national" elections, only four or five general elections of the thirteen that occurred in imperial Germany fit this pattern. Most of the elections in imperial Germany came about through the natural expiry of a Reichstag,

2. Hamerow, "The Origins of Mass Politics in Germany, 1866-1867," *Deutschland in der Welt-politik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. Fritz Fischer zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Immanuel Geiss and Bernd Jürgen Wendt (Düsseldorf, 1973), 105-120 and, here, p. 120. Hamerow was referring to Bismarck's decision to include universal adult male suffrage in the constitution of the North German Confederation.

**Figure 2(a)**  
**Voter Participation in 2/3 Catholic Districts, 1871-1912**



**Figure 2(b)**  
**Voter Participation in 2/3 Protestant Districts of Prussia, 1871-1912**



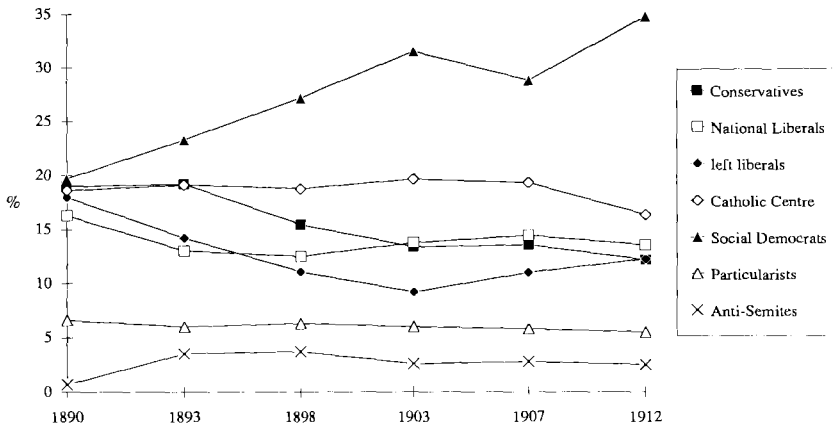
with the important issues of the dying session already resolved. The relative calm of these elections was reflected in lower voter participation, although this still increased from one “normal” election to the next. Given the lack of one specific issue dominating the campaign, the oppositional parties, in particular, were freer to choose their own issues and concentrate on the sort of campaigns that were advantageous in their respective regional and social environments. One group of parties – particularly the conservatives and National Liberals – did well where the issues were “national” ones. Other parties, and most notably the left liberals, Centre Party, and Social Democrats, put forward quite a different set of issues.

This difference in issues was also a difference in style and structure. The Social Democratic Party was the first modern mass party in Germany, and the left liberal, agrarian, anti-Semitic and, in some regions, Catholic Centre parties borrowed some of its "democratic" features, in the form of permanent electoral organization, centralized campaigns, mass agitation and propaganda, and tight integration with particular social-economic groupings rather than appeals to the idealized patriotic "citizens" to whom liberals liked to appeal. From 1890 onwards, when Bismarck's antisocialist legislation lapsed, the SPD was unleashed to grow massively in popular support, from 19.8 per cent of the vote and thirty five seats in 1890 to 34.8 per cent and 110 seats in 1912. At the same time, imperial Germany's anti-Semitic and agrarian agitation reached its height. The Catholic Centre Party, meanwhile, adapted successfully enough to both these trends, matching the agrarianism in the countryside through its own agrarian programme and peasant affiliates, and the socialism in the cities through new mass propaganda like that provided by the People's Association for Catholic Germany (*Volkverein für das katholische Deutschland*). Through to 1907 the Centre Party remained constant at about 19 per cent of the vote and 95 to 105 seats. Most other parties tended downwards (Figure 3).<sup>3</sup>

The tradition was that elections should be about great questions of state, national and military and cultural questions, but these varied groups, while they staked out characteristic positions on these questions, often emphasized in their election platforms and propaganda matters of taxation, equity of economic policy, civil rights and opposition to privilege direct economic and power interests of the "common man." The political terminology of turn-of-the-century Germany was laced with value-laden terms like *Demokratie* and *Demagogie*, *Volkspartei* (people's party) and *Volkstümlichkeit* (popularity), *Radikalismus* and *Agitation*. To traditional politicians and government leaders, all of these words had universally negative connotations; but the populists who opposed the governmental parties (or who, within those parties, opposed the governmental leaders) were rather less disturbed by these terms, even proud to be associated with them. Populist language and issues provided a focal point where voters could identify with "their" parties, to affirm what Stanley Suval has called "habitual voting patterns

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3. Electoral data for this chart and all subsequent statistics are from the following: Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Neue Folge, 250 (1912), no. 1, 1907 and 1912 Reichstag election results; Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, *Vierteljahrshefte zur Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, 2 (1893), no. 4, 1893 Reichstag results; 9 (1900), no. 4, and 12 (1903), no. 2, supplements to the 1898 results; 12 (1903), no. 3, 1898 and 1903 results; and 14 (1905), no. 4, and 16 (1907), no. 1, supplements to the 1903 results; Reichstag, *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstages*, 8. Legislaturperiode, Anlageband I, used for the 1890 results due to unavailability of the corresponding Statistisches Amt publications. In counting results for this study, the totals used for each constituency were the final totals for the valid elections that sent a deputy to the Reichstag (sometimes for various reasons a *Nachwahl*).
  4. Blackburn, "The Politics of Demagogy in Imperial Germany," *Past and Present* 113 (November 1986): 152-84, examines the meaning of the term "demagogy" to contemporaries, as a characterization of how the radical nationalists and anti-Semites differed from moderates. James Retallack, *Notables of the Right: The Conservative Party and Political Mobilization in Germany, 1876-1918* (Boston, 1988), 2-5, makes a related point.

**Figure 3**  
**Reichstag Election Results 1890-1912 (Percentages)**



Abbreviations for this and subsequent tables and graphs:

Cons[ervative] = DKP + RP

LL denotes "left liberal" (FVP + FVg + DVP, plus others described as *freisinnig* or *demokratisch*).

Particularists are candidates identified as Polish, Alsace-Lorrainer, Guelph, Danish, Mecklenburg or Hesse *Rechtsparteien*, Masurians, Lithuanians

Anti-Semites include Christian-Social, German-Social, German-Social Reform Party, Reform Party, plus others described as *Antisemit*

FVP = *Freisinnige Volkspartei* (Left Liberal People's Party, 1893-1910)  
1871-1884: *Fortschrittspartei* (Progressives)  
1884-1893: *Deutsch-Freisinnige Partei* (German Left Liberal Party)  
1910-: *Fortschrittliche Volkspartei* (Progressive People's Party; with FVg and DVP)

FVg = *Freisinnige Vereinigung* (Left Liberal Union, 1893-1910)  
to 1881: *liberale* (liberal)

DKP = *Deutschkonservative Partei* (German Conservative Party)

RP = *Reichspartei* (Imperial Party or Free Conservatives)

NL = *Nationale Liberal Partei*

DVP = *Deutsche Volkspartei* ([South] German People's Party, to 1910)

1881-1893: *Liberale Vereinigung* (Liberal Union)

Z = *Zentrum* (Catholic Centre Party)

SPD = *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Dem. Party of Ger.)

based upon their commitments to social groupings."<sup>5</sup> "Electoral cleavages," wrote Suval, "were manifestations of the conflicts and struggles in everyday life ... social groupings were the perceived foci of these cleavages." During the 1890s, the emergence of mass, populist politics based on new social groupings and new issues exposed the weaknesses of the older *Honoratiorenpolitik* (politics of notables). To be successful, the small cliques of notables and deputies who formed the backbone of the older parties

5. Stanley S. Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 6 and the same for the following quotation.



had to develop a more articulated organization, in spite of their distaste for the new politics.<sup>6</sup>

These changes were not a simple matter of a sudden transformation from one kind of politics to another. Change and the speed of change varied by situation in individual constituencies, and by region. The nationalist parties and the government tried in various ways to preserve the old "national" kind of polarization of politics, the great patriotic rallying that went above sectional divisions and seemed loftier than populist appeals to the interests of common people. In at least certain regions and certain types of constituencies, the nationalist pattern persisted.

### THE PERSISTENCE OF NATIONALISM: REGIONS OF "NATIONAL" CONFLICT IN REICHSTAG ELECTIONS

For ease of analysis, the imperial Reichstag's 397 constituencies can be grouped into seven mutually exclusive categories or types, each of which aggregates constituencies of similar socio-economic character and political culture.<sup>7</sup>

1. *Large-Landownership Area*. Agricultural, 2/3 or more Protestant, dominated by large land holdings, and where regional or ethnic particularists (see *Type 7a*) were not strong (N = 34). Type 1 seats were mainly on the Baltic coast.

2. *Protestant Rural Seats*. Other Protestant, nonparticularist, rural seats, not dominated by large holdings (N = 63).

3. *Protestant Mixed Rural-Urban Seats*. Protestant, nonparticularist constituencies of mixed rural-urban structure (N = 66).

4. *Protestant Urban Seats*. Protestant, nonparticularist, urban constituencies (N = 45).

5. *Catholic Rural/Small Town Seats*. Constituencies that were 2/3 or more Catholic, not particularist, and not dominated by one or more large cities (N = 73). Type 5 seats were concentrated in a belt around the southern, western, and eastern fringes of the Reich. They include some Polish seats not contested strongly by Polish candidates.

6. The 1890s have been identified as a transitional period by virtually every historian who has examined popular politics. W. Wölk has referred to the period around 1890 as a "turning point in the development of the German Empire" ("Sozialstruktur, Parteienkorrelation und Wahlentscheidung im Kaiserreich am Beispiel der Reichstagswahl von 1907," *Wählerbewegung in der deutschen Geschichte. Analysen und Berichte zu den Reichstagswahlen 1871-1933*, eds. Otto Büsch, Wolfgang Wölk, and Monika Wölk (Berlin, 1978), 546, note 35. See also Thomas Nipperdey, *Die Organisation der deutschen Parteien vor 1918* (Düsseldorf, 1961), 31-37; Hans-Jürgen Puhle, "Parlament, Parteien und Interessenverbände 1890-1914," in *Das kaiserliche Deutschland: Politik und Gesellschaft 1870-1918*, ed. Michael Stürmer (Düsseldorf, 1970), 340-77 and, here, 348-49; David Blackburn, *Class, Religion, and Local Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Center Party in Württemberg before 1914* (New Haven, 1980), 9-10 and 14-15; Geoff Eley, *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck* (New Haven, 1980), vii; and Retallack, *Notables of the Right*, 77 ff.
7. This scheme is adapted from Brett Fairbairn, "The German Elections of 1898 and 1903," PhD diss., Oxford University, 1987, Appendix 2, which explains the sources of the socio-economic data used in the classification. The vote totals used are based on the period 1890-1912.

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6. *Catholic Urban Seats*. Catholic, nonparticularist, urban constituencies (N = 10).

7. *Seats of "National" Conflict*. Constituencies where electoral conflicts were shaped by confessional, ethnic, or particularist struggles, including:

a.) where particularists won 1/3 or more of the vote in any election (N = 54).

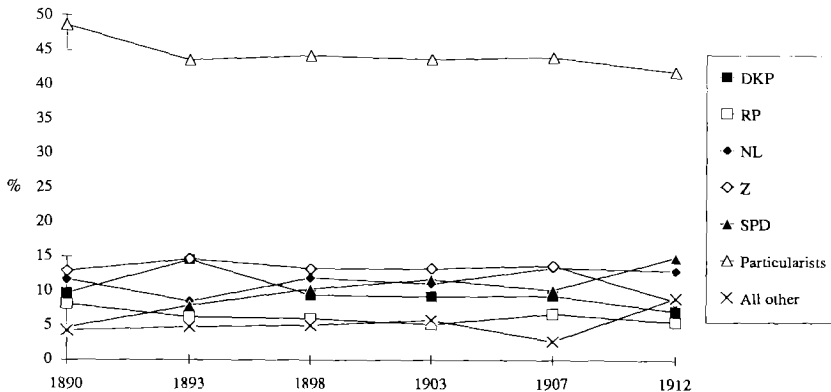
b.) where neither confession had a 2/3 or greater majority (N = 52).

These seats were spread mostly around the fringes of the Reich, away from Protestant "middle Germany."

For the present purposes to analyse the persistence of "national" polarizations, it is the Type 7a and 7b seats that are of the greatest importance.

Type 7a seats were dominated by national conflict, reflected in the proportion of the popular vote won by particularist candidates, meaning candidates representing ethnic or regional minorities: Poles in eastern Prussia, Alsace-Lorrainers, Guelphs in Hanover, Danes in Schleswig, and tiny fractions like Hesse and Mecklenburg "rights parties" (*Rechtsparteien*) or the Masurians and Lithuanians in East Prussia (Figure 4). These seats were defined as those in which a particularist candidate attained one-third of the popular vote in *any* general election between 1890 and 1912. The fact that the *average* particularist vote in these constituencies exceeded 40 per cent is a general indication of how greatly concentrated and consistent the particularist votes were. This, in turn, enabled them to win 194 of the 324 contests in these seats over the six elections.

**Figure 4**  
**Particularist Constituencies (Type 7a), 1890-1912**  
N = 54



Two points are worthy of note with respect to the Type 7a seats. First, in these seats *every* election tended to be a "national" election, regardless of the issues at the Reich level. While conflicts between liberals and conservatives or between socialists and the old parties did enter into the picture, the main dynamic was a competition between the local particularist party and (perhaps on the second ballot) the strongest local representative of the so-called "German" parties. Just about any liberal, con-

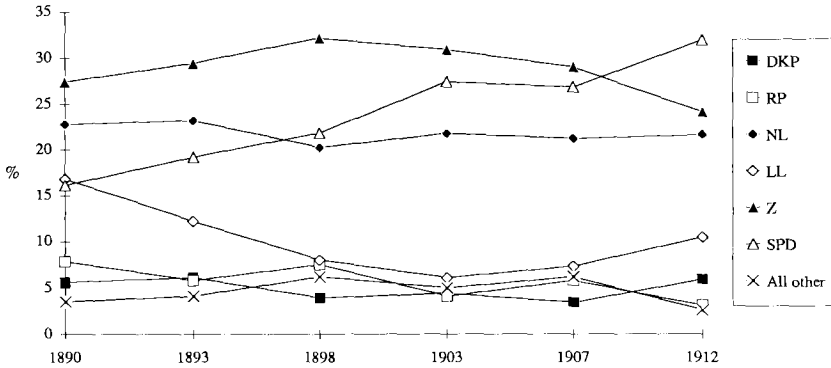
servative, or Centre party candidate counted as "German." In Figure 4, then, the commanding lead shown for the particularists is misleading insofar as the different particularist parties are here aggregated while the "German" parties, which here functioned in many cases as a kind of coalition, are not. Second, what the performance of the individual German parties does show, however, is that, at least until 1907, the older liberal, conservative, and Centre parties did not decline (as they did in the Reich overall), but maintained their vote with some consistency. In other words, in the presence of constant "national" mobilization and the absence of polarization on the basis of "fairness" questions, the old parties maintained their strength and the SPD advanced far slower than in other constituencies. The fact that many Type 7a seats were more often Catholic and agricultural than the Reich average undoubtedly also hindered SPD penetration of these areas.

Similarly, in regions of mixed confession (Type 7b), the "fragmentation" was a bit less than in most of the Protestant seats, perhaps because the structural dynamic of confessional conflict helped reinforce the old party lines. The overall pattern pitted the Centre against liberal or secondarily conservative opponents (the dominant opposition being Centre-National Liberal) with the SPD rising to overtake the other Protestant parties (Figure 5). Over the six elections, the most mandates (89 of a possible 312) were won by the Centre party. The Protestant parties were divided, but the National Liberals won the most mandates (eighty nine over the period 1890-1912), followed by the SPD (fifty six). Interestingly, the Imperial party won a substantial number of mandates (twenty seven) to come fourth in this category of seats, ahead of the German Conservatives and the left liberals who, on the national scale, were much more substantial parties. This may reflect the occasional choice by "national" election committees to select an Imperial party candidate to attempt to serve as a nonagrarian, nonliberal, straightforward patriotic candidate rallying the whole nonsocialist and non-Catholic field. The Imperial party was similarly stronger than the norm in the Type 7a seats, though not to as great a degree as in Type 7b, and anecdotal evidence supports the notion that the Imperial party sometimes served as a compromise patriotic party for the "national" camp.<sup>8</sup>

The constituencies that were Catholic by a two-thirds majority (Types 5 and 6) were, unlike Types 7a and 7b, dominated by a single party: the Catholic Centre party. In the rural (Type 5) seats in particular, the Catholic Centre won more than 70 per cent of the vote and at least sixty-eight of seventy-three mandates in every election from 1890 to 1912, with no real sign of weakening over the time period. The only other party to win more than one of these seats in a single election was the Bavarian Peasants' League, which scored some breakthroughs, most notably in 1898. The Catholic urban (Type 6) seats were more divided, for in these the SPD was, by 1912, nearly as strong as the Centre. Nevertheless, these constituencies were only ten in number, so that, overall, the Centre remained dominant in the Catholic groups of constituencies. In spite of the nearly homogeneous domination of these seats by a single party, elements of nationalist conflict were apparent in them as well. First of all, the electoral participation trends discussed above (Figure 2a) show that Catholic constituencies were responsive to "national" campaigns, which brought increased turnout. This is evidence that the Centre

8. See Fairbairn, "German Elections," Chaps. 3 and 5.

**Figure 5**  
**Mixed-Confession Constituencies (Type 7b), 1890-1912**  
**N = 52**



party's confessional appeal was, at least in part, a "national" or more precisely anti-"national" appeal. Second, the Protestant population in these seats was subject mainly to the appeals of the National Liberal party, which courted their votes with distinctively vehement, nationalist, anti-Catholic propaganda. Only later in the Wilhelmine period did the SPD become the strongest Protestant party in these categories of seats. Thus, although it rarely affected the outcome of voting, there was institutionalized nationalist conflict among these seats. Whatever other effects this had, it lent an anticlerical wing to the National Liberal party and perpetuated the Catholic Centre party's sense of being under attack.

The National Liberals, as much by evolution as by plan, functioned as part of a loose, nation-wide coalition of "national" parties. The parties that had cooperated in Bismarck's *Kartell* of 1887-90 German Conservatives, Imperial party, and National Liberals were faced in Wilhelmine Germany with generally declining shares of the vote. Particularly when challenged by the old particularist enemies or by rising socialist votes,

**Table 2**  
**Multilinear Regression Data on *Kartell* Parties, 1890-1912**

	1890	1893	1898	1903	1907	1912
% Vote for RP	-.609	-.525	-.456	-.504	-.410	-.316
	-9.19	-7.20	-.608	-6.19	-5.07	-3.74
% Vote for NLP	-.682	-.539	-.500	-.533	-.407	not sig.
	-12.38	-9.37	-8.22	-8.67	-6.84	
adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.3144	.2191	.1760	.1864	.1277	.0295
F(from mean: 5, 391 DF)	91.813	56.559	43.299	46.368	29.991	7.011
Note: Dependent variable = % vote for DKP; regression coefficient on top, t-ratio beneath (390 DF).						

they tended to cut back to their regions of strength, and make implicit or explicit deals not to compete with each other for first-ballot votes. Until 1912, disputes among the *Kartell* parties were usually limited to a small minority of constituencies where these parties were roughly equal in strength. Where one of them clearly dominated, the others tended to give way. One way to examine this noncompetition among the *Kartell* parties is to do a multilinear regression using the vote percentages for two *Kartell* parties to attempt to explain the voting strength of the third (Table 2).

The table shows a significant negative relationship between the German Conservative share of the vote and the Imperial party and National Liberal party shares, until the 1912 elections, when party alignments were distinctly different. While we might expect *some* negative relationship between the vote shares for any two given parties, this strong negative relationship is out of the ordinary.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of these results, plus constituency by constituency analysis and anecdotal evidence, one could say that the *Kartell* remained an effective, *de facto* electoral coalition in a significant proportion of constituencies until after 1907.<sup>10</sup> Equally, however, one would have to conclude that the governmental coalition was less and less effective as time went on, in spite of "national" issues, the *Sammlungspolitik* of 1898 (to be discussed below), and increasing calls for antisocialist unity. Perhaps these various efforts mitigated the corrosive effects on the older parties of the increasingly well-organized "mass" socio-economic constituencies, but they did not halt those effects. The *Kartell* gradually broke down in one constituency after another, so that by the 1912 elections the statistics show only a weak tendency for the *Kartell* parties to avoid opposing one another.

While the nationalist coalition was breaking down, then, the parties were not quite so fragmented or so weak as the overall electoral picture would suggest. Moreover, imperial German elections had a second ballot if no candidate won an absolute majority on the first. This second ballot polarized constituencies into two camps, and facilitated the well-disciplined cooperation of "national" parties against particularists, of liberals against Catholics, or of almost all of these against socialists. Even where a *Kartell* arrangement broke down on the first ballot, therefore, the parties might be able to salvage their unity on the second. While this created a *perception* of fragmentation, as well as genuine problems for the government in finding Reichstag majorities, it is not clear to what extent it reflected an actual fragmentation of society.

Also important for analysing popular (as opposed to Reichstag) politics is the fact that the fragmentation so often referred to was not a fragmentation among parties within each region, but a fragmentation among regions or types of electoral environments. The Reichstag presented a confusing array of more than a dozen significant parties, but there were no constituencies with equal twelve-way fights. Almost all constituencies had

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9. There are theoretical problems that arise when interdependent variables like vote percentages for competing parties are treated as respective dependent and independent variables, in order to have some of them "explain" another. The chance of error in the results is increased. Nevertheless, there are ways to test the significance of such relationships and, while the chance of error is greater, a relationship of large magnitude such as that shown here is still an important piece of evidence.

10. Fairbairn, "German Elections," Chaps. 2 and 3.

simple one-, two-, or three-way races; several state and provincial studies point to emerging regional three-party systems.<sup>11</sup> In a very broad way, one could say most regions were contested by liberals or conservatives, by socialists, and by Catholics or particularists.

Despite these qualifications, it is clear that the government's desired coalition of "national" parties was falling apart in the Wilhelmine period, facing declining vote totals in the face of Social Democracy, pressures towards disunity, disruption by anti-Semitic and agrarian outbursts, and lack of unifying issues. In this situation, leaders of the government and of the governmental parties sought to find the sorts of unifying "national" issues that would help their coalition. The non-"national" elections of 1898 and 1903, where such rallying together of the national cause was attempted and failed, illustrate the limitations of nationalist politics in imperial Germany.

#### "NATIONAL" ISSUES IN GERMAN ELECTIONS: 1898 AND 1903

There were attempts by various political leaders to turn the 1898 elections, in particular, into "national" elections. These attempts revolved in part around nationalist issues such as the expansion of the German battle fleet inaugurated by Admiral Alfred Tirpitz in the spring of 1898, just weeks before the Reichstag elections. They also involve *Sammlungspolitik* (the "politics of rallying together"), which was announced in the spring of 1898 with that year's Reichstag elections very much in mind. To historians of the German "critical school" of the 1970s — Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Dirk Stegmann, Hans-Jürgen Puhle, Peter-Christian Witt, and others — the term *Sammlungspolitik* has a broad, synthetic meaning designating a long-lasting conjunction of social-protectionist policies, manipulative antisocialist methods, and agrarian-industrial compromise, which together stabilized the "system of rule" that dominated Germany from 1876-79 until at least 1918. The period 1897-1902 is said to show the success of this "strategy" because it saw the passage of the navy law of 1898, the tariff law of 1902, and the development of *Weltpolitik*, particularly the battle fleet, as a newer and better integrative force.<sup>12</sup>

Yet *Sammlungspolitik* needs to be examined more carefully in the specific context of the 1898 election campaign where the term originated.<sup>13</sup> It was, after all, an electoral

11. Günther Franz, *Die politische Wahlen in Niedersachsen 1867 bis 1949* (3rd ed., Bremen-Horn, 1957), 11 and 20 (the three parties in the province of Hanover were the National Liberals, Guelphs, and SPD); Hermann Hiery, *Reichstagswahlen im Reichsland. Ein Beitrag zur Landesgeschichte von Elsaß-Lothringen und zur Wahlgeschichte des Deutschen Reiches 1871-1918* (Düsseldorf, 1986), 304, on Alsace-Lorraine (Centre, liberals, SPD).
12. See Stegmann, *Die Erben Bismarcks: Parteien und Verbände in der Spätphase des wilhelminischen Deutschlands. Sammlungspolitik 1897-1918* (Cologne, 1970), 14; Witt, "Innenpolitik und Imperialismus in der Vorgeschichte des 1. Weltkrieges," in *Liberalismus und imperialistischer Staat: Der Imperialismus als Problem liberaler Parteien in Deutschland 1890-1914*, eds. Karl Holl and Günther List (Göttingen, 1975), 17-20; Wehler, *Das Deutsch Kaiserreich 1871-1918* (5th ed., Göttingen, 1983), 100-105.
13. Geoff Eley was the first historian to examine *Sammlungspolitik* in the 1898 elections where it originated, and to point out its failure; see his neglected article, "Sammlungspolitik, Social Imperialism and the Navy Law of 1898," originally published in *Militärgeschichtliche Mit-*

strategy. An election pamphlet secretly distributed by the Prussian Interior ministry in 1898, *Was will der Ruf zur Sammlung?* ("What Does the Call to *Sammlung* Mean?"), answered, "[t]he call to *Sammlung* means the unification of voters for the Reichstag elections.... the agreement on a unified electoral programme!"<sup>14</sup> A good test of the success of *Sammlungspolitik* would be to determine whether or not there really was a "unified electoral programme" in 1898.

On 5 March 1898, three months and a week before the elections, an "Economic Committee" sponsored by Prussian Finance minister Johannes von Miquel presented its "Economic Declaration" to the German public. The signatories numbered some 1,500 in all, notably most of the agriculturalists from the Agrarian League, the German Agriculture Council (*Deutsche Landwirtschaftsrat*), and the Catholic regional peasant leagues, plus representatives of the Central Association of German Industrialists, accompanied by Miquel and Count Arthur von Posadowsky-Wehner from the government and by ex-Chancellor Bismarck.<sup>15</sup> The statement advocated that parties should make the tariff question paramount in their internal politics and selection of candidates: "Representatives of industry, agriculture, trade and commerce must unite to support only those candidates inside the individual parties who stand firmly on the long-standing program of protection of national labour and equitable consideration of all branches of economic life." The press coverage of the time shows that "protection of national labour" and "equitable consideration" did not obscure the basic idea: the declaration was taken by the liberal and left-wing press to represent the gratification of one-sided agrarian tariff demands. In the context of discussion of "national" coalitions in imperial Germany, one particular aspect of Miquel's *Sammlungspolitik* stands out. It was distinctive as an attempt to make economic questions the unifying basis of a "national" electoral appeal, in contrast to the military questions used previously. Since the conservatives and liberals were divided by economic policy, Miquel's idea was in for a difficult reception.

*Sammlungspolitik* was a minority proposal. No leading ministers other than Miquel and Posadowsky would lend their names to the document. The Reich and Prussian caucuses of the National Liberal and, initially, the Conservative parties refused to sign, as did many prominent National Liberal heavy industrialists. Within ten days the chemical, machine, electrotechnical, trading, and banking communities had issued a counter-declaration calling for a "liberal *Kartell*" to oppose agrarian demands. *Sammlungspolitik* was widely seen as identical with concessions to the agitation of the Agrarian League. Social Democrats, particularists, the Centre, free-trading left liberals, and left-wing National Liberals criticized the proposed coalition, while moderate government leaders and governmental politicians held themselves aloof.

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*teilungen* 15 (1974): 29-63, and reprinted in his anthology *From Unification to Nazism: Reinterpreting the German Past* (London, 1986).

14. *Was will der Ruf zur Sammlung?* in HSA Düss Reg. Aachen Prä. 815, no. 175.

15. The full text and some discussion of the *Sammlung* declaration can be found in *Schulthess' Europäischer Geschichtskalender*, N.F. Vol. 14 (1898), 78-79, and in contemporary press coverage from March 1898 such as those collected in ZSA I (Potsdam), RT 31995. On signatories, attitudes of various groups, etc, see Stegmann, *Erben Bismarcks*, 74-79.

The minutes from the Prussian Ministry of State for 19 April 1898 show that Miquel presented the case for an aggressive campaign on the issues of *Sammlungspolitik*:

In connection with the question of the elections [Miquel] described it as desirable that before the Reichstag elections the general position of the government on the great economic questions be presented by His Majesty in the Reichstag or in the [Prussian] House of Lords. A short indication that the government desired the cooperation of the state-supporting elements against subversion, unity of the productive classes, protection of national work, in particular of agriculture and of the *Mittelstand*, would make a favourable impression.

Miquel presented his proposal apologetically, conscious of the criticism he was about to receive from the other ministers. He admitted the danger “that with such a governmental program one would say too much for the one [Agrarian League] and too little for the others [liberals],” and that this “would be turned into ... agitational material for the parties.” These reservations were strongly echoed by the remainder of the ministers.<sup>16</sup>

Chancellor Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst emphasized the risk to the government: “If the government intervened decisively for the conservative party, it would take its possible defeat upon itself, and equally with a National Liberal program; in intervening for trade treaties it would awaken a storm among the agrarians. Such a program could therefore only be completely colourless.” Hohenlohe’s view of the government’s problems was not untinged with pessimism, although in the event the pessimism was justified. “The next Reichstag will probably ... remain under the bondage of the suffrage of the masses: the parties that rule the masses [Centre and Social Democrats] will take the victory.... Fighting subversive tendencies will have the result that the propertied classes would certainly be defeated....” “A formal program could only be presented by the government,” observed the chancellor, “if it based itself on *one* party, which, however, does not work with our party fragmentation.”<sup>17</sup> The alternative was what one critic in 1903 called a policy of “satisfaction,” of avoiding provocative measures, preserving the regime’s prestige “above the parties,” and permitting the SPD its activities, in the hope that minimizing scandal and *Reaktion* would minimize the opposition vote.<sup>18</sup> In the April 1898 Ministry of State meeting, one minister after another supported a few, harmless, low-profile, vague phrases about economic questions, rather than the kind of polarizing declaration desired by Miquel.

Hohenlohe’s worry about “fragmentation” was more than a perception; it was the reality of German party politics at the turn of the century, and it only grew worse by

16. Min. State 19 April 1898(II), in Bundesarchiv Koblenz (hereafter BAK) R43F/1817.

17. Ibid. Hohenlohe also wrote that he believed the SPD vote gain if agricultural prices increased (in this case meat prices) would be greater than the peasant disaffection if higher prices were not brought in, meaning the government could not afford to challenge the SPD on this kind of economic issue (Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, *Memoirs*, ed. Friedrich Curtius [London, 1906], entry for 7 March 1900).

18. Udo Graf zu Stolberg-Wernigerode, writing to Bülow, quoted by Klaus Saul, *Staat, Industrie, Arbeiterbewegung im Kaiserreich: Zur Innen- und Außenpolitik des wilhelminischen Deutschlands 1903-1914* (Düsseldorf, 1974), 14.



1903 as the bitter tariff law controversy unfolded. As one district administrator commented in 1902 following a fiercely contested Hanoverian by-election, "the prospects for the [Reichstag] election in the coming year ... appear doubtful. Differences over economic policy are bringing the state-supporting parties ever further from one another." In the byelection in question, agrarians had defected from the National Liberal incumbent and abstained, or even voted for the Guelph particularist, nearly causing the loss of the seat to the government. Officials concluded "that the cooperation of the national parties will be impeded to the extreme next time" and that "scorn and malice" now characterized relations between National Liberals and conservatives in Hanover.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the tariff question, which Miquel wanted to use as the basis of a "national" type of patriotic appeal, was exactly the question that was frustrating a unified "national" campaign.

A glance at the state-wide Reichstag election results confirms this picture of dissension. The number of conflicts among the governmental parties increased despite all the efforts of *Landräte* (local officials) to promote unity. In 1893, significant National Liberal and conservative or agrarian candidates had opposed each other in nineteen Prussian Reichstag seats; in 1898, the figure was eighteen, with an increase in conflicts in the west balanced by the elimination of some old rivalries in the east. In 1903, however, the figure doubled to some thirty-seven constituencies. This represented about 20 per cent of all Prussian seats in which right-wing or governmental candidates stood any chance of victory. The 1903 total represents the lowest ebb of governmental unity in the entire Wilhelmine period, save 1912.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the eruption of political anti-Semitism that was associated with the 1890s was only barely dying down in 1898-1903. Rebel anti-Semites fought conservatives or National Liberals in an additional 10 to 15 per cent of the governmental parties' winnable seats. In total, in 1893 and 1898 the government's desired coalition broke down in 29 and 30 per cent of winnable seats in Prussia, in 1903 in 34 per cent, when the agrarian anti-Semites are considered.

There was a real strategic and electoral problem for the government and, as a result, its vague statements on the burning questions of the day gave little direction to the campaign in 1898, and even less in 1903, when the tariff issue was still more pronounced. All observers of German politics noted the "silence" of the government and speculated on its significance. One left liberal columnist commented in 1898, "The Reich government has by and large exhibited a noteworthy reserve in the midst of these efforts by the parties. It almost seems as though individual members of the Reich agencies are not quite comfortable with the thought that an even more extremely agrarian Reichstag majority than previously might emerge from the elections." If opposition parties noted with some irony and satisfaction that the government was failing to support

19. Hauptstaatsarchiv (hereafter HSA) Hanover Hann 122a I Nr. 13, nos. 246-251.

20. "Significant" candidacies are counted as those having received at least 5 per cent of the vote, while a "chance of victory" for the governmental parties is judged as their receiving (together) a proportion of the vote potentially large enough to have carried one of them into a second ballot (this could be as little as 20 per cent where the other parties' votes were fragmented). "Agrarians" are counted here as Agrarian League only. Only the 236 Prussian seats are considered here, since only in these could Prussian officials work directly to implement the government strategy.

agrarian radicalism, more right-wing analysts exhibited simple frustration. A prominent “national” paper complained at the end of February 1903, “New elections stand at the threshold, new elections of special, far-reaching importance. If the government really wants to ‘govern’ and not just ‘administer,’ then it must make the attempt to create and to represent some kind of election program....”<sup>21</sup> The government’s allies were eager that it commit itself; and among the most disappointed of its partisan supporters were those who wanted a campaign on the fleet issue.

Some party politicians strongly advocated an energetic governmental campaign, in 1898 even hoping for the defeat of the fleet bill to give the government a pretext for dissolution and a “national” campaign. The National Liberals were positively anxious that this happen, since none of the other issues of the later 1890s was beneficial to their party’s campaign. As the National Liberal deputy Dr. Paasche put it in May 1898, “As for questions of economic policy, I hold it as undesirable that divisive economic questions stand in the foreground of the political movement; it would be much better for the development of our people if great ideal political questions, like we once pursued, were decisive in our elections.” The passage of the fleet bill was therefore a disappointment to nationalists, as the *Krefelder Zeitung* made clear in its yearning for simpler, more idealistic issues: “the fleet law has been passed ‘by the grace of the Centre [party],’ and instead of great popular tasks economic things with their thousandfold encumbrances push themselves more and more into the foreground.” Nevertheless, the Conservatives and the Centre reported that the fleet not only did not excite their (largely rural) electorates; it was an actual liability for the elections. In the end, the government preferred to make the necessary compromises and not risk the fleet with the voters.<sup>22</sup> As several agrarian anti-Semites commented in the Reichstag in the spring of 1898, they were *glad* the fleet issue had been dispensed with. Not only was it unpopular with their constituents, but “patriotic election campaigns ... lead very easily to completely unnatural economic groupings in the elections.” Now, as they saw it, the path was clear for the government to take up the reins and ride to victory on the protectionist cause which, of course, it also did not do.<sup>23</sup>

Of the major parties, only the National Liberals exhibited enthusiasm for the fleet, declaring in their 1898 national platform that they were filled with “joyous pride” at Germany’s fleet and colonial policies. They claimed with eagerness the distinction of being “the first party which recognized unanimously and without reservation that the fleet law was a necessity for the preservation of peace, for the health and power position of Germany.”<sup>24</sup> This solitary distinction brought the party no perceptible gains among

21. Arthur Levysohn, “Politische Wochenschau,” *Berliner Tageblatt*, 29 May 1898, p. 1; *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 24 February 1903, in Zentrales Staatsarchiv (hereafter ZSA) I (Potsdam) RLB PA 6060, no. 37.
22. Quotations from *Kölnische Zeitung*, 24/5/98m and *Krefelder Zeitung*, 2 May 1898, noon ed. See Walther Peter Fuchs, ed., *Großherzog Friedrich I. von Baden und die Reichspolitik 1871-1907* (Stuttgart, 1980), nos. 1808 ff. for party leaders’ opinions about the advantageousness or disadvantageousness of the fleet issue.
23. *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 9. Legislatur-Periode, 5. Session 1897/1898, III, pp. 1818-1827.
24. *Programmatische Kundgebungen der Nationalliberalen Partei 1866-1913* (Berlin, 1913), 64-68.

the electorate: compared with the 1893 results, the National Liberals won some twenty five thousand fewer votes and seven fewer seats. Their share of the popular vote, at 12.5 per cent, was their lowest in the history of the empire.<sup>25</sup> The National Liberals' attempt, virtually alone, to extol the ideal-national virtues of the fleet to their voters in 1898 was, in part, an attempt to resurrect a "national" issue that would work to their advantage in elections that were otherwise material or social in their issues. It did not work.

In 1903, one newspaper commented, "increased expenditures for the armaments of the Reich on water and on land are never popular and cannot be so."<sup>26</sup> The elections of 1898 and 1903 bear this out for, in each case, the fleet's opponents attacked it with devastating effectiveness on the basis of its cost and the unfair tax base of Reich finances, the same basis on which military spending had always been attacked in previous "national" elections, while the parties that had voted for the fleet by and large tried to shift the blame.

The SPD and the bulk of the left liberals attacked both fleet and tariffs without fear or restraint and, in the SPD's case, achieved two consecutive, decisive election breakthroughs by doing so. "One Billion Marks!" shouted an SPD pamphlet in 1903 in a frontal attack on all armed forces expenditures. "What will all the millions from tariffs and taxes be applied to? Are they perhaps to the benefit of the people? On, no! They serve primarily to *cover the costs* which the *army and fleet* require...."<sup>27</sup> The behaviour of the Centre was potent testimony to the effectiveness of this criticism, for the party took great pains to show itself, not as the party instrumental in approving the fleet, but rather the party that *limited* naval demands and forced the government to scale down its excessive projects. In 1898, the national election platform claimed that the Centre stood for "prudent thrift in all areas of the Reich budget, particularly with the army and navy," and among the party's achievements it listed the prevention of "new taxes, namely those which would have been a further burden to the broad masses of the people." The fleet was presented as a matter for the "practical politician" who "must reckon with the given circumstances" (that is, that the fleet was inevitable); "the important principle" was that new taxes not rest "on the consumption of the broad masses ... on the shoulders of the weak."<sup>28</sup> As for the conservatives, they avoided mentioning the fleet or treated it in the context of past army debates, as a patriotic duty for the good of the Fatherland. In the stock phrase, the fleet was just part of the program of "preserving and reinforcing the German Reich." "As burdensome as [the level of] armament is that the German people has to bear," the Imperial party consoled its voters, "it is nevertheless the pre-condition for the power, the influence, the health of the German empire."<sup>29</sup>

25. See statistics in G.A. Ritter and M.Niehuss, *Wahlgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch: Materialien zur Statistik des Kaiserreichs 1871-1918* (Munich, 1980), 38-42.

26. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 23 May 1903, ev. ed., p. 1, "Centrum und Weltpolitik."

27. Leaflet in HSA Düss Reg. Aachen Präs 815, no. 194; "Volksfeinde und Volksfreunde," in Hessisches Staatsarchiv Marburg Bestand 180 Hersfeld Nr. 922. See also the Freisinnige Volkspartei program in *Berliner Tageblatt*, 6 May 1898, morn. ed., p. 1.

28. *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 7 May 1898, ev. ed., p. 1; *Niederrheinische Volkszeitung*, 24 May 1898, morn. ed., p. 1.

29. "Wahlaufzug der freikonservativen Partei," *Kölnische Zeitung*, 7 May 1898, morn. ed., p. 1.

The positions taken by the parties in the 1898 elections (which were echoed in 1903) and their relative fates at the hands of the voters must raise doubts whether any "social imperialism" exerted a perceptible effect on the broad masses of the population in these years. The widest claims for "social imperialism" argue that it won "mass loyalty," "mass support," or "popularity" for the government.<sup>30</sup> This was clearly not the case in non-"national" election campaigns. The fleet was controversial and fitted too well into the opposition parties' critiques of the regime. "Mass support" in these elections went to the SPD, which opposed the fleet uniformly, and the Centre, whose deputies approved it but whose propaganda apologized for it.

In electoral strategy as actually pursued by the government, it was the purely political aspect of *Sammlung* that was dominant, rather than the agrarianism, economic policy, and tariff compromises associated with Miquel's version, or the fleet and imperialism that some National Liberals thought they could use. The only unifying feature of such "rallying" of the governmental cause as was actually pursued by the government and to some extent realized in the elections was its relatively quiet antisocialist crusade, together with a louder but regionally limited anti-Polish crusade in the east.

#### "ENEMIES OF THE REICH": SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND POLES

The government was increasingly concerned, in elections, with the Social Democratic challenge. Its response was to attempt to deal with Social Democracy as a "national" enemy, and to organize or inspire a patriotic coalition to oppose it, in the manner of previous nationalist campaigns. The Ministry of State, in both 1898 and 1903, discussed the possibility of an aggressive antisocialist campaign, including manipulating the timing of the elections to the SPD's disadvantage, and dissolving the Reichstag to stage a surprise antisocialist campaign. In 1898 these ideas were put forward by Miquel, in 1903 by Minister of the Interior Baron Hans von Hammerstein-Loxten. In 1903, Posadowsky most clearly put the counterargument, which was that precedent should come before politics; the government must act responsibly. It was "strongly" recommended, he said, "to avoid with extreme caution every disrespect or departure from constitutional stipulations." The ministers listened to arguments like Posadowsky's, noting that Reichstag elections "had already taken place several times in the middle of June," and that early elections would mean shortening the term and impeding necessary legislative work in both the state and national parliaments. There was, in fact, little support for a dissolution and sudden antisocialist campaign.<sup>31</sup>

30. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, "Sozialimperialismus," in *Imperialismus*, ed. H.-U. Wehler (Cologne, 1970), 83-96; Wehler, "Bismarcks Imperialismus und späte Rußlandpolitik unter dem Primat der Innenpolitik," in Stürmer, ed., esp. 238; Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, 166-67. Stegmann mentions the intention of winning proletarian support without commenting on the reality ("Wirtschaft und Politik nach Bismarcks Sturz. Zur Genesis der Miquelschen Sammlungspolitik 1890-1897," in Geiss and Wendt, *Deutschland in der Weltpolitik*, 172), as does Volker Berghahn (*Der Tirpitz-Plan. Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* [Düsseldorf, 1971], 139-57). A vague idea of "social imperialism" as the winning of mass support for the regime is also in such general histories as Eda Sagarra, *A Social History of Germany 1648-1914* (New York, 1977), 427, and Winfried Baumgart, *Deutschland im Zeitalter des Imperialismus (1890-1914)* (Frankfurt a.M., 1972), 53-54.

31. Min. State 14 March 1903, in BAK R43F/1792. For the follow-up see Min. State 18 March

The government's concern in both 1898 and 1903 was to present an image of business as usual, of responsible administration and constitutional rectitude, and deliberately to avoid stirring up the electorate with failed pieces of legislation or parliamentary dissolutions. Antisocialist policy was to be conducted within the framework of respectable legislative accomplishment, rather than provocative political manoeuvres. Germany's leaders, it appears, wanted to defeat the threat represented by the SPD by cooling down electoral politics, not by heating it up further. In 1898 the government wanted to conduct elections under the "favourable impression" to be created by the resolution of the fleet and military court controversies of that spring, while in 1903 it was anxious to avoid dissolution and pass both its budget as well as its measures to improve electoral secrecy the latter a demonstration of its good faith.<sup>32</sup> Positive measures and the capability to govern were to be emphasized at the national level; antisocialism was a matter mainly for the local electoral level, to be conducted through the partnership of Prussian officials and the governmental parties.

The antisocialist campaign in 1898 was an *ad hoc* one. Barely ten days before the vote in 1898, with the chancellor in Paris on a state visit, Posadowsky telegraphed to him requesting permission to leak a letter to the press that would provide somewhat of a rallying point for the governmental forces in the Reichstag elections, "for which the prospects are very doubtful." The leak subsequently occurred in the form of a letter from Posadowsky to an anonymous "notable politician" which was published in the *Berliner Neueste Nachrichten*. The rest of the press instantly recognized it for what it was; the National Liberal *Nationale Zeitung* called it "an openly political statement intended from the beginning for publication as a governmental announcement."<sup>33</sup> As published, the statement was a vigorous call to first-ballot unity in the fight against Social Democracy. Posadowsky emphasized that every supporter of the fatherland "must subordinate his personal inclinations and disinclinations to the *one* political duty, the *common struggle against subversion!*" Those who insisted instead on their separate party claims "run the danger of effectively supporting the Social Democratic movement" by weakening the patriotic cause. With this statement Posadowsky tried to substitute antisocialism for economic issues as the focal point of the campaign.<sup>34</sup>

The Centre-affiliated *Kölnische Volkszeitung* commented significantly that "the economic passage in [Posadowsky's] letter falls strongly back before his fear in the face of Social Democracy. The word '*Sammlung*' was not even used by him." The governmental *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* called the letter "self-explanatory but very

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1903, in BAK R43F/1792. For the 1898 discussions see Min. State 29 July 1897 in ZSA II (Merseburg) 90a AVIII 1,d Nr. 3, nos. 234-238; Min. State 4 March 1898, and Min. State 19 April 1898 (I), in BAK R43F/1817.

32. See Posadowsky's comments, Min. State 4 March 1898, in BAK R43F/1817; Lerchenfeld to MdA, 25 March 1903, in Bayrisches HSA Munich MA 76274.

33. *Nationalzeitung*, 8 June 1898; see also *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 8 June 1898, 3rd morn. ed., and *Großherzog Friedrich I*, no. 1856 (Jagemann to Reck, 9 June 1898) for discussion of the intention of the leak. Many clippings on the subject are collected in ZSA I (Potsdam) RLB PA 5076.

34. BAK R43F/17, telegram from Posadowsky to Hohenlohe, 5 June 1898. The published form of the statement appeared in virtually every major newspaper on 8 June 1898.

necessary'' as a call for the parties divided by the tariff issue to unite themselves. The pro-*Sammlung*, conservative *Kreuzzeitung* tried rather weakly to dismiss these kind of interpretations by scoffing at them, but offered no substantial response. Since *all* non-socialists (including free traders) were to unite to fight socialism ahead of *all* other issues, Posadowsky's statement was recognized at the time as an implicit rejection of economic-interest politics.<sup>35</sup> *Vorwärts* had cause to write dismissively that "what Count Posadowsky has said there has long been known by all the world." The left liberal *Vossische Zeitung* concurred that the letter was redundant, because the parties agreeing with it needed no reminders, and dangerous "because it must still further increase the gravity of an eventual victory of Social Democracy." The *Nationale Zeitung*, on the other hand, disagreed with the emphasis, since the fight against the SPD was the same as it always had been, whereas the new threat of "reactionary agrarianism" needed urgently to be dealt with.<sup>36</sup>

The break with *Sammlungspolitik* was made still more explicit when Posadowsky's leaked letter was compared to another, initially less spectacular leak, this one by the chancellor himself. Hohenlohe wrote a supportive letter during the campaign to Prince von Schönauich-Carolath, a liberal candidate in Guben-Lübben in Brandenburg. Schönauich-Carolath, dubbed the "red prince" by his conservative opponents for his support for the Caprivi trade treaties and other liberal causes, was opposed by an agrarian conservative and by the local officials (*Landräte*) in his district. Hohenlohe's encouragement of the prince was considered a public rebuke both to the agrarians and the officials, or as one paper put it, "in governmental circles one is ... most distressingly surprised .... this telegram [is] ... well-suited to letting the chancellor appear to be standing in harsh opposition to his lower officials...." While Posadowsky's letter at least tolerated the idea of an economic *Sammlung*, merely deemphasizing it, Hohenlohe appeared to repudiate the whole idea.<sup>37</sup>

Free-trading left liberals could be part of an antisocialist coalition, but not a protectionist or (in 1898 and 1903) an imperialist one. Political *Sammlungspolitik*, in the sense merely of antisocialist cooperation, was alive and well and became the officially sponsored tactic. "The policy of *Sammlung* proved its worth brilliantly here," declared a long-time conservative party official in Berlin in 1898 – "if we had not supported a left liberal the Social Democrats ... would have won." Electing a free trader instead of a Social Democrat was hailed in the press as "a triumph of Posadowskian *Sammlungspolitik*."<sup>38</sup>

In 1903, instead of leaking further letters, Posadowsky personally called together the Centre deputy Karl Bachem and the National Liberal Paasche for a private meeting,

35. *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 8 June 1898; *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 June 1898; *Kreuzzeitung*, 12 June 1898, morn. ed., p. 1.

36. *Vorwärts*, 8 June 1898, p. 1; *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 8 June 1898, 3rd morn. ed., p. 1 (quotes reports of other papers).

37. *Staatsbürger Zeitung*, 12 June 1898 in ZSA I (Potsdam) RLB PA 5076 (see also *Berliner Tageblatt*, 12 May 1898, morn. ed., and 13 May 1898, 1. Beiblatt).

38. Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin-Dahlem Rep. 90 128, nos. 262-263; *Berliner Tageblatt*, 26 June 1898.

in which he suggested that they work out a Reich-wide deal for the runoffs covering exchanges of support to defeat SPD candidates. Bachem then acted to obtain his party's compliance to the deal.<sup>39</sup> Yet, while this is another reflection of Posadowsky's consistently antisocialist position, and of the major nonsocialist parties' general agreement with it, it was a minor and unambitious tactic. The arrangement in 1903 was only for the second ballot, where antisocialist cooperation was in any case a tradition, and not (like his leaked letter in 1898) intended to encourage first-ballot coalitions. It was also secret, committing the government to nothing and putting no prestige on the line.

If a Reich-wide antisocialist campaign still posed difficulties, regional campaigns against particularists were easier to organize. A consensus existed among most of the so-called "German" parties (this included the Centre in some cases, but not the SPD) that lesser differences were to be put aside in the face of Polish, Danish, Guelph, or Alsace-Lorrainer challenges. Of these groupings, the Poles were the largest, the most radical, and the most worrisome to nationalists — the last because the Polish areas of eastern Prussia were becoming depopulated rather than Germanized, while surplus Polish labour was forming ethnic Polish colonies in the Ruhr. While the Centre, the left liberals, and the SPD had cooperated with the Poles in the past, the radical trend that triumphed in the Polish movement at the turn of the century insisted on separate Polish candidates. The left liberals and the Centre, as a result, became more deeply involved in the "German" coalition fighting the "Polish danger."

Between elections there was, by 1900, a nearly continuous pro-German and anti-Polish campaign in place in eastern Prussia. German cultural and political associations were led and funded by state officials, while Polish ones were harassed over language regulations; communal self-government was denied to Polish regions; and large "Settlement Funds" were approved by the Prussian Diet to subsidize German farmers and settle them or keep them on the land. The implication of all this for Reichstag elections, which Germans usually thought of in any case as "battles" between ideal causes, was predictable. Ethnic Germans who did not turn out to vote (*how* they would vote could be assumed) were subject to administrative sanctions, from expulsion from patriotic organizations up to withdrawal of credit.

The central government encouraged this kind of political mobilization as part of its electoral strategy. A few months before the 1898 elections, the Ministry of State approved a "Decree ... to Civil Servants in the Provinces of Mixed-Language Population" that is, of Polish-speaking population. Miquel, one of the leading advocates of sharper anti-Polish causes in the central government, proposed the measure to remind Prussian officials of their duty ("officials should not proceed aggressively against the Poles," he reassured more moderate ministers, "but positively strengthen Germanism") and to rally support to the government by establishing an image of decisiveness in "national" causes. The Minister of Religion argued against making the decree public, saying that the government should base its appeal on a record of solid achievement rather than rabble-rousing. The discussion showed, however, that the agitational effect was precisely what Miquel and the majority of the ministers wanted in the run-up to the

39. Bachem Papers, Hauptarchiv der Stadt Köln 1006 Nr. 197 and Nr. 198, memo of 19 June 1903 and related material.

Reichstag elections. Chancellor Hohenlohe and the Minister for Religion contented themselves with moderating the language, changing the decree from an appeal to "German national feeling" to refer instead to "Prussian state consciousness," from a response to the "artificially aroused" antagonisms of the "Polish" population to a means of dealing with "existing" antagonisms of the "foreign-speaking" population. On 12 April 1898, when the crisis of the naval bill was safely past, the Ministry of State ordered the decree's publication.<sup>40</sup>

In this way, the Reich and Prussian government helped perpetuate and even accentuate the "national" conflicts in the particularist regions to further its own interests and to help its allied parties. Nevertheless, throughout most of Prussia the government's political role was constrained by electoral and legal-political realities to employing its officials as general behind-the-scenes facilitators for antisocialist and nationalist campaigns by the governmental parties. Its party-political allies were too divided for it to take a more active role and it was powerless to heal the divisions. The initiative of *Sammlungspolitik* articulated by Miquel in 1897-98, and the broader antisocialist vision pursued in fact by the Prussian state apparatus, were two attempts to come to terms with what was happening to German society, as reflected in voting patterns and the increasing success of the "parties that ruled the masses" against the "fragmented" liberals and conservatives. The government clearly perceived election campaigns to be fights against the proscribed parties. It clearly committed its entire apparatus and did everything it perceived to be possible to unite its allies and defeat those enemies. It considered a variety of "national" policies and strategies to assist in these efforts. Judging by both the voting trends and the seat totals in 1898-1903, it failed either to stop the decline in popular support for the governmental parties or to increase their effectiveness in winning seats. The government saw its own activities in just such terms, and they explain the pessimism and gloom, bafflement and indignancy, which the election results provoked.

At the end of June 1903 *Vorwärts* crowed with jubilation:

The officials have worked against two parties in these elections, including through official influence. Two parties were excluded from the brotherhood of all parties: the Social Democrats and the Poles. And these parties are the sole ones to conclude the election battle with successes.... No bourgeois party ... is capable of living out of its own power, in its own right. They exist only out of mutual declarations for the lesser evil [electoral pacts] and receipt of electoral help....

The lesson was not lost on others. Some said that what Germany needed was another Bismarck: "In earlier times at least the powerful figure at the head of the Reich provided a solid pivot in the general turning and aimless swaying. When meek hands took the imperial rudder, the ship began to list more strongly. The firm will from below pushed itself into the general confusion above."

The "firm will from below" was represented before all else by Social Democracy, whose support the government had done everything it could think of to reduce, and without effect. Despite energetic mobilization, the old particularist enemies like the

40. Min. State 19 March 1898, 22 March 1898, and 12 April 1898, in ZSA II (Merseburg) RdI 15338.



Poles could not be defeated, and the new enemies advanced, in 1898 and 1903, impressively and unstoppably.<sup>41</sup>

The SPD, in 1903 more firmly than in 1898, wove together "the struggle against the agrarians," against privilege, unfair taxes, and wasteful armament spending, into a single coherent campaign. Early in the campaign *Vorwärts* referred to the most important issues in the campaign as the fleet, the tariff, and the arms race; at the height of the battle it listed them as the tariff, militarism, and civil liberties.<sup>42</sup> Since closure had been invoked to silence the Social Democratic filibuster, the SPD was able to claim not only that it was the sole party to fight the tariff effectively, but also that the Reichstag majority had violated freedom of speech and the rights of the socialist deputies in forcing the measure through. "This new tariff is in our eyes a product of illegality and barbarism," claimed the *Schwäbische Tageszeitung*.<sup>43</sup> In this way the tariff debates enhanced the SPD's ability to portray itself as a party of the popular interest, opposing both a regressive financial imposition on mass consumption and a restriction on political rights, while laying the blame on the other parties that made up the Reichstag majority.<sup>44</sup>

The inclusion of civil liberties as an election issue reflected the repressive antisocialism of the governmental parties, and took specific form in the issue of suffrage. The Reichstag suffrage, "universal, equal, secret, and direct" as it was described at the time, was the most democratic in Germany and conflicted with less progressive state suffrages. This relatively wide-open suffrage conflicted, for example, with Saxony, which actually moved in the opposite direction, toward a more unequal suffrage, in 1896. By 1901, the new system had been phased in and all Saxon voters had experienced its extreme inequality. A powerful protest movement was growing in Saxony that could only effectively express its dissatisfaction using the Reichstag suffrage, and this contributed to the importance of the suffrage issue in the 1903 campaign. In Prussia, the conservatives and National Liberals were stubbornly resisting all reform, and the SPD decided to contest Prussian Landtag elections for the first time, starting with the autumn elections of 1903, as a means to express protest. In south Germany, the suffrage reform movements were gathering momentum in parallel to the growing strength of the SPD and the Centre and to coalitions between the two parties. Baden, Bavaria, and Württemberg eventually saw suffrage reform enacted in 1905-06.<sup>45</sup>

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41. Quotations from *Vorwärts*, 27 June 1903; *Deutsch Tageszeitung*, 13 December 1902.

42. *Vorwärts*, 1 May 1903, p. 1; 3 June 1903, p. 1; and 16 June 1903, pp. 1-2.

43. Dated 2 May 1903; clipping in HSA Stuttgart E130a Nr. 1426.

44. Anni Roth, "Politische Strömungen in den rechtsrheinischen Kreisen Mülheim, Wipperfürth, Gummersbach, Waldbröl und Sieg des Regierungsbezirks Köln 1900-1919," diss., Bonn, 1968, 146-47, provides a good example of how the tariff issue dominated the SPD campaign in 1903.

45. For state elections in Prussia, Bavaria, and Saxony, and concerning their suffrages, a convenient source is Ritter and Niehuss, 132-89. Much more could be done concerning state suffrages; a start is made by Merith Niehuss's article, "Party Configurations in State and Municipal Elections in Southern Germany, 1871-1914," in *Elections, Parties and Political Traditions. Social Foundations of German Parties and Party Systems 1867-1987*, ed. Karl Rohe (New York, 1990), 83-106.

## THE LIMITS OF NATIONALIST POLITICS

The suffrage issue was a “fairness” issue of another sort, but it was woven into the Social Democrats’ campaign against privilege, repression, regressive taxes and tariffs, and military spending. In pursuing this combination of issues, the SPD won two successive victories in the 1898 and 1903 elections. Equally, the Centre party made great show of defending the Reichstag suffrage and, if the Centre was a bit less convincing in opposing regressive taxes and military spending since its deputies were instrumental in passing the offending bills, the party at least succeeded in deflecting enough of the blame to retain its popular support and its standing from 1890 to 1912 as the largest party in the Reichstag.

The issues in 1898 and 1903 were endemic issues of Wilhelmine politics – tariff, suffrage, army, navy, taxes, socialism, nationalism, increasingly bound together into a polarized system of issues, pitting either fairness against privilege and reaction or, in the terms used by the other side, responsibility and loyalty against subversion. The parties which focused on “fairness” issues in reference to defined social constituencies, and which engaged in modern methods of agitation to mobilize those constituencies, emerged as the biggest winners.

### CONCLUSION

Nationalist issues remained vitally important in Reichstag elections long after German unification was achieved, but this importance was much greater for certain regions of Germany and for certain political parties – above all the National Liberals, but also the Imperial party and, outside its Protestant large-landownership (Type 1) strongholds, the German Conservative party. The “enemies of the Reich” proved nearly impossible to dislodge in their own regional strongholds, however, while the waving of the national flag became less effective in the majority of constituencies. The parties that lived by waving the flag declined. Outside of the regions of particularist conflict, the Social Democrats advanced seemingly relentlessly up to 1907, and the Centre party and the left liberals were effective in retaining their strength or keeping pace with the socialist advance. All of these parties advanced issues best characterized as “fairness” issues: incidence of taxation, civil liberties and equality of suffrage, and social and economic reform to protect the interests of workers and consumers.

In effect, a new *social* polarization of politics was being superimposed onto the old nationalist polarization. The “national” parties tried to bring the polarization back to the old one, by emphasizing patriotic issues, and by characterizing Social Democrats and, in some cases, Catholics as “un-German.” In the end, however, these efforts were ineffective. Social issues and fairness issues predominated, and the “parties that ruled the masses” were the victors. The liberal and conservative parties clung to national issues, but were undermined by social and economic ones. The contradiction between the two was more than they could manage.