

# Germany

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Elections</b>	<b>2</b>
19 January 1919 . . . . .	2
6 June 1920 . . . . .	3
4 May 1924 . . . . .	3
7 December 1924 . . . . .	4
20 May 1928 . . . . .	5
14 September 1930 . . . . .	6
31 July 1932 . . . . .	6
6 November 1932 . . . . .	7
5 March 1933 . . . . .	8
<b>Parties</b>	<b>8</b>
Social Democratic Party . . . . .	9
Independent Social Democratic Party . . . . .	10
Communist Party of Germany . . . . .	10
German Democratic Party . . . . .	11
Center Party . . . . .	11
German People's Party . . . . .	12
German National People's Party . . . . .	12
National Socialist German Workers' Party . . . . .	12

# Introduction

Germany became an independent state after the Prussian-led war against France in 1871. While multi-party elections were held in the German Empire, the government was not responsive to parliament but to the Emperor. In the final days of World War I, German sailors from the imperial fleet and workers across the country staged the predominantly non-violent November Revolution, which forced the Emperor and nobility to abdicate. On November 9th, 1918, the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed a parliamentary republic just hours before Karl Liebknecht from the *Independent Social Democratic Party* declared the foundation of a socialist republic. In the subsequent violent power struggle, the *Social Democratic Party* cooperated with parties from the political center and the Germany Army. Emerging victorious, a left-liberal-catholic coalition drafted a liberal democratic constitution, and the Weimar Republic was born (Jones, 2016; Käppner, 2017; Winkler, 2018).

Permissive proportional electoral rules allowed a wide variety of parties to compete. Three major cleavages dominated German politics at the time. The division between capital (right) and labor (left) played an important role throughout the Weimar period (1919-1933). Center-periphery conflicts were relevant in the early years of the young republic, especially in the south (Bavaria) and west (Rhineland), but they were mostly resolved after the crisis year of 1923. Most importantly, a deepening *regime* cleavage brought together social democrats, liberals, and Catholic as the defenders of liberal democracy against communists on the one hand and an alliance of nationalists, monarchists, and eventually fascists on the other. Against the backdrop of the Treaty of Versailles that had burdened the young republic with massive reparation payments, territorial losses, and an admission of “war guilt”, the nationalist coalition framed the signing of the Armistice as a treacherous act by the republican founding members. The dramatic economic consequences coupled with the myth of betrayal led a majority of voters to support the communists and the fascists in pivotal elections in 1932. Supporters of the monarchy entered into an alliance with fascist leader Adolf Hitler. Once he had become the leader of the government, he persecuted political opponents and had parliament transfer him

supreme powers in March 1933.

## Elections

Between 1919 and 1933, nine legislative elections took place. The constitutional assembly adopted a unique system of proportional representation that fixed the number of votes needed to win a parliamentary seat. The so-called fixed quota thus mechanically increases the size of parliament when the population grows or turnout increases (Ziegler, 1958). Assembly size of the *German Reichstag* rose from just over 423 in 1919 to 647 in 1933 (Bormann and Kaftan, 2024).

Germany experienced considerable political instability with 13 different prime ministers and 29 cabinets in just 14 years of democratic rule. Government instability reflected the numerous economic and social crises, especially from 1919 to 1924 and after 1930, when a new cabinet assumed office about every six months.

### 19 January 1919

Just over two months after the birth of the young republic, German citizens went to the polls to elect a constitutional assembly. The election was widely anticipated as decisive in the struggle between a liberal democratic form of government favored by the *Social Democrats* and its centrist allies and a socialist republic favored by the *Independent Social Democrats* and particularly the Communists. Held in the immediate aftermath of a short but deadly violent insurrection by the Communist party and the murder of its leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the election yielded an overwhelming victory for the *Social Democratic Party of Germany*, the *Catholic Center Party*, and the liberal *German Democratic Party*. Together the three parties garnered more than 70% of votes and almost three quarters of all seats in the assembly.

In the face of massive defeat, workers loyal to the *Independent Social Democratic Party* and the Communists organized general strike in the industrial areas of the Ruhr area, in central Germany, and in Berlin. The heavy-handed state response that sought

the help of former, frequently right-nationalist soldiers organized in militias escalated into a bloody civil war. To protect itself from the fighting, the constitutional assembly moved to the relatively stable town of Weimar in the center of Germany. Weimar then became the widely-adopted name of the new constitution, republic, and the coalition of Social Democrats, Catholics, and liberals that shaped both.

## 6 June 1920

In the early months of 1920, the German government faced down a coup attempt from the right and fought a violent rebellion by radicalized workers in the Ruhr area. Increasing disillusionment with the Treaty of Versailles and the difficult transition from a war to a civilian economy handed the Weimar Republic's founding coalition of Social Democrats, Catholics, and liberals a dramatic electoral loss in the June 1920 polls. Compared to the constitutional assembly elections in the previous year, the *Social Democratic Party* lost 16 percentage points and dropped to 21.58% of votes while support for the liberal *German Democratic Party* almost halved to 8.46%. Only the Catholic *Center Party* suffered smaller losses and lost slightly under two percentage points to 13.61% of the final vote. In contrast, conservative nationalist parties almost doubled their vote shares to about 27%, and the far-left *Independent Social Democratic Party* added more than 10 percentage points to reach 18.81%. Ahead of the election, nationalist and right-wing politicians attacked the government on its foreign policy record and too much redistribution. In contrast, the *Independent Social Democrats* criticized the ruling *Social Democratic Party* for not implementing socialist policies of nationalization.

## 4 May 1924

Faced with reconstructing the German economy and paying reparations to the victors of World War I, the German government opted to print money to ease the debt burden. The resulting hyperinflation between 1921 and 1923 wiped out the savings of most Germans, and led the German state into default. As the German government could no longer pay the reparation payments stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles, French and Belgium troops

occupied Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr area, to extract payments in the form of coal and steel. The economic problems and the national reaction triggered by the Ruhr occupation strengthened nationalist and communist actors (e.g., Winkler, 2018: 186-243)

In the fall of 1923 both the extreme left (October) and the extreme right (November) attempted to violently overthrow democracy but ultimately failed. However, in the 1924 elections, the *German National People's Party* with the stated goal to return to monarchic rule and the *Communist Party of Germany* with the state goal of a dictatorship of the masses both achieved their best electoral results yet with vote shares of 19.45% and 12.57% respectively.<sup>1</sup> Adding to right-wing opposition to democracy, a precursor to the then illegal *National Socialist German Workers' Party* gained 6.7% of the vote to give anti-democratic forces almost 40% of all electoral support. The pro-democratic camp comprising the *Social Democratic Party* (20.45%), the Catholic *Center Party* (13.32%), and the liberal *German Democratic Party* (5.63%) achieved its weakest result yet (Shepard, 1924).

The center-right *German People's Party* (9.17%) emerged as a central player in the subsequent negotiations over reforms. Under the leadership of foreign minister Gustav Stresemann, the party played a pivotal role in the Center-led coalition by convincing several representatives of the opposition *German National People's Party* to agree on painful economic reforms to fulfill renegotiated reparation payments under the Dawes Plan (Graper, 1925: 364).

## 7 December 1924

In spite of the legislative successes of the centrist governing coalition that led to a marked relaxation of external tensions, ended the Ruhr occupation, and improved the economic situation, new elections were needed in 1924. Chancellor Wirth from the Center Party found it impossible to reconcile the attempts by Stresemann's *German People's Party* to move economic policy to the right by extending the coalition to include the monarchist *German National People's Party* with the decidedly republican convictions of the *German*

---

<sup>1</sup>The *Independent Social Democratic Party* had split in 1922. Part of its members had returned into the *Social Democratic Party* while the other segment had joined the *Communist Party of Germany*.

*People's Party.*

The December elections brought the first gains to republican parties since the constitutional assembly elections in 1919. Especially, the *Social Democratic Party* gained thirty seats with 26% of the vote while ideological extremes in represented by the *Communist Party of Germany* (8.95%) and the Nazi-precursor party (3%) lost electoral support. Support for the monarchist *German National People's Party* improved slightly and the party remained the second largest force in the German parliament. Although the balance of power between the non-extreme parties had shifted in favour of the Social Democrats, attempts to bring the party back into power failed due to the resistance by Stresemann's *German People's Party* (Winkler, 2018: 272). The only other viable government was a centrist to center-right government between the *Center Party*, the *German Democratic Party*, the *German People's Party*, and the *German National People's Party*, which eventually formed in January 1925. The bourgeois coalition marked the first time, the monarchist *German National People's Party* participated in a cabinet.

## 20 May 1928

After the violent and crisis-ridden years between 1919 and 1924, the period between 1924 and 1928 brought relative stability to the Weimar Republic. Economic growth and less confrontational foreign affairs reduced the support to the political extremes. In the 1928 elections, the *Social Democratic Party* gained almost thirty per cent of all votes and clearly distanced the second-placed *German National People's Party*, which lost a quarter of its electoral support (14.25%). On the political extremes, the *Communist Party of Germany* experienced limited gains (10.62%) while Hitler's *National Socialist German Worker's Party* languished with 2.63% of the vote. For the first time since 1923, the Social Democrats returned to government and led a coalition with the Catholic *Center Party* and the center-right *German People's Party*.

## 14 September 1930

The first parliamentary election of the 1930s was triggered by the outbreak of the Great Depression. Unable to agree upon reforms to fund the strained unemployment insurance, the Social Democrats left the ruling coalition in March 1930. Heinrich Brüning from the *Center Party* led a minority government and started using emergency decree powers granted to him by President Hindenburg to pass laws to address the economic crisis. Not finding any parliamentary support for his measures, Brüning asked President Hindenburg to dissolve parliament and schedule new elections.

While returning the *Social Democratic Party* as the largest party to parliament (24.53%) and virtually unchanged support for the incumbent Catholic *Center Party* (11.63%), the election heralded the beginning of the end of German democracy. Hitler's *National Socialist German Workers' Party* rose to become the second largest party with 18.3% of votes and 107 out of 577 seats. On the other extreme side of the spectrum, the *Communist Party of Germany* increased its vote share to 13.13%. Adding the monarchist *German National People's Party*, the vote share of anti-democratic parties had increased to 38%. As the Social Democrats continued to refuse cooperation with the government, Brüning and his *Center Party* returned to power and used emergency decrees to rule.

## 31 July 1932

1932 saw the worst economic conditions of the Great Depression in Germany. Unemployment reached 30%, real income had declined precipitously, and public order started failing as competing political factions of the extreme left and right engaged in political violence. The presidential election in March/April of 1932 had already shown the massive popularity of Hitler's extreme right Nazi movement. Incumbent President Hindenburg barely achieved a majority in the second round with the support of the Weimar Coalition of *Social Democrats*, the *Catholic Center Party*, and moderate right-wing parties (Childs, 1932*a*). Subsequent state elections in Prussia and elsewhere foreshadowed the Nazi triumph (Childs, 1932*b*). In July, President Hindenburg dismissed Heinrich Brüning as Chancellor and replaced him with Franz von Papen who, while also a member of the

Catholic *Center Party*, appointed technocratic ministers and sought to govern with the help of heavy industry interests. Without the support of his own party or the Weimar coalition, von Papen faced an immediate loss of parliamentary support, which he staved off by convincing President Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag and call for new elections.

The parliamentary party in July 1932 became a triumph for the National Socialists. Hitler's *National Socialist German Workers' Party* became the largest parliamentary party with 37.36% of the vote. The Nazis distanced the *Social Democratic Party* (21.58%), the *Communist Party of Germany* (14.56%), and the Catholic *Center Party* (12.28%). Together the Nazis and the Communists blocked any democratic majority. On their own, neither extreme party could govern. Even a potential coalition with the monarchist *German National People's Party* (5.8%) did not yield a majority for the NSDAP. German politics was deadlocked.

## 6 November 1932

Without a parliamentary majority, von Papen's cabinet immediately faced a vote of no confidence during the only regular parliamentary session in September. To prevent the vote, von Papen obtained another dissolution of parliament during a 30-minute break in which the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* caucus consulted on its strategy. Although von Papen presented the dissolution order, Parliamentary President Hermann Göring nevertheless allowed the now meaningless vote, which the government lost 42-513.

The subsequent election campaign was less violent than the one in July and the election saw less dramatic shifts in voter support. Notably, both the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* (33.09%) and *Social Democratic Party* (20.43%) received fewer votes, while both the nationalist *National Socialist German Workers' Party* (8.34%) and the extreme left *Communist Party of Germany* (16.86%) saw a small increase in electoral support. The vote shares of the Catholic *Center Party* remained almost unchanged (11.76%).



## 5 March 1933

After Hitler had been appointed Chancellor at the end of January, he immediately asked for a dissolution of parliament. His government used executive decrees to impose significant restrictions on the parties of the left. The burning of the Reichstag on February 27th led to the closure of Social Democratic and Communist publications as well as the incarceration of most Communist MPs. The Nazis complemented state persecution with a massive terror campaign orchestrated by its paramilitary wings against Communist and Social Democratic campaigners.

To the surprise of many observers, Hitler's *National Socialist German Workers' Party* failed to win an absolute majority with 43.91% of voter support. However, the *National Socialist German Workers' Party* 7.97% were enough to form a radical right coalition government that quickly moved to finish off the remnants of the democratic system. The democratic parties, including the *Social Democratic Party* (18.25%), the *Center Party* (11.09%), its ally, the *Bavarian People's Party* (2.88%), and the liberal *German Democratic Party* (0.85%) barely mustered a third of the vote. After annulling all 81 seats that the *Communist Party* had won (12.32%), the National Socialists had gained the absolute majority. They then convinced all other parties, except for the Social Democrats, to support the Enabling Act on March 23rd, which gave Hitler dictatorial powers.

## Parties

Three major cleavages characterized Germany's interwar party system. First, the economic left-right pitted different social democratic and communist parties against liberal and conservative parties. Second, church-state and center-periphery divisions overlapped. The *Center Party* and its ally the *Bavarian People's Party* represented cross-class Catholic voting blocs in southern and western parts of Germany. The protestant vote, in contrast, was divided between multiple different parties. This religious cleavage was one of the reasons that prevented the consolidation of a strong conservative party (Ziblatt, 2017: 210-214). Third, conflicts over the system of government plagued Weimar Germany

from its birth. On the pro-democratic side of this regime cleavage, the so-called Weimar Coalition composed of the working class *Social Democratic Party*, the Catholic *Center Party*, and the liberal *German Democratic Party* wrote the Weimar constitution. The Weimar Coalition was opposed by the *Communist Party* on the far left, which aimed to introduce Soviet-inspired council republic, supporters of reintroducing the monarchy on the right (*German National People's Party*), and the fascist *National Socialist German Worker's Party* on the extreme right.

## Social Democratic Party

Original Name	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
Other Names	Majority Social Democratic Party
Abbreviation	SPD
Factions	

Germany's oldest party, the *Social Democratic Party* (SPD), was Weimar Germany's largest and most popular party from 1919 until 1932. The main representative of the working class, the SPD had suffered a major split during World War I over its continued support for the war. After the November Revolution, social democrats was split into the majority (pro-war) SPD and the anti-war Independent SPD. The majority SPD pushed for the establishment of parliamentary majority and formed the main component of the pro-democratic Weimar Coalition that drafted the Republic's new constitution, which introduced female suffrage. Next to its democratic agenda, the party advocated workers' rights and socially progressive reforms. The Stinnes-Legien pact from November 1918 established unions as the institutionalized representatives of workers in wage bargaining, introduced the 8-hour day, and enabled worker representation in companies with more than 50 employees (Winkler, 2018: 45). Industrial workers and artisans from heavily industrialized and urban areas of Germany, including the Ruhr Valley, Saxony, Berlin, and Silesia, formed its core voter base (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: 431).

Original Name	Unabhngige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
Other Names	Independent Social Democratic Party
Abbreviation	USPD
Factions	

## Independent Social Democratic Party

After splitting from the SPD over disagreements over continued support of financing World War I, the *Independent Social Democratic Party* (USPD) pursued the establishment of a council republic rather than a parliamentary majority after the German Revolution of November 1918 (Sternberger et al., 1969: 246-7). Although the USPD shared government power in the first democratic cabinet with the majority Social Democrats, it became increasingly clear that the Independents did not command majority support for their plans of a council republic. Army violence against revolutionary soldiers at least tacitly approved by the majority Social Democrat representatives in the government led to the resignation of the USPD cabinet members. A further split within the USPD, led to the foundation of the *Communist Party of Germany* in early January 1918. Sidelined in the constitution-making process and internally split over its relationship to the Soviet Union, the USPD dissolved in October 1920. Its members joined the Communist Party and the majority SPD (McHale and Skowronski, 1983: 423).

## Communist Party of Germany

Original Name	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
Other Names	German Communist Party
Abbreviation	KPD
Factions	

The *Communist Party of Germany* was formed by the so-called Spartacus League around Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and other radical left members of the anti-war *Independent Social Democratic Party* in late December 1918. Its program was revolutionary in its goals to socialize private property and establish a proletarian dictatorship modeled on the Soviet example (Wende 1981: 109; [414]McHale1983). After the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg on January 15th, 1919, and multiple failed attempts of

violent revolution, the party fared poorly in the first democratic elections of Weimar Germany. However, the influx of large parts of the Independent Social Democrats in late 1920 led to a reversal of fortunes. Alignment with the Soviet Union under Ernst Thälmann's leadership precluded any coalition with the *Social Democratic Party* [415]McHale1983. The party gained its greatest support during the Great Depression and became the third largest party with 16.86% in the November 1932 elections, just before being brutally repressed by Hitler's first government in February 1933.

## German Democratic Party

Original Name	Deutsche Demokratische Partei
Other Names	German Democratic Party
Abbreviation	DDP
Factions	

The left-liberal *German Democratic Party* (DDP) was one of the three founding members of Weimar Coalition that jointly drafted the Weimar constitution. Founded by liberal intellectuals, the party's initial electoral success in the constitutional assembly election quickly tapered off. Its programmatic appeal of progressive and pro-democratic positions overlapped with the Social Democrats' program. However, the party's voter base was limited to predominantly urban intellectuals and teachers (Wende 1981: 85; McHale and Skowronski 1983: 419-20). In spite of relatively weak electoral support, the DDP participated in a large number of cabinets of the Weimar Republic, and strongly influenced Weimar Germany's foreign policy in the early 1920s with Walter Rathenau as foreign minister.

## Center Party

Original Name	Deutsche Zentrumspartei
Other Names	German Center Party
Abbreviation	Zentrum
Factions	

The *Center Party* was the third member of the Weimar Coalition and the main representative of Germany's Catholics outside Bavaria, where its ally, the *Bavarian People's Party* operated. Representing Catholics across class boundaries, the party included both a center-left redistributive and a center-right pro-business wing. Despite this internal division, Center-party politicians were the architects of the German welfare state. The *Center Party* was represented in most Weimar governments and led the Republic's cabinets for more than seven years.

## German People's Party

Original Name	Deutsche Volkspartei
Other Names	German People's Party
Abbreviation	DVP
Factions	

## German National People's Party

Original Name	Deutschnationale Volkspartei
Other Names	German National People's Party
Abbreviation	DNVP
Factions	

## National Socialist German Workers' Party

Original Name	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
Other Names	National Socialist German Workers' Party
Abbreviation	NSDAP
Factions	

## References

- Bormann, Nils-Christian and Lea Kaftan. 2024. “Introducing the Democratic Electoral Systems data, 1919-1945.”
- Childs, Harwood L. 1932*a*. “The German Presidential Election of 1932.” *American Political Science Review* 26(3):486–496.
- Childs, Harwood L. 1932*b*. “Recent Elections in Prussia and Other German Länder.” *American Political Science Review* 26(4):698–705.
- Grafer, Elmer D. 1925. “The Reichstag Elections.” *American Political Science Review* 19(2):362–370.
- Jones, Mark. 2016. *Founding Weimar – Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Käppner, Joachim. 2017. *1918–Aufstand für die Freiheit: Die Revolution der Besonnenen*. Munich, DE: Piper.
- McHale, Vincent E and Sharon Skowronski. 1983. *Political Parties of Europe*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Shepard, Walter James. 1924. “The German Elections.” *American Political Science Review* 18(3):528–533.
- Sternberger, Dolf, Bernhard Vogel, Dieter Nohlen and Klaus Landfried. 1969. *Die Wahl der Parlamente und anderer Staatsorgane, Bd 1/Halbbd 2, Europa*. de Gruyter.
- Wende, Frank. 1981. *Lexikon zur Geschichte der Parteien in Europa*. Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag.
- Winkler, Heinrich August. 2018. *Weimar 1918-1933: die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie*. Munich, DE: CH Beck.
- Ziblatt, Daniel. 2017. *Conservative Political Parties and the Birth of Modern Democracy in Europe*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Ziegler, Donald J. 1958. "Prelude to Democracy: A Study of Proportional Representation and the Heritage of Weimar Germany, 1871-1920." 67.