

The July 1932 Reichstag Elections

As the July 1932 Reichstag elections approached, Germany's economic and political crisis was worsening. Nearly 6 million Germans were registered with the government as unemployed. The actual number of unemployed was probably much higher. In industry and mining alone, 5.4 million jobs had been lost since 1928, the last year of prosperity. Almost 50 percent of Germany's union members were unemployed.

Chancellor Heinrich Brüning had not had a working majority in the Reichstag since the spring of 1930. Increasingly, he relied on President Hindenburg, now nearly 85 years old, to govern through emergency decrees, as permitted by Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution. In 1932, sixty-six presidential emergency decrees were issued, while the Reichstag passed only five laws through the legislative process.

The presidential elections of the spring of 1932 indicated that many Germans were looking for a strong leader to solve Germany's problems. President Hindenburg was re-elected by a clear majority, but only after he had been forced into a run-off election against Adolf Hitler. In the first round of balloting, Hitler captured 30 percent of the vote to finish second behind the aging president. In addition, the KPD candidate won 14 percent of the vote, while a minor candidate polled 7 percent. Rather than run their own candidates, the Center Party and the SPD lent their support to Hindenburg.

Hitler's strong showing in the presidential race was a reflection of the NSDAP's growing political sophistication. By the early 1930s, the Nazis had set up local party organizations in towns and cities throughout Germany. They had also learned to tailor their propaganda to win over specific groups and regions. Moreover, the NSDAP's broad-based strategy gave the party an edge over its political rivals. Unlike the SPD and KPD, which appealed mainly to working-class voters, and the Center, whose support was limited largely to Catholics, the Nazis directed their message to virtually all ethnic Germans, regard-

less of their religion, occupation, or region.

As the July 1932 parliamentary elections approached, the NSDAP, the SPD, the Center, and the KPD were the likely favorites among the Reichstag's fifteen political parties. (In fact, these four parties would together receive nearly 90 percent of the vote.) Each of these parties had a different perspective on the problems facing Germany. Each had a different set of fundamental values. And each proposed a different program to guide Germany toward the future. On the following two pages is a summary of the philosophy and source of support for each party.



The *Election Turntable*, by Gerd Arntz, depicts the choices available to German voters in the 1932 elections. Which political parties are represented?

KPD (Communist Party of Germany)

Founded at the time of the failed Spartacist uprising in 1919, the KPD rejected the legitimacy of the Weimar system and continually attacked its leaders. The KPD's support was found primarily among factory workers and the unemployed in large cities. The KPD had little strength in the countryside. Although both the KPD and the SPD directed their appeal to the working class, the two parties were bitter enemies. Alone among Weimar Germany's major political parties, the KPD called for the violent overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers state, as had occurred in Russia in 1917. By the late 1920s, the KPD was closely following the direction of Josef Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union. From 1929 to 1932, the KPD secretly cooperated with the NSDAP to bring down the Weimar Republic. Each extremist party believed that it would emerge victorious from the ashes of the Weimar system's destruction. Like the NSDAP, the KPD had paramilitary forces numbering in the tens of thousands. The KPD forces disrupted the meetings of their political opponents and fought street battles against the S.A., the NSDAP paramilitary organization, for control of neighborhoods. The KPD also shared the NSDAP's attention to the recruitment of young people. KPD clubs were established to involve teenagers in recreational activities.

SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany)

Founded during the latter part of the 19th century, the SPD was Germany's largest party until 1932. Its strength was based in the growing industrial working class. The leaders of the major non-Catholic labor unions largely shaped SPD policies. Except for a brief period from 1928 to 1930, the SPD was not a formal partner in a Weimar governing coalition after 1922. Nonetheless, the SPD was a powerful force in the Reichstag. The SPD led efforts to pass legislation that established the eight-hour workday, laid down rules for settling employer-employee disputes, protected labor unions, and created social programs that benefited the working class. Both the SPD and the KPD drew from the teachings of Karl Marx, but the SPD firmly rejected violent, revolutionary means to change German society. Rather, SPD leaders were committed to working within the system to improve the status of workers and to achieve what they called "economic democracy."



*Mother, have you born your children for this purpose?
Show that you are against battleships and war!*

Center (originally called the Christian People's Party)

Founded during the latter part of the 19th century, the Center, like its close ally, the Catholic Bavarian People's Party (BVP), drew support largely from Germany's Roman Catholics. Center voters came from different regions and different classes, but they were united in their desire to protect their Catholic heritage from government interference. Although Catholics were roughly 37 percent of Germany's population, many of the Weimar Republic's chancellors were drawn from the ranks of the Center leadership, thanks largely to the loyalty of the Center's supporters. As one Center leader said, "one did not join the Center, one was born into it." The political and social outlook of the Center was dominated by traditional family-centered religious values. The Center's strong opposition to Marxism led party leaders to regard the SPD with suspicion. During most of the Weimar period, Center politicians went to great lengths to keep the SPD out of the government.

NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party)

Founded in Munich in 1920, the NSDAP attracted little attention at first. Like the KPD, the NSDAP rejected the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and argued that Weimar leaders had betrayed the German people by accepting the Versailles Treaty. The NSDAP's program was based on extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism, and condemnation of the Versailles Treaty. The party's success was due largely to the charisma of Adolf Hitler, who declared himself Fuehrer, or leader, of the movement. Hitler was a gifted, hypnotic orator. His highly charged speeches ignited the sense of anger and humiliation that many Germans felt, especially after the economic depression began. Because he did not become a German citizen until 1932, Hitler did not serve in the Reichstag. Instead, he remained a fiercely critical political outsider as the Weimar system unraveled. The NSDAP leapt to national prominence with the parliamentary elections of 1930. The NSDAP's support came primarily from Protestant, white-collar workers, small businessmen, farmers, and craftsmen. While young voters and new voters voted heavily for the NSDAP in the early 1930s, most factory workers were not attracted to this "workers" party.

Reichstag Election Results — 1920-1930 (Percentage of votes cast)

Political Party	<i>June 1920</i>	<i>May 1924</i>	<i>Dec. 1924</i>	<i>May 1928</i>	<i>Sept. 1930</i>
Center	13.6%	13.4%	13.6%	12.1%	11.8%
SPD	21.7%	20.5%	26.0%	29.8%	24.5%
KPD	2.1%	12.6%	9.0%	10.6%	13.1%
NSDAP	—	6.5%	3.0%	2.6%	18.3%

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