

# **Stately Ceremony and Carnival. Voting and Social Pressure in Germany and Britain between the World Wars<sup>1</sup>**

**Benjamin Schröder**

## **RESÜMEE**

Die dichte Beschreibung konkreter Wahlpraktiken in Deutschland und Großbritannien zwischen den Weltkriegen zeigt viele Kontinuitäten aus dem 19. Jahrhundert. Während die britische Selbstinszenierung des Gemeinwesens am Wahltag viel von ihrem Volksfestcharakter behielt, waren deutsche Wahlen von mehr Ernsthaftigkeit und Sorge um soziale Hierarchien, von stärkerer Empfindsamkeit gegenüber Regelverletzungen und einem größeren Regulierungsbedarf der Konfliktformen geprägt. Die Mentalitätsunterschiede gehen darauf zurück, dass anders als in Großbritannien vor 1914 freie Wahlen in Deutschland mühsam der Obrigkeit abgetrotzt werden mussten. Einen Epilog fand diese Geschichte im Wahlgeheimnis, das auch nach 1918 nicht überall vollständig gesichert war. Damit lastete bis in die 1930er auf deutschen sehr viel höherer sozialer Druck als auf britischen Wählern.

The 1920s and 1930s saw unprecedented numbers of people going to the poll in Britain and Germany, among them large numbers of young people and women, who voted for the first time. Except for relatively minor changes later in the century, the franchise reforms of 1918 and 1928 produced electorates very similar to the ones of our present day: mass democracy had arrived. How did this affect the meaning of elections? In pursuing this question, the following article will use elections and referenda of national

1 I would like to thank the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, whose generous grant for the project 'Wahlkampf als demokratische Alltagskultur – Studien zur politischen Kommunikation im 20. Jahrhundert' made possible the research for this article.

significance to have a close look at how the act of voting was performed within concrete local contexts, based on a variety of locally and centrally produced sources. I assume that social practices are imbued with meaning, and that we can learn about that meaning if we carefully read them much as we would read a text.<sup>2</sup> This approach, requiring a focus on individual voting acts, is not free from methodological problems, particularly in the context of mass suffrage. With millions of electors casting their ballots, what significance can the detailed study of a necessarily rather small number of voting acts have? This problem is far too complex to be resolved here in any simple fashion,<sup>3</sup> but I would like to suggest that, bearing it in mind, we can use single incidents to construct a wider panorama of what voting in Germany and Britain would have been like between the World Wars, allowing more general conclusions to be drawn.

The plan for this is to explore the scenery of typical polling days and then follow electors into the polling stations where they cast their ballots, discussing how the contexts in which voting took place bore on the act itself. However, as parliamentary elections were hardly a new thing in the interwar years, we will begin at the beginning and first have a look at how earlier traditions shaped the electoral scene after the Great War – a theme that runs through all of what follows. As these traditions went further back in Britain than in Germany, it seems a suitable place to start there.

## Traditions

In the old days, elections to the House of Commons were an occasion for public festivity. Polling stretched over several days that were marked by colourful processions to the public nomination of candidates, crowds booing and cheering at the candidate's speeches, and voters parading to the central polling place, intimidated or encouraged by their non-enfranchised fellow townspeople who scrutinized how the few would cast their votes in public. When polling was over and the winner declared, the election climaxed in the charring of the victorious member: a lengthy procession was formed, once again, and in a festive atmosphere the constituency's new representative was carried through the streets.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, these highly ritualized practices were reshaped considerably, as the franchise was extended successively, the duration of polling eventually restricted to one day, public nominations abolished, a secret ballot introduced, and legislation against disorder and bribery enacted. Some historians have

2 On my methodology see also the more extensive introduction to this volume. My approach is similar to F. O'Gorman, *Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies. The Social Meaning of Elections in England 1780–1860*, in: *Past & Present*, 135 (1992), pp. 79–115 and theoretically inspired mostly by C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York 1973.

3 P. Mandler, *The Problem with Cultural History*, in: *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), pp. 94–117.

4 This is of course only a very rough sketch. For the full picture see F. O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties. The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England 1734–1832*, Oxford 1989, pp. 126–41; id., *Campaign Rituals* (n. 2); J. Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 80–102.

therefore argued that ‘the old electoral culture’ was gone by the 1880s, but this view obscures how persistently these traditions continued to shape British elections in the early twentieth century and even beyond.<sup>5</sup>

This was evident, for example, in the declarations, which were still high-profile ceremonies drawing large numbers of people in the 1920s and 1930s. Huge crowds turned up to wait for the results in front of the town hall, the guildhall, the corn exchange, or some other building central to the civic landscape of the community.<sup>6</sup> We know from an observer describing a series of by-elections in the mid-1920s that there was always ‘a great deal of hubbub’ at such occasions. Sections of the crowd chanted ‘The Red Flag’ and ‘God Save the King’ in rivalry, and the returning officer making the declaration from a balcony or some other high position had to repeat his words over and over again, as shouting, cheering, clapping of hands and ‘noises of every description’ drowned out everything he said. Likewise the candidates, exhausted from a campaign of public speaking, faced one last time the strain on their lungs and vocal chords when they made their declaration speeches.<sup>7</sup> Towards the end of the interwar period, technological developments came to their aid: loudspeakers ensured that more people than ever before could actually hear the announcements of the results and the candidates’ speeches. On the other hand, public address technology could also create a larger distance between electors and elected as the latter were now able to speak from the inside of a building.<sup>8</sup>

After the declaration, some candidates were still chaired, though by this time the term ‘chairing’ in the newspapers probably referred to being carried on the shoulders of supporters without an actual chair being used.<sup>9</sup> This is what regularly happened in the ancient constituencies of Cambridge and Cambridgeshire during the 1920s. At a by-election for the borough seat in 1922 even one of the losers, the Labour candidate Hugh Dalton, was lifted on the shoulders of two of his supporters and carried around the market place, accompanied by cheers and the singing of ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’. Fortunately, the men were sober, Dalton confided to his diary, because many of his supporters had been drinking. When his rival, the local landowner Douglas Newton, emerged from the Guildhall, a group of them beleaguered him, booing, hissing, and

5 O’Gorman, *Campaign Rituals* (n. 2); more recently id., *The Secret Ballot in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, in: R. Bertrand et al. (eds.), *Cultures of Voting. The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot*, London, Paris 2007, pp. 16–42, esp. pp. 36–41; cf. M. Crook/T. Crook, *The Advent of the Secret Ballot in Britain and France, 1789–1914: From Public Assembly to Private Compartment*, in: *History*, 92 (2007) 308, pp. 449–71, here pp. 465–7, and also the reading proposed by Vernon, *Politics* (n. 4). Contrast J. Lawrence, *Electing our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair*, New York 2009, esp. pp. 49–50, 229–35.

6 On the significance of these places see Vernon, *Politics* (n. 4), pp. 49–55.

7 L.-C. Lo, *The Conduct of Parliamentary Elections in England*. PhD Diss, Columbia University, New York 1928, pp. 63–4. Large numbers in 1930s: *Sheffield’s Seven National Conservatives*, in: *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 28 Oct 1931; *Election Victory Scenes*, in: *Cambridge Chronicle*, 14 Feb 1934.

8 In Sheffield amplification was used in 1931: *How Sheffield Heard*, in: *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 28 Oct 1931; a photo of this is in: *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 28 Oct 1931. Megaphones were used earlier both in Sheffield (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 31 May 1929) and in Cambridge (*How Cambridge “Electioneered” on Polling and Declaration Days*, in: *Cambridge Chronicle*, 23 Mar 1922).

9 This had been the practice in constituencies newly enfranchised in 1867: O’Gorman, *Campaign Rituals* (n. 2), p. 114.

shaking their fists. Newton had his own supporters around, though, and despite police protection a group of them were able to seize him and raise him on their shoulders to celebrate victory before he reached ‘the haven of the Conservative Club’.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what they used to be in the old days, these were hardly carefully arranged processions. Chairings in the interwar years were of a much more spontaneous nature, and the police as well as many candidates were anxious to prevent them, for they were, in the words of Neville Chamberlain, ‘a most dangerous proceeding’.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, when they occurred, they still brought the candidate into very close contact with ‘the people’, and even if they merely loomed over candidates as a possibility, they highlighted the dependence of the leader on the led.<sup>12</sup>

The endurance of these practices suggests that elements of interwar electoral culture would still have been recognisable from an early nineteenth century viewpoint. One reason for this is an underlying continuity that British historiography often takes for granted, but which stands out in stark contrast if we look at the distinctly deeper caesura and changes to the electoral system that Germans experienced (or many other Europeans, for that matter). Following the collapse of the German war effort in 1918, revolution brought not only universal suffrage but also the abolition of the monarchy and the creation, for the first time ever, of a parliamentary democracy based on proportional representation. In comparison, even the tripling of the electorate in Britain in the same year appears a minute change indeed, for the framework of elections remained essentially the same. As was the case before and still is today, British elections in the 1920s and 1930s continued to centre on individual candidates campaigning against each other in constituencies of modest size, to be elected by a relative majority. True enough, electoral culture had been transformed considerably to accommodate for changes in mentality, changes to the electoral system and the availability of technology, as one might well expect. Certainly, much of the interaction between politicians and constituents had become more distanced, as perhaps was inevitable with the manifold multiplication of the electorate and indeed the population since the late eighteenth century. But most importantly, a sense of festivity had survived and continued to make for a carnivalesque atmosphere that hinted at a temporary inversion of the social hierarchy, which had been a prominent feature of the old election rituals.<sup>13</sup> This was evident in the declaration ceremonies, when constituents took the licence to shout at local magnates, but also more generally throughout polling day. Before we have a look at that on an exploratory tour of a constituency, however, we need to have a short comparative glance at German traditions of voting before the Weimar years.

10 Sir Douglas Newton M.P., in: *Cambridge Daily News*, 17 Mar 1922; How Cambridge “Electioneered” (n. 8); Hugh Dalton Diary, London School of Economics Archives, DALTON/1/4, p. 212. Parts of the account are missing from the published version: H. Dalton, *Call Back Yesterday. Memoirs 1887–1931*, London 1953, pp. 134–5.

11 Letter to his sister Ida, 11 Nov 1923, R. Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters*, Aldershot *et al.* 2000, vol. II, p. 193; cf. ‘Wild Declaration Scenes’, *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Mar 1931.

12 Emphasized by Vernon, *Politics* (n. 4), pp. 96–8.

13 O’Gorman, *Campaign Rituals* (n. 2), esp. pp. 84–5, 108–9; Vernon, *Politics* (n. 4), pp. 85–6, 93.

This is a more difficult subject, simply because we do not know as much about nineteenth century electoral culture in Germany. In particular, our knowledge of practices under the constitutional systems emerging from 1815 onwards is patchy at best. Comprehensive studies that focus on elections using a cultural approach exist only for later years of the nineteenth century when voting became a more regular institution involving larger proportions of the people. From the impressions these works convey, parliamentary elections were a rather more solemn business in Germany, in a quite literal sense. The contemporary expression ‘election business’ (*Wahlgeschäft*) reveals that there was an air of sobriety to polling, which has prompted the remark that German electors went to the polling station as if making a ‘visit to the post office’ – though this simile does not quite capture the sense of civic duty attached to the act of voting. In any case, it appears there was nothing of the carnivalesque atmosphere so typical of British elections.<sup>14</sup>

Whether elections would remain as quiet, though, was the cause for some anxiety in the first years after the Great War when the turmoil of revolution and counter-revolution overshadowed polling. In 1919, special precautions were taken to secure polling stations and to deal with any potential disturbances, and in a few ‘red’ strongholds in the Ruhr district, Spartacists did succeed in disrupting or preventing polling. In general, however, observers were relieved to find that the election proceeded quietly.<sup>15</sup> It was the same with the first Reichstag election in 1920. In the weeks leading up to polling day, the press both in Berlin and in the provinces abounded with rumours of a coup planned by extremists either on the left or on the right, and authorities were taking warnings of a Communist uprising very seriously. Yet again, although some commentators were certain that Germany had never seen a fiercer or filthier campaign – nothing happened.<sup>16</sup> Voting on the ‘fate of the nation’, a regular expression reminding newspaper readership in strong terms of their moral duty, was regarded as important as it had been before the war, if not more so, and so it seemed polling would continue to be as calmly performed as it had been before.

## Polling Day

To gain an impression of what a polling day would have looked like in interwar Britain, we will return to the Cambridge borough by-election of 1922 and follow Douglas

14 S. Suval, *Electoral Politics in Wilhelmine Germany*, Chapel Hill 1985, pp. 3–4 (quote p. 4); M. L. Anderson, *Practicing Democracy. Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany*, Princeton 2000, pp. 280, 292, 35–51; A. Biefang, *Die Reichstagswahlen als demokratisches Zeremoniell*, in: id. et al. (eds.), *Das politische Zeremoniell im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1918* Düsseldorf 2008, pp. 233–70. Prussian state elections were a different matter, but we will come to that later in our argument, see below, n. 69.

15 Wahltag, in: *Münstersche Zeitung*, 19 Jan 1919; Reports of the election commissioners 1919, Bundesarchiv (BArch), R 1501/114494.

16 E.g. Landesarchiv NRW, Abt. Westfalen, Polizeipräsidium Bochum, No. 543, 4 (secret letter Regierungspräsident Arnsberg to Landrat Bochum, 4 Nov 1921); Büro Kölpin, No. 2 (dossier on left-wing movements in Münster, 1919–20); ‘Neuer Rechtsputsch in Vorbereitung’, in: *Pfälzische Post*, 27 May 1920; *Westfälische Landeszeitung*, 7 Jun 1920.

Newton on the tour that candidates customarily undertook. Newton's car was richly decorated with ribbons and balloons; the whole city was bedecked with party colours. Strongholds of support in certain areas were easily identifiable by placards and photographs of the candidates that followers had put on display behind the windows of their houses. Not only walls and hoardings were used for posters bearing election slogans, someone had also scribbled 'Vote for Newton' on the pavement – right before the Central Liberal Club. As if to return the provocation, Labour zealots had plastered one of the Conservative committee rooms with posters of their champion. Much to his annoyance, the window of a well-known tradesman was a similar site for unsolicited symbolic demonstrations. People walking through the streets flaunted the colours of the various candidates; a few ladies had even turned their dogs into supporters of the Liberal cause. As schools were closed to accommodate the polling stations, children were swarming the streets, singing election songs in support of the candidates and trying to snatch a balloon off Douglas Newton's car, or a ribbon off one of the over 100 other cars that were rushing through the constituency to bring voters to the poll. When Newton stopped for one of his companions to get out, two youngsters immediately took the seat and insisted on a free ride to the end of the street. The general atmosphere was good-natured, though some of the rival demonstrations could become heated, and occasionally an argument turned into a scuffle.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, polling day was not equally lively in all places and at all times. Due to the confusing situation in the immediate aftermath of the war, the December 1918 general election, for example, was noted everywhere for its almost surreal lack of fervour. There was also a great variation from constituency to constituency, even within single towns. In Sheffield the western part of the city was noted for its quietness on polling day, compared with the 'red hot' elections in the working-class East End.<sup>18</sup> The report on the Cambridge by-election above, too, singled out some areas of the city for their lack of enthusiasm and noted that there was little excitement generally. This became the dominant tone of commentary especially in the 1930s, feeding on the contrast with pre-war elections, which had been altogether livelier. Even so, such contemporary assessments revealed the expectation that polling should be a 'jolly good time',<sup>19</sup> and we shall see that in comparison with Germany it still was.

As noted for the declaration ceremony, a feature of this 'good time' was a carnivalesque sense of licence extended to voters. The conveyance that voluntary party supporters offered to electors who could not walk to the poll (or pretended to) can also be seen in this light. It was probably not only the youngsters at Cambridge who insisted on a ride, contemporaries believed there was a certain group of voters who would cast their votes for candidates on the condition that they be chauffeured to the polling station. On the

17 Cambridge Borough Conservatives, Scrapbook, Feb–Nov 1922, Cambridgeshire Archives (CArch), 363/O.1, pp. 50, 71, 81, 104, 127.

18 Shocking Accident Marks Polling Day, in: Sheffield Mail, 29 Oct 1924.

19 Lo, Elections (n. 7), pp. 44–6 (quote 46).

other hand, if candidates had as little means as Albert Stubbs did – a local printer contesting Cambridgeshire in 1923 – they might ask their supporters to take the Tory car yet mark their ballot for Labour.<sup>20</sup> As cars were still a costly luxury item, ownership carried with it a sense of class distinction, and conveyance arrangements would often have been a matter of the (male) haves driving around the have-nots.<sup>21</sup> At the polling stations, there were similar scenes. Police constables watching children just outside the polling stations while their mothers voted inside were a frequent sight and a popular subject for press photography.<sup>22</sup> Reporters played with how unusual such interactions would be in a ‘normal’, that is a non-election setting, to produce a certain kind of humour in anecdotes that tried to recapture the atmosphere of polling day. Consider, for example, the Liberal vote checker outside a polling booth in Sheffield Hallam, who failed to recognize Frederick Sykes and asked him if he had voted Liberal. Sykes, or, more properly, Sir Frederick, was not only a distinguished Air Vice-Marshal and son-in-law of Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law, he also wore a large blue cockade, and – he was the Tory candidate in the division.<sup>23</sup>

The press regularly abounded with such episodes. In the context of mass suffrage, there was a deeper meaning to them. If only for the duration of the election, they highlighted the equality of the citizenry, and in that sense they had a high relevance to the very particular historical situation of the interwar period, which becomes evident in some of their themes. One of them was to present elderly electors to remind others, whose way to the poll would be less arduous, of the moral duty of voting.<sup>24</sup> Some electors themselves made a similar point: there was a tradition of people queuing as early as possible at polling stations in an attempt to be the first to cast their vote.<sup>25</sup> Another popular motif in the press was how the newly enfranchised ‘learned’ how to vote, especially shortly after the franchise extensions in 1918 and 1928. For example, there was one woman in Sheffield who, after being careful that no one saw how she voted, turned around and asked ‘Which is Mr Casey’s box?’ in 1918. Women were typical but not exclusive to figure in such anecdotes. In the same year, there was also a young man who went to said Mr Casey’s committee room to cast a vote using one of the poll cards candidates sent around to remind electors of their duty. And there was one illiterate man, who, when asked for whom he wanted to vote, first replied, ‘Oh, either of them,’ then paused, and went on to say: ‘Well, my wife’s voted for Casey, so I’d better do the same.’<sup>26</sup>

20 Ibid., pp. 134–7; Ephemera related to general election 1923, CArch (n. 17), 416/O.34.

21 See the extensive discussion in S. O’Connell, *The Car and British Society. Class, Gender and Motoring, 1896–1939*, Manchester, New York 1998, esp. chs. 1–3.

22 E.g. in: *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 28 Oct 1931; *Hull Daily Mail*, 14 Nov 1935; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 15 Nov 1935. One even found its way into a German paper: *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, 8 Nov 1931.

23 *The Polling in Sheffield*, in: *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 15 Nov 1922. A similar story from Parracombe (Barnstaple): *News of the West*, in: *The Western Times*, 14 Dec 1923.

24 The oldest elector I have been able to find was Mrs Emma Coate at Taunton, aged 105: *Somerset Woman Oldest Voter*, in: *Western Morning News*, 15 Nov 1935.

25 *Lo, Elections* (n. 7), pp. 39–40.

26 *Polling-Day near Home*, in: *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 16 Dec 1918.

These stories recapitulated polling day events that may have happened to any elector, with an emphasis on ‘may’. As any anecdote they have a ring to them as if what they are telling us is not necessarily something that *literally* happened, but something that *typically* might be expected to happen. We may take them as describing the ‘paradigmatic human event[s]’ Clifford Geertz was so interested in because they are particularly telling to outside observers as they provide insight into how communities communicate with themselves about themselves.<sup>27</sup> These stories worked as a mirror held up to society, and they aimed at readers looking into that mirror, recognizing their own experience, perhaps even themselves, and nodding in agreement, often with a smile on their face.

In Germany, this mode of speaking about elections is difficult to come by. The genre of the humorous polling day incident did not exist in newspapers; only in the 1950s to the 1970s did the press adopt a similar style of reporting in a cheerful key.<sup>28</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, elections were rarely a laughing-matter. Other findings add to this impression. During the two 1924 Reichstag elections, a series of advertisements appeared in the Berlin and the provincial press using puns on the election as a choice between different options to sell detergents, clothes, and other consumer goods. Some of the ads played on widespread sentiments critical of electoral politics such as politicians talking nothing but hot air (in advertisements for hair dryers), or the fragmentation of the party system (as in a huge variety of shopping options). Such ads were also a regular feature in British newspapers throughout the interwar years. They recommended throat lozenges both to speakers and hecklers at election meetings, or they praised mustard to help swallow what the candidates had to say: ‘Take mustard and you can digest anything.’<sup>29</sup> There seems not to have been any particular time when such advertisements were more prominent than at other times, contrary to Germany, where the 1924 campaigns remained relatively isolated. Julia Sneeringer has therefore tried to link them to the particular situation of that year, implying they may be regarded as part of a republican effort to stabilize Weimar democracy after its tumultuous inception. A more simple reading can perhaps better explain why the practice was rather short-lived. As Sneeringer herself points out and theorists at the time argued, for advertisements to be successful they had to use symbols that appealed to consumer sentiments in order to identify products with positive associations.<sup>30</sup> The election theme simply did not do this in Weimar Germany. Polling was not associated with a cheerful mood that would lend itself to having a chuckle.

Consequently, polling days in Germany had a different tone. This is not to say that they were not festive, but their festivity was rather more like the solemn mood associated with a religious holiday than the exuberant atmosphere of a fair. Voters wore their Sunday best

27 C. Geertz, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, in: *Interpretation* (n. 2), pp. 412–53, here p. 450.

28 See Claudia Gatzka’s contribution to this volume; T. Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfes in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1990*, Göttingen 2010, pp. 337–8.

29 *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 28 May 1929; *Sheffield Mail*, 25 and 27 Oct 1924.

30 J. Sneeringer, *The Shopper as Voter: Women, Advertising, and Politics in Post-Inflation Germany*, in: *German Studies Review*, 27 (2004) 3, pp. 477–501. The Persil campaign she describes also appeared in the provincial press, and there were a few isolated advertisements later, e.g. in *Volkswille* (Münster), 11 and 14 Sep 1930.



or perhaps their uniforms if they were veterans, combining the way to the poll and back with the traditional Sunday stroll. Bourgeois commentators in particular highlighted the dignified nature of the occasion, though the air was pregnant with tension that had built up over the course of the campaign. On the face of it, the rival displays of partisanship were similar to those in Britain. Political parties were coordinating last-ditch efforts to get voters to the poll. Groups of supporters flooded the streets with thousands of handbills, others paraded in groups or presented themselves on lorries decorated with flags and posters to demonstrate their party's strength during the last hours of polling. Cities were bedecked with party colours, and nationalists and republicans flew their rival black-white-red and black-red-gold flags.<sup>31</sup> The night before, rival bands of billposters (*Klebekolonnen*) had plastered the cities with posters and little stickers, often pasting their propaganda on top of that of their opponents. Notably in Berlin the violent clashes between these bands, which even in the early 1920s claimed a few activists' deaths, gave a foretaste of the political crisis that would mark the end of the Republic, when government bans of demonstrations, uniforms, and brandy were felt necessary to contain the violence that partisanship engendered.<sup>32</sup>

Yet even before the 1930s, newspapers voiced grave concerns at excessive electoral excitement.<sup>33</sup> This is perhaps not too surprising. The explosion of political advertisement and demonstrations in the public sphere that the post-war era saw were unfamiliar, as the state had used its powers to regulate and strictly curtail political activities before the Great War.<sup>34</sup> Local governments, too, felt the need to curb partisan spirits in the 1920s. In Münster, formal agreements were drawn up and published that parties would, in the interest of not spoiling the cityscape, restrict their propaganda to those pillars and hoardings officially designated for the use of election advertisements. In Ludwigshafen – where arguments about spoiling the cityscape were perhaps not quite as persuasive – local authorities added that citizens had justly complained about the excesses of wild billposting. The city would provide additional hoardings to satisfy the parties' needs, but at the same time, the police warned the overzealous (as they did in Münster) that they had been ordered by the Interior Ministry to intervene decisively against any illegal posting of propaganda.<sup>35</sup> I know of no similar attempts at regulation in Britain. Taken together with the more serious mood Germans attached to polling, these varying attitudes indi-

31 Die letzte Wahlreklame, in: Pfälzische Post, 5 May 1924; Die Wahl in Münster, in: *ibid.*, 8 Dec 1924; G. Schultze-Pfaelzer, Wie Hindenburg Reichspräsident wurde. Persönliche Eindrücke aus seiner Umgebung vor und nach der Wahl, Berlin 1925, pp. 36–43; cf. P. Fritzsche, Presidential Victory and Popular Festivity in Weimar Germany: Hindenburg's 1925 Election, in: *Central European History*, 23 (1990), pp. 205–24.

32 Blutiger Zusammenstoß in Köpenick, in: *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, 2 May 1924; Das Uniformverbot in der Pfalz, in: *Neue Pfälzische Landeszeitung*, 12 Sep 1930; Branntweinverbot am Wahltag, in: *ibid.*, 5 Jul 1932; Burgfriede nach den Wahlen, in: *Westfälische Landeszeitung*, 3 Nov 1932.

33 E.g. Wahlstimmung, in: *Münsterischer Anzeiger*, 5 May 1924.

34 P. Kampffmeyer, Agitation und Politik, in: *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 34 (1928) 6, pp. 467–72.

35 Stadtarchiv Münster (StAMs), Polizeiregistratur, No. 95, pp. 240–7 (Dec 1924 election); Aus der Stadt, in: *Münsterischer Anzeiger*, 24 April 1924 (Similar agreements had existed since 1920); Wahlpropaganda durch Plakate, in: *Pfälzische Post*, 21 April 1928; Plakattafeln kommen zur Aufstellung, in: *ibid.*, 30 Aug 1930.

cate that Germans were more sensitive about transgressions of what they considered the proper and orderly conduct of political fighting. This is also evident if we follow voters into the polling station.

### Voting and its Discontents

Once inside a station, British voters would receive a ballot, which the presiding officer had stamped with an official mark after checking off the voter's name on the electoral register. Electors were then to mark the paper in the secrecy of a polling booth, fold it in half so that the official mark could be seen on the back, and insert it into the ballot box.<sup>36</sup> Proceedings were slightly different in Germany. Here the eligibility of a voter was checked after they had folded the ballot and put it into a marked envelope. When the voter was found on the register the chairman of the electoral board would announce in a loud voice that they could vote, and it was he, not the electors themselves, who dropped the envelope into the box after it had been handed to him.<sup>37</sup>

The origin of this procedure lay in the nineteenth century, when the authoritarian state feared unruly subjects might bring additional ballots – or snatch one out if they came too close to the urn.<sup>38</sup> It may seem like a small detail, but it was a very meaningful detail in at least some polling stations even in the interwar years. This becomes evident if we have a closer look at the election boards' composition. In Wilhelmine Germany, most people serving on these boards as chairmen or vice-chairmen were men who commanded the respect of others: factory owners, teachers, estate-owners. In the polling stations voters met their social superiors, and they were often made to feel the gulf that lay between them and those on the boards, who used the situation to assert their authority. This gave polling a distinctly 'authoritarian [*obrigkeitsstaatlich*] character', one historian has argued.<sup>39</sup> After the war, election boards consisted of one chairman and one vice-chairman appointed by the returning officer plus a secretary and three to six additional members representing the various parties in the voting district. The chairmen were often state officials or others ranking high in the local hierarchy. In small towns and villages in regions as diverse as the Palatinate and East Frisia, for example, the mayors usually sat as chairmen, and in manorial districts (*Gutsbezirke*) in the Prussian east, estate owners continued to supervise elections at least until the districts were dissolved in 1927. The resulting boards were very similar to their Wilhelmine predecessors: socially 'high-grade', as one American observer put it, and almost exclusively male.<sup>40</sup>

36 Lo, *Elections* (n. 7), pp. 40–3.

37 J. K. Pollock, *German Election Administration*, New York 1934, pp. 32–3.

38 Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), p. 50.

39 Biefang, *Reichstagswahlen* (n. 14), pp. 246–7, 255, 265; see also Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), pp. 36–45.

40 Pollock, *Administration* (n. 37), pp. 21–4. Lists of chairmen and vice-chairmen were published in newspapers, see e.g. *Ostfriesische Nachrichten*, 24 Jun 1932; see also lists for 1932 in *Stadtarchiv Ludwigshafen* (StALU), alt, LuA 2298; manorial districts: S. Baranowski, *The Sanctity of Rural Life. Nobility, Protestantism, and Nazism in Weimar Prussia*, New York, Oxford 1995, pp. 56, 140.

In the anonymity of bigger cities, this probably did not weigh too heavily on the act of voting. However, in smaller rural communities, where people knew each other very well, handing your ballot to the chairman of the electoral board was an operation that could still be imbued with social difference. When a mayor-as-chairman took ballots out of envelopes to check them; when a board member jibed at a farm labourer who had come to vote; and even when the head of a manorial district (*Gutsvorsteher*) allowed a husband to vote for his sick wife, these men felt they could do so due to their dominant position in the local community.<sup>41</sup> Electors transgressing their role in the polling procedure demonstrate these hierarchies even more clearly. In the presidential election of 1932 in the manorial district Groß-Muritsch in Lower Silesia, one Mrs Wrzeszcz put her ballot into the urn ‘on her own authority and herself [*eigenmächtig selbst*]’ – the redundant wording in the official report still conveys some of the indignation at a voter, and a woman at that, thus overstepping the line. The vice-chairman of the electoral board opened the box, took out the uppermost envelope and immediately put it back again.<sup>42</sup> Bizarre as this may seem, we should understand it as an attempt to symbolically assert the social order, which stands in marked contrast to the carnivalesque features of British polling days. Compare also the woman who complained to the administration in Ludwigshafen because a temporary clerk had oddly scribbled his name and two flags on her polling notification card: as the ‘well-mannered’ woman she was, she would have to be ashamed showing up in the polling station with a card scrawled over like that.<sup>43</sup> In a rare bit of German polling station humour, one journalist serving as chairman on an election board mocked the German attention to order in an SPD newspaper. A ‘somewhat enormous’ local notable, he reported, felt ‘a sting to her heart’ when she was called up from the register without her honorary title – ‘only in the republic could something like this happen!’<sup>44</sup>

These episodes show how voting as a fundamentally egalitarian act could also challenge traditional hierarchies, and how bold electors might try to push the point. Though this was by no means a novel feature in the Weimar era,<sup>45</sup> perhaps it was more deeply troubling to many Germans than before. Not only had they lost the war, revolution and the post-war inflation had turned on its head the world as they knew it. Small wonder, then, that questions of order and proper conduct became particularly ticklish. Yet calling for order could cut two ways. Mrs Wrzeszcz’s husband lodged a formal complaint against the official who had illegally opened the ballot box – ‘*eigenmächtig selbst*’, one is tempted to add. And he was not the only one to cry foul at irregularities at the poll. Germans com-

41 Aus der Wahlbewegung in der Pfalz, in: Pfälzische Post, 23 Jan 1919; BArch (n. 15), R 1501/1 14707 (election fraud, 1925); 125167, pp. 271–4 (election complaints, 1928).

42 Rulings of the Reichstag election court, BArch (n. 15), R 101/5366, p. 105.

43 Complaint dated 16 Jul 1932, StALu (n. 40), alt, LuA 2298, pp. 209–11.

44 Wahlvorsteher a.D., in: Pfälzische Post, 23 May 1928; cf. Kulickes gehen zur Wahl, in: Neue Illustrierte Zeitung, 10 Mar 1932.

45 Anderson, Practicing Democracy (n. 14), pp. 415–6. The picture of voting as a purely egalitarian performance painted by Suval, Electoral Politics (n. 14), pp. 3–4, misses this dialectic.

plained because urns did not have the correct dimensions or safeguards protecting the secrecy of voting were missing or inadequate, they bemoaned that electoral boards had not been impartially composed, or they reported that party propaganda had illegally been posted in the polling station. Between 1920 and 1930, over the course of five Reichstag elections, they lodged 363 official complaints. If the two presidential elections and the two national referenda of the Weimar era are added in, the total number of charges stands at 513.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, seven general elections held between 1918 and 1935, and more than 240 contested by-elections, prompted just four petitions in Great Britain.<sup>47</sup> As suggestive as these figures might seem, however, one should be careful not to draw simplistic conclusions from them. The conduct of inquiries into electoral malpractice was fundamentally different in Britain and Germany, which complicates comparison. In Germany, once someone had alleged dubious activities, it was up to the authorities to investigate the charges. Indeed a formal complaint was not even necessary for the German election court to become active, for it routinely reviewed the official election returns and investigated any reports of possible law infringement that came to the attention of a judge, even if it was but a notice they read in their morning paper.<sup>48</sup> Most importantly, except maybe for the effort of writing and sending a letter, all of this was free of cost to any complainant. By contrast, electors or rival candidates in Britain had to plead their case personally against the returned MP as if the investigation were a private conflict. They had to procure evidence to substantiate their accusation, they had to pay for counsel, and if the case was lost they usually had to cover the winner's expenses as well. This proved a powerful disincentive, for while petitions could become extremely expensive, their outcome was far from certain.<sup>49</sup> In the 1930s, the typical cost for trying a case was assumed to be around 5,000 pounds,<sup>50</sup> but it could become much more expensive. When the petition in the Drake division of Plymouth in 1929 was dismissed with cost, two electors were left to settle a bill of more than 20,000 pounds.<sup>51</sup> For the average Briton, who earned perhaps some 150 or 160 pounds a year in the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>52</sup> these were steep sums indeed.

46 The majority of complainants were individual citizens. S. Meyer, *Das justizförmige Wahlprüfungsgericht beim Reichstag der Weimarer Republik. Institution, Verfahren, Leistung*, Berlin 2010, part D, number of complaints pp. 273–5, cf. pp. 9–10. My own count for the Reichstag elections in Dec 1924, 1928 and 1930 from the rulings in BArch (n. 15), R 101/5363–5 differs slightly (in both directions), but Meyer has seen more material than I.

47 F. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Statistics 1918–1968*, Glasgow 1968, pp. 21–3, 106.

48 Meyer, *Wahlprüfungsgericht* (n. 46), pp. 55, 73.

49 K. Rix, 'The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections? Reassessing the Impact of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act', in: *The English Historical Review*, 123 (2008) 500, pp. 65–97, here pp. 82–4.

50 H. Fraser, *The Law of Parliamentary Elections and Election Petitions. With Suggestions on the Conduct and Trial of an Election Petition, Forms and Precedents, and Statutes Bearing on the Subject*, London 1922, pp. 205, 210–4; Petition for new Poll, in: *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Nov 1935. The petition tried at N-E Derbyshire in 1923 was in that region: *House of Commons Hansard*, 5th series, vol. 194, c. 896, 19 Apr 1926.

51 Election Petition at Plymouth, in: *The Times*, 28 Jun 1929, 26 Oct 1929.

52 Figures from G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1906–60*, Cambridge 1965, p. 104. A. L. Chapman, *Wages and Salaries in the United Kingdom 1920–1938*, Cambridge 1953, p. 27, gives lower average annual earnings of between 140 and 150 pounds.

This alone would seem to explain why there were far fewer formal complaints about electoral misconduct than in Germany. However, there was another reason why petitions were so rare in Britain: they were not very popular with many electors. It was thought that in an ensuing by-election the losing side would profit from the sympathy the electorate felt with the unseated member. In one of the two petitions that succeeded during the inter-war years, this was not enough for the Liberals to retain the seat,<sup>53</sup> but at Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1923, sentiment even cut across party lines. Here two well-known local Independent Liberals had successfully petitioned against the National Liberal MP Hilton Philipson on the grounds that his agent had exceeded the legal campaign spending limit. When Philipson was unseated his wife stepped in – as a Conservative. The National Liberal organisation in London supported an official Liberal who was facing her, and David Lloyd George asked his supporters in the constituency not to do anything to hinder a reunion of the split Liberal party. Nevertheless, the local party, in the words of their president, ‘didn’t care twopence for London’ and endorsed Mabel Philipson’s candidature. The election, they claimed, was not political at all but was a case of giving a vote of sympathy to Philipson through his wife. Though he had personally not had anything to do with the trial, the Liberal challenger faced ‘election petition odium’ throughout the campaign, and Philipson was returned with a majority even larger than anticipated.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, the expectation was that candidates would play the game and, if they happened to lose, would bear ‘defeat like a man’, as one former MP had put it in the 1890s.<sup>55</sup> Candidates still had good reason to heed this advice in the 1930s, and they did. When the Glasgow Labour party inquired into irregularities during the count in 1935, their candidate stated he himself would not be party to a petition ‘which sought a new election on any legal quibble’.<sup>56</sup>

Polling day anecdotes confirm that electoral purity was of little concern to many Britons. Indeed, it seems some of them downright expected foul play. Consider the voter who tried to bribe a presiding officer in Sheffield: ‘Ah say, owd cock, we want to get r’ Labour chap in eer this time. Me an’ ahr Bill’s been tawking it o’er, an’ if thar’ll do what thar can, ther’s a noo suit fer thee if thar calls at –.’ When the official denied having any influence on the result, the man only winked and replied, ‘It’s awl raight. Call at –.’<sup>57</sup> What this man seemed to accept as part of the electoral game was precisely what Germans were complaining about all the time. What are the reasons for such contrary attitudes? For explanations we must once more turn to the nineteenth century.

53 ‘Oxford By-Election’, in: *The Times*, 24 May 1924; ‘The Oxford Election’, in: *Manchester Guardian*, 6 Jun 1924.

54 Berwick Election Petition, in: *The Times*, 26 Apr 1923; Majority Larger Than Expected, in: *ibid.*, 2 Jun 1923; Berwick’s Strange Election, in: *Manchester Guardian*, 18 May 1923; Mrs. Philipson wins at Berwick, in: *ibid.*, 2 Jun 1923.

55 Rix, ‘Elimination’ (n. 49), pp. 84–5; also Lawrence, *Masters* (n. 5), p. 89. Contrast R. Arsenchek, *Der Kampf um die Wahlfreiheit im Kaiserreich. Zur parlamentarischen Wahlprüfung und politischen Realität der Reichstagswahlen 1871–1914*, Düsseldorf 2003, p. 150, for the German Empire, where it seems voters punished electoral misconduct.

56 Kelvingrove, in: *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 Dec 1935.

57 A Presiding Officer, *Adventures in the Polling Booth*, in: *Sheffield Mail*, 29 Oct 1924.

Money had figured largely in pre-reformed electoral contests in Britain. Voters generally expected to be ‘compensated’ for their trouble and treated to drink and amusement by the candidate to whom they would give support. Some also regarded it as their right to use their vote as a marketable commodity, and even whole constituencies were sold to those willing to pay. Spending large sums to secure votes, whether in the form of ‘bribery’ or ‘treating’ – a line that was always difficult to draw – persisted throughout the nineteenth century. However, politicians increasingly viewed the ‘undue influence’ exerted by excessive expenditure as a problem and eventually introduced legislation to deal with it – in spite of many voters disagreeing. There is some debate as to how successful these efforts to curb corruption were, and how long it took until it effectively vanished, but there is little to suggest that it played any role in the years after the Great War.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the tradition still shaped patterns of what was considered electoral misconduct, even if, as we should note in comparison with Germany, there were very few complaints about misbehaviour at all. Only one petition in the interwar years dealt with allegations of bribery, but it was found that no money had changed hands and the case was dismissed.<sup>59</sup> Outside the election courts, hints at such practices were extremely rare, even in private. Practically the only case I have come across is Harold Macmillan’s campaign in 1923, when his agent reported on polling day that someone had opened a committee room in a house where alcohol was sold and one of their clerks had bought someone else a drink and asked for his vote. An election petition could be lodged on these grounds (but was not).<sup>60</sup>

By comparison, as much as people liked to complain in Germany, no one would have been particularly alarmed at this. Macmillan’s agent would have been astonished to learn that Germans felt no qualms at all about holding election meetings in pubs. Even polling stations were often located there so that those serving on election boards had convenient access to refreshments.<sup>61</sup> Though there were a few complaints regarding the alcohol consumption of individual board members,<sup>62</sup> such things were not considered a general problem, and there were consequently no attempts to outlaw them. They were simply not associated with illegitimate influence: British-style electoral corruption had been practically unknown in nineteenth-century Germany. As the complaints about electoral boards and insufficient facilities for secret voting in the Weimar era indicate, Germans had their very own tradition of what they perceived as constituting illegitimate influence. In the Empire, electors were not bought but rather intimidated: by their priest, their

58 O’Gorman, *Voters* (n. 4), pp. 141–71; C. O’Leary, *The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868–1911*, Oxford 1962; Rix, ‘Elimination’ (n. 49); Lawrence, *Masters* (n. 5), pp. 67, 93–4, 110–1; M. Dawson, *Money and the Real Impact of the Fourth Reform Act*, in: *Historical Journal* 35 (1992) 2, pp. 369–381, here pp. 376–7.

59 *The Times*, 18 and 21 Oct 1929. The case is discussed in more detail below.

60 H. Macmillan, *Winds of Change. 1914–1939*, London 1966, p. 144.

61 Pollock, *Administration* (n. 37), pp. 24–5.

62 *Rulings of the Reichstag election court*, BAArch (n. 15), R 101/5363, pp. 51, 73–4 (Dec 1924).

landlord, their employer, and state officials overseeing polling. As Britons talked about ‘bribery’ and ‘treating’, Germans complained of ‘election terror’.<sup>63</sup>

This is not to say that intimidation was unknown in Britain. On the contrary, throughout the nineteenth century landowners and employers, just as their German counterparts, used their positions to influence the outcome of elections by threatening to lay off workers or evict tenants. Even in 1910, there were numerous allegations of this.<sup>64</sup> However, there are good reasons to believe that intimidation by ‘bread lords’ was felt to be much more pervasive in the German Empire.<sup>65</sup> Contrasting the forms ‘intimidation’ could assume is instructive in that regard. In Britain, it could also target voters higher up in the social hierarchy as gangs of rowdy supporters harassed voters on the other side of the partisan fence. Characteristically, Jon Lawrence has argued that politicians directed their efforts to reform electoral practices just as much at protecting ‘respectable’ voters from ‘roughs’ and ‘mobs’ as they sought to lift pressure weighing on the economically vulnerable. In Germany, this type of electoral violence, which was so endemic even in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain,<sup>66</sup> was almost unknown. One has to look hard for isolated incidents of fighting breaking out in partisan clashes, which the police had not trouble quelling.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, we do not hear of any complaints about electoral boards trying to influence polling in Britain by such typical German practices as rejecting ballots or registering, against the law, how electors had cast their votes.

Both points hint at the importance of a profound structural difference underlying voting in Britain and Germany. British contests were between two (later three) groups fighting for the spoils, each trying to mobilize all sections of the electorate using the same tactics according to how promising they seemed. The electoral system and electoral procedure appeared neutral, not giving an obvious advantage to just one side. Crucially, the state did not appear as a separate actor who had its own stakes in the electoral gamble and consequently tried to influence the outcome of contests. In Germany, power was much more asymmetrically distributed. The state, as a separate entity, actively and visibly influenced elections according to its own interests, which were mostly aligned with Conservatives and Liberals – precisely those groups whose representatives presided over polling. Their attempts to curtail the influence of Social Democrats and Catholics by marginalising

63 See above all Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), esp. chs. 2–7, p. 377; it was similar in Prussian state elections: T. Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preußen 1867–1914. Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und politischem Massenmarkt*, Düsseldorf 1994, ch. 1. It is telling that Britain and Germany can be used as ‘extreme cases’ to test assumptions about political corruption and modernity: J. Ivo Engels, *Politische Korruption in der Moderne. Debatten und Praktiken in Großbritannien und Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, 282 (2006) 2, pp. 313–50, on elections pp. 340–4.

64 Rix, *Elimination* (n. 49), p. 89.

65 Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), esp. pp. 170–3, 224–31 (quote 226); contrast P. Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910. Radicalism and Community*, Oxford 2003, esp. pp. 72–7.

66 J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 181–8; Lawrence, *Masters* (n. 5), p. 47.

67 Some are reported in A. Gawatz, *Wahlkämpfe in Württemberg. Landtags- und Reichstagswahlen beim Übergang zum politischen Massenmarkt (1889–1912)*, Düsseldorf 2001, p. 295, Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), pp. 27–8.

them – dangerous ‘enemies of the Empire’ (*Reichsfeinde*), they were called at times – were met by these groups forming cohesive milieus held together by considerable social pressure – exerted by the priest or the trade union – to assure the loyalty of their followers against coercion from the outside. Elections thus became an arena for voters to demonstrate their loyalties and to assert their rights against the *Obrigkeitsstaat*,<sup>68</sup> a point that could hardly have been made with attempts at bribery and violent intimidation. Instead, Germans came to hold elections in very high regard. Hence the seriousness with which they went to the poll and the detailed attention to irregularities. Those who felt excluded realized that they could attain emancipation by learning the rules of the game and trying to bring those who broke and bent them to comply.<sup>69</sup>

Central to this was the struggle for the secrecy of the ballot. If the individual’s decision were effectively shielded from being known by others, the influence an elector’s master (or anyone else) could exert on their choice would be minimized. The secret ballot would thus shift the source of legitimate political opinion from the community to the individual, as historians have variously highlighted.<sup>70</sup> The story of how this was achieved is mostly a story of the nineteenth century, but it had an epilogue, to which we will now turn in an attempt to examine how private the act of casting a ballot really was after the Great War.

### A Secret Ballot?

In Britain the Ballot Act introduced secret voting in 1872, but many voters were difficult to persuade of its effectiveness. In the 1880s Liberals felt compelled to publish a number of reassuring pamphlets to drive home that polling was indeed anonymous,<sup>71</sup> and even forty years later, electors remained sceptical. In the 1920s and 1930s correspondents regularly wrote to local newspapers contesting the claim that voting really was anonymous. We may view this as further evidence for the expectation of many Britons that elections were a corrupt business, though in these cases the tone was critical rather than accepting. Almost all of the writers referred to the fact that the clerk handing out the ballot wrote the elector’s registration number on a counterfoil that could be matched

68 The point is most forcefully argued in Suval, *Electoral Politics* (n. 14); on the chronology see Gawatz, *Wahlkämpfe* (n. 67), ch. 7; cf. Hedwig Richter’s contribution to this volume.

69 A central argument in Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), esp. ch. 9. Compare Prussian state elections, where at least the proceedings in the electoral colleges had a different tone. They oscillated between boredom and festivity, and there was a good deal of humorous obstruction, which the different context may explain. The opposition could thus undermine the legitimacy of the massively unequal three-class franchise by ridiculing it, something they had no reason to do in competitive Reichstag elections: Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht* (n. 63), pp. 128–64.

70 E.g. Vernon, *Politics* (n. 4), pp. 157–8; T. Mergel, *Die Wahlkabine*, in: A. Geisthövel/H. Knoch (eds.), *Orte der Moderne. Erfahrungswelten des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt am Main, New York 2005, pp. 335–44; cf. the critical view in Bertrand et al., *Hidden History* (n. 5).

71 Crook/Crook, *Advent* (n. 5), p. 466; cf. for 1910: N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People. The General Elections of 1910*, London 1972, p. 375.



to the ballot paper, asking whether this was legal. It was. The provision was part of the Ballot Act, a concession to the House of Lords intended to make possible a scrutiny of individual votes in the case of an election petition.<sup>72</sup> Newspapers therefore tried to reassure their readers that strict rules and hefty penalties ensured that nevertheless none of the officials would violate the secret of voting.<sup>73</sup> The counterfoils were kept separately from the ballots and could only be examined by order of an election court. Furthermore, all the ballots within a constituency were brought to one central site and mixed before the count.<sup>74</sup> An observer trying to find out how someone else had voted therefore would have had to somehow spot and memorize the number on the back of the ballot handed to an elector and afterwards identify the relevant slip during the count of some ten thousands of them. Tracking votes like this was practically impossible. In 1880 an election petition sensationally demonstrated as much – it was to remain the only case in which the ballot's secrecy was ever questioned.<sup>75</sup>

Nevertheless, politicians' speeches also indicate that to some degree the social pressure associated with open voting was a factor electors still considered relevant in interwar Britain. Conservatives reminded voters in 'red' parts of their constituencies that the ballot was secret and that no one would know if they put their cross against the Tory candidate's name. Douglas Newton in Cambridge even went as far as to suggest there were people in the borough going about 'in terror of declaring themselves Conservatives' due to the pressure put onto them.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, in rural areas Labourites accused Tories of systematically hinting that there were ways of finding out how someone had voted to intimidate economically dependent voters.<sup>77</sup> Labour publications also circulated stories of polling stations decorated in Tory colours, painting a picture of a politically backward countryside where prevailing deferential structures presented an obstacle to the onward march of socialism. However, such stories were usually rather vague. Clare Griffiths suggests that they were popular not so much due to their substance but because they provided a mythology that conveniently explained Labour's lack of success in rural Britain.<sup>78</sup> We should also note that while the letters sent to newspapers show that many voters were seriously concerned about secret voting, they concentrated on the theoretical possibility of tracing votes via the numbered counterfoils rather than on concrete evidence of secrecy being breached.<sup>79</sup>

72 B. L. Kinzer, *The Ballot Question in English Politics, 1830–1872*, Toronto 1975, pp. 225–6, 234–5, 240–2.

73 *Is the Ballot Secret*, in: *Essex Chronicle*, 20 and 27 Oct 1922; *To the Editor*, in: *ibid.*, 3 Nov 1922; *By the Way*, in: *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 13 and 15 Nov 1935.

74 *Lo, Elections* (n. 7), p. 58.

75 O'Leary, *Elimination* (n. 58), pp. 130–2.

76 *Litvinoff and the Loan*, in: *Cambridge Daily News*, 25 Oct 1924; see also: *Monster Meeting*, in: *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 27 Oct 1931, and a similar message to potential first-time Liberal electors in: *North Devon Journal*, 30 May 1929.

77 G. G. Desmond, *The Countryman at the Polling Booth*, in: *The New Leader*, 28 Nov 1924.

78 C. V. J. Griffiths, *Labour and the Countryside. The Politics of Rural Britain 1918–1939*, Oxford 2007, pp. 57–64. I would like to thank Clare Griffiths for sharing her impressions on this with me.

79 The most concrete case I know of is: *Letters to the Editor*, in: *Western Daily Press*, 9 Dec 1922, a story based on the proverbial friend telling about a polling clerk having said... I could not find a conclusion to the allegations.

By contrast, quite specific incidents made the rounds in Germany, indicating what happened here was on a different scale altogether. In May 1928 Lothar von Fürstenberg, a Westphalian right-wing aristocrat, gained knowledge of a notice put on display in the village of Mellrich, denouncing him as a ‘parasite’ who would now be chucked out. Fürstenberg made inquiries as to who might be responsible for the rant and received a list of 72 locals who had ‘probably’, he was told, voted ‘yes’ on the referendum to expropriate the princes two years earlier. How could he know? The Weimar constitution provided that if one tenth of the electorate signed a list supporting a draft bill it would be presented to parliament and, if defeated, would be passed into law if half of the electorate endorsed it in a referendum. Knowing that it was well-nigh impossible to reach that quorum, opponents of a bill would ask their supporters to boycott the election, and while the actual ballot was secret, the list that supporters had to sign for the initiative was not. Fürstenberg could therefore make reasonable guesses – and marks on the list in his papers indicate he did – who had voted in favour. Compared with 72 electors who had signed the list in Mellrich, there had been 65 votes for the bill, one against, and six spoiled ballots.<sup>80</sup>

These provisions made it possible to exert considerable pressure on voters. The ensuing ‘election terror’, as it was still called, was particularly rife in rural areas. Landowners would not only monitor polling in 1926, threatening to dismiss dependants who supported the expropriation bill. They also pushed vulnerable electors to sign the initial petition in the campaign against the reparations settlement in 1929, the only other national initiative that reached the referendum stage in the Weimar era. Owners of large estates in areas such as Pomerania or Mecklenburg were particularly ruthless. Many dependent voters in such places felt the only way to deal with the pressure was to succumb and sign the petition but then void their ballots in the actual referendum.<sup>81</sup> Nor were such tactics the prerogative of the right. The SPD too, having asked their supporters to abstain, monitored who went to the poll in 1929, causing disturbances and a formal complaint by a Nazi supporter of the referendum.<sup>82</sup>

True, the referenda were an exceptional case as the procedure differed from Reichstag and presidential elections, but there were many similar features as well. Since the unification of Germany in 1871, voting for the Reichstag had been secret according to the constitution. The reality of polling, however, fell far short of this provision. Intimidation was so rife in nineteenth-century Germany because it was easy for electoral boards and party representatives in the polling stations to control how electors voted. Rather than a standardized ballot, voting was by private voting paper: electors were supposed to write the name of a candidate on a slip which they would cast as ballot. In practice, political parties distributed ready-made papers that contained the candidate’s name in print, developing

80 File on support of the DNVP, Vereinigte Westfälische Adelsarchive, Egh.Fam.A.IX/30.

81 O. Jung, *Direkte Demokratie in der Weimarer Republik. Die Fälle „Aufwertung“, „Fürstenenteignung“, „Panzerkreuzverbot“ und „Youngplan“*, Frankfurt am Main, New York 1989, pp. 57–8, 119–27; Baranowski, *Sanctity* (n. 40), pp. 139–41.

82 Rulings of the Reichstag election court, BAArch (n. 15), R 101/5366, pp. 83–5.

ever more subtle ploys to make them conform to the legal requirements but at the same time distinguishable. Polling booths and an envelope to shield the paper from the sight of curious onlookers were only introduced in 1903; and only ten years later was the size of ballot boxes regulated to prevent the envelopes from stacking on top of each other, which had made it possible to match them to the order in which voters were polled. Margaret Anderson is right to point out that these changes constituted a 'watershed' for the practice of voting as they replaced the thin veil of secrecy with a considerably heavier curtain.<sup>83</sup> However, I would like to suggest that although there were no debates surrounding voting procedures in Weimar comparable to those of the Empire, the secrecy of the ballot remained precarious in many places after the war.

In the first two elections, private voting papers were still used, though in 1920 a change was made that if a party sent their papers to the chairman of an electoral board he had to put them on display on a table in front of the polling station.<sup>84</sup> Whether this was practiced is another matter. In Pirmasens in 1920, for example, voters still depended on party representatives distributing the papers in front of the polling stations if they had not acquired one before polling day.<sup>85</sup> Dependence on availability was one thing characteristic of the system of private voting papers, as was most obvious to the priest in Schneckhausen – a village of some 240 electors – who had the local constable remove an SPD distributor from the polling station in 1919. The possibility of control was another. It would have taken considerable courage to follow said priest from the church to the polling station and take any other than the Catholic BVP ballot on offer.<sup>86</sup> Some contemporaries mused about other forms of control that were still possible in spite of the provisions within the polling station. The table on which voting papers were laid out, for example, could be so positioned as to be in view of the electoral board. Landowners could give ballots to their dependants and scrutinize them throughout polling to make sure they did not acquire any rival paper. Particularly cunning factory owners serving on electoral boards might even give hand-written ballots to their workers and later control how many of them had been cast.<sup>87</sup> Again, the left were accused of similar practices. During the Saxony state elections in November 1922, the Free Trade Unions handed out paper slips to be stamped at the polling stations and later collected to control who of their members had failed to meet their duty.<sup>88</sup>

83 Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), pp. 256–60 (quote p. 260). Even Arsenschek, *Wahlfreiheit* (n. 55), pp. 349–66, who tries his utmost to refute Anderson's argument, acknowledges that 'the problem of secret voting was eventually close to a solution' in 1913 (p. 366).

84 There had been a rule in Württemberg earlier that the state would thus provide papers for all parties – inevitably, there were complaints because chairmen did not put them on display impartially, see Meyer, *Wahlprüfungsgesetz* (n. 46), pp. 99–100, 203.

85 *Wahlkampf in Pirmasens*, in: *Pfälzische Post*, 10 Jun 1920.

86 *Zentrums-Terrorismus*, in: *ibid.*, 27 Jan 1919; *Aus der Wahlbewegung in der Pfalz*, in: *ibid.*, 23 Jan 1919; *Wie wähle ich Zentrum?* in: *Münsterischer Anzeiger*, 30 Apr 1924; *Die Ergebnisse der Reichstagswahlen vom 20. Mai 1928 und 7. Dezember 1924 in den Gemeinden der Pfalz, Ludwigshafen am Rhein 1928*, p. 37.

87 J. Rosenthal, *Ueber den reichsrechtlichen Schutz des Wahlgeheimnisses*, Tübingen 1918, pp. 46–8.

88 *Neue Preußische (Kreuz-)Zeitung*, 16 Nov 1922.

Only the introduction of a standardized ballot containing all the parties in 1924, which Britons had been using since 1872, rendered such practices ineffective. Yet even then, polling was closely watched. Voters approaching a polling place had to ‘run the gauntlet’ between rows of activists, who continued to represent their parties as sandwich men in front of the stations. Their agitation could be intimidating to electors, as at least one complainant claimed in 1924.<sup>89</sup> Later many of these men (there were only few women) wore a party uniform, a sight that became emblematic of the symbolic political battles of the Weimar era.<sup>90</sup> The parties were also very much present within the polling stations. Not only did their representatives sit on electoral boards, additional scrutineers were given space to register who had voted, so that tardy electors could be reminded to go to the poll. Others might also be watching. In densely packed stations in the cities, queuing voters were not kept out of the room but crowded in on those occupying the polling booths. The facilities for shielding how someone marked their ballot were often merely a thin canvas that allowed others to see where their fellow electors put their crosses. Attitudes about this were ambivalent, as some people did not even bother using the compartments but marked their ballots outside, and some even lodged formal objections because electoral boards forced them to use the secret compartments.<sup>91</sup> Yet at the same time, there were always many more complaints about violations of secret voting.<sup>92</sup> Much depended on where electors cast their votes. In rural areas, polling districts were much smaller. Every community (*Gemeinde*) formed a district, with larger communities split up into several districts of no more than 2,500 inhabitants each. Other than stipulating that they should not be so small as to endanger the secrecy of the vote, the election code prescribed no minimum limit for districts. Up until 1912, there had been several unsuccessful attempts to introduce one, and those dealing regularly with electoral procedure and misconduct in the 1920s were still well aware that voting in small communities endangered the secrecy of the ballot.<sup>93</sup> Yet curiously enough, the issue was marked by its absence from the discussion when the new electoral law was devised in the early Weimar years. More fundamental concerns such as the drawing up of constituencies and the mode of allocating seats probably preoccupied legislators.<sup>94</sup> Only the provisional

89 Pollock, *Administration* (n. 37), pp. 33–4; Rulings of the Reichstag election court, BArch (n. 15), R 101/5363, p. 73.

90 G. Paul, *Kampf um Symbole. Symbolpublizistischer Bürgerkrieg 1932*, in: id. (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder. 1900 bis 1949*, Göttingen 2009, pp. 420–7. If one were to pick a theme similarly iconic of British polling stations, the choice would probably and tellingly fall on the police constable looking after little children, see above, p. 47.

91 In Britain, vote checkers had to stand outside the station. Pollock, *Administration* (n. 37), pp. 33–4; R. H. Wells, *German Cities. A Study of Contemporary Municipal Politics and Administration*, Princeton 1932, p. 94; Meyer, *Wahlprüfungsgericht* (n. 46), p. 234.

92 Besides the formal complaints discussed above cf. regular articles in the press, e.g. *Aus Stadt und Land*, in: *Pfälzische Post*, 22 May 1928; *Ämtliche Verletzung des Wahlheimnisses*, in: *ibid.*, 30 Apr 1925.

93 *Verhandlungen des Reichstages*, 13. Legislaturperiode 1912, vol. 298, Nos. 49 and 94, 9 and 14 Feb 1912; Anderson, *Practicing Democracy* (n. 14), pp. 56–7, 257–8; Meyer, *Wahlprüfungsgericht* (n. 46), pp. 245–6; cf. Landrat to Regierungspräsident in Königsberg, Apr 1924, *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (GSStA)*, XX. HA, Rep. 2, II, No. 2996, p. 55.

94 The extensive discussions in the Reichstag protocols can be found using their index. The final Weimar regulation is §45 *Reichswahlordnung* 31 Dec 1920, *Reichsgesetzblatt* 1920, p. 2182.

code for the election to the National Assembly contained a provision in that respect, stipulating that polling districts should comprise 2,500 people on average. Yet experience showed that this was far too large a number in thinly settled areas, and the rule was dropped. One observer even pointed out that there was really no danger to the secrecy of voting in having very small communities form their own polling districts – because everyone in a village knew anyhow to what political party everyone else belonged.<sup>95</sup> Thus into the 1930s even communities as tiny as Bettenhausen in the Palatinate (46 electors) or Fehnhusen in East Frisia (around 50 votes cast) continued to form their own districts. There was of course little crowding in such polling stations. The representation of party activists around the station would also have been much more homogeneous than in cities. In most elections at Schneckenhausen the priest would not have needed to scare away any Social Democrat, as none would have found their way into the village. Composing an electoral board from members representing the parties in the district would have been similarly one-sided, as the BVP/Centre Party received up to 85 per cent of the vote and only around ten ballots were ever cast for the SPD and the Communists together in the 1920s and in 1930.<sup>96</sup> The interaction between election boards and electors was also rather more intimate than in the cities. For example, there was a thin line between board members helping voters to mark their ballot and helping them to mark their ballot ‘correctly’, which prompted the governor of East Prussia to have all election board chairmen ‘emphatically’ reminded in 1924 that the only excuses for giving assistance were illiteracy or physical handicaps.<sup>97</sup> Finally, when the election was over, the local results were published in the press. Unlike in Britain, everyone knew in precise numbers how their community had voted – and everyone knew that everyone else knew.

The impact of this was obvious if voting behaviour was scrutinized in court. Finding reliable witnesses for clerical or employer intimidation was notoriously difficult in Imperial Germany due to the very same local dependencies on which it fed. A case from Bavaria in 1908 may serve to illustrate this. The local priest had asked his flock whether they had all voted for the Centre Party, and when they replied in positive yet a press report pointed out that fewer Centre ballots had actually been cast, criminal proceedings on account of election fraud were initiated. The witnesses were in a predicament: How they claimed to have voted did not tally with the result, so that some of the testimonies were obviously more an expression of obligations felt towards the parish than of actual voting behaviour. Due to the complex problems such cases produced, the pre-war Reichstag was reluctant to investigate them.<sup>98</sup> The same logic may also provide the key to explaining some fea-

95 StAMs (n. 35), Stadtregistratur, Fach 6 No. 9, pp. 630–1; similar documents in StALu (n. 40), alt, ZR I 1412/30; reports of the voting commissioners, 1919, BArch (n. 15), R 1501/114494, p. 82 (Osnabrück).

96 Ergebnisse 1928 und Dezember 1924 in der Pfalz (n. 86), p. 37; Die Ergebnisse der Reichstagswahlen vom 14. September 1930 und 20. Mai 1928 in den Gemeinden der Pfalz, Ludwigshafen am Rhein 1930, p. 37; Ostfriesische Nachrichten, 2 Apr and 2 Aug 1932.

97 Circular, 7 Nov 1924, GStA (n. 93), XX. HA, Rep. 2, II, No. 2997, pp. 27–9; cf. rulings of the Reichstag election court, BArch (n. 15), R 101/5363, p. 51 for a complaint on this (Westphalia, 1924).

98 Rosenthal, Schutz (n. 87), pp. 29–32; Arsenschek, Wahlfreiheit (n. 55), pp. 107–8, 249; Anderson, Practicing Democracy (n. 14), p. 61.

tures of electoral investigations in the Weimar Republic. Some witness accounts still did not match what the ballots showed, though this could also indicate fraud. Two women in Stolp in Pomerania, for example, claimed to have voted Communist to spite the local squire (*Rittergutsbesitzer*) in 1928, but all of the 163 ballots in the district showed nationalist DNVP votes.<sup>99</sup> In cases of diverging testimonies like this one, the Reichstag election court had a curious tendency to accord credibility to election boards rather than independent witnesses. The court would usually rule that what had happened could not be fully clarified, but since the alleged offence would not change the overall election result the complaint could be dismissed. This was of course true in view of the court's task to validate elections, but it also suggests judges were happy not to stir up trouble if they did not need to. It also means we should be careful not always to accept at face value the statements of witnesses who gave testimony that they had not seen anything untoward, while it can serve to explain odd claims like the one by a woman who testified she did not remember anything because of her own 'ignorance [*geistigen Beschränktheit*] and forgetfulness'.<sup>100</sup>

One may object that this kind of argument rests to some degree on speculation, and indeed, by its very nature it is difficult to substantiate further. However, it is perhaps telling that whereas the question of how one had voted could be such a tricky one in Germany it was dealt with very casually in Britain. Quite a few voters publicly exclaimed their choice when dropping their ballot into the box, a theme turned into humorous anecdotes rather than discussions about undue influence.<sup>101</sup> Formally, the question of influence was only dealt with in one petition in the interwar years – characteristically it was founded on allegations of bribery, not intimidation. At Plymouth in 1929, an extremely rich (and somewhat eccentric) philanthropist named Ballard, who was running a charitable institute for boys, was accused of bribing the children to persuade their parents to vote Labour. According to most accounts he promised them money and a fireworks display if they succeeded and threatened he would have to close the institute if not. In what was the only evidence given on the question of whether the scheme was successful, the courtroom erupted in laughter when one boy stated his parents had voted Conservative in spite of Ballard's wishes and that his mother would not allow him to return to the institute. What became clear during the proceedings was that Ballard had been unable to capitalize politically on the influence he was said to have acquired over so many of Plymouth's families. Indeed, his actions did him 'considerable harm', as Ballard found out much to his chagrin. They were not popular with the boys, nor with their parents, and 'torrents of abuse in the papers' ensued.<sup>102</sup>

99 Electoral complaints, 1928, BArch (n. 15), R 1501/125167, p. 242–3, 248.

100 Meyer, *Wahlprüfungsgericht* (n. 46), p. 64 with n. 222.

101 To-day's Gossip, in: *Sheffield Mail*, 29 Oct 1924.

102 Plymouth Election Petition, in: *The Times*, 19 Oct 1929; Election Petition at Plymouth, in: *ibid.*, 24 and 26 Oct 1929.

## Conclusion

What, then, does this contrasting evidence tell us about the act of voting between the world wars? Though the secrecy of the ballot seems to have been much better guarded in Britain, this should not mislead us into thinking that it was a complete farce in Germany. In most places it worked as envisaged, and even in the crassest cases of encroachment on voting we have looked at, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to know systematically and with absolute certainty how each individual voter had cast their ballot. At the minimum, the secret ballot afforded individual voters deniability, even on rural estates in Eastern Prussia. However, what our findings on electoral practices and the manifold contemporary complaints do suggest is that long after secret voting had been introduced, many voters still clearly felt the pressure to conform to expected loyalties, and it weighed much more heavily on Germans than it did on Britons. That is one reason why polling day retained its gravitas in Germany. Much as it had been in the days of the Empire, it remained an occasion for voters to affirm their loyalties.

This was still very evident in the 1930s, as symbolic demonstrations of power came to the fore of public politics in Germany and the electorate realigned to provide the basis for the transfer of power to the National Socialists. The Nazi Party owed much of its success to not only individuals but entire communities converting their loyalty to it, and its particularly bad performance in other places was often a case of its inability to chip away at solid blocks of Socialist or Catholic votes.<sup>103</sup> In Britain, the style of electoral politics also changed towards the 1930s, but in a different direction. The cheerful atmosphere and the lower expectations towards procedural purity in Britain arguably facilitated dealing with the massive political and social conflicts of the interwar years. Elections became noticeably quieter. Commentators often deplored the lack of passion that a comparison with much livelier polling days of the pre-war era invited because they saw it as a potentially troublesome sign of apathy and insufficient political interest on behalf of the expanded electorate. Yet over time, they found reassurance in figures: as long as a high turnout continued to demonstrate the involvement of the many in public affairs, newspapers argued, there was nothing to complain about calm elections.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, such comments hinted at a new mode of discussing elections, which would become predominant after the Second World War. In the second half of the twentieth century, abstract statistics rather than the public visibility of voters in the electoral arena would be used to measure participation and the state of democracy.

103 For figures see *Ergebnisse 1930 und 1928 in der Pfalz* (n. 96); cf. W. Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik 1918–1933. Die Verschränkung von Milieu und Parteien in den protestantischen Landgebieten Deutschlands in der Weimarer Republik*, Düsseldorf 1996.

104 Apathy! in: *Sheffield Daily Independent*, 6 Nov 1935; J. Lawrence, *The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War*, in: *Past & Present* 190 (2006), pp. 185–216; *id.*, *Masters* (n. 5), ch. 4.