


**Review by Thomas Ertman, New York University**

In 1936, three years after Hitler’s ascension to power, the German émigré political scientist F.A. Hermens published an article entitled “Proportional Representation and the Breakdown of German Democracy.” In it, he argued that the Weimar electoral system, while not the only cause, was nonetheless a “conditio sine qua non for the breakdown of the German Republic.” Hermens’ argument gained widespread acceptance in Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, but it seemed to lose its appeal thereafter, due in part to criticisms by Hans Fenske and others and in part to the clear compatibility of proportional representation and durable democracy in many western states (including the Federal Republic of Germany) after 1945.

In this book, Marcus Kreuzer, an assistant professor of political science at Villanova University, revives the Hermens thesis and subjects it to rigorous and imaginative scrutiny. He does so by comparing Weimar Germany to a country that, he claims (not entirely convincingly), faced similar political and economic challenges during the 1920s and early ’30s yet possessed a very different electoral system, namely Third Republic France. He then delineates the way in which the contrasting electoral systems—an extremely pure form of proportional representation in Germany and a two-round plurality system (“double ballot”) in France—helped preserve or undermine democracy in the two countries. More specifically, Kreuzer compares how divergent electoral incentives influenced the responses of German and French Socialists, Liberals, and Conservatives to three ongoing problems of political life: the need to reduce the career uncertainty of politicians, finance electoral campaigns, and above all attract voters.

Kreuzer’s complex argument can be summarized as follows. The French electoral system of the period 1928–1940, with its large number (over 600) of small (circa 18,000 voters) single-member constituencies conditioned the behavior of French politicians in a number of distinctive ways. First, because of the hundreds of electoral districts, parties were unable to control the local candidate selection process. In order to be chosen and re-chosen, candidates
needed to work constantly to remain in the good graces of constituency party members, which in turn decreased the ability of central party authorities to discipline successful candidates once they entered the National Assembly. Second, the low election costs associated with small district size furthered the independence of candidates from the national party by decreasing the need for subsidies from central party coffers, while at the same time limiting the impact of interest groups willing to trade money for influence. Finally, the indivisible choice faced by French voters in their single-member districts led them to consider voting, especially in the second round, for candidates whose ideological position differed from their own yet who stood a better chance of election than their ideal candidate (“strategic voting”). The prospect of attracting large numbers of non-core voters in turn led French candidates to position themselves towards the ideological center and to frame their appeals in broad, inclusive terms. The difficulty of winning the hotly contested battle over a single local parliamentary seat also meant that politicians dissatisfied with their own party tended to switch to another large, well-established political grouping rather than form a splinter party or run as an independent.

By contrast, according to Kreuzer, the form of proportional representation employed in Weimar brought with it a very different set of incentives and hence behavior on the part of Germany’s politicians. With the country divided into only 35 (not eighteen, as stated on p. 56) giant constituencies each electing on average eighteen representatives and voters choosing party lists rather than individual candidates, it was central party organizations that controlled selection for and placement upon such lists. Furthermore, large district size meant high electioneering costs, thereby bolstering yet further the importance of both central party coffers and contributions from interest organizations like trade unions, business groups and religious bodies. This electoral framework thus encouraged individual candidates to “tow the party line” and left parties themselves vulnerable to pressure from interest groups able to aid them financially. Finally, because of Weimar’s low threshold for election and almost perfect translation of voter preferences into seats, there was little incentive for strategic voting: electors could search out a party which most closely matched their own viewers and be nearly certain that it would win at least some seats in the Reichstag. This induced parties to distinguish themselves ideologically rather than converge towards the center and, since barriers to entry into the Reichstag were so low, it also encouraged dissatisfied politicians to form new parties rather than work within established organizations.

The results of the contrasting incentives produced by the divergent French and German electoral regimes were, Kreuzer contends, clearly visible at the national level. Thus the French party system was characterized by a high level of stability during the interwar period, “with established parties in 1939 retaining 88.2 percent of the seats they won in 1918.” The corresponding figure for Germany was only 44.2 percent (164). Furthermore, while both party systems were fragmented, French parliamentary fractions were fluid and coop-
erated with one another, whereas Weimar's factions were, according to Kreuzer, rigidly segmented and ideologically hostile to one another. Finally, pressures for ideological convergence and disincentives against the founding of new parties limited the vote for extremist parties in France to only 5.4 percent, compared to 54.4 percent for similar parties in Germany after 1929 (164). In sum, while Weimar's system of proportional representation may not have single-handedly destroyed the Republic, it was responsible—to a degree not sufficiently acknowledged of late—for creating conditions which made it that much more difficult for democracy to survive, whereas the Third Republic's double ballot provided an extra line of defense against democratic collapse.

Much speaks for this argument. It would have been even more convincing, however, had Kreuzer's book not suffered from a number of significant flaws. First, since a number of the author's claims are already found in Hermens, he should have acknowledged this more fully and confronted directly the criticisms to which Hermens' work and those of his disciples like Schanbacher have been subjected over the past several decades. Second, the fact that France adopted a mild form of proportional representation for elections in 1919 and 1924 before returning to the double ballot after 1928 undercuts somewhat the force of Kreuzer's argument even if it does not invalidate it. One must wonder whether a comparison with interwar Britain and its single-member plurality system would not have better served his purposes. Lastly, the author never really addresses the problems caused by such a limited number of cases. All western European democracies with the exception of Britain and—after 1928—France adopted proportional representation in the aftermath of World War I, yet in nine of these states democracy survived while it collapsed in five others (Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, and Portugal). This fact raises the larger question of the conditions under which proportional representation and democratic survival are compatible. Unfortunately, Kreuzer's book does not provide us with even a hypothesis concerning this issue, an adequate treatment of which would of course require a much broader comparison group.

In spite of such shortcomings, this work represents a valuable new contribution to our understanding of the failure of democracy in Weimar Germany. Kreuzer's approach generates many original insights into the behavior of politicians and their parties, and it also demonstrates the benefits of applying rational choice concepts currently so popular in political science to historical problems. Above all, his book makes an excellent case for the rewards of two country comparisons. It is to be hoped that more social scientists and above all historians will follow his example in the future.

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