Noblesse Aveugle? Reactionary Bureaucrats, Political Violence and the Erosion of Weimar Democracy

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Abstract

A distinctive feature of the first German transition to democracy after World War I was the paucity of meaningful democratizing reform of the sprawling federal, state, and local bureaucracies. In this paper, I argue that insufficient efforts to reform a deeply anti-democratic state apparatus prevented the consolidation of democratic governance in the Interwar period. Focusing on the state of Prussia and the 1917-1932 period, I build a county-level panel dataset that combines original career data on local law enforcement officials and novel biographical data on the universe of candidates for elected office with secondary data on incidents of politically motivated violence and electoral outcomes. Leveraging a difference-in-differences design, I demonstrate that replacement of reactionary law enforcement officials with outsider candidates vetted by the democratic central government (i) led to a reduction in the incidence of politically motivated violence, (ii) reduced the number of Nazi candidates running for office, and (iii) increased electoral support for pro-democratic parties at the expense of anti-system Nazi and stalinist parties. My paper identifies the persistence of autocratic bureaucracies as a crucial obstacle to democratic consolidation and efforts to limit political violence.

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Introduction

In many first-wave European democracies, democratic reform proceeded gradually and incrementally. In contrast, Germany – on the heels of catastrophic defeat in World War I – launched itself into the democratic age with great abruptness, breaking decisively with the repressive legacy of the German Empire. Compared to its European and North American peers, the Weimar constitution of 1919 initiated a for the time exceptionally progressive and ambitious democratic project. In contrast to France, women had the right to participate in every aspect of democratic life (Teele 2018). In contrast to the United Kingdom and the United States, proportional representation and the resulting multiparty system gave voters an exceptional degree of choice, fueling vigorous democratic competition. In contrast to all other democracies of its time except Switzerland and some U.S. states, Weimar opened the door to direct citizen participation in policy-making through referenda (Rux 2002). Yet after little more than a decade, the exceptionally *democratic* project of Weimar was displaced by the exceptionally *violent* project of National Socialism – a project that led to World War II, genocide against European Jews, and the systematic killing, persecution and displacement of political opponents, queer people, ethnic and religious minorities, people with disabilities and many others.

Why did Weimar democracy fail? In this paper, I center the role of political violence, encouraged by the lasting presence of an insufficiently democratized law enforcement apparatus, as a crucial driver of democratic erosion. Political violence was an ever-present threat in the Weimar years, from communist-led insurgencies and targeted killing of politicians by far-right assassination commandos in the early years to clashes between armed affiliates of political parties in later years (Jones 2016; Sabrow 1994; Schumann 2001). Focusing on developments in the later years of the Republic, I argue that violence was central to democratic erosion. Violence modified the parameters of democratic competition to change incentives for participation and mobilization, and undermined the legitimacy of democratic reformers in government. In this way, violence strengthened anti-democratic Nazi and stalinist forces, and weakened pro-democratic parties.

Escalating political violence was the consequence of a major flaw of the Weimar transition to democracy: The absence of meaningful democratizing reform of the state coercive and judicial apparatus, and law enforcement in particular. Pre-democratic adminstrative elites in many places retained positions of influence throughout the democratic transition. Sympathizing with anti-democratic forces such as the NSDAP, they used the discretion provided by their offices to stifle policy initiatives targeting anti-democratic mobilization and prevented effective policing of political violence. Qualitative accounts of Weimar history have long emphasized the deep-rooted anti-democratic resentment among traditional administrative and law enforcement elites (Muncy 1970; Pikart 1958; Jasper 1963; Runge 1965; McElligott 2013), and speculated on their consequences for democratic governance.

My paper is the first to provide quantitative evidence that traditional administrative elites indeed undermined Weimar democracy. To make my case, I rely on original county-level panel data from Prussia – the largest subnational state of the Weimar Republic – covering the years 1917 to 1932. Drawing on original, previously unused government and electoral records, I build a dataset that combines information on the universe of Prussian county police chiefs and the universe of candidates for office competing in state parliament elections with secondary data on politically motivated assassinations and voting. These data shed light on the relationship between policing, political violence and electoral outcomes at a highly granular level.

I work with a difference-in-differences framework to estimate the causal effects of democratizing the police – replacing a traditional elite police chief in a particular county with a democratically appointed outsider candidate – on the incidence of political violence, candidate entry, and voting behaviour. I find that compared to control counties where law enforcement remained staffed by traditional elites, counties where police were democratized saw lower levels of lethal political violence, fewer Nazi candidates running for office, and lower vote shares for anti-democratic Nazi and stalinist parties, offset by higher vote shares for pro-democratic parties.

The paper makes four contributions to scholarship. First, scholars of comparative politics and development as well as policy-makers have long argued that bureaucracies insulated from political interference constitute a crucial prerequisite for democratization and good governance (Geddes 1996; Evans and Rauch 1999; Dahlström, Lapuente, and Teorell 2012; Cornell and Lapuente 2014; Dahlström and Lapuente 2017). Most of these arguments rely on the notion that insulation prevents patronage and improves public sector performance, thus contributing positively to democratization and development by giving rise to an effective state capable of delivering public goods.

My paper challenges this simplistic view. To understand how insulated bureaucracies affect democratization, we need to understand *who* benefits from insulation. In Weimar Germany, the administrative elites benefiting from insulation were disproportionally graduates of socially exclusive law schools, which were all but inaccessible to women, Jewish Germans, and the middle or working classes. When the Weimar constitution and the constitutions of the states upheld insulation of much of the civil service, they inadvertently secured the stranglehold of affluent landed elites and the German nobility over the Weimar bureaucratic apparatus. Lacking respect for democratic institutions, these insulated administrative elites tolerated the undermining of – or even actively worked to undermine – popular governance. When socially exclusive educational institutions gatekeep access to bureaucratic employment, civil service reform that insulates the administrative state from political interference is likely to be *detrimental* rather than conducive to democratization.

Second, and relatedly, my work speaks to the importance of purges of members of the state apparatus during regime transitions for democratic consolidation (Nalepa 2022). I

single out law enforcement as a part of the state that is especially critical to democratic stability. In polarized societies, law enforcement officials, from heads of police units all the way to street-level officials, play a key role in negotiating tensions that inevitably appear between maintaining public order and safety on the one hand, and safeguarding essential political freedoms, such as free assembly, on the other hand. How law enforcement agents fulfil their duties – and whether they are loyal to the democratic order and committed to safeguarding popular governance – matters greatly to the subsequent trajectory of democratization. Illoyal law enforcement officials constitute a significant liability when they fail to effectively protect those participating in democracy against violent threats, or when they suffocate democratic rights in the name of maintaining public order.

In Weimar, democratic reformers allowed many pre-democratic administrative elites to remain in positions of influence after democratic transition due to political constraints – in particular the need to fend off communist insurgencies – and financial constraints (Jasper 1963; Runge 1965). Despite significant opposition, rules insulating the civil service were enshrined in the Weimar and state constitutions. My work emphasizes the importance of the exact circumstances surrounding democratization, as they created the preconditions necessary for anti-democratic administrative elites to undermine democracy in later years. Transitions to democracy and the compromises embedded in founding constitutions are critical for determining subsequent regime trajectories (Albertus and Menaldo 2017). Adding to this work, I show that creating or maintaining insulated bureaucracies – when outgoing pre-democratic elites hold a near monopoly over bureaucratic staffing – can be an effective strategy to embed "elite bias" in democratic governance (Albertus and Menaldo 2017, ch. 3). Regarding democratization, my work implies that sustainable transitions to democracy become more difficult as pre-democratic state capacity increases. Put simply, democratic reformers need to do a lot more "house cleaning" when they inherit a complex state apparatus, compared to situations where the state is small.

Third, I contribute to the large and growing body of scholarship on electoral violence (Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund 2020; Birch 2020). I emphasize the role of law enforcement, and in particular the identities and political preferences of those tasked with enforcing the law, as critical for explaining variation in the incidence of electoral violence. To understand why electoral violence occurs, asking whether state institutions have the *capacity* to prevent violence, and how the capacity varies across time and space, is insufficient (De Juan and Pierskalla 2015; Wig and Tollefsen 2016; Müller-Crepon, Hunziker, and Cederman 2021). Even when state institutions are capable, violence might still occur as a result of divergence in preferences of "street-level" law enforcement actors to whom policing is delegated. Contemporary and historical legal frameworks governing political expression are not complete contracts between policymakers and those tasked with enforcing the law. Law enforcement officials navigate complex tradeoffs between maintaining public order and safeguarding political expression, and individual preferences matter for how these tradeoffs are resolved in

daily police work.

Finally, my paper sheds new light on the drivers of democratic erosion specific to the case of Weimar Germany (Gerschenkron 1946; Luebbert 1987; Weyland 2021). Existing work on Weimar focuses on external and structural causes of democratic erosion, such as legacies of antisemitism (Voigtländer and Voth 2012), war-induced nationalism (De Juan et al. 2024) or the lack of economic and fiscal policy autonomy as a consequence of excessive war reparations (Galofré-Vilà et al. 2021; Doerr et al. 2022). In this line of work, the end of democracy is the inevitable result of external and structural pressures, leaving little room for agency for democratic reformers. Challenging this fatalist perspective, I argue that more decisive action to reform bureaucratic and civil service institutions could have paid dividends by stabilizing popular governance during the Great Depression years. Joining a small but rich literature on militant democracy (Loewenstein 1937; Capoccia 2005), I argue that whether or not European Interwar democracies survived was not preordained, but depended on the ability of pro-democratic reformers and incumbents to strengthen democracy through defensive activities.

My argument also raises new questions for Ziblatt's (2017) influential account of democratic erosion as a consequence of the weakness of Germany's main conservative party, the DNVP. I contend that the lack of support by German conservative elites for the DNVP – the pernicious consequences of which Ziblatt throws into sharp relief – is likely a *consequence* of the fact that said elites retained important levers to influence the use of state power through their positions in the administrative apparatus. Simply put, conservative elites did not buy into a strong, competitive conservative party because they did not have to, as bureaucratic insulation provided them with a more direct channel of influence.

In addition to these substantive contributions, the data described in this paper are likely of great interest to scholars of German political development, political violence and comparative politics more broadly. Puzzlingly, despite the prominent role the states (*Länder*) and municipalities played in law enforcement or education, dynamics at the state or local levels have almost entirely been ignored by analysts of the Weimar Republic. My data allow for rigorous analysis of the logics of democratization and democratic erosion at subnational and local levels, generating exciting opportunities for new micro-historical research (Mares 2015, ch. 10).

German Democracy in the Interwar Period

Explanations of the erosion of Weimar democracy abound. This paper emphasizes two features of the post-WWI transition to democracy that have to date received insufficient attention. First, the pre-democratic administrative apparatus emerged relatively unscathed from the revolutionary turmoil, both institutionally and in terms of personnel. This gave rise to tensions between newly diverse *political* elites, which included citizens of middle-

class and working-class backgrounds, Jewish Germans, and women, and *administrative* elites, whose ranks were made up almost entirely of aristocratic, Protestant men. Second, democratic life in the Weimar Republic emerged under the shadow of intense violence, emanating from monarchist, Stalinist and Nazi forces prepared to pursue their political projects with violence. I will discuss each of these features of Weimar democracy in turn.

Constitutional Change, Administrative Persistence

The November Revolution of 1918 that followed the German Empire's devastating defeat in World War I provided the impetus for a decisive departure from the pre-democratic status quo. Relative to other Western Interwar democracies, the Weimar constitution launched an exceptionally progressive and ambitious democratic project that fully enfranchised women, created vigorous multiparty competition through proportional representation, and even made far-reaching provisions for popular participation in policy-making through referenda. This exceptional expansion of formal democratic rights contrasts sharply with the persistence of pre-democratic state institutions, including the German Army (*Reichswehr*), law enforcement, the judiciary, and educational institutions. Against opposition from parts of the left, the Weimar constitution, as well as the constitutions of the states, cemented the status quo ante of an insulated administrative apparatus staffed by career civil servants with advanced degrees, most of whom were insulated from democratic accountability (Eschenburg 1954; Jasper 1963, 211).

Administrative continuity was reflected not just in the legal framework governing the civil service, but equally in the social composition of administrative elites. While many democratic reformers recognized the necessity of "democratizing" the state apparatus, their ability to do so was limited for two reasons. First, in its early years, Weimar democracy was threatened by communist insurgencies like the Bavarian Soviet Republic or the Spartacist uprising (Jones 2016), prompting the Social Democratic leaders to cooperate with the *Reichswehr* and law enforcement in an effort to prevent a communist takeover.[1] The necessity to stave off the communist threat precluded more decisive action to democratize the military and law enforcement in the early years of the Weimar Republic (Jasper 1963, ch. 8; Runge 1965, 16-21).

Second, leading administrative positions were typically staffed by graduates of law schools who had to complete onerous civil service examinations. Access to education and credentials was highly socially stratified, with significant obstacles to entry for individuals from middle- and working-class backgrounds, women, and Jewish Germans (Wunder 1977; Runge 1965, 179-200).[2] While some reforms were made to formally open access to leading

1. The alliance between governing Social Democrats, led by Friedrich Ebert, and the Reichswehr, led by General Wilhelm Groener, is sometimes referred to as the Ebert-Groener-Pakt. For the role of the Reichswehr more generally, see Carsten 1964.

2. For example, Walther Rathenau – whose work as foreign minister in the early years of the Republic

administrative posts to “outsiders", the supply of qualified candidates to fill such positions was limited, forcing democratic reformers to make do with the existing pool of bureaucrats (Runge 1965, 44-51).

The absence of meaningful reform of the administrative apparatus quickly proved to be an impediment to democratic consolidation. The 1920 Kapp Putsch, led by a reactionary group of officers in the German Army, laid bare the lack of loyalty within parts of the armed forces and law enforcement to the nascent democratic order (Erger 1967). The coup attempt was defeated by a general strike hastily called by trade unions and democratic reformers, and followed by a first wave of lustration of administrative elites that openly supported the coup (Runge 1965, 121-134).

However, the legal insulation of much of the civil service and judiciary continued to place hard constraints on the democratization of the administrative apparatus. From 1921 to 1922, a wave of assassination plots against leading politicians, culminating in the murders of finance minister and leading Christian-democratic reformer Matthias Erzberger and Jewish foreign minister Walther Rathenau, and an abortive assassination attempt against the first president of the republic, Philipp Scheidemann, shook the young republic to its core (Jasper 1963; Sabrow 1994, 106-127). The judicial system – led by judges that made no secret of their affinity for anti-democratic forces – failed to effectively prosecute the assassins, and showed remarkable leniency to those who were successfully put to trial (Hannover and Hannover-Drück 1966). In response, democratic reformers attempted a strategy of institutional layering. The 1922 Law for the Protection of the Republic, designed to deter future acts of political violence, was to be enforced not by the regular German court system, but by a special Court for the Protection of the Republic (Jasper 1963, 56-92). To curb the influence of German judicial elites, the court was staffed by a majority of lay judges (Jasper 1963, 58). The fact that democratic reformers had to resort to institutional layering – rather than being able to engage in more sustainable, far reaching reform of the state apparatus – puts into sharp relief just how little success democratic reformers had in fundamentally altering the politics of the bureaucratic apparatus.

The Long Shadow of Violence

Weimar democracy was famously bookended with intense violence – the end of World War I prompted democratization, while the 1933 Enabling Act allowed the Nazi regime to first embark on a campaign of intense internal repression, culminating in World War II and the genocide of European Jews. However, even throughout the democratic period, political violence was commonplace. Communist insurgencies in Bavaria and Berlin (Jones 2016), the monarchist Kapp coup (Erger 1967) and the 1921-1922 assassination wave (Sabrow

left a lasting impact on German relationships with France, the U.K. and the U.S. – was initially barred from pursuing a career in the diplomatic service because of his Jewish faith (Volkov 2012).

1994) marred democratic life in the early years of the Republic. A period of relative calm after the passage of the First Law for the Protection of the Republic was followed by an escalation in violence in the years of the Great Depression until the end of the Weimar project in 1933.

Critically, the nature of violence differed between these periods. Communist insurgencies were aimed at challenging the authority of the state on a particular territory, while the assassination spree by far-right paramilitary groups targeted prominent politicians. The violence in the post-1924 period – which will be the focus of this paper – is more similar to what the literature refers to as electoral violence (Birch, Daxecker, and Höglund 2020, 4). That is, violence that occurs as a byproduct of electoral competition, with armed affiliate organizations of political parties emerging as pivotal actors. In response to the early violent years of the Republic, all major political parties created strong organizational links with armed organizations sympathetic to their objectives (Schumann 2001; Siemens 2017; Elsbach 2019).[3]

These organizations were often tasked with protecting party events in public spaces, and were critical actors in political campaigning. Especially for political parties courting working-class voters, who could be mobilized primarily by campaigning in public spaces, these organizations became indispensable. Due to the nature of their activities, violence between members of these organizations became increasingly commonplace, escalating in the years of the Great Depression. Police forces – which were organized and directed at the state rather than the federal level – increasingly struggled to pacify elections and electoral campaigns. Tracing this evolution, Figure 1 shows quarterly averages of the number of politically motivated assassinations per day in the Weimar Republic for the period from 1924 to 1933. Violence increases steadily starting in 1930, and reaches a peak of two assassinations per day on average in the first quarter of 1933.

Prussia: The Beating Heart of Weimar Democracy

The empirical focus of this paper is the largest and most populous subnational state of the Weimar Republic: the Free State of Prussia. In addition to providing the data required for my inquiry, Prussia is critical for at least two reasons. First, more than 60% of the population of the Weimar Republic lived in Prussia, and the Free State made up more than 60% of the territory of the Weimar Republic, making it the largest and most populous state of the Republic by some distance. Second, for almost the entire period between the end of World War I and the 1933 Enabling Act, Prussia was governed by a stable pro-democratic coalition of the social democratic SPD, the Catholic Zentrum, and other smaller coalition

3. The SPD was affiliated with the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold. The DNVP was affiliated with the Stahlhelm. The KPD had close connections to the Roter Frontkämpferbund (RFB), and the NSDAP was linked to both the SA and SS.

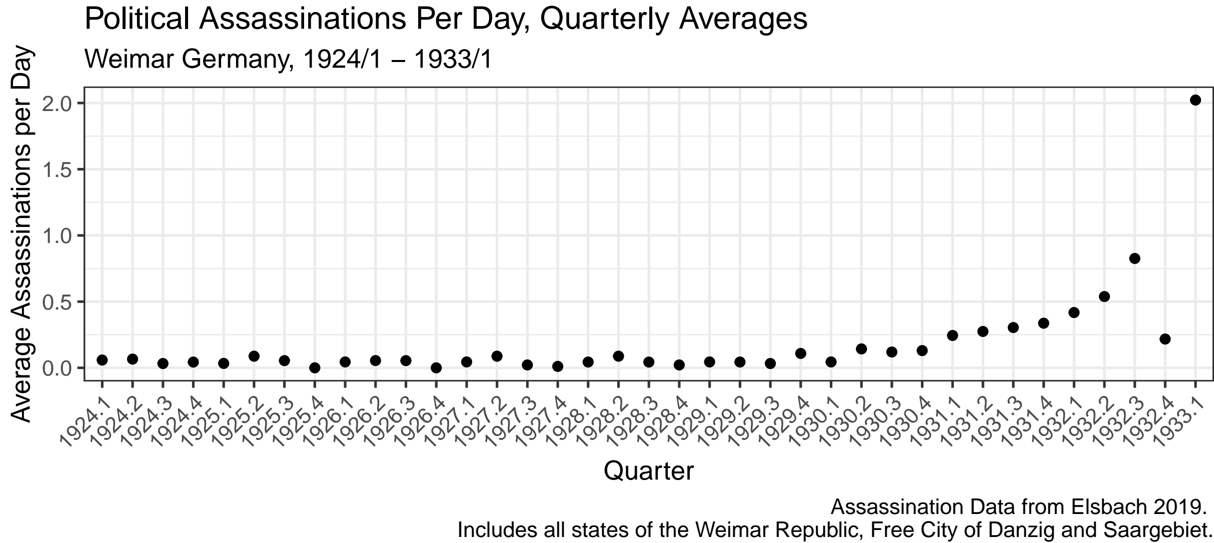

Figure 1: Political Murders per Day, Quarterly Averages, 1924/1 - 1933/1

partners DDP and DVP, sometimes dubbed the "Weimar coalition". With a few brief interruptions, the Prime Ministership of Prussia was held by the social democrat Otto Braun. In contrast to turbulent politics at the federal level and in other states marked by frequent turnover in government, Prussian politics were remarkably predictable. Unsurprisingly, the influential liberal foreign minister Gustav Stresemann referred to Prussia as the "bulwark of democracy" (Winkler 1988, 400). Control of Prussia was considered to be of paramount importance for national politics. In the words of Joseph Goebbels: "The key to power in Germany lies in Prussia. They who control Prussia control all of Germany" (Ribhegge 2007, 488).

The defects of Weimar democracy identified above – the rift between administrative and political elites, and the ever-present threat of political violence – filtered through from the federal level to Prussian state-level politics. Just like at the federal level, high-level appointments in the Prussian administration had been firmly controlled by traditional elites, who had no intention of giving up their control over the state apparatus. In response, social-democratic ministers of the interior Carl Severing and Albert Grzesinski embarked on an ambitious program of police modernization, with the explicit goal of democratizing law enforcement (Lessmann 1989; Alexander 1992, 129-132). These reforms aimed both at diversifying the ranks of administrative elites, and changing how policing operated on Prussian territory. The police were meant to become democratically accountable, and police officers were to be well-trained and equipped servants of a democratic society. Severing and Grzesinski opened police academies, procured state-of-the-art equipment, and tried to modernize policing through the collection and dissemination of new statistical data on

crime and police activity (Lessmann 1989).

Despite these efforts, Prussia saw significant political violence throughout the democratic period. In line with its general aim to democratize policing, the Prussian government attempted to tackle violence, which typically erupted between the armed affiliates of political parties, in a manner that would impose as few limits as possible on political expression and campaigning. In 1927, Minister of the Interior Grzesinski ordered the creation of roundtable discussions with the heads of the parties' armed factions to adhere to codified rules of engagement, including a ban on cudgels and particularly provocative activities, such as the performance of political song when in close proximity to other events.[4] As violence steadily escalated, the Ministry of the Interior responded by collecting extensive statistical data on incidents of violence, confiscation of weaponry and police interventions, suggesting a desire to tackle violence with targeted interventions. Ultimately, however, efforts to tackle violence fell short. In July 1932, a riot in the town of Altona, featuring clashes between members of the SA and communists, ended with 18 people killed. The event served as a pretext for the so-called *Preussenschlag*, in the course of which the NSDAP and the right wing of the Catholic Zentrum illegally deposed the democratically elected Prussian government (Biewer 1983).

Policing Rural Prussia

Within the state of Prussia, my paper focuses on rural counties or *Landkreise*. Figure 2 displays a map of the entirety of the Weimar territory, the Prussian territory and its Landkreise and Stadtkreise (urban counties). I specifically label four Landkreise that I will focus on later in the paper.

Landkreise are relevant because they share a common model of police governance, and because they were typically electoral strongholds of conservative and later far right parties, although there is considerable variation in voting behaviour. Policing in the Landkreise was overseen by county principals or *Landräte*. A high-ranking administrative official, the Landrat was, among other tasks, in charge of policing decisions for the entirety of the county. While originally created as a locally elected office, since the Imperial period, the Landrat was directly appointed by the central government (Hue de Grais 1926; Bitter 1928).[5] Already during the Imperial period, the Landrat had emerged as a critical broker of conservative interests in rural areas, leveraging the influence of his office to tilt the electoral playing field to preserve Imperial rule, particularly against social-democratic opposition (Mares 2015, chapter 3). Accordingly, Landrat offices were overwhelmingly staffed with staunch loyalists of the monarchy, drawn from the families of *Junkers* or landed elites

4. See GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 77, Tit. 4043 Nr. 119.

5. Local parliaments or *Kreistage* were allowed to propose candidates, but the Prussian state government retained complete authority in staffing matters.

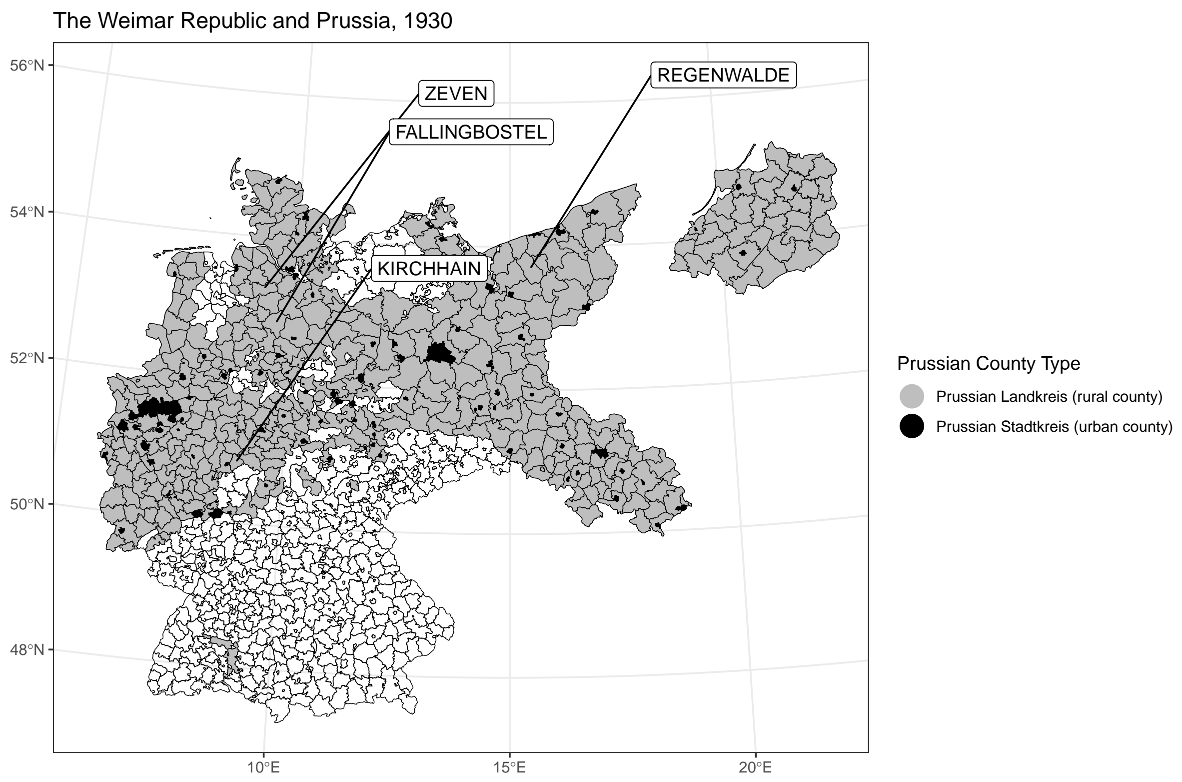

Figure 2: Weimar Germany and Prussia, 1930

(Muncy 1970, 58-62).

The democratic Prussian constitution left the office of the Landrat intact. However, recognizing the importance of the office, democratic reformers made some important changes to the appointment process. First, reformers cemented the status of the Landrat as a political appointee, subject to dismissal at the sole discretion of the Prussian cabinet (Bitter 1928; Runge 1965, 33-34). Importantly, however, employment was not completely at will – Landräte who were dismissed were typically paid a substantial share of their wage while idle, before being posted to a different office within the Prussian administration (Runge 1965, 21-23, 57-59). Second, democratization opened up the possibility for outsiders – individuals without law degrees and completed civil service examinations – to serve as Landräte (Bitter 1928). Previously, access to the office had been limited to trained lawyers, making it all but impossible for individuals from middle- or working class backgrounds, women or Jewish Germans to be appointed to these positions (Runge 1965, 57).

These policy changes demonstrate that democratic reformers were aware of the important role Landräte played in policing their counties. Nonetheless, replacement of officials proceeded only gradually, with many Landräte who served under the Emperor remaining in their posts, or finding themselves parachuted into different counties. Figure 3 shows the share of traditional elite Landräte and female Landräte as a proportion of all Landräte for the years 1921 to 1932. I contrast these proportions with the proportions of women and members of the nobility among political elites, defined as candidates for and members of state parliament, the *Landtag*. Two conclusions can be drawn from the figure. First, while its influence waned over time, the nobility made up a far greater share of administrative elites compared to political elites. Second, democratization efforts were successful insofar as the share of traditional elite Landräte declined, but women remained entirely excluded from critical positions in the state apparatus, despite making inroads in electoral politics.

Why did pro-democratic reformers not proceed more quickly to diversify the ranks of law enforcement officials? First, the Minister of the Interior and the state government may simply have underestimated the extent to which Landräte were willing and able to pursue objectives that differed from theirs. Second, financial constraints played an important role. Landräte – like all other political appointees – could not easily be taken off government payroll. Although they could be relieved of their duties in a particular county without explanation, they typically remained on payroll until they were rotated to a different post within the Prussian administration. Hence, mass lustration would have been very costly for the Prussian government, as it would have had to keep idle officials on payroll. In a moment of great economic turmoil with hyperinflation and the need to pay hefty reparations to the winners of World War I, the Prussian state government had to use its limited resources judiciously. Mass idling of bureaucrats was not perceived as a judicious use of resources.

Finally, insufficient supply of trained candidates for these offices likely constrained lustration. While the government was able to appoint outsiders, who were typically drawn

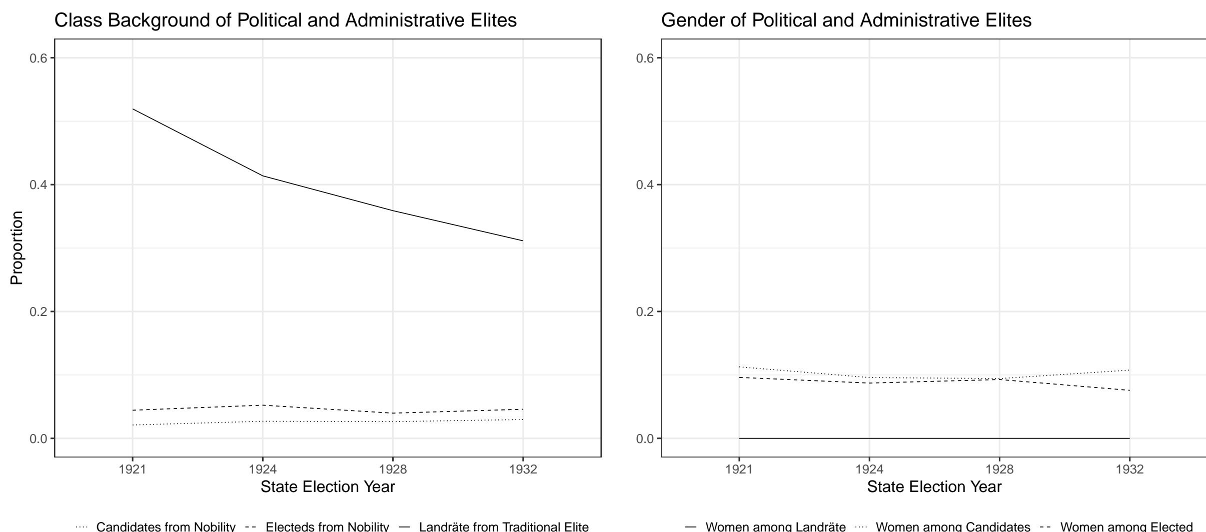

Figure 3: Administrative and Political Elites in Prussia, 1921-1932

from the ranks of trade union officials or clerical administrators, the pool of capable individuals was small, given the dearth of legally trained individuals with working-class or middle class backgrounds (Runge 1965, 44-52).

Did traditional elite Landräte really hold anti-democratic preferences? Did they turn a blind eye on or even encourage anti-democratic mobilization? Based on a close reading of qualitative evidence from personnel files compiled by the Prussian Ministry of the Interior as well as secondary literature, I provide illustrative examples of Landräte harboring anti-democratic preferences, signaling them through acts of symbolic resistance, and lending support to anti-democratic mobilization.

The first illustration comes from the rural counties of Zeven and Fallingbostel[6], located in the wide plains of the Lüneburger Heide in the Western province of Hannover. The Landräte of both counties – Karl Freiherr von Hammerstein-Gesmold in Zeven and Hermann Rotberg in Fallingbostel – had been in office since long before the transition to democracy in 1918. Their socio-economic background is typical for Imperial German administrative elites: von Hammerstein-Gesmold was born into Hanoverian nobility, and joined the ranks of the highly elitist, monarchist and often antisemitic fraternities[7] when studying for his law degree (Herlemann and Schatz 2004, 137-138). Rotberg similarly joined a fraternity while studying law in Munich and Marburg, and was appointed Landrat in Fallingbostel in 1909 (Herlemann and Schatz 2004, 307-308).

6. See Figure 2 for location of these counties.

7. For a history of fraternities in German-speaking Europe and their role in reactionary politics, see Heither et al. 1997.

In 1930, the two Landräte, who both held seats in the Hanoverian provincial parliament, were thrust into serious controversy when they vocally opposed state-wide restrictions on Hitler Youth mobilization efforts in Hanoverian schools. The Prussian government, determined to curb Nazi mobilization, relieved Hammerstein-Gesmold, Rotberg, and a third Landrat of their duties, rendering the three bureaucrats idle. Official correspondence revealed that the Ministry of the Interior viewed the behaviour of the Landräte as a staggering act of disloyalty, revealing deep-seated resentment against the democratic government and support for anti-democratic agitation.[8] Tellingly, Rotberg – the youngest of the three sanctioned officials – was reappointed Landrat immediately after the 1932 Preussenschlag, and served as a Landrat in various counties during the Nazi regime.

A closer look at the personnel files on Hermann Rotberg available in the Prussian Privy State Archives provides additional evidence of the anti-democratic resentment of the Landrat. In an effort to commemorate the end of Imperial rule and transition to democracy, democratic reformers created an annual constitutional holiday (*Verfassungsfeier*). Festivities featured speeches by leading state officials and prominent display of the national emblems of Weimar Germany. In rural counties, the Landräte were meant to make a prominent appearance (Jasper 1963, 229-240). Unsurprisingly, Hermann Rotberg had no inclination to celebrate a democracy he deeply resented – in letters to the Interior Ministry, he repeatedly asked for medical leave, proposing that his deputy commemorate the republic instead of him.[9] While perhaps unremarkable to his superiors at the time, in retrospect, Rotberg's behaviour appears calculated. To anyone trying to mobilize against democracy, Rotberg's repeated absence on the most important holiday of the republic would have clearly signaled the Landrat's true preferences and loyalties.

A second illustration of disloyalty in the ranks of the Landräte comes from the Eastern Province of Pomerania and the county of Regenwalde. The conflict between its longtime Landrat, Herbert von Bismarck, and the democratic reformers in Prussian government has been chronicled in detail by McElligott (2013, 169-179). A great-nephew of former chancellor Otto von Bismarck, Herbert embarked on a typical *Junker* career in the Imperial Prussian administration. After studying law, he was appointed Landrat in Regenwalde county in 1918, just prior to democratization. While he stayed in office after democratization, his behavior in office suggests disdain for the democratic reformers he was supposed to be an agent of. In his official correspondence, von Bismarck continued to use emblems of the German Empire, and like Rotberg, he disregarded his official duty to commemorate democratization in the context of constitutional holidays. Again, the symbolic defiance of the democratic order by von Bismarck was *overt* – the prominent use of monarchical emblems would have come to the attention of anyone conducting official business in the county. Von Bismarck's reactionary preferences – until then explained away by old habits

8. See GStA I. HA Rep. 77 Nr. 5067, Bl. 85-112.
9. See GStA I. HA Rep. 77 Nr. 5067, Bl. 85-87.

dying hard – came to the fore again in 1931, when he defied the authority of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior and openly campaigned for a referendum designed to recall the democratically elected government and trigger snap elections. Although he was promptly removed from office, there can be little doubt that the citizens in his county were aware of his loyalties throughout the preceding decade.

The above examples illustrate how reactionary Landräte overtly signaled their rejection of the democratic order through acts of symbolic resistance. The case of Adolf von und zu Gilsa, Landrat in Kirchhain county in the province of Hesse-Nassau, shows that they occasionally went even further. Von und zu Gilsa was another typical representative of the class of Imperial administrative elites. Born into a family of Hessian nobility, he studied law in Göttingen and joined a local fraternity, prior to his appointment as Landrat in Kirchhain in 1911 (Hessische Biografie 2023). He was removed from office in 1928 after the Prussian government found that he had tolerated exercises by a staunchly anti-democratic paramilitary formation, the *Schwarze Reichswehr*, in his county (Runge 1965, 147). Linked to reactionary elements within the Germany Army, the paramilitary organization was an important reservoir for recruitment to the SA, the SS, and the NSDAP (Sauer 2004).

These vignettes, drawn from different geographical regions in Prussia, illustrate that traditional administrative elites – drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of German nobility – held deep anti-democratic resentment, which did not however hinder many of them from remaining in their offices after democratization. Acts of resistance or micro-aggressions against symbols of the Weimar Republic were commonplace. Because of their overt nature, acts of symbolic resistance could signal to anti-democratic forces that a particular official was sympathetic to their cause, and that they could expect tacit or even overt support. In some cases, illustrated by the actions of Landrat von und zu Gilsa in Kirchhain county, officials went so far as to knowingly defy the law to allow paramilitary activity of violent anti-democratic actors.

Theory

What explains the dramatic escalation of violence in the later years of the Weimar Republic? How did violence affect democratic life? And what role did administrative elites play in policing political violence?

My theory centers the critical role of law enforcement elites in explaining variation in political violence, and the quality of democratic competition more broadly. The threat of political violence – in particular when violence is a byproduct of electoral competition – raises complex issues for law enforcement. On the one hand, policing at its core aims to maintain public order and prevent violence. However, that objective can come into conflict with the need to maintain bedrock political rights such as free assembly. In the Weimar case, those objectives came into particularly sharp conflict. Public political events, such as

rallies during campaigns, were flashpoints for violent clashes between armed organizations and party affiliates. At the same time, political parties – in particular those aiming to mobilize working and middle-class voters – relied on campaigning in public spaces to reach their voters. Overly onerous restrictions would have prevented voter mobilization, limiting democratic competition.

Hence, legal frameworks governing free assembly – both historically and today – grant significant discretion to law enforcement, in effect delegating decisions about restrictions on assembly necessary for maintaining order to police authorities. The implication is that those in charge of local law enforcement are in charge of making complex judgement calls on how to resolve conflicts between prevention of violence and free assembly.

Based on my discussion of the Prussian case, we can think of the policing of elections and electoral campaigns as giving rise to a canonical principal-agent problem (Gailmard 2014). The principal – the Minister of the Interior on behalf of the state government – tasked local police officials with the safeguarding of political rights and the maintenance of public order. The delegation of such a complex task entails the risk of significant agency loss – agents may choose to act in line with their own preferences, neglecting the preferences of the principal without fear of sanctioning.

As a result, I expect that variation in police staffing should give rise to variation in policing and electoral outcomes. Specifically, I contend that the replacement of traditional administrative elites by outsider Landräte – or the absence thereof – causally affects policing and electoral outcomes. Traditional administrative elites are likely to have held anti-democratic preferences – both as a result of their typically upper-class background, and because the Imperial government selected staunch loyalists to serve in law enforcement. As a result, they are more likely to have been permissive of anti-democratic mobilization, which typically increased the risk of violent confrontation. Replacing such a Landrat with an outsider – an official who is not part of the traditional administrative elite – should thus decrease the risk of political violence.

H_1: Replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider candidate *reduces* the incidence of political violence.

I expect political violence to have downstream consequences on democratic competition. Since violence was concentrated in the context of campaign events, it primarily affected those who were directly involved with campaigning, such as canvassers, organizers and candidates for office. Police staffing should therefore causally affect who participates in political campaigns – both because policing affects the incidence of political violence and because policing affects how individuals perceive the threat of violence.

H_2: Replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider candidate *increases* the number of individuals running for office.

I expect differential effects of changes in the policing of political violence on campaigning activity across political parties. Proper policing of elections and electoral campaigns typically implied imposing restrictions on far-right and far-left parties, most notably the NSDAP and the stalinist KPD. Hence, campaigning – and the ability to recruit individuals to campaign – should be limited for these parties in places where political violence is policed more strictly.

Moreover, changing costs to entry into politics – in this case, greater threat of experiencing violence – has been argued to affect the most polarized individuals the least (Hall 2019). The intuition behind this prediction is that policy motivation for such individuals – in the case of the NSDAP and the KPD, the chance to push Weimar to fascism or stalinism, respectively – crowds out any concerns about the risks entailed by activism. Hence, these individuals should be the least sensitive to expected levels of violence, while less polarized individuals – the members of pro-democratic parties in the Weimar context – should respond more strongly to changing expectations of violence.

H_{2a}: Replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider candidate *increases* the number of pro-democratic candidates for office, and has no effect on the number of anti-democratic candidates for office.

I also expect differential effects of changes in the policing of political violence on campaigning activity by gender. The Weimar constitution enshrined the formal right for women to vote and run for office, and women became a fixture in the parliamentary factions of all major parties with the notable exception of the NSDAP. However, women faced patriarchal backlash to their participation in politics, led in particular by Nazi politicians, whose affirmed objective was to "depoliticize [that is: disenfranchise] the woman" (Hindenburg 2021, 90). I expect that the threat of political violence may have affected women's participation in campaigning for two reasons. First, women may have felt particularly threatened by violence resulting from patriarchal backlash against their representation. Second, facing the prospect of violence, women may have found it difficult to mobilize network support for their activism (Bondeli 2024).

H_{2b}: Replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider candidate *increases* the number of women candidates for office.

Finally, I expect that variation in the policing of political violence should causally affect electoral outcomes. Strict policing of political violence entailed imposing limits on the campaign activities of anti-democratic parties, particularly the NSDAP and the KPD. With their ability to mobilize potential voters limited, we should expect to see a lower vote share for these parties in elections. Additionally, the occurrence of violence may itself have affected electoral outcomes. Providing safety from violence is a core function of the state.

Frequent violence undermines the legitimacy of state institutions, and may create demand for government turnover or even regime change. As a result, strict policing of political violence should have increased the vote share of pro-democratic parties, to the detriment of anti-democratic parties.

H_3: Replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider candidate *increases* the vote share of pro-democratic parties, and reduces the vote share of anti-democratic parties.

Data

I test my theoretical predictions about the effects of law enforcement staffing on political violence, candidate entry and electoral outcomes using original time-series cross-sectional data from the state of Prussia, covering the period between 1917 and 1932.

Unit of Analysis

The cross-sectional unit of analysis in this paper is the rural county (*Landkreis*) in the state of Prussia. Due to cession of various territories as required by the Treaty of Versailles as well as a number of internal territorial reforms, the number of counties declines slightly, from 430 in 1920 to 416 in 1932.[10]

Law Enforcement Personnel

In each county, ultimate authority in local policing decisions was vested in a *Landrat*. I collected original biographical data on the universe of Landräte in the state of Prussia for the years 1917 and 1920 to 1932, using official government records – the *Handbooks of the Prussian State* – as a primary source. In a first step, I recorded the name of the Landrat for each county-year. Using string pattern recognition, I then recorded additional information for each county-year. First, I recorded whether a Landrat in a particular county-year after democratization had already been in office prior to democratization, in 1917. Second, based on the name of the official, I recorded whether a Landrat in a particular county-year was a member of the German nobility. Nobility status is identifiable based on the appearance of nobility titles such as "Graf" or "Freiherr" as well as the prefix "von" in an official's last name. Although nobility as a legal status was abolished in the Weimar constitution, and nobility titles no longer held legal significance, they survived as components of family names (Runge 1965, 180).

10. Note that the number of units used to for causal panel estimation will be lower primarily because my main estimator excludes always-treated units. Additionally, some units exhibit missing data, and I exclude the small number of units with treatment reversals in my main specifications.

Based on this information, I then create an indicator variable denoting a Landrat's status as an outsider to traditional administrative elites. To be classified as an outsider (and coded as 1), an official must not have been occupying the office of police chief in a particular county since before democratization, and must not belong to nobility. Officers who remained in their posts since before democratization or were members of the nobility are classified as traditional elites and coded as 0.

Focusing on the social class of appointees – rather than simply their tenure in a particular county – matters as members of the nobility were among the staunchest opponents of German democracy, while also claiming the lion's share of elite positions in the predemocratic German administrative apparatus (Muncy 1970; Runge 1965, 179-204). The problematic role of the landed nobility – the infamous *Junker* class – has been emphasized in many accounts of the erosion of Weimar democracy (Gerschenkron 1946; Muncy 1970), and reforms intended to open elite administrative positions were intended precisely to break the stranglehold of the *Junker* class on political appointments. Wherever possible, the Prussian executive attempted to appoint outsiders to Landrat positions, progressively marginalizing members of the nobility.

Figure 4 displays Landrat identity – my treatment variable – for the years 1921, 1924, 1928 and 1932 for the universe of Prussian Landkreise. The maps show that traditional elite Landräte were progressively replaced, but remained in charge of various counties right until the end of the democratic period.

Political Violence

To measure incidence of political violence, I rely on a list of successful assassinations committed with a demonstrably political motive compiled by the historian Sebastian Elsbach (Elsbach 2019, 618-667). Based on evidence triangulated from multiple sources, including government records, the press, and records of civil society organizations, Elsbach's data cover the entire German Reich including the Free City of Danzig and the occupied Saargebiet for the period from 1924 to 1933. For each assassination event, the data record date and place of the assassination, the name of the victim, and the organizational affiliations of the perpetrator and victim. Each entry in the list is accompanied by detailed information on the sources used to characterize the event. During an archival visit in Germany, I was able to easily verify the reliability of the information provided in the list.

The Elsbach dataset has a number of desirable properties for the purposes of my statistical analysis. First, it covers the entire period from 1924 to 1933, and the entirety of the state of Prussia. Second, though it does not contain information on other important forms of violence, including vandalism and assault, the focus on assassinations has the advantage that the occurrence of assassinations is often easier to verify by triangulating information from multiple sources. In high-capacity states, such as Weimar Germany, assassinations

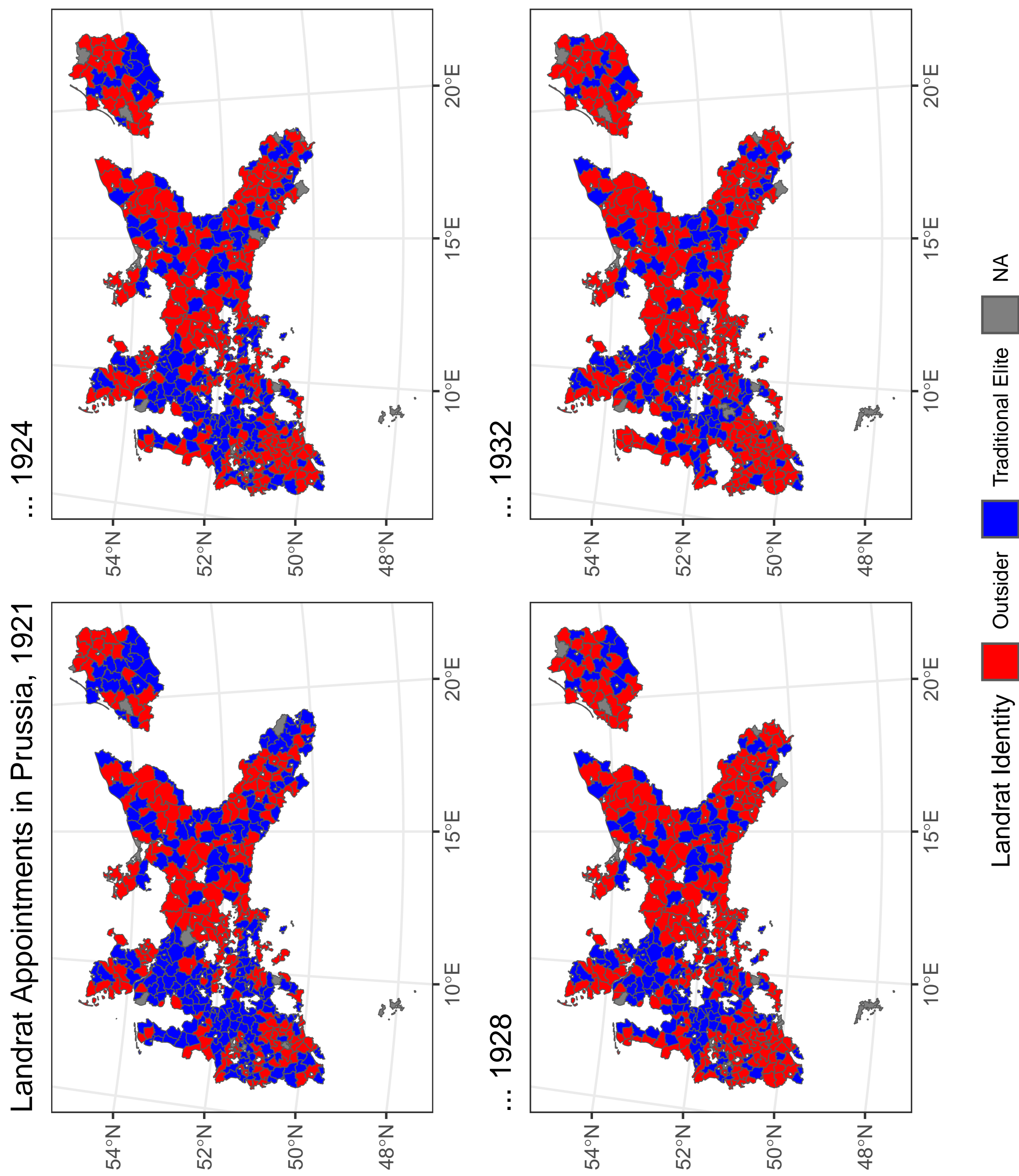

Figure 4: Landrat Appointments in Prussia, 1921-1932

leave a significant administrative “paper trail", in sharp contrast to less intense forms of violence that do not entail the death of one or more individuals. This paper trail allows the historian to verify the occurrence of an assassination with greater reliability, reducing the potential for measurement error.

These advantages come into particularly sharp relief when comparing the Elsbach data to another potential source of information on incidents of political violence, the *Statistic on Political Riots* compiled by the Prussian Ministry of the Interior, starting in 1927.[11] The statistic was designed to collect yearly county-level counts of political riots necessitating the intervention of police forces, with information on the organizations involved in a particular riot.

These data are inferior to the Elsbach data in a variety of ways. First, although data were collected from 1927 to 1933, archival records are incomplete, and are missing almost entirely for the years 1927 to 1929, rendering longitudinal data analysis difficult. Second, and critically, the data were collected under the supervision of the *Landrat* in each county – precisely the authority whose professional reliability and willingness to cooperate with central Prussian authorities is doubtful! Indeed, during archival research, I came across correspondence between the Prussian Ministry of the Interior and county-level officials revealing concerns about incorrect, incomplete or untimely reporting, raising broader concerns about the reliability of these data.[12] As in many other contexts, we cannot take law enforcement data from Weimar Germany at face value without further verification (Cook and Fortunato 2023).

While the Statistic on Political Riots may be unusable as a data source for quantitative analysis, its very existence is indicative of how Prussian authorities attempted to address the issue of political violence. The effort to collect fine-grained quantitative data on incidents of political violence – to make violence “legible" – epitomizes efforts by democratic reformers to create modernized, transparent, accountable policing that strikes a balance between maintenance of public order and safeguarding of democratic rights.

To go from the raw Elsbach data to county-year measures of the incidence of political violence, I first geocoded assassination events using the Google Maps API. Using historical shapefiles created by Project Mosaic (MPIDR and CGG 2011), I then record which county

11. Data collection was begun during the tenure of social-democratic Minister of the Interior Albert Grzesinski. The original decree creating the statistic is lost, but its contents can be reconstructed from GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 77, Tit. 4043 Nr. 119 Bl. 326. The records collected by the Ministry of the Interior are located primarily in GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 77, Tit. 4043 Nr. 119-124.

12. In one notable case, the Landrat of Rastenburg county in the province of East Prussia, Dodo zu Innhausen und Knyphausen (in office since 1912) was accused of producing misleading data, claiming that a riot was started by the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold (a pro-democratic paramilitary group), conflicting with reports of his superiors that the riot had been started by the NSDAP. The Landrat offices were asked to collect data on perpetrators and victims of violence in addition to counts, a classification task that is far from obvious. However, disagreements also emerged over which types of incidents to report and over untimely reporting. See GStA PK, I. HA Rep. 77, Tit. 4043 Nr. 119 Bl. 327-336.

a particular assassination event took place in, and generate a county-year panel aggregating information from the raw dataset.[13] The key outcome variable I will focus on is an indicator variable taking the value 1 for each county-year with a recorded assassination, and 0 otherwise.

Candidate Entry

To measure a specific aspect of political campaigning – the entry of candidates for office from a particular county – I build an original dataset relying on lists containing the universe of candidates for the Prussian State Parliament (*Wahlvorschläge*), collected in the *Handbooks of the Prussian Landtag*. I analyse the four regular elections for Prussian parliament held in 1921, 1924, 1928 and 1932. In the closed-list proportional representation system used in elections to the federal and state parliament, parties submitted ordered lists of candidates for office. Lists could be submitted for each of Prussia's 23 electoral districts as well as for the entire state. Candidates were eligible to appear on multiple lists irrespective of their residence. Each list entry identifies the candidate name, their party affiliation, their position on the ordered list, a self-reported descriptor of their occupation, their place of residence, as well as whether they won a seat in parliament.

After digitizing the candidate lists, I converted the lists to tabular form with the help of a research assistant. The research assistant also coded the gender of the candidate as female or male based on the name of each candidate entry. In a second step, I used string matching to identify candidates who appeared on multiple lists based on their name and other characteristics, to create a dataset of all *unique* candidates running for office in each particular election. Using the string pattern recognition approach described above, I then coded whether candidates were members of the nobility and whether they held a doctoral degree based on their names. I also record whether candidates were novices (i.e. they had never run for office before) and whether they were incumbents (i.e. they had won a seat in parliament in the previous election).

In a third step, I geocode candidate residences using the Google Maps API, and a handcoded crosswalk where automated geocoding failed or gave incorrect results. Using historical shapefiles created by Project Mosaic (MPIDR and CGG 2011), I then record the county of residence of each candidate, and aggregate the candidate data to create an election year-county panel. For each election year-county, I record the number of candidates vying for office, overall as well as separately by party family, number and share of novice and incumbent candidates, among other measures. I analyze these measures both in absolute terms and adjusted for county population. For population adjustment, I use data on the

13. The use of Project Mosaic shapefiles and Google Maps API for geocoding is standard in quantitative research on Weimar Germany (Selb and Munzert 2018; De Juan et al. 2024).

number of voting-age adults by county-year computed by Falter and Hänisch 1990.[14]

Electoral Outcomes

To measure electoral outcomes at the county level, I use data compiled by Falter and Hänisch (1990) on county-level electoral returns in federal parliament (*Reichstag*) elections for the years 1920, 1924, 1928, 1930 and 1932. Unfortunately, I am not aware of county-level electoral data for state parliament elections. Where multiple elections were held in a single year, I average over the electoral returns to get a single election year-county estimate. The data contain information on the number of voting-age adults in a particular county, the vote shares of all major parties, and voter turnout.

For the purposes of this analysis, I am particularly interested in the results of the pro-democratic *Weimar Coalition* composed of SPD, Zentrum, DVP and DDP on the one hand, and the clearly anti-democratic extremist KPD and NSDAP on the other hand. The vote shares of these two coalitions arguably matter most to explain democratic erosion – the 1932 coup against the Prussian government followed an election which gave the KPD and NSDAP a negative majority, undermining the legitimacy of the working pro-democratic government (Biewer 1983). Hence, the key dependent variables will be the combine vote share of KPD and NSDAP, and the combined vote share of the parties of the Weimar coalition, respectively.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics. Note that because outcome variables are available for different years, the panels differ in the number of time periods available for analysis. The table shows descriptive statistics separately for each panel.

Estimation

My theory makes predictions about the causal effects of replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat on my outcomes of interest. I endeavour to estimate this causal quantity from panel data. Due to recent advances in panel data econometrics, best practice for estimating such effects has evolved rapidly, as the limitations of the workhorse two-way fixed effects (TWFE) estimator have been clarified. This research has shown that even when basic identifying assumptions are met, the TWFE estimator correctly quantifies causal effects only under further restrictive assumptions on the nature of treatment effects. A plethora of alternative estimators is now available for causal panel analysis, of which many of which either impose significant restrictions on the nature of treatment trajectories of different units (such as staggered adoption) or the units admissible for treatment estimation, thus limiting statistical power (Liu, Wang, and Xu 2024, 160, 175).

14. The denominator is not available for the year 1921, so I am using information on the voting-age population from 1920 instead.

Panel 1: Landrat Appointments and Violence

County-year, 1924-1932

Variable	*Min.*	*1st Quartile*	*Median*	*Mean*	*3rd Quartile*	*Max.*	*SD*	*Num. obs.*	*T*
Replace Traditional Elite	0	0	1	0.66	1	1	0.47	3429	9
Any Assassination	0	0	0	0.03	0	1	0.16	3331	9
N Victims	0	0	0	0.03	0	4	0.21	3331	9

Panel 2: Landrat Appointments and Candidate Entry

County-election year (Prussia): 1921, 1924, 1928, 1932

Variable	*Min.*	*1st Quartile*	*Median*	*Mean*	*3rd Quartile*	*Max.*	*SD*	*Num. obs.*	*T*
Replace Traditional Elite	0	0	1	0.60	1	1	0.49	1541	4
Candidates/10k voters	0	0.34	0.69	0.82	1.15	4.89	0.70	1444	4
Women candidates/10k voters	0	0	0	0.04	0	0.99	0.13	1444	4
Weimar Coalition candidates/10k voters	0	0	0.10	0.25	0.40	2.27	0.34	1444	4
Communist candidates/10k voters	0	0	0	0.12	0.20	2.85	0.24	1444	4
Nazi candidates/10k voters	0	0	0	0.11	0	2.20	0.25	1444	4

Panel 3: Landrat Appointments and Voting

County-election year (Reich): 1920, 1924, 1928, 1930, 1932

Variable	*Min.*	*1st Quartile*	*Median*	*Mean*	*3rd Quartile*	*Max.*	*SD*	*Num. obs.*	*T*
Replace Traditional Elite	0	0	1	0.63	1	1	0.48	1917	5
N Voters	4446	21957	29627	34180.00	41415	371736	20599.71	1829	5
Vote Share, Weimar Coalition, in %	10.45	34.26	48.79	50.89	65.99	99.43	20.85	1829	5
Vote Share, Nazi and Communist, in %	0	3.18	10.59	18.47	28.96	75.06	19.23	1829	5
Voter Turnout, in %	51.45	75.36	79.81	78.97	83.28	93.41	6.33	1829	5

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	DV: Any Recorded Assassination		
	TWFE	FEct	FEct
		obs equally weighted	units equally weighted
Replace Traditional Elite	-0.037^{***}	-0.036^{**}	-0.039^{**}
	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.016)
County FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
RMSE	0.153	0.082	0.082
N Clusters	388	163	163

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

Table 2: Replacement of Traditional Elites and Violence

Given the particularities of my estimation task, in this paper, I rely on the fixed effects counterfactual (FEct) estimator developed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2024). This estimator ensures that average causal effects are convex combinations of individual treatment effects without restricting unit-level treatment trajectories or requiring discarding large numbers of observations. I use time and unit fixed effects for effect estimation, and standard errors are computed using the bootstrap. Where possible, I implement the new generation of panel diagnostic tests developed by Liu, Wang, and Xu (2024, 166-171) to probe the plausibility of identifying assumptions.[15]

In addition to the FEct estimator, I also implement the traditional vanilla TWFE estimator, using time and unit fixed effects. The estimator is computed using OLS with CR2 standard errors clustered at the unit level.

Results

How did replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat causally affect political life in Prussian counties? In H_1, I conjectured that replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat would reduce the risk of political violence. Table 2 and Figure 5 show the estimated causal effect of such a replacement on the incidence of political assassinations.

Both TWFE and FEct estimators agree that on average, replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat *reduces* the incidence of political violence. Compared to a county with a traditional elite Landrat remaining in office, a county in which such a Landrat is replaced reduces its risk of seeing a political assassination by on average 3 to 4 percentage points. Figure 5 plots dynamic treatment effects. Replacement of a traditional

15. See Appendix A for these tests.

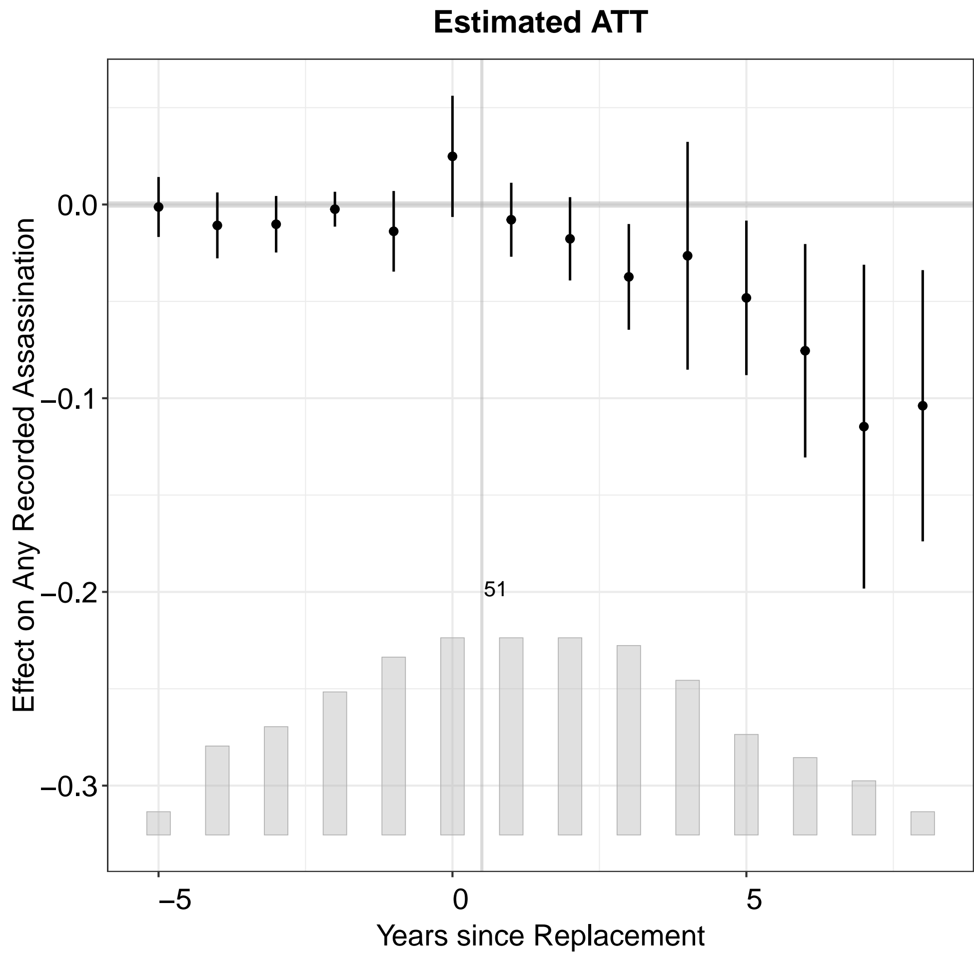

Figure 5: Period-wise ATT Estimates on Any Recorded Assassination

elite Landrat by an outsider official reduces the risk of deadly political violence.

How did turnover in law enforcement personnel affect political entry? In H_2 and subhypotheses, I conjectured that replacing a traditional elite Landrat should boost entry into politics with a greater number of candidates overall, a greater number of women and a greater number of pro-democratic candidates competing for office. Tables 3 and 4 show the estimated causal effects of replacing a traditional elite Landrat on candidate entry.

Table 3 summarizes the effects of replacing a traditional elite Landrat on candidate entry. While the estimated effect of Landrat replacement on the overall number of candidates per capita is indeed positive, it is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero. Compared to control counties, counties which replaced their traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat did not see a greater number of candidates running for office, providing no support for H_2.

Regarding women candidates, the estimated effect of Landrat replacement is statistically indistinguishable from zero, and its sign is negative. Compared to control counties, counties which replaced their traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat did not see a greater number of women candidates running for office, providing no support for H_{2a}.

Table 4 summarizes effects of Landrat replacement on candidate emergence by partisanship. The effect on entry by candidates belonging to the Weimar coalition is indeed positive, although the effect is not estimated with sufficient precision to distinguish it from zero. Unexpectedly, there is divergence between candidate entry from the extreme left and extreme right. Landrat replacement has no effect on the number of communist candidates per capita, but a negative and statistically significant effect on the number of Nazi candidates per capita. Confounding hypothesis H_{2b}, democratization of law enforcement did not increase the number of pro-democratic candidates per capita, but did reduce the number of Nazi candidates vying for office.

Finally what are the effects of change in law enforcement personnel on electoral outcomes? In H_3, I conjectured that replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat should depress voting for extreme anti-democratic parties, and increase vote shares for parties of the pro-democratic Weimar coalition. Table 5 and Figure 6 summarize the findings.

First, replacing a traditional elite Landrat has a positive effect on the vote share of the pro-democratic Weimar coalition parties, as seen in the first three columns of Table 5 and the upper panel of Figure 6. The TWFE and FEct estimators differ substantially in the estimated effect size. Where the two estimators disagree – for example, in the presence of effect heterogeneity – FEct is a more accurate estimator than TWFE. The results suggest that compared to control counties, counties which replace a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat on average see vote share for Weimar coalition parties increase by 3.3 to 3.4 percentage points. This effect is substantial, and in line with comparable effects found in the literature on Weimar voting. For comparison, De Juan and coauthors (2024,

	DV: Candidates/10k voters			*DV: Women candidates/10k voters*		
	TWFE	FEct	FEct	TWFE	FEct	FEct
Replace Traditional Elite	0.048	0.032	0.020	−0.028	−0.038	−0.017
	(0.076)	(0.091)	(0.088)	(0.020)	(0.025)	(0.023)
obs equally weighted		✓			✓	
units equally weighted			✓			✓
County FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RMSE	0.550	0.372	0.372	0.112	0.097	0.097
N Clusters	393	202	202	393	202	202

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

Table 3: Replacement of Traditional Elites and Entry, General and Women

	DV: Weimar Coalition candidates/10k voters			DV: Nazi candidates/10k voters			DV: Communist candidates/10k voters		
	TWFE	FEct	FEct	TWFE	FEct	FEct	TWFE	FEct	FEct
Replace Traditional Elite	0.050	0.052	0.037	-0.058^{**}	-0.066^{**}	-0.090^{***}	0.015	0.026	0.029
	(0.043)	(0.050)	(0.043)	(0.026)	(0.032)	(0.035)	(0.026)	(0.033)	(0.032)
obs equally weighted		✓			✓			✓	
units equally weighted			✓			✓			✓
County FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RMSE	0.281	0.249	0.249	0.221	0.152	0.152	0.199	0.138	0.138
N Clusters	393	202	202	393	202	202	393	202	202

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

Table 4: Replacement of Traditional Elites and Entry, by Partisan Group

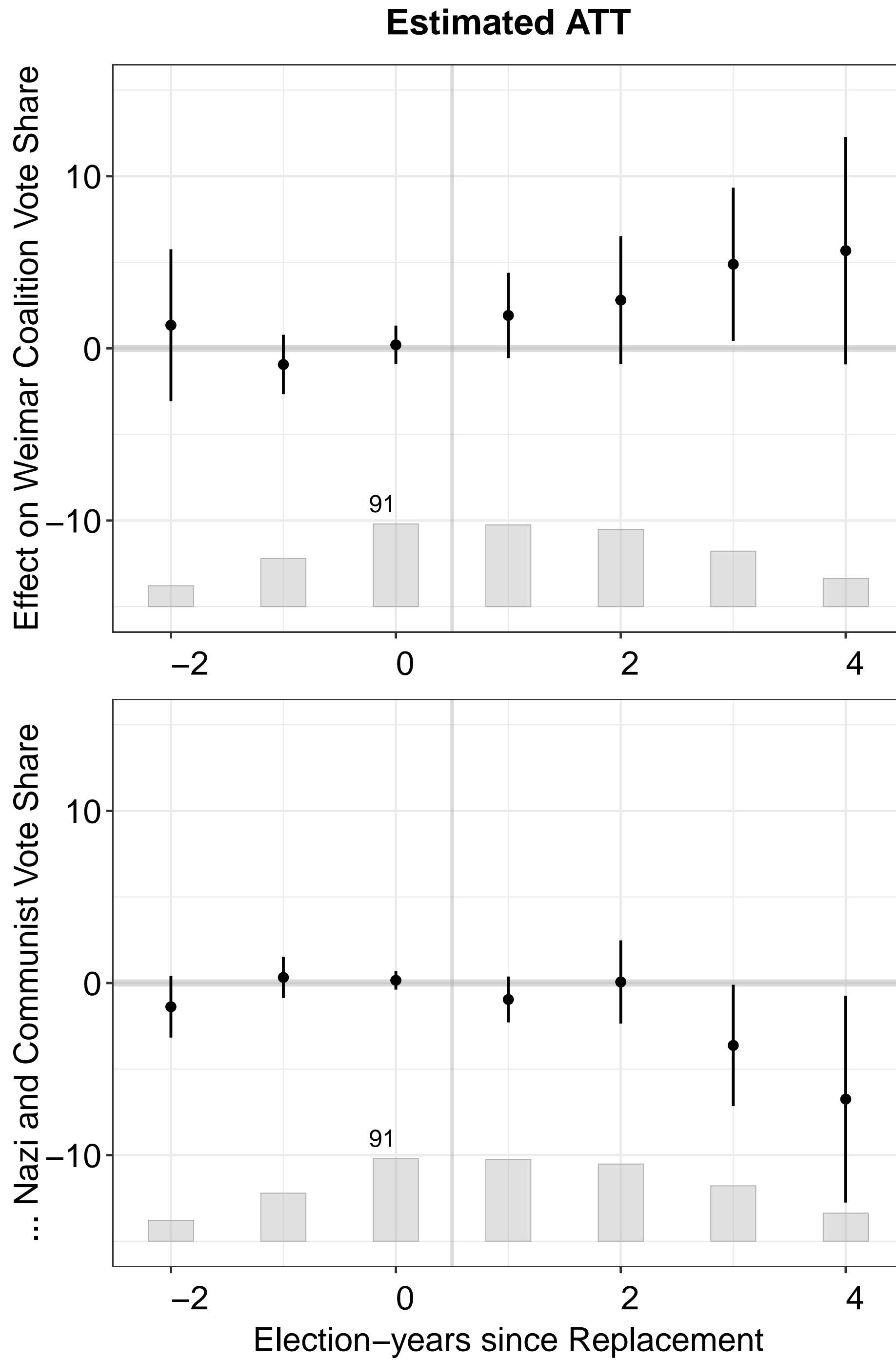

Figure 6: Period-wise ATT Estimates on Voting

	DV: Vote Share, Weimar Coalition			DV: Vote Share, Nazi and Communist		
	TWFE	FEct	FEct	TWFE	FEct	FEct
Replace Traditional Elite	0.190	3.311*	3.444**	−1.670*	−1.913*	−2.091
	(1.291)	(1.742)	(1.733)	(1.007)	(1.076)	(1.279)
obs equally weighted		✓			✓	
units equally weighted			✓			✓
County FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RMSE	7.938	7.449	7.449	6.837	4.015	4.015
N Clusters	395	206	206	395	206	206

$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$

Table 5: Replacement of Traditional Elites and Party Vote Shares

153) estimate that compared to counties with below-median WW1 casualty fatality rates, counties with above-median WW1 casualty fatality rates see an increase in voting for nationalist parties by around 5 percentage points.

Second, we see the opposite average effect on voting for anti-democratic NSDAP and Stalinist parties, an effect that manifests irrespective of the estimator used. The estimates are summarized in the last three columns of Table 5 and the lower panel of Figure 6. Compared to control counties, counties which replace a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat on average see vote share for the NSDAP and stalinist parties (KPD) decline by 1.7 to 2 percentage points. The democratization of law enforcement thus increases vote shares for pro-democratic parties and limits vote shares for anti-democratic parties, lending support to H_3.

Conclusion

"[...] How was it possible for Germany to fall into the Hitler Dictatorship? I can only answer: Versailles and Moscow."
– Otto Braun, Prime Minister of Prussia, *von Weimar zu Hitler*, 1938, p. 5.

In 1932, the last democratically elected Prussian government was illegally removed from office in the *Preussenschlag*, removing one of the last serious obstacles to the Nazi dictatorship. Fearing for the life of his bedridden wife and almost certainly his own, the previously all-powerful social-democratic Prime Minister of Prussia, Otto Braun, hastily fled to the seaside town of Ascona on Lago Maggiore in Switzerland, where he would spend the next two decades in exile. In his 1938 memoir, penned under the watchful eye of Swiss military censors and published in New York[16], Braun blamed the catastrophic

16. See Wichers 2004.

decline of Weimar democracy on external actors: The victorious allied powers of WWI for imposing crippling war reparations which suffocated the German economy, and Stalin for lending relentless support to the most anti-democratic elements of the German communist movement.

Contemporary scholarship likewise attributes little democracy-saving agency to democratic reformers and Weimar elites. Analysts have pointed to century-old legacies of antisemitism (Voigtländer and Voth 2012), the radicalizing aftereffects of World War I (De Juan et al. 2024) or paralyzed fiscal and economic policymaking as a result of war reparations (Galofré-Vilà et al. 2021; Doerr et al. 2022) as drivers of democratic decline.

My paper challenges this fatalist perspective. A central feature of the post-WWI transition to democracy is that the democratizing coalition did little to dismantle a large, complex, and hostile administrative apparatus. Institutions insulating the civil service from political interference and accountability were kept intact. Rather than promoting good governance, the timidity of civil service reform perpetuated the dominance of a class of staunchly monarchist Protestant men, drawn disproportionately from landed nobility, over the state apparatus. The middle or working classes, Jewish Germans, or women remained marginalized from positions of power within the bureaucracy. Democratizers failed to use windows of opportunity – such as the failed reactionary Kapp Putsch or mass mobilization in the wake of the assassination of Walther Rathenau – for decisive reform of the state apparatus.

I zoom in on a particular facet of administrative reform – the replacement of traditional elite *Landräte* with outsider candidates in Prussian rural counties – to demonstrate its stabilizing effects for democratic governance. With armed party organizations threatening to derail elections and election campaigns with violence, the *Landrat* – principal law enforcement officer in his county – played a pivotal role in democratic life. Decisive law enforcement action to pacify election campaigns could limit the incidence of political violence and mobilization of anti-democratic forces, such as the Nazis and the KPD. On the flip side, the office gave reactionary law enforcement officials the opportunity to tolerate or even actively participate in the undermining of democratic governance.

Leveraging original data on law enforcement staffing and candidate entry combined with secondary data on voting and the incidence of political violence in a difference-in-differences design, I demonstrate that replacing a traditional elite Landrat with an outsider Landrat exerted democracy-stabilizing effects. Compared to control counties where law enforcement remained under control of traditional elites, counties in which an outsider *Landrat* was appointed subsequently saw (i) lower levels of lethal political violence, (ii) reduced entry by Nazi candidates for office, and (iii) higher vote shares for pro-democratic parties at the expense of the NSDAP and KPD. These results are consistent with qualitative accounts emphasizing how traditional elite law enforcement officials tolerated anti-democratic mobilization and violence in their counties, and underscores the democracy-stabilizing effects

of purging anti-democratic bureaucrats.

Centering the lack of democratizing reform of the state apparatus does not imply that external constraints did not matter. As I point out in the paper, the strain on public finances accentuated by the punishing provisions of the Treaty of Versailles combined with the legal framework governing civil service appointments to render democratization of law enforcement more difficult. Nonetheless, a full accounting of the failure of Germany's first foray into modern democracy would be incomplete without noting the lack of serious reform of domestic administrative institutions. In addition to Versailles and Moscow, Berlin deserves a fair share of the blame.

In addition to shedding new light on the downfall of Weimar democracy, my paper holds general implications for scholarship on democratization, bureaucracy, and political violence. The creation of a politically insulated bureaucracy is often seen by scholars and practitioners as a bedrock "good governance" reform which limits patronage and corruption, improves public sector performance and thus catalyses development and democratization. My close inspection of the Weimar case reveals the dangers of insulated bureaucracies for democratization. When access to bureaucratic appointments is stratified and socially exclusionary educational institutions act as gatekeepers, insulating bureaucracies in effect means cementing the influence of traditional elites over the state apparatus. Far from a "good governance" reform, limiting political influence over the bureaucracy then exerts destabilizing effects on democratization and development.

My paper also underscores the critical role law enforcement plays in democratization. In polarized societies at risk of political violence, law enforcement plays a key role in negotiating tensions between the maintenance of public order and the safeguarding of political expression. Effective policing of political violence and violent, anti-system actors depends critically on the loyalty of law enforcement officials to the democratic order. For reformers inheriting complex coercive bureaucracies molded under autocratic rule, democratizing law enforcement presents a formidable and critical challenge.

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Supplementary Materials

A Diagnosing Pre-Trends **40**

A Diagnosing Pre-Trends

As is the case with all observational causal inference, the causal interpretation of the quantities estimated in this paper hinges on fundamentally untestable identification assumptions. In the analysis presented here, two crucial assumptions are that the model to impute counterfactual outcomes is correctly specified, and that in expectation, untreated potential outcomes of all units move in parallel. The last assumption is known as the parallel trends assumption (Liu, Wang, and Xu 2024, 163-164).

We cannot provide a dispositive test of the validity of these assumptions, given the fundamental problem of causal inference. However, the plausibility of the assumptions can be evaluated by testing for a pre-trend in the data prior to treatment onset. If identification assumptions are plausible, on average, the difference between the outcomes of later-treated units and the estimated control potential outcomes of later-treated units should be zero. If the difference is not zero, we might have to worry about a pre-trend – a divergence in trends between treated and control units prior to treatment onset.

I implement a set of novel diagnostic tests proposed as a global test for pre-trends (Liu, Wang, and Xu 2024, 169-170). The first test is a joint F-test with the null hypothesis that average differences between outcomes and imputed control outcomes of later-treated units are zero in all pre-treatment periods (the average prediction error). Rejecting this null hypothesis (a small p-value for the F test) would suggest a possible violation of identification assumptions. In line with the recommendations in the literature, I complement this test with an equivalence test. The equivalence test tests against the null that average prediction errors in pre-treatment periods fall outside of a prespecified equivalence range. Rejection of this null is evidence for equivalence, and *lends support* to identifying assumptions. Absent priors about relevant effect sizes, I use the default equivalence range proposed by Liu, Wang, and Xu 2024.

Figures 7, 8 and 9 display the results of this set of diagnostic tests. P-values for the F-test and the equivalence test are shown on the top left. Recall that we larger p-values for the F-test and smaller p-values for the equivalence test indicate that identification assumptions are plausible.

None of these tests give rise to concerns about the plausibility of identifying assumptions. In all cases, the F test fails to reject the null that average prediction errors in any pre-treatment periods are different from zero. Reassuringly, the equivalence tests in all cases do reject the null hypothesis of inequivalence of average prediction errors. The upshot of this analysis is that there are no statistically detectable pre-trends in the data. There is no evidence, for example, that the replacement of a traditional elite Landrat follows changes in the mobilization of radical anti-democratic parties, rather than being the *cause* thereof, based on the analysis presented here.

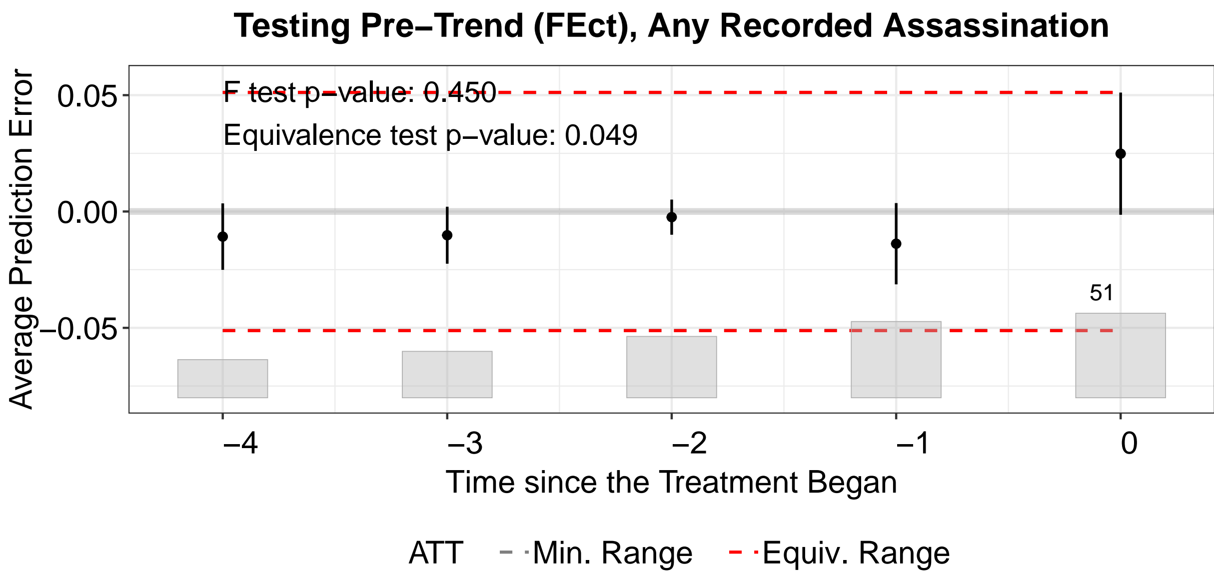

Figure 7: Diagnosing Pre-Trends, Political Assassinations

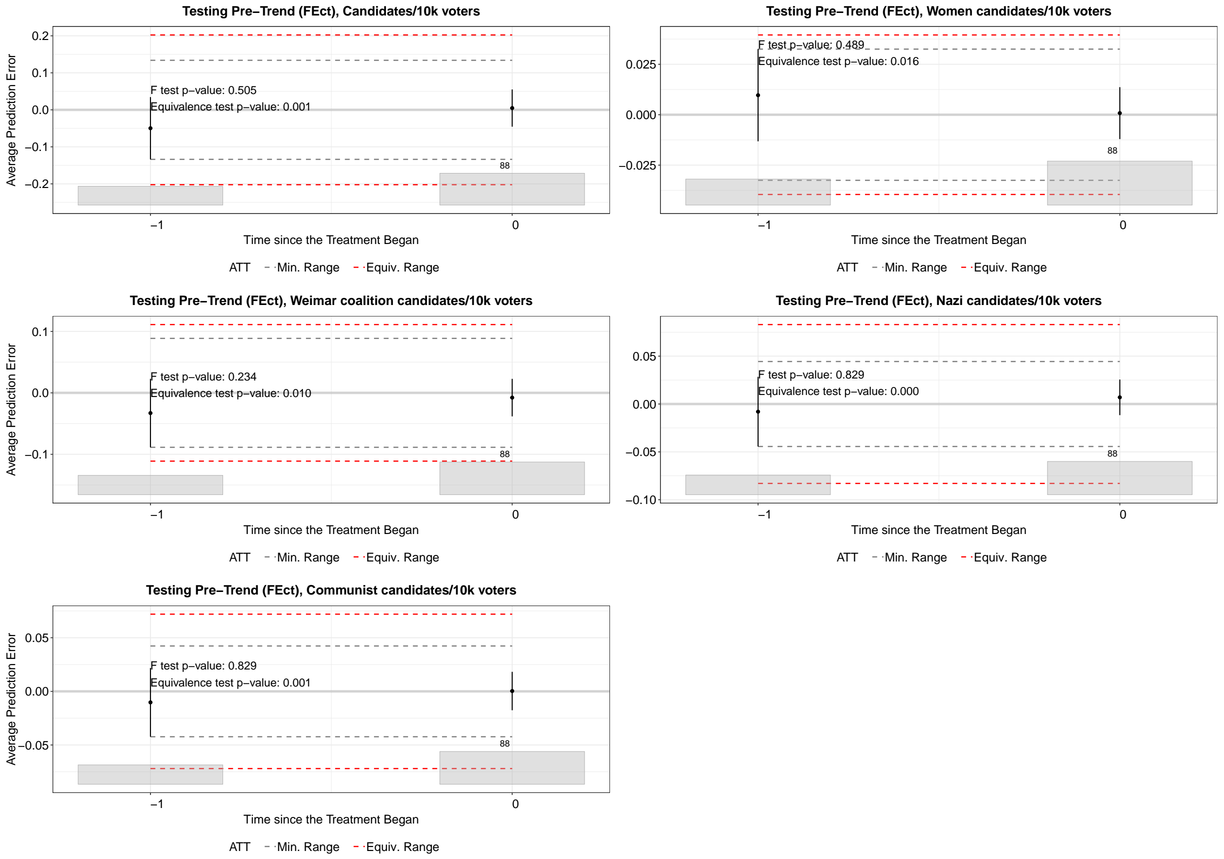

Figure 8: Diagnosing Pre-Trends, Candidate Entry

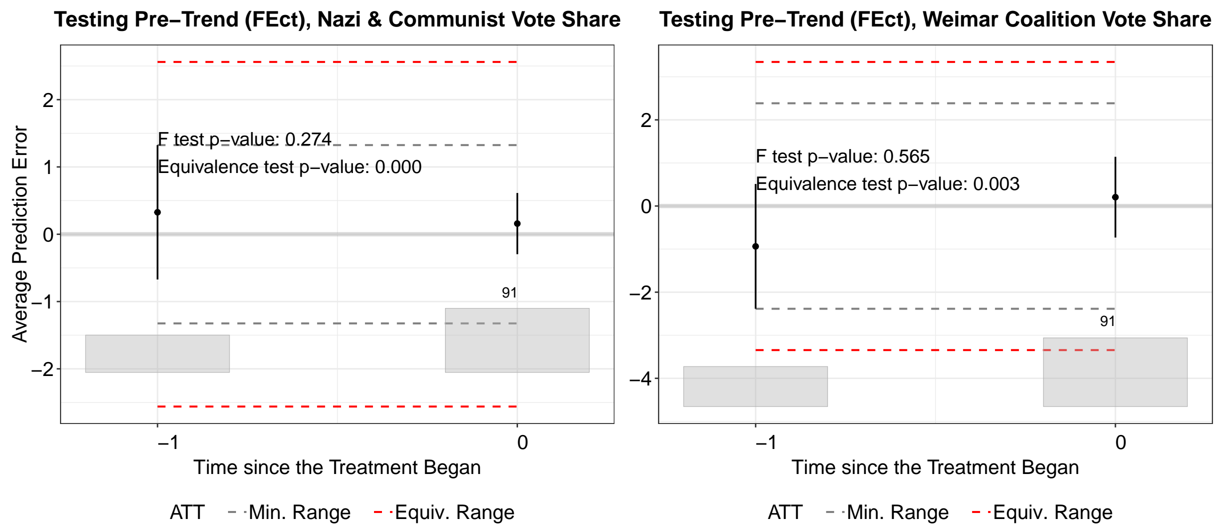

Figure 9: Diagnosing Pre-Trends, Electoral Outcomes