



HISTORICAL EXHIBITION PRESENTED BY THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG

---

### **Political parties in the Empire** 1871 – 1918

The Imperial Constitution made no reference to political parties, whose activities were governed by the **law on associations**. Indeed, prior to 1908 political parties were subject to the legislation of the individual federal states regulating the activities of associations, but in that year the statutory provisions governing associations were standardised throughout the Empire, and this codification was accompanied by a liberalisation of the right of association and the right of assembly, which lifted existing restrictions whereby women could not normally become members of associations, and public political gatherings in enclosed spaces required authorisation by the police.

The dominant type of political party in the Empire was an **elite-based party**, in which all of the crucial party-political functions were performed by small groups of personalities whose role as leading representatives of their respective sections of society gave them an exalted position. Party organisations were still in their infancy and only existed at the constituency level. After 1871 the way in which parties were led and organised began to change, and during the Empire the Centre and the Social Democratic Party became the first **mass-membership parties** of the modern type.

The **five-party landscape** may be said to have prevailed throughout the duration of the Empire, as the various splinter parties never came to exert any real influence. Each of the five large political camps was largely linked with a particular milieu. The model of the people's party, drawing support from various milieux, was still in its infancy.

The strongest political force in the early days of the Empire was **Liberalism**, which relied chiefly on the bourgeoisie for its votes, although it was weakened by division into the Liberal Left and National Liberalism. In spite of common basic Liberal convictions – belief in the market economy, the rule of law and respect for individual freedoms – there were major differences of opinion between the two tendencies on specific political issues. The Liberal Left wanted Parliament to have greater powers within the political system, although it had no wish to undermine the constitutional monarchy. It also advocated an active government social policy. Many splits and mergers occurred within the Liberal Left camp, giving birth to parties such as the **German Progress Party** (*Deutsche Fortschrittspartei*), the **German Liberal Party** (*Deutsch-Freisinnige Partei*) and the **Liberal People's Party** (*Freisinnige Volkspartei*). Among the leading representatives of the Liberal Left were Eugen Richter (1838-1906) and **Friedrich Naumann** (1860-1919). **National Liberalism**, represented by the **National Liberal Party**, was also torn by factional fighting. **Rudolf von Bennigsen** (1824-1902) and Ernst Bassermann (1854-1917) set their seal on the National Liberalism of their time. The National Liberals were largely supportive of the policies pursued by Bismarck and his successors and, unlike the Left Liberals, backed a foreign policy based on the quest for power through the build-up of military and naval armaments.

The **German Conservative Party** (*Deutschkonservative Partei*) and the **German Imperial Party** (*Deutsche Reichspartei*) were the representatives of **Conservatism** and were closely associated with Bismarck and his political line, though critical of every concession he made to the Liberals. Aristocrats and owners of large estates from the eastern provinces of Prussia were especially prominent in these parties and primarily pursued their economic interests as farmers. One of the leading Conservatives was **Otto von Manteuffel** (1805-1882). Within the Conservative spectrum there were also splinter parties with anti-Semitic views.

The **Centre Party**, as the representative of political Catholicism, was akin to the model of the people's party, since the Catholic faith, the common factor that united its members, covered a wide range of social milieux. This also meant, however, that various wings emerged, chiefly a more 'conservative' wing, which cooperated with the Conservatives, and a more 'leftist' labour wing, which campaigned for active government social policies to assist the working classes. The outstanding leader of the Centre Party was **Ludwig Windthorst** (1812-1891), who became a formidable opponent of Bismarck in the Reichstag.

In the town of Gotha in 1875, the General German Workingmen's Association (*Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiterverein*), which had been founded in 1863 by **Ferdinand Lassalle** (1825-1864), merged with the Social Democratic Workers' Party, founded in 1869 by **August Bebel** (1840-1913) and **Wilhelm Liebknecht** (1826-1900), to form the **Socialist Workers' Party of Germany** (*Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* – SAP), renamed **Social Democratic Party of Germany** (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* – SPD) in 1891. The Social Democrats, most of whose activists and voters came from the growing ranks of industrial labour, remained entrenched for a long time in the political theories of Karl Marx, which caused bitter strife within the party and ultimately led to a split that became permanent after 1918. The Social Democrats campaigned intensively for democratic rights and equality and were fundamentally opposed to the political system of the Empire and to Bismarck. Despite twelve years of persecution under the **Socialism Act** (1878-1890), which included expulsions and press bans, the Social Democratic Party of Germany was able to consolidate and emerged from this period in its history as a stronger force. **August Bebel** was the pre-eminent unifying leader of the Social Democrats at that time.

Bibliographical references:

Volker Berghahn, *Das Kaiserreich 1871-1914* (Vol. 16 of Gebhardt, *Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte*). Fully revised tenth edition, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart, 2003.

Winfried Halder, *Innenpolitik im Kaiserreich 1871-1914*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 2003.

Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Bürgerstolz und Weltmachtstreben. Deutschland unter Wilhelm II. 1890 bis 1918*. Propyläen-Verlag, Berlin, 1995.

Administration of the German Bundestag, Research Section WD 1, March 2006.