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Research agendas or appeals for a »new electoral history« with a transnational ambition have multiplied in recent years.¹ For a long time, both social scientists and historians continued to treat elections as transparent operations for translating socio-political patterns into representation or as rituals designed to hide real power processes. Historians of different horizons have noted how, over the last few decades, election history has moved from a state of »crisis« (Thomas Kühne) or »neglect« to an »academic enthusiasm« (Alain Garrigou).² True enough, elections and election campaigns have prominently come into public debate in recent years and have seen their very rationale being questioned with reference both to their widespread use in non-democratic regimes (both established and new) and their »hollowing out« in Western »post-democracies«.³ The late 2010s have only accelerated this disenchantment, with contested votes across the Atlantic and the denunciation of populism as an ideology misusing elections and referenda in order to speak for the »people«.⁴ Not incidentally, democracy theorists have also increasingly discussed the place of elections in democracy anew. While some have defended the importance of elections⁵, discussed the moral

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³ For classical takes on these transformations, see Fareed Zakaria, The Future of Freedom. Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad, New York 2003; Colin Crouch, Post-Democracy, Cambridge/Malden 2004; Peter Mair, Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy, New York/London 2013; with a critical warning against restricting democratic participation to elections, Pierre Rosanvallon, La Contre-Démocratie. La politique à l’âge de la défiance, Paris 2014 (first published 2006).


duty to vote\textsuperscript{6} or even the necessity of compulsory voting\textsuperscript{7}, others have criticised the multiple biases of elections and advocated in favour of epistocratic institutions\textsuperscript{8} or of radically different forms of participation and decision-making, such as sortition, participatory and/or deliberative democracy.\textsuperscript{9} Historians studying elections and campaigns thus venture into a field already saturated with various forms of expertise, political commentary and critique. Meanwhile, elections have become ubiquitous, not only across the globe, but also beyond the conventional political field, from trade unions via school representatives to TV shows. The burgeoning social movements of the 2010s themselves could rarely avoid considering the question of whether to participate in elections.\textsuperscript{10} And even the push for more direct democracy in many countries, while contesting the legitimacy of elected representatives, is still based on having individual citizens casting a vote so as to »confirm« the electorate’s will. These trends do not necessarily weaken elections and the act of voting, but rather reveal and question their centrality in contemporary democracies.

This is where historians can shed light on the processes that made elections seem so natural in the first place. As this research overview will discuss, the various renewals of political history following the epistemic »turns« of the 1990s and 2000s offered a substantial contribution in revealing the heuristic potential of »denaturalising« elections and election campaigns from the nineteenth century to the present, prolonging the major research done on elections before representative democracy and mass suf-


\textsuperscript{8} Jason Brennan, Against Democracy, Princeton 2016.

\textsuperscript{9} For instance, David Van Reybrouck, Against Elections. The Case for Democracy, London 2016 (first published in Dutch 2013).


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frage\(^{12}\), on the long and uncertain road to universal suffrage\(^{13}\) as well as on other forms of selection such as sortition.\(^{14}\) Yet beyond shared approaches and inspirations, research on elections and election campaigns has asked different questions and adopted various methodologies, so that one may wonder if there really is such a thing as a transnational new history of elections. Indeed, while many recent studies aspire to a transnational perspective, it seems that national historiographical traditions and perspectives are particularly tenacious in political history.\(^{15}\) This is not only the case because – in spite of frequent claims to be studying democracy in a »non-normative« light – discussing elections of the past always resonates with the state of democracies today. Depending on the context, the various renewals of political history also entertain varying relations with other disciplines studying politics, such as political science, sociology, anthropology, communication science and gender studies. Faced with this diversity, it seems all the more important to bring these various perspectives into discussion, particularly across linguistic and national borders. Focusing for the most part on English-, German- and French-speaking works on elections in Western Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this literature review aims to contextualise the boom in election studies, discussing recent studies and suggesting questions for further research. In consideration of the vast and diverse research landscape, it does not aim at exhaustivity, but strives to deepen ongoing debates and open new perspectives for research, particularly beyond disciplinary and linguistic borders.

1 Denaturalising Elections? New Perspectives in the Social Sciences and History

**Social Sciences: From the Apparent Transparency of Elections Results to the Study of Campaigns and Elections in their Own Right**

The social sciences too have rediscovered elections and campaigns in recent decades, from which historians may draw interdisciplinary inspiration. From the perspective of the history of knowledge, their approaches also gain from being historicised because they contributed to shape dominant perceptions of elections and campaigns in the public sphere. From electoral geography to social history, elections have long been re-


duced to what they seemed above all to produce: voting statistics on the one hand, the distribution of executive or legislative positions on the other. As to election campaigns, they were deemed superficial at best, since structural factors (local and social configurations in particular) were considered central in producing the vote.\textsuperscript{16} The parallel development of polling and political science after 1945 had ambivalent consequences for the study of elections and election campaigns: it led to a boom of electoral studies, typically based on polling, but did not make campaigns and elections per se legitimate objects of study. Although the pioneering studies led by Paul Lazarsfeld at the University of Chicago in the 1940s studied voting as a locally anchored, social practice\textsuperscript{17}, their later reception centred on the thesis that electoral campaigns would only have »limited effects« on electoral behaviour. The contemporary Michigan school followed in the same vein and, most importantly, shifted the focus away from studying how social interactions form voting behaviour to measuring individual party identification by relying predominantly on polling, setting the study of campaigns and elections as political sequences aside.\textsuperscript{18} Political scientists interested in long-term trends in voting behaviour on the basis of electoral statistics also approached elections foremost as opportunities to reconstruct individual preferences and »cleavages« in the wake of Seymour Lipset’s and Stein Rokkan’s approach.\textsuperscript{19} In many countries, political science institutes established in the post-war decades still kept records of contemporary campaigns and elections based on media and campaigning sources, which are of great interest for contemporary historians today.\textsuperscript{20}

The perspective of social scientists on election campaigns and elections started changing in the 1970s, as political scientists noticed not only shifts in political cleavages, but also short-term changes in electoral results,\textsuperscript{21} which questioned the impact of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Angus Campbell/Philip E. Converse/Warren E. Miller et al., The American Voter, New York 1960.
\end{itemize}
election campaigns on electoral results anew. In parallel, a public discussion emerged in many democracies on the potential influence of television on electoral behaviour, focusing on televised campaign adverts and/or debates. Since then, media studies have focused on election campaigns as an opportunity for studying the importance of agenda-setting and news framing as well as for questioning the «mediatization of politics» in general. While some studies have turned to the reception of media campaigns by citizens, media scholarship on elections faces the frequent criticism for being media-centric, forgetting not only about citizens, but also about the diversity of political and media actors in the public sphere.

In contrast, political scientists have attempted to model changes in election campaigns by taking both the media and political actors (parties and candidates) into consideration. The concept of Americanisation, so popular in public debate, served as a point of entry for examining changes in campaigning perceived as «American», from the inflation of campaign budgets to the increased importance of entertainment. Precisely because of its (overwhelmingly negative) uses in public debate and its difficult operationalisation, the concept has encountered heavy criticism. Particularly regarding «newer» democracies, political scientists have attempted to refine the diagnosis of Americanisation by analysing the concrete transfers and hybridisations of knowledge and practices happening around the globe.

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23 For this discussion in Germany, see Mergel, Propaganda nach Hitler, pp. 34f.
26 For a critical overview, see Philippe Riutort, Sociologie de la communication politique, Paris 2020, pp. 44–50.
speaking of campaign modernisation as a less pejorative (but still delicate) alternative to Americanisation. Building on communication history, Pippa Norris, David Farrell and Paul Webb, among others, have developed three-stage models of campaign modernisation between the middle of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. While Farrell and Webb presented their models as mere »heuristic devices«, they unavoidably separated the perspective on mass election campaigns from other forms of mobilisation and took established representative democracies as the standard for global evolutions. By centring their three phases on technological changes (the emergence of television and then of the internet), they risked technological determinism, as Farrell and Webb themselves acknowledged. Recalling the pitfalls of modernization narratives, in their attempt to sketch clear causalities, these models also approach campaign transformations as an almost mechanical reaction to long-term changes in voting behaviour and/or in party structure. Such causal chains tend to create too neat a separation between a naturalised »political demand« and a »political offer« that would simply adapt to the former. Recent studies have placed a stronger focus both on institutional settings and on the agency of political actors in shaping their campaigning environment and campaigning practices. Yet paradoxically, this insistence on observable practices often forgets not only about their varying meanings in different contexts, but also about the actors themselves, their own uncertain and potentially contradictory perspectives on campaigning and their modes of self-legitimation. In comparison, studies focusing on the professionalisation of political communication attempt to approach the diverse rationalities and beliefs of political actors, their motives for investing in specific mobilisation techniques and forms of know-how, and question the patterns of legitimation given for the alleged need to »professionalise« election campaigns.

33 Farrell/Webb, Political Parties as Campaign Organisations, p. 106.
34 For a critique, see Clément Desrumaux/Rémi Lefebvre, Pour une sociologie des répertoires d’actions électorales, in: Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique, 2016, no. 113, pp. 5–16, here: pp. 8f.
35 Farrell/Webb, Political Parties as Campaign Organisations, p. 103, notes 1 and 3.
38 Desrumaux/Lefebvre, Pour une sociologie des répertoires d’actions électorales, p. 10.
Furthermore, social scientists interested in the symbolic dimensions of politics have suggested looking at campaigns as political rituals, not so much to highlight their superficiality, but rather in order to analyse how they allow the staging of representative democracy and hence contribute to its legitimising. In parallel, anthropologists (among others) were also focusing on elections and campaigns across the globe as a point from which to observe and understand changes in political culture. Yet they also paid attention to «informal» forms of politics beyond elections. Long overlooked as «second-order», subnational election campaigns provide fascinating case studies for analysing «electoral repertoires of contention» and low-scale negotiations within political parties about candidates and platforms, but also daily interactions about politics. In recent years, political scientists have reconciled this anthropological perspective with a more classical focus on voters, reviving the forgotten tradition of «ecological» or «contextual» electoral studies.

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44 For a proposal to adapt Charles Tilly’s concept to an analysis of election campaigns, see Desrumaux/Lefebvre, Pour une sociologie des répertoires d’actions électorales.


If many studies in the social sciences have thus contributed to shedding light on election campaigns as complex moments leading up to the vote, contemporary election technologies themselves are still mostly studied in the Global South to assess the »quality« of democracy in comparison with elections in the Global North, where these questions are assumed to have been resolved long ago. Yet it is the Global South, and particularly Africa, that now drives innovations in this field and crystallises transformations of global and internal politics – particularly the role of NGOs, but also of new commercial actors in »democracy promotion«.47 The stunning political comeback of debates on postal and electronic voting in the United States and beyond48, but also the timeless question of compulsory voting49 in the Global North, are an invitation for social scientists and contemporary historians there to study their democratic but also their anthropological implications anew.

A New »Electoral History«? Multiple Ways to Historicise Elections

As long as political history remained discredited as an event-based history of »big men«, historians also continued to look at elections foremost as manifestations of deep social structures. The sociological paradigm of »social-moral milieus« (Mario Rainer Lepsius), which became influential among social historians, shared commonalities with cleavage approaches in political science.50 Across borders, in the wave of the various (cultural and linguistic, but also anthropological, visual and performative) »turns« of the 1990s and 2000s, historians also fundamentally changed their perspective on the »political« from a substantive, institutionalist definition to a relational, dynamic approach involving the constant renegotiation of its boundaries. But the different historiographical renewals that followed occurred in different disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) configurations. Cultural approaches (with different emphases) have been prominent in Anglo-American and northern European political historiography.51 English-speaking historians have thus studied past elections as a window into fundamentally different »electoral cultures«, asking about the transformations of political rituals


and material practices of voting.\textsuperscript{52} With their discussion of »popular politics\textsuperscript{53}, scholars have linked their cultural perspective with a steady interest (even after the decline of Marxist perspectives) in the negotiation of conflicts, power and authority in changing societies.\textsuperscript{54} Frank O’Gorman has thus importantly nuanced the classical assumption of a traditional popular »deference« towards authority in the nineteenth century and shown how it could imply an accepted and/or calculated relationship of interdependence.\textsuperscript{55}

In the historiography of German elections, historians have also focused on political culture and particularly on »electoral culture«, defined by Thomas Kühne as a »set of formal and informal rules, patterns and experiences that enable and restrain choices, goals and actions of voters, canvassers, and politicians«.\textsuperscript{56} In comparison with UK historiography, debates have focused less on power and class approaches than on how to interpret long-term transformations and particularly »interrelations between democratic and authoritarian practices and ideas; between change and stasis«.\textsuperscript{57} Countering the Sonderweg narrative, which diagnosed a dysfunctional gap between economic and social modernisation and political authoritarianism\textsuperscript{58}, a series of studies started analysing mass elections after universal suffrage for the Reichstag (1867) as a moment of (unintended) »politicisation« which accustomed citizens to parliamentary democracy and opened unsuspected political opportunities for marginalised groups, from the working class to women.\textsuperscript{59} Historians focusing on the regional level, however, discussed

\textsuperscript{57} Kühne, Elections, p. 78.
Prussia’s conservative weight in the Reich and the impact of the differentiated suffrage systems, which offered leeway for a backlash against universal suffrage.\(^\text{60}\)

In the 2000s, German historians formalised and discussed a cultural history of politics focussing on politics »as social action, as an ensemble of meanings, symbols, discourses, in which – often contradictory – realities are constructed« (Thomas Mergel).\(^\text{61}\) Methodologically speaking, this approach drew on discourse theory and anthropological approaches to symbols and performance. Beyond elections, Thomas Mergel also argued that election campaigns should be studied not as the »prehistory« of elections, but as »sensitive and performative events« where a society observes itself.\(^\text{62}\) His seminal book on post-1945 election campaigns in West Germany develops this approach with regard to a period less studied by political historians.\(^\text{63}\) This revitalised form of political history has also studied how diverse forms of knowledge and professional expertise, from polling to marketing, emerged around elections over time. Enjoying a varying proximity to academic scholarship, these forms of knowledge contributed both to a »scientification of politics« and to shaping political practices and representations.\(^\text{64}\)

Elections have also attracted the interest of historians since the 1990s in other historiographical contexts, but with different orientations. In French-speaking historiography, while Pierre Rosanvallon’s conceptual approach to French suffrage history is probably the best-known internationally\(^\text{65}\), other historians have discussed the risk of overestimating the impact of political ideas over more down-to-earth power dynamics on the extension of suffrage.\(^\text{66}\) And the historiographical debate on French elections


\(^{62}\) Mergel, Propaganda nach Hitler, p. 11.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.


\(^{65}\) Rosanvallon, Le sacre du citoyen.

has rather centred upon the process of citizens’ »politicisation«, which Maurice Agulhon famously defined as the »descent of politics towards the masses« in his study of the diffusion of national (and particularly republican) political schemes through »sociability« in southern villages. Agulhon located this process in the first competitive elections following universal (male) suffrage (1848). This periodisation of politicisation in France was also heavily debated, between authors centring on other, earlier or later republican milestones (the Revolution or the Third Republic) and those revisiting periods usually left out of republican narratives (particularly the restoration). As Yves Déloye and Olivier Ihl have noted, authors differed in their explanations of politicisation, in whether they identified its roots outside of politics and specifically in socio-economic processes, contributing to the nationalisation of politics (according to Eugen Weber) or in political changes per se (revolutions and their traumatic memory; or new conflicts arising from suffrage extensions). Later studies both on cities and on the countryside have drawn a more varied panorama of politicisation forms, temporalities and levels according to specific local configurations. Moving beyond the continuing debate over periodisation, recent research has fundamentally complicated the concept of politicisation, now also considered as a long-term and open-ended hybridisation process between different (pre- and post-suffrage, localised and national/hegemonic) political cultures allowing for diverse ways of appropriation and »translation« of »politics« – »subversion, derision, circumvention, enrolment«, up to resistance and persistent misunderstandings on the meanings of elections. Instead of focusing on traditional republican actors (elected officials, political parties, civil ser-


vants, schoolteachers), studies have focused on actors of politicisation standing aside of republican citizenship norms, from Catholic clerics to more horizontal agents and spaces of politicisation, such as rumour-spreaders, meetings and workers’ spaces.\footnote{François Ploux, De bouche à oreille. Naissance et propagation des rumeurs dans la France du XIXe siècle, Paris 2003; Yves Déloye, Les voix de Dieu. Pour une autre histoire du suffrage électoral. Le clergé catholique français et le vote, XIXe–XXe siècle, Paris 2006; Paula Cossart, Le Meeting politique. De la délibération à la manifestation (1868–1939), Rennes 2010.}

Methodologically speaking, this debate has also been deepened since the 1990s by the research agenda of socio-histoire, which drew from the burgeoning French-speaking political sociology. When studying politics, socio-histoire advocated studying the genesis of political institutions and political problems by joining the practice of historical know-hows – archival analysis and oral history – and the reasoned use of sociological conceptualisation, which allows objects to be constructed differently and historical sources to be read differently\footnote{Michel Offerlé, Socio-histoire, in: Perrineau/Reynié, Dictionnaire du vote, pp. 850–856.}. In this vein, authors such as Alain Garrigou, Yves Déloye and Olivier Ihl have studied the progressive and tentative institutionalisation of elections around a set of rules, power relations, knowledge forms and know-hows, the fetishisation of techniques and objects (such as the voting booth) supposed to make the autonomous, informed, rational voter a reality.\footnote{Alain Garrigou, Le vote et la vertu. Comment les Français sont devenus électeurs, Paris 1992; id., La construction sociale du vote. Fétichisme et raison instrumentale, in: Politix, 1993, no. 22, pp. 5–42; Offerlé, Le vote comme évidence et comme énigme.}

This went in hand with the attempt to sanction forms of deviance, from annotated ballots to forms of political expression other than voting (particularly when violent or contentious).\footnote{Yves Déloye/Olivier Ihl, Légitimité et déviance. L’annulation des votes dans les campagnes de la IIIe République, in: Politix, 1991, no. 15, pp. 13–24; id., Des voix pas comme les autres. Votes blancs et votes nuls aux élections législatives de 1881, in: Revue française de science politique 41, 1991, pp. 141–170; Nathalie Domnien, La clef des urnes. La construction socio-historique de la déviance électorale en France depuis 1848, Thèse de doctorat, Grenoble 2002.}

Following Bourdieusian sociology, authors such as Daniel Gaxie have proposed to study how elections became a disposition and transaction historically constituted on political markets, with an offer of (material but also increasingly public and symbolic) goods on the one side and electors on the other side, starting with very different approaches to politics due to their social position (particularly regarding social class and gender) and distance to the political field.\footnote{Daniel Gaxie,Introduction. Le vote comme disposition et comme transaction, in: id., Explication du vote, pp. 11–34.}

Key to this analysis is indeed the progressive autonomisation of a political field separating professionals from laypersons and operating with its own logic and forms of knowledge.\footnote{Michel Offerlé/Loïc Blondiaux (eds.), La profession politique: XIXe–XXe siècles, Paris 1999; Loïc Blondiaux, La fabrique de l’opinion. Une histoire sociale des sondages, Paris 1998; Yves Déloye,La construction politique d’une «science électorale» en France sous la IIIe République. Facteurs et acteurs d’un mé- tissage politico-scientifique, in: Revue internationale de politique comparée 19, 2012, no. 3, pp. 37–66.}

This changes the perspective on the socially unequal distribution of political competency, approached not only as a capacity to read these political logics, but also as a feeling of being com-
petent (or not). This critical perspective on necessarily uncompleted and socially anchored dynamics of politicisation and depoliticisation thus opens the eye to the variety of ways in which citizens appropriate politics – in the past as well as today. Taken to its logical end, this perspective is thus not only at odds with positivist approaches to elections as a seemingly transparent procedure of opinion aggregation, but also with a common functionalist tendency (linked to an idealised view of democracy) to validate the efficiency of elections in allowing citizens to express clear »political« opinions that are easily translated into policies and representation. If therefore there exists such a thing as a »new electoral history«, its various strands have as much in common – beginning with an ambition to historicise elections in their practical and cultural dimensions – as divides them, from the theoretical models they decide to follow to their perspectives on functionalism, legitimation and inequality.

II The Elephant in the Room: What Can Elections Tell Us about Democracy?

Re-assessing Democratisation through the Study of Suffrage and Elections

Displaying the heterogeneity of this »new electoral history«, recent studies have taken divergent paths, particularly when discussing the relationship of elections with democracy (as a type of political regime and/or a normative ideal) as well as with democratisation (as a process). In German political history, elections have made a comeback in recent re-assessments of the democratisation (or failure thereof) of imperial Germany. In his richly detailed book on »election battles« in »Red Saxony« (1860–1918), James Retallack prolongs his substantial research on Wilhelmine politics and particularly on Saxony by focusing on elections as »a means to an end« or an »interpretative key« (p. 4) in order to »throw new light on the reciprocal relationship between political modernisation and authoritarianism« in imperial Germany (p. 2). Retallack focuses on the tension between »political democratization« through institutions and procedures and »social democratization«, a process linked to socio-economic modernisation, through which »Germans were pulled into the world of political activity« (pp. 3f.). To do so, Retallack conflates both election campaigns and battles over suffrage law under the (German) phrase Wahlkampf or »election battle« (p. 5). Retallack approaches the state of Saxony, marked not only by a complex historical position with regard to German unity, but also by early industrialisation and urbanisation, as a »laboratory« (p. 3). His regional focus prolongs earlier research contrasting the national to the regional levels of Wilhelmine politics and contributes to rectifying a research bias that long favoured such supposedly clear-cut cases as »backward« Prussia or the »liberal« south-

83 See Patrick Lehingue’s enlightening discussion of the manifest versus the latent function of elections, Lehingue, Le vote, pp. 77–88.
Within this research interest, Retallack is interested mostly in the "high politics" (p. 7) of elections, focusing on (newly accessible) diplomatic sources and letters revealing the strategies of political forces regarding elections and suffrage rights. While Retallack sets out to give a "culturally inflected history of politics" (p. 15), his approach is rooted in social history, and he regrets in passing that cultural history "deflected attention away from the study of class conflict" (p. 8). Indeed, Retallack focuses on the opposition in Saxony between the Social Democrats, who evolved into a well-organised mass party, particularly from the 1890s onwards, and "bourgeois" forces, heterogeneous and yet increasingly united by a common anti-socialism. Retallack thereby acknowledges the democratisation potential of elections in imperial Germany by opening a space for competition in the first place but adds nuance to the perspective adopted by Margaret Anderson and others who opposed the teleological Sonderweg narrative by emphasising the symbolic importance and learning effect of voting for citizens of the empire. In Saxony, their politicisation did not lead to institutional democratisation, on the contrary: Retallack shows the "durability of obstacles" to proponents of democratisation (p. 6). Not only did the introduction of a three-class franchise pushed by conservatives and national liberals in 1896 considerably restrict suffrage, but the backlash to it – the impressive victory of the socialists in the 1903 elections – further inflamed anti-socialism. Conflated with anti-Semitism, it fuelled the "enemies of democracy", who did their utmost to maintain "bastions of authoritarianism", fearing the "spectre of democracy" (p. 6). In contrast with other historians, Retallack thus relativises the progressive character of the 1909 electoral reforms. Beyond these milestones, Retallack shows in detail how elections and the concrete organisation of voting (beginning with gerrymandering) did not serve democratisation but worked as tool against it.

Beyond his re-evaluation of Wilhelmine politics through the Saxon prism, Retallack means to show that universal suffrage and elections could serve authoritarian aims as much as it did democratic and liberal aspirations (p. 11). Distinguishing the advent of mass elections from democratic ideals and from democratisation understood in a linear way is a thread running through many election studies, not least in authoritarian contexts, a "detour" that has also helped to question the manifold functions of elections. This idea is also central in another recent study on nineteenth-century elections written by the German historian Hedwig Richter, who took a completely different approach and whose reception has been remarkably at odds with that of Retallack's study in the German-speaking historical community – a testament among others for the vivid debates on "German democracy" past and present. Asking about the trans-

85 See Kühne, Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung.
86 Anderson, Practicing Democracy.
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Atlantic success of elections as legitimising instruments throughout the nineteenth century, Richter compares the United States and Germany and thereby writes against the backdrop of linear narratives of democratisation as a straightforward advance towards freedom and equality (p. 9). Unlike Retallack, Richter sets out to follow the inspiration of a »new electoral history« with a cultural and material focus (p. 23). Building on existing literature in both countries, she focuses both on suffrage extensions and on concrete electoral practices and symbols in order to demonstrate how elections were first imposed »from the top«, and not for »normative« reasons, but from »social-structural factors« (p. 10) and with the aim of »disciplining« citizens, not least in the context of nation-building (p. 558). Electoral procedures and technologies had to be refined, rationalised and standardised to become really attractive, and only later in the century did citizens’ »interest« in elections really increase, which resulted both in increased turnout and in demands (this time »bottom-up«) for elections and the extension of suffrage beyond white men. While Richter argues that disciplining the vote, but also the specific claims of women, contributed overall to the pacification of politics, she contrasts the importance of violence, fraud and corruption in American elections late in the nineteenth century with an earlier and stronger adherence to rules in Prussian elections in spite of persistent government manipulation. As she acknowledges, this contrast may yield insights into differences in state construction. Yet Richter’s dense and detailed analysis is sometimes at odds with her broad conclusions regarding the centrality of elections in – admittedly non-linear, bumpy and conflict-ridden – processes of democratisation.

This might be a general difficulty about looking at democratisation through the prism of elections. Both Retallack and Richter do so in order to counter idealised and teleological readings of the nineteenth century, seeing in each extension of the franchise and in each election another step in the inexorable progress of »democracy«. But they conversely run the risk of limiting democratisation, which they conflate with mass participation or »politicisation«, to electoral sequences. Participation in elections (including joining electoral meetings or riots) becomes artificially detached from other forms of political participation, such as demonstrations or strikes. Besides, an emphasis on suffrage rights, electoral law – and, in Richter’s case, technologies – entails a focus on decision-making processes. We follow elections essentially »from above«: how elites organised, disciplined, channelled, or rather, following Retallack, restricted opportunities for participation in elections. This was Retallack’s avowed aim, and it

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89 Richter, Moderne Wahlen, p. 91.

certainly brings conflictuality (including within elites) and resistance ›from above‹ back into the picture. Richter’s emphasis on ›disciplining‹, while resonating with Alain Garrigou’s pioneering analysis of electoral norms as a form of ›social orthopedy‹, leaves us wondering about the place and the potential (open or hidden) resistance of ›ordinary‹ citizens in these elections, if elites were the ones pulling the strings – though probably neither with full control of events nor in perfect harmony.

**Elections ›from below‹?**

The tension between the abundant sources documenting views ›from above‹ and the difficulty of accessing perspectives ›from below‹ is of course a recurrent debate in the various proposals of a new political history. Election history is no exception, not least because participation statistics and elites’ second-hand observations on voters’ opinions are not perfect substitutes for reconstructing the many ways in which citizens reacted and contributed to electoral processes. Regarding French elections, Laurent Le Gall’s research takes note of this difficulty by attempting to balance both sides of ›politicisation‹ and to historicise the complex balance between dynamics of individualisation and of social disciplining. His earlier study of elections in Second Republic Finistère revisited this question through the perspective of rural history and anthropology and showed the variety of politicisation processes behind the (retrospective) impression of a straightforwardly backward and ›conservative‹ department. His latest synthetic contribution to election history offers a rich, interdisciplinary and avowedly personal account of elections, bridging the gap from nineteenth-century scholarship to ›Polaroids‹ of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Le Gall is interested in the many and potential contradictory ways in which the vote as an ›individualized act under social constraint‹ (p. 10) is an interface between the individual and the social, far from the liberal mythology of the vote as a purely individual decision. An important part of his reflexion concerns the development, but also the transformation and upkeep of ›electoral norms‹ (p. 13), building on Alain Garrigou’s ›social orthopedy‹, but this time from the side of voters. Electoral participation is thus approached as the (always uncertain) result of a social injunction that has to be constantly reaffirmed, not least through the common stigmatization of non-voting – with the result that even anarchists tend to conform. By linking these social constraints to individual, intimate experiences with the vote, Le Gall suggests to study our memories of voting and politics as constitutive of an ›electoral habitus‹ (p. 16) on the long term, a con-

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91 Garrigou, Le vote et la vertu, p. 277.
cept inspired by Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu which he unfortunately does not elaborate upon. Indeed, the incorporation of electoral practices from generation to generation can be an object of study in itself, not least with regard to recent decades. Oral history could be of help in approaching the »electoral journey« (p. 20) of »ordinary citizens« over time, just as it helps to analyse the mobilisation pathways of activists.96

Such a political history »from below« can also be attempted based on written sources – especially for the twentieth century. In her book on local politics in post-fascist Italy and Western Germany from the 1940s to the 1980s, Claudia Gatzka ambitions to study the conceptions of parliamentary democracy through the lens of »urban daily communication between electors and elected« (p. 13). Within her original comparative setting, she sets out to nuance three major narratives of post-war Western democracies: the success story of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Italian crisis narrative and the Anglo-Atlantic history of political metamorphosis due to the 1960s social movements (p. 12). In all three, citizens appear as a passive audience to which historians have access chiefly through polls and/or the media. Instead, drawing on inspirations from cultural history and Alltagsgeschichte, Gatzka approaches citizens as both objects and actors of interpretation in election campaigns (p. 13) based on a variety of party sources, from accounts of meetings to correspondence with citizens. Gatzka focuses on four cities (the leftist strongholds of Bologna and Hamburg and their Christian Democratic counterparts, Bari and Ulm) as spaces where the boundaries of politics had to be newly negotiated after the distorting experiences of dictatorship and war. While the two democracies thereby faced similar challenges, German parties particularly struggled to recreate their legitimacy and build relationships with citizens after the war, not least because »politics« remained negatively marked by the spectre of dictatorship and was constrained by Allied control of political life. In contrast, political parties in Italy were quicker to find ways to organise local forms of collective solidarity in the void left by the state and hence claim spaces of »politics« (beginning with the piazza) that citizens could appropriate. In both cases, Gatzka adds nuance to common assumptions regarding »post-war democracy«: citizens in both countries were neither passive nor deferential towards politics but distrusted »partisan« divisions. This initial aversion to conflict did not prevent parties from negotiating a respectful but pluralistic competition over time. From the interplay between political change and social »basis processes«, Gatzka concludes that German political parties caught up with changes in society and the media in the 1960s and 1970s by learning from the new social movements and adapting their political communication to the new requirements of the attention economy. At the same time, Italian parties, marked by their earlier successful modes of local mobilisation, had a harder time finding new ways to address citizens. Gatzka’s study thus highlights the importance of local and »face-to-face« dynamics when studying political communication, which echoes studies discussing the performance of »presence« or »proximity« as a (past and contemporary) response to

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recurring complaints about distance between citizens and politicians and the various emotional economies expressed by citizens (e.g. in their letters), but also employed by politicians to «connect» with voters. Gatzka’s study is an important contribution to an emerging field in contemporary political history approaching not only letters but also the media and popular culture as «communicative spaces» in which to study how twentieth-century citizens appropriated politics and political identity. Yet this raises the question of who these expressive «citizens» were in politics and society. A further dimension of reflexivity for this type of study could thus be to question the relative and certainly changing positions of «voters» and «elected» over time, in discourse as well as in practice.

III A Transnational, Interdisciplinary and Non-normative Approach? Questioning the Research Perspective

Three programmatic ambitions are common in recent scholarship: historians of elections and election campaigns call for the adoption of transnational, interdisciplinary and non-normative approaches. Recurrent pleas for transnational approaches have meanwhile given way both to comparative studies and to scholarship analysing elections in supranational spaces, but also the transnational circulation of ideas, representations, norms and technologies around voting – the Australian ballot and the transnational female suffrage movement being two cases in point. In a manner simi-
lar to a recurrent discussion in transnational and global approaches, scholars face the difficulty of integrating global or at least transnational circulations while giving dynamics linked to nation- and state-building their due. The challenge for historians is thus to exploit the heuristic potential of comparison without falling into the generalisation trap of large-scale political science studies, which have faced the critique of an insufficient contextualisation.¹⁰³ By setting out to challenge two national narratives – that of an exceptional US democracy versus an impossible German democratisation – Richter runs the risk of fighting two strawmen that are a reality in public discourse more than in historiography. Because national narratives of democracy remain so present and «political culture», defined too sweepingly, may inadvertently lead to essentialisation¹⁰⁴, comparative settings run the risk of restricting election research to validating or invalidating existing narratives of democratic success versus crisis. This is also a very real challenge for historians as narrators, as comes to mind when reading Gatzka’s conclusions contrasting her two case studies, which leave her little room for the rich nuances of her previous analysis. Gatzka also studied Germany and Italy from a perspective that is comparative rather than connective, arguing convincingly that the two post-fascist democracies did not take much notice of each other at this particular level. The instances Gatzka mentions where they do so are all the more fascinating for offering a glimpse at the way each democracy constructed its own narrative in contrast with a supposedly different «culture». These narratives could be linked to wider narratives of differences in democracy across the continent, particularly between «northern» and «southern» Europe.

As Richter argues, processes of (self-)ascription in the past matter not only as narratives for historians today, but also because declaring oneself or others to be inherently «democratic» (or not) may well impact the scope of possible, conceivable or acceptable reforms and practices (p. 31). Yet her study does not make much of existing contacts and hence cross-cultural perspectives between the United States and Prussia. The proposal of histoire croisée by Bénédicte Zimmermann and Michael Werner may contribute to integrating (self-)ascription processes within and between political communities into the analysis as a reflexive dimension of electoral and, more broadly, political cultures.¹⁰⁵ In this regard, discussions between election and campaign historians and scholars studying narratives of democracy in a transnational perspective might be en-

¹⁰⁴ For an ethnographic critique of the concept, see Romain Bertrand/Jean-Louis Briquet/Peter Pels, Towards a Historical Ethnography of Voting, in: id., Cultures of Voting, pp. 6–7.
Swiss self-representation as an old, consensus-oriented, pre-professionalised democracy has thus served as an argument against the state-funding of parties and campaigns, since this was presented as a "foreign" problem. The importance of democracy narratives holds particularly true when thinking about elections in a global, post-colonial context: if democracy promotion programs lead actors in formerly colonised countries to position themselves according to electoral norms coming from the Global North, historians might also shed light on what (post-)colonial connections do to representations of democracy and elections there. The argument that Western practices of voting have spread throughout the world because of their multiple functions or even that elections were part of "Westernisation" neglects not only about early experiences with voting and electoral innovations in colonies and newly independent nations, but also how the colonial project of expansion via land appropriation implied the long-standing exclusion of most colonial "subjects" from citizenship rights, for which the earlier justifications of suffrage restrictions "at home" (regarding ownership and finances as a sign of independence, or intellectual capacity) were revalued and racialised to oppose demands for equality. Several studies in recent years have looked at suffrage extensions and elections in late colonial contexts and asked about the complex negotiation of political agency. Yet such insights often remain at the "margins" of electoral histories focussing on colonial "centres", as in the case of Le Gall’s book. Just as the impact of colonial practices and representations have been analysed for elections in the Global South, election his-

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tory in the Global North could consider colonial and post-colonial (dis-)continuities in suffrage laws, voting practices and representations.

A common ambition of political historians is to »defamiliarise« (verfremden) the perspective on elections. An opening towards transnational and postcolonial perspectives can certainly help in that regard. But such a process is seldom documented and reflected upon. The »tool box« of histoire croisée invites us to precisely such reflexivity regarding what a transnational perspective does not only to the research object, but to the research perspective as well. This is why Laurent Le Gall’s reflexions on his own electoral experiences and political socialisation are original and promising. Reflecting on one’s own socialisation to electoral participation as a civic duty, for instance, helps denaturalise what might otherwise have remained an unstated assumption in the research process. Le Gall’s introspection builds on the French tradition of ego-histoire but also echoes the reflexive stance common in political anthropology, such as Florence Faucher documenting how her non-native perspective on Britain helped her ask different questions than a native observer when attempting to »exoticise« political rituals such as party conferences.

In doing so, Le Gall aims to give an interdisciplinary perspective on elections, as have many other historians of elections who have drawn inspiration (and counter-models) from other disciplines – not least because the »new« research agenda for political history drew inspiration from anthropology and sociology as well as from media, cultural and gender studies. Reversely, the recent interest of political scientists in studying the history of democratisation (»historical turn«) might open new possibilities for interdisciplinary discussion. But in spite of common research objects, relations with political science remain fraught, not least because spaces for interdisciplinary discussion are scarce, particularly in English- and German-speaking research contexts. Historians and sociologists may be wary of the temptation to look for clear-cut explanations for »democratisation« processes.

This conflicted proximity to political science and political theory in particular is also what leads many political historians to distance themselves from »normative« or »moral« evaluations. But where does normativity end and where does it begin? This posture is seldom elaborated upon and seems particularly complex while dealing with an object that has long been and still is normatively loaded, not least in citizenship education. Political actors and intellectuals have long approached elections and campaigns as a means to educate citizens and later a means to test their democratic values, to assess democratisation in general or even the morale of a whole society. Here, once again, the status of (past and present) political ideas and judgements in election histories is worth clarifying. While political scientists have rightly pointed to the need to integrate tactical considerations into democracy history, for instance by looking at what actors (male elites and suffragists) expected of female suffrage, this does not diminish the importance of ideas as justifications for (past and future) actions and as assumptions shaping practices. Echoing the call of intellectual historians to study ideas beyond the writings in which they are developed and expressed and by anchoring them in their socio-political contexts, election history could also help bridge the gap between »ideas« and »practices«. For instance, election history offers opportunities to study the practical (re-)negotiation, questioning and contestation over time of the gender divide between private and public, from theory to law and practice. This focus on gender does not only mean looking, for instance, at how women achieved forms of participation in spite of their (professed) exclusion from the public sphere, but can help examine how models of male citizenship were negotiated and contested. Studies of plural voting laws also lead the way in asking about the importance of the family (and hence the paterfamilias) as a political unit, whereas political liberalism centred its citizenship ideal on the individual. Just like ideas, practices do not form coherent entities – which means that historians should be wary of absolutising the normative justifications of a given practice or its effects (intended or not) as its function in democracy.

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123 See the recent French discussion, which ties in with the Cambridge school of intellectual history, Chloé Gaboriaux/Arnault Skornicki (eds.), Vers une histoire sociale des idées politiques, Villeneuve-d’Ascq 2017.


126 For a recent critique of this pitfall regarding sortition, see Yves Déloye, D’une matérialité à l’autre. Le tirage au sort au prisme de l’acte électoral, in: Participations, hors-série, 2019, pp. 513–519.
In that sense, it could be interesting to historicise elections precisely as moments of »democratic evaluation«, just as studies on electoral fraud and clientelism do when asking about the contemporaries’ own normative evaluation of these behaviours. Electoral processes, with their uncertainty, mishaps and breaking of taboos or even rules – and sometimes their »miracles« – can provoke strong judgements and emotions over the state of democracy. They do so not only among »authorised« commentators, for which the 2020 US election might serve as an (admittedly extreme) example. These evaluations involve both time and space: they reactivate and may contribute to re-interpreting collective (or group-specific) memories and notions of time and change, e.g. dichotomies distinguishing »modern« from »archaic« practices. They also imply a comparison of one’s own democratic community with others, precisely because of the connection between democracy narratives and collective identities – not only in countries marked by constitutional or civic patriotism. Democracy can thereby serve as a political weapon for actors to legitimise themselves and delegitimise opponents (at home and abroad). Evaluating democracy through elections has also relied on the emergence of various knowledge forms, among which are democracy rankings or the criteria and best-practice handbooks used in election observation. While historians have warned against writing a history of »democratic fulfillment«, there is a need to historicise how democracy and democratisation have progressively served to rank nations in colonial and post-colonial contexts (with similarities to the civilisation principle). This can help to deepen an alternative explanation to the success of elections, beyond their adaptability and various potential functions from a context to another: elections as a performance (and sometimes a facade) of democracy.

IV  What to Do with the Outcome of Elections?

While the »new histories of elections« often define themselves in opposition to a traditional election history centred on election results, the question of what to do with the outcomes of elections is still open to discussion. Both the ambition to look at campaigns as political sequences in their own right independently from election results and to look behind the supposed evidence and transparency of voting practices have certainly brought important insights. But is there not a risk of artificially detaching practices from what they are supposed to produce, namely the channelled expression of political preferences and the selection of representatives? Electoral results (past and future) were and are present in the minds of actors, be they state officials, party leaders, electors, journalists, activists or »ordinary« citizens. Several authors thus rightly warn

against taking stories of success and failure told by actors in retrospect for granted. In this regard, instead of leaving aside electoral results, it seems more useful to historicise the many ways in which actors anticipated, predicted and then interpreted them. This cycle of prediction and interpretation could have effects from an election to the other by pushing actors to search for knowledge and/or forging certain beliefs about, say, the efficiency of a certain mobilisation practice. This would mean not only to study knowledge forms for their own sakes, but also to include a sensibility for (contemporary and retrospective) knowledge production and uncertainty management at the centre of election history. Particularly for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the practises of electoral commentary before and after elections are a fascinating object of study, not only as an emerging field of professional expertise, but also in that it contributes to establishing certain interpretations of voting behaviour and forging collective beliefs and interpretations about a »game« constructed as »uncertain«, central to our democracies and based on free individual choices. Contrary to the assumption of modernisation, the development of various fields of expertise actually builds on a sense of helplessness among parties and candidates – building in recent decades on the supposed »volatility« of voters or the diagnosis of a multifold »crisis«, while political commentators tend to overemphasise the rationality and efficiency of their corrective strategies. The prism of »materiality« and »knowledge« can furthermore also be extended to the collection and transmission of electoral results as well as to objects of electoral analysis and commentaries. Diagrams or electoral maps not only constitute representations and identities, but can also contribute to naturalising common-sense social oppositions into seemingly obvious political divides, for instance between centre and periphery or between cities and countryside.

Integrating a knowledge history perspective – not just at the margins of election history, but right at its centre – might also help to gain distance from actors’ own interpretations. When sources only offer takes on the reactions and intentions of voters through the mediation of others, they are best understood as historically constructed and socially situated perspectives, not as revealing societal trends. If political scien-

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130 Mergel, Propaganda nach Hitler, p. 36; Willemez, Interdisciplinarité ou invention d’une «offre» disciplinaire?. What happens after an electoral defeat can thus also be an object of study, Frédéric Louault/Cédric Pellen (eds.), La défaite électorale. Productions, appropriations, bifurcations, Rennes 2019.

131 See the reflections in Desrumaux/Lefebvre, Pour une sociologie des répertoires d’actions électorales, p. 12; Ihl/Déloye, La sociologie historique du vote, pp. 625f.


tists and anthropologists struggle today to understand voting and non-voting behaviour and in general citizens’ relations to politics, historians should be all the more cautious not to presume what made citizens tick in the past based on electoral statistics, particularly since we know how varied past and present appropriations of voting can be – beginning with the varied social practices of voting. In particular, if historians have heavily debated electoral turnout statistics, they should also be cautious with their interpretations, not least because the evolution of turnout has served to say great many things over time – from the »laxity« (Laxheit) of the masses to their post-war apathy or to today’s »post-democracy«. Beyond these connoted labels, the seemingly neutral concepts of »political interest« and »political competence« can also be historised as scientific constructs with intellectualist and/or androcentric biases, which have long implicitly set the boundaries of »politics« around conventional, legitimate forms of participation, particularly voting, while making invisible other forms of »doing« and »thinking« politics. In other words, if the aim is to denaturalise the place of elections in democratic and political history, interest in elections is the place to start.

Finally, asking about the outcomes of elections could also help to better approach representation as a process. Studying electoral representation does not have to stop at the final result in the form of elected representatives. It can also start by studying the selection of candidates, the constitution of lists and the differentiated promotion of candidates during a campaign – processes that are marked by electoral and party rules, intra- and interparty competition patterns and the unequal distribution of resources between actors (finances, but also political, social and cultural capital). From a potential candidate to the final elected representative, the »sieve« of representation is a complex process which historians often leave to political scientists and, with regard to the representation of women, gender studies. Beyond a mere structural and quantitative approach, studying representation during elections can encompass both the selection of potential representatives and the communication acts that attempt to justify them for the public. While the recent »constructivist« turn of representation theory proposes approaching representation as a (potentially informal) communication process during campaigns and elections, formal representation comes on top of manifold informal »representative claims« (Michael Saward) issued by would-be represen-

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140 Déloye, Pour une sociologie historique de la compétence à opiner »politiquement«; Lehingue, Le vote, pp. 207–232.

tatives. This approach thus echoes with the call by modern and contemporary historians to study representation as a communication process. Looking at potential and selected candidates as well as the winners can thus go hand in hand with the analysis of speeches, posters or meetings through which would-be representatives and parties assert a »representative claim« over specific electorates. Whether endorsed or contested by citizens, representative claims also contribute to framing collective understandings of representation in the short as well as the long run.

This constructivist approach can help historians to go beyond the longstanding presupposition of a pre-existing political demand on the side of social groups or individuals, which remains implicit in many works even outside of class or cleavage approaches. It thereby resonates with studies of the construction of national but also political identities in the wave of the linguistic turn. The British historians Miles Taylor and John Lawrence have thus suggested »devot[ing] more attention to the ways in which political parties have themselves defined and been forced to redefine the social identities and audiences to which they address their politics.« Echoing Saward and building on Bourdieu’s approach to political representation, French historian Michel Offerlé has also pointed out that

»the idea that an electorate is represented by a political group should not be rejected a priori; but representation can only be conceived as the always uncertain and contested outcome of multiple struggles of positioning, designation and stigmatisation. When modern forms of representation were invented, there were no cleavages that were ready to gather up on the one hand and parties willing to do so on the other, to be recognised as having the right to speak out. Divisions and parties, if this adventurous dichotomy is to be maintained, are the result of multiple act of random tinkering by which political entrepreneurs [...] perform as politicians, while producing the groups they bring together.«

In a similar vein, historians can analyse how both political actors (within parties but also in social movements and trade unions) and experts (political scientists and pundits in recent decades), either with the aim of setting and mobilising electoral targets or to make electoral markets more intelligible, contributed to define electoral catego-

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ries, divides and cleavages with which citizens would or would not identify. Instead of merely wondering at the stability or lability of electorates over time, this perspective leads to asking how political entrepreneurs maintained but probably adapted and re-composed their representative claims on their (necessarily changing) electorate(s) over time beyond a too simple rupture between class or milieu parties and catch-all parties.

In line with a social perspective on political ideas, studying the communication acts on representation during campaigns and elections can also reveal the different ideals used to legitimise the choice of representatives and hence the changing principles of democratic representation since the imperative mandate of the revolutionary era. Campaigns may indeed allow for different and potentially contradictory ways to conceive of good representation, both on the side of voters and elected, from liberal ideals of a socially abstract representation based on competency and responsiveness to demands of a descriptive and/or substantial representation for minority groups. Campaign archives thus provide fascinating material to study how different representation ideals are negotiated over time, not least following the recurrent critique and distrust of representation but also the hopes these ideals can produce.

Looking at the diverse, historically changing and potentially contradictory ideals underlying elections should also mitigate a tendency in democracy history to conflate the diffusion of mass elections over time too readily with the progress of equality, just because universal suffrage itself carries a radical (if only formal) equalitarian promise. Instead, elections have also been said to mark an »almost intrinsic inequality between electors and elected«, not only because of the inequality of resources within and outside the political field as well as within the electorate itself, but also because the choice of representatives during elections (in contrast with sortition) has often been framed as a selection of the »best«, as famously shown by Bernard Manin. Historians are thus able to shed light on the changing equilibrium between elitist, particularly epis-tocratic, and equalitarian arguments used over time to promote elections in general and the legitimacy of candidates in particular. In this perspective, representation can be considered as unstable and hence in constant need of stabilisation. Looking at representation as a complex process marked by struggles for legitimacy can help to better understand tensions around representation both past and present – going beyond the mere confirmation or relativisation of a »crisis of representation«.

152 Le Gall, A voté, p. 6.
Asking about the legitimation, but also the contestation of representation in elections leads back to the question of how elections became central to or even equated with democracy in the first place. The effect of centring democracy on elections lies precisely in the absolutisation of representation as the main (or the only possible) democratic mechanism. While many studies have highlighted this progressive sanctification of elections over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries[^154], asking about the recurring affirmation, but also the contestation of this centrality and its consequences the definition of political participation – could be a further step in »denaturalising« elections in the history of democracy.

[^154]: Richter/Buchstein, Einleitung: Eine neue Geschichte der Wahlen, p. 4; Le Gall, A voté, p. 45.