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Moments of Democratic Evaluation?

Literature Review on the History of Elections and Election Campaigns in Western Europe from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century

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«, of which the decline in turnout and party membership are both symptoms.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 duty to vote⁶ or even

¹ The phrase can already be found in a 2000 article by Eduardo Posada-Carbó pleading for a comparative perspective on Latin American elections, *Eduardo Posada-Carbó*, Electoral Juggling. A Comparative History of the Corruption of Suffrage in Latin America, 1830–1930, in: *Journal of Latin American Studies* 32, 2000, pp. 611–644; more recently, see *Hedwig Richter/Hubertus Buchstein*, Einleitung: Eine neue Geschichte der Wahlen, in: *idem* (eds.), *Kultur und Praxis der Wahlen. Eine Geschichte der modernen Demokratie*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 1–27, here: p. 5. My thanks to the editors of the *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, Laurent Godmer, Bernard Voutat, Philipp Müller and my colleagues at the German Historical Institute of Paris and particularly Jürgen Finger for their thoughtful comments on this text. This review continues a research project financed by the Swiss National Foundation, *Political Parties and Election Campaigns in Post-war Switzerland*, directed by Damir Skenderovic and Oscar Mazzoleni, URL: <<http://p3.snf.ch/Project-137811>> [15.11.2020].

² *Thomas Kühne*, Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung, in: *Simone Lässig/Karl Heinrich Pohl/James Retallack* (eds.), *Modernisierung und Region im wilhelminischen Deutschland. Wahlen, Wahlrecht und Politische Kultur*, Bielefeld 1995, pp. 39–68; *Alain Garrigou*, Review: Laurent Le Gall, *A voté. Une histoire de l'élection*, Paris/Anamosa 2017, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 65, 2018, no. 4, pp. 195–197.

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).

⁴ *Jan-Werner Müller*, *What Is Populism?*, Philadelphia 2016; *Hanspeter Kriesi*, Is There a Crisis of Democracy in Europe?, in: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 61, 2020, pp. 237–260.

⁵ *Anthoula Malkopoulou*, Does Voting Matter? The Devaluation of Elections in Contemporary Democratic Theory, in: *Kari Palonen/Tapani Turkka/José María Rosales* (eds.), *The Politics of Dissensus. Parliament in Debate*, Santander 2014, pp. 81–99; *Winfried Thaa*, Issues and Images – New Sources of Inequality in Current Representative Democracy, in: *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 19, 2016, pp.

the necessity of compulsory voting⁷, others have criticised the multiple biases of elections and advocated in favour of epistocratic institutions⁸ or of radically different forms of participation and decision-making, such as sortition, or participatory and/or deliberative democracy.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.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«¹¹ elections and election campaigns from the nineteenth century to the present, prolonging the major research done on elections before representative democracy and mass suffrage¹², on the long and uncertain road to universal suffrage¹³ as well as on

357–375; *John Keane*, Eine kurze Geschichte über die Zukunft von Wahlen, in: *Aurel Croissant/Sascha Kneip/Alexander Petring* (eds.), *Demokratie, Diktatur, Gerechtigkeit: Festschrift für Wolfgang Merkel*, Wiesbaden 2017, pp. 53–73; *Adam Przeworski*, *Why Bother With Elections?*, Cambridge/Medford 2018.

⁶ *Jason Brennan*, *The Ethics of Voting*, Princeton 2011; *Ben Saunders*, A Further Defence of the Right not to Vote, in: *Res Publica* 24, 2018, pp. 93–108; *Julia Maskivker*, *The Duty to Vote*, Oxford/New York 2019.

⁷ *Anthoula Malkopoulou*, *The History of Compulsory Voting in Europe. Democracy's Duty?*, New York/London 2014; *Viola Neu*, Gegen eine Wahlpflicht, in: *APuZ* 67, 2017, no. 38-39, pp. 29–32; *Michael Kaeding*, Für eine Wahlpflicht, in: *ibid.*, pp. 25–28.

⁸ *Jason Brennan*, *Against Democracy*, Princeton 2016.

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

¹⁰ The French »yellow vests« (*gilets jaunes*) are an excellent example. For an overview on this question, see *Doug McAdam/Sidney G. Tarrow*, *Social Movements and Elections. Toward a Broader Understanding of the Political Context of Contention*, in: *Jacquelin van Stekelenburg/Conny Roggeband/Bert Klandermands* (eds.), *The Future of Social Movement Research. Dynamics, Mechanisms, and Processes*, Minneapolis 2013, pp. 325–346; *Swen Hutter/Hanspeter Kriesi/Jasmine Lorenzini*, *Social Movements in Interaction with Political Parties*, in: *David A. Snow/Sarah A. Soule/Hanspeter Kriesi et al.* (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Hoboken 2018, pp. 322–337.

¹¹ As suggested in particular by *Patrick Lehingue*, *Le vote. Approches sociologiques de l'institution et des comportements électoraux*, Paris 2011, p. 35; *Christophe Le Digol/Virginie Hollard/Christophe Voilliot et al.*, Introduction. Regards croisés sur le vote et les élections, in: *idem* (eds.), *Histoires d'élections : représentations et usages du vote de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Paris 2018, pp. 7–18.

¹² *Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger*, *Vormoderne politische Verfahren*, Berlin 2001; *Olivier Christin*, *Vox populi. Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel*, Paris 2014; *Le Digol/Hollard/Voilliot et al.* (eds.), *Histoires d'élections*.

¹³ In particular *Pierre Rosanvallon*, *Le sacre du citoyen : histoire du suffrage universel en France*, Paris 1994; *Alexander Keyssar*, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, New York 2009; *Detlef Lehnert* (ed.), *Wahl- und Stimmrechtskonflikte in Europa: Ursprünge – Neugestaltungen – Problemfelder*, Berlin 2018; *Hedwig Richter/Kerstin Wolff*, *Frauenwahlrecht: Demokratisierung der Demokratie in Deutschland und Europa*, Hamburg 2018.

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 on-going debates and open new perspectives for research, particularly beyond disciplinary and linguistic borders.

I 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 reduced 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.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,

¹⁴ Hubertus Buchstein, *Demokratie und Lotterie. Das Los als politisches Entscheidungsinstrument von der Antike bis zur EU*, Frankfurt am Main 2009; Yves Sintomer, *Petite histoire de l'expérimentation démocratique. Tirage au sort et politique d'Athènes à nos jours*, Paris 2014.

¹⁵ A similar observation is made by Kerstin Brückweh/Martina Steber, *Aufregende Zeiten. Ein Forschungsbericht zu Neuansätzen der britischen Zeitgeschichte des Politischen*, in: *AfS* 50, 2010, pp. 671–701.

¹⁶ Jacques Gerstlé, *Sociologie de la campagne électorale*, in: Dominique Reynié/Pascal Perrineau (eds.), *Dictionnaire du vote*, Paris 2001, pp. 133–138. On the ambiguous legacy of André Siegfried's work in that regard, see Alain Garrigou, *L'initiation d'un initiateur: André Siegfried*, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 106, 1995, pp. 27–41, here: p. 39–41.

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 practice¹⁷, 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.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.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.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 results²¹, which questioned the impact of election campaigns on electoral results anew.²² 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.²³ Since then, media studies have focused on election campaigns as an opportunity for studying the importance of agenda-setting and news framing²⁴ as well as for questioning the »mediatisation of politics« in

¹⁷ Paul Felix Lazarsfeld/Bernard Berelson/Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice. How the Voter Makes up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, New York 1944; see for a reappraisal Robert R. Huckfeldt, *Politics in Context: Assimilation and Conflict in Urban Neighborhoods*, New York 1984; Céline Braconnier, *Une autre sociologie du vote. Les électeurs dans leurs contextes: bilan critique et perspectives*, Cergy-Pontoise 2010, p. 79–84.

¹⁸ Angus Campbell/Philip E. Converse/Warren E. Miller, et al., *The American Voter*, New York 1960.

¹⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset/Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments. Cross-National Perspectives*, Toronto 1967; Stefano Bartolini; Peter Mair: *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilization of European Electorates 1885-1985*, Colchester 2007².

²⁰ See in particular for the British Nuffield Studies, Dennis Kavanagh, *On Writing Contemporary Electoral History*, in: *Electoral Studies* 1 (1), 1982, pp. 117–126; for a critical appraisal of earlier German studies, Thomas Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Wahlkampfes in der Bundesrepublik 1949–1990*, Göttingen 2010, p. 34; for France, Odile Gaultier-Voituriez: *Archelec, les archives électorales de la Ve République, du papier au numérique*, in: *Histoire@Politique* (30), 2016, pp. 213–220.

²¹ Norman H. Nie/Sidney Verba/John Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter*, Cambridge 1976; Russell J. Dalton/Scott C. Flanagan/Paul Allen Beck (eds.), *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies. Realignment or Dealignment?*, Princeton 1984. For a retrospective critique of these studies Lehingue, *Le vote*, pp. 175–182 and 234–263.

²² On this debate in political science, David M. Farrell/Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, *Do Political Campaigns Matter? Campaign Effects in Elections and Referendums*, London 2002.

²³ For this discussion in Germany, see Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler*, 2010, p. 34f.

²⁴ Roger W. Cobb/Charles D. Elder, *The Politics of Agenda-Building. An Alternative Perspective for Modern Democratic Theory*, in: *The Journal of Politics* 33, 1971, pp. 892–915; Maxwell E. McCombs/Donald L. Shaw, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, 1972, pp. 176–187; William A. Gamson/Andre Modigliani, *Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power. A Constructionist Approach*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 95, 1989, pp. 1–37.

general.²⁵ While some studies have turned to the reception of media campaigns by citizens²⁶, 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ Precisely because of its (overwhelmingly negative) uses in public debate and its difficult operationalisation, the concept has encountered heavy criticism.²⁹ 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.³⁰ Scholars have suggested speaking of campaign *modernisation* as a less pejorative (but still delicate) alternative to Americanisation. Building on communication history³¹, 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.³² While Farrell and Webb presented their models as mere »heuristic devices«³³, they unavoidably separated the perspective on mass election campaigns from other forms of mobilisation and took established representative democracies as the standard for global

²⁵ *Gianpietro Mazzoleni/Winfried Schulz*, »Mediatization« of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?, in: *Political Communication* 16, 1999, pp. 247–261; for a critique *Clément Desrumaux/Jérémie Nollet*, Présentation. Quelques apports, limites et dépassements des théories de la »mediatization« du politique, in: *Réseaux* 187, 2014, no. 5, pp. 9–21.

²⁶ For a critical overview see *Philippe Riutort*, *Sociologie de la communication politique*, Paris 2020, pp. 44–50.

²⁷ On this critique *Mergel*, *Propaganda nach Hitler*, 2010, p. 35; *Rens Vliegthart/Liesbet van Zoonen*, Power to the Frame. Bringing Sociology Back to Frame Analysis, in: *European Journal of Communication* 26, 2011, pp. 101–115.

²⁸ *Klaus Kamps* (ed.), *Trans-Atlantik, Trans-Portabel? Die Amerikanisierungsthese in der politischen Kommunikation*, Wiesbaden 2000; *Fabrice d’Almeida*, L’américanisation de la propagande en Europe de l’Ouest (1945–2003), in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 80, 2003, no. 4, pp. 5–14.

²⁹ *Ralph Negrine/Stylianos Papathanassopoulos*, The »Americanization« of Political Communication. A Critique, in: *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 1, 1996, no. 2, pp. 45–62; *Thomas Mergel*, Americanization, European Styles or National Codes? The Culture of Election Campaigning in Western Europe, 1945–1990, in: *East Central Europe* 36, 2009, pp. 254–280.

³⁰ *David L. Swanson/Paolo Mancini*, *Politics, Media, and Modern Democracy. An International Study of Innovations in Electoral Campaigning and Their Consequences*, Westport/London 1996; *Fritz Plasser*, *Global Political Campaigning. A Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and their Practices*, Westport 2002; *Frank Esser/Barbara Pfetsch*, *Comparing Political Communication. Theories, Cases, and Challenges*, Cambridge 2004; *Gerald Sussmann*: *Global Electioneering: Campaign Consulting, Communications, and Corporate Financing*, Oxford 2005.

³¹ *Jay G. Blumler/Dennis Kavanagh*, The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features, in: *Political Communication* 16, 1999, pp. 209–230.

³² *Pippa Norris*, *A Virtuous Circle. Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*, Cambridge 2000; *David Farrell/Paul Webb*, Political Parties as Campaign Organisations, in: *Russell J. Dalton/Martin P. Wattenberg* (eds.), *Parties Without Partisans. Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford 2002, pp. 102–125.

³³ *Farrell/Webb*, *Political Parties as Campaign Organisations*, p. 106.

evolutions.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

Furthermore, social scientists interested in the symbolic dimensions of politics have suggested looking at campaigns as political rituals, not so much to highlight their superficiality⁴⁰, but rather in order to analyse how they allow the staging of representative democracy and hence contribute to its legitimising.⁴¹ 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.⁴² Yet they also paid attention to »informal« forms of politics beyond elections⁴³. Long

³⁴ For a critique, see *Desrumaux/Lefebvre*, *Pour une sociologie des répertoires d'actions électorales*, p. 8f.

³⁵ *Farrell/Webb*, *Political Parties as Campaign Organisations*, p. 103, notes 1 and 3.

³⁶ Farrell and Webb link their second and third phases to the advent of catch-all parties (Otto Kirchheimer) or cartel parties (Richard Katz/Peter Mair), *Otto Kirchheimer*, *Der Wandel des westeuropäischen Parteiensystems*, in: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 6, 1965, pp. 20–41; *Richard S. Katz/Peter Mair*, *Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy. The Emergence of the Cartel Party*, in: *Party Politics* 1, 1995, pp. 5–28.

³⁷ *Russell J. Dalton/David M. Farrell/Ian McAllister*, *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage. How Parties Organize Democracy*, Oxford 2011; *Hanspeter Kriesi/Laurent Bernhard/Regula Hänggli*, *The Politics of Campaigning – Dimensions of Strategic Action*, in: *Frank Marcinkowski/Barbara Pfetsch* (eds.), *Politik in der Mediendemokratie*, Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 345–365.

³⁸ *Desrumaux/Lefebvre*, *Pour une sociologie des répertoires d'actions électorales*, p. 10.

³⁹ *Jean-Baptiste Legavre*, *D'un groupe à l'autre. Le passage de l'expertise en communication à la pratique politique professionnelle*, in: *Politix* 35, 1996, no. 3, p. 131–148; *Ralph Negrine/Christina Holtz-Bacha/Paolo Mancini* et al. (eds.), *The Professionalisation of Political Communication*, Chicago 2007; Jérôme Pozzi (ed), *De l'attachée de presse au conseiller en communication: Pour une histoire des spin doctors*, Rennes 2019.

⁴⁰ In the tradition of *Murray Jacob Edelman*, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Urbana/Chicago 1985.

⁴¹ *Ulrich Sarcinelli*, *Symbolische Politik. Zur Bedeutung symbolischen Handelns in der Wahlkampfkommunikation der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Opladen 1987; *Andreas Dörner/Ludgera Vogt* (ed.), *Wahl-Kämpfe : Betrachtungen über ein demokratisches Ritual*, Frankfurt 2002.

⁴² *Marc Abélès*, *Rituels de campagne. L'élection municipale de 1989 à Auxerre*, in: *Mots* 25, 1990, pp. 43–63; *Richard F. Fenno*, *Senators on the Campaign Trail: The Politics of Representation*, Norman 1998; *Yves Pourcher*, *Votez tous pour moi! Les campagnes électorales de Jacques Blanc en Languedoc-Roussillon, (1986–2004)*, Paris 2004; *Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi/Myriam Catusse/Jean-Claude Santucci* (eds.), *Scènes et coulisses de l'élection au Maroc. Les législatives de 2002*, Aix-en-Provence 2013; *Layla Baamara/Camille Floderer/Marine Poirier* (eds.), *Faire campagne, ici et ailleurs : mobilisations électorales et pratiques politiques ordinaires*, Paris 2016.

overlooked as »second-order«, subnational election campaigns provide fascinating case studies for analysing »electoral repertoires of contention«⁴⁴ and low-scale negotiations within political parties about candidates and platforms, but also daily interactions about politics.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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

⁴³ *Jean-François Bayart*, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire. Questions de méthode*, in: *Politique africaine*, 1981, pp. 53–82; *Jean-François Bayart/Joseph-Achille Mbembe/Comi M. Toulabor*, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, Paris 2008; *Laurent Le Gall* (ed.), *La politique sans en avoir l’air. Aspects de la politique informelle, XIXe–XXIe siècle*, Rennes 2012.

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*.

⁴⁵ *Jacques Lagroye/Patrick Lehingue/Frédéric Sawicki* (eds.), *Mobilisations électorales. Le cas des élections municipales de 2001*, Paris 2005; *Eric Agrikoliansky/Jérôme Heurtaux/Brigitte Le Grignou* (eds.), *Paris en campagne. Les élections municipales de mars 2008 dans deux arrondissements parisiens*, Paris 2011; *François Dubasque/Éric Kocher-Marboeuf/Yves Jean* et al. (eds.): *Terres d’élections. Les dynamiques de l’ancrage politique, 1750-2009*, Rennes 2014; *Sandrine Lévêque/Anne-France Taiclet* (eds.), *À la conquête des villes. Sociologie politique des élections municipales de 2014*, Villeneuve d’Ascq 2018; *Laurent Godmer*, *Le travail électoral. Faire campagne à Paris*, unpublished professorial thesis, Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2020.

⁴⁶ For some of the different approaches, see *Nina Eliasoph*, *Avoiding Politics. How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, Cambridge 1998; *Alan S. Zuckerman* (ed.), *The Social Logic of Politics. Personal Networks as Contexts for Political Behavior*, Philadelphia 2005; R. Robert Huckfeldt/John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics and Social Communication. Information and Influence in an Election Campaign*, Cambridge 2006; in France: *Braconnier*, *Une autre sociologie du vote*; *Eric Agrikoliansky*, *Les sens du vote. Une enquête sociologique (France, 2011–2014)*, Rennes 2016; *Olivier Fillieule/Florence Haegel/Camille Hamidi* et al. (eds.), *Sociologie plurielle des comportements politiques*, Paris 2017.

⁴⁷ *Olivier Ihl*; *Yves Déloye*: *La sociologie historique du vote*, in: *Yves Déloye/Nonna Mayer* (eds.): *Analyses électorales*, Bruxelles 2017, pp. 597–645; For a critique and a convincing research agenda on African elections, see *Sandrine Perrot/Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle/Justin Willis*, *La fabrique du vote. Placer la matérialité au cœur de l’analyse*, in: *Politique africaine* 144, 2016, no. 4, pp. 5–26; *Nic Cheeseman/Gabrielle Lynch/Justin Willis*, *The Moral Economy of Elections in Africa. Democracy, Voting and Virtue*, Cambridge 2021.

⁴⁸ *Ralf Lindner/Georg Aichholzer/Leonhard Hennen* (eds.): *Electronic Democracy in Europe. Prospects and Challenges of E-Publics, E-Participation and E-Voting*, Cham 2016.

⁴⁹ *Anthoula Malkopoulou*, *The History of Compulsory Voting in Europe: Democracy’s Duty?*, New York; London 2014.

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.⁵² With their discussion of »popular politics«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.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.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«.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«.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ M. Rainer Lepsius, *Parteiensystem und Sozialstruktur. Zum Problem der Demokratisierung der deutschen Gesellschaft*, in: Friedrich Lütge, (ed.), *Wirtschaft, Geschichte und Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Festschrift zum 65. Geburtstag von Friedrich Lütge*, Stuttgart 1966, pp. 371–393; see Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler*, p. 32.

⁵¹ For recent historiographical overviews, Joanne B. Freeman, *Political History and the Tool of Culture*, in: Halttunen, Karen (ed.): *A Companion to American Cultural History*, Malden, Mass. 2008, pp. 416–424; Kerstin Brückweh/Martina Steber, *Aufregende Zeiten. Ein Forschungsbericht zu Neuansätzen der britischen Zeitgeschichte des Politischen*, in: *AfS* 50, 2010, pp. 671–701.

⁵² Frank O’Gorman, *Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies. The Social Meaning of Elections in England 1780–1860*, in: *Past & Present*, 1992, no. 135, pp. 79–115; James Vernon, *Politics and the People. A Study in English Political Culture, c. 1815–1867*, Cambridge/New York etc. 1993.

⁵³ On this concept, Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, 1998; for a reinterpretation from the subaltern studies, Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, New York 2004.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of these changes, Susan Pedersen, *What is Political History Now?*, in: David Cannadine (ed.), *What is history now?*, New York 2002, pp. 36–56.

⁵⁵ Frank O’Gorman, *Electoral Deference in «Unreformed» England: 1760-1832*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 56, 1984, no. 3, pp. 392–429.

⁵⁶ Thomas Kühne, *Elections*, in: Matthew Jefferies (ed.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Imperial Germany*, Surrey/Burlington 2016, pp. 77–90, p. 78. German historians thereby often refer to Karl Rohe’s broadening of the concept towards symbols and interpretations, Karl Rohe, *Politische Kultur und ihre Analyse*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift*, 1990, no. 250, pp. 321–346. For new perspectives on this discussion, Wolfgang Bergem/Paula Diehl/Hans J. Lietzmann (ed.): *Politische Kulturforschung reloaded: neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, Bielefeld 2019.

⁵⁷ Kühne, *Elections*, p. 78.

Countering the *Sonderweg* narrative, which diagnosed a dysfunctional gap between economic and social modernisation and political authoritarianism⁵⁸, 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.⁵⁹ Historians focusing on the regional level, however, discussed Prussia's conservative weight in the Reich and the impact of the differentiated suffrage systems, which offered leeway for a backlash against universal suffrage.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).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.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.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.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Thomas Kühne, *Wahlrecht – Wahlverhalten – Wahlkultur. Tradition und Innovation in der historischen Wahlforschung*, in: AfS 33, 1993, pp. 481–547; For a recent critique, Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *A Deficit of Democracy? The German Kaiserreich in Comparative Perspective*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44, 2018, pp. 367–398.

⁵⁹ In particular Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany*, Princeton 2000; Arsenschek, Robert: *Der Kampf um die Wahlfreiheit im Kaiserreich: Zur parlamentarischen Wahlprüfung und politischen Realität der Reichstagswahlen 1871–1914*, Düsseldorf 2003.

⁶⁰ Thomas Kühne, *Dreiklassenwahlrecht und Wahlkultur in Preussen 1867–1914. Landtagswahlen zwischen korporativer Tradition und politischem Massenmarkt*, Düsseldorf 1994; Lässig/Pohl/Retallack, *Modernisierung und Region im wilhelminischen Deutschland*; Andreas Gawatz, *Wahlkämpfe in Württemberg. Landtags- und Reichstagswahlen beim Übergang zum politischen Massenmarkt*, Düsseldorf 2001.

⁶¹ Thomas Mergel, *Überlegungen zu einer Kulturgeschichte der Politik*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28, 2002, pp. 574–606, p. 605; Achim Landwehr, *Diskurs – Macht – Wissen. Perspektiven einer Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*, in: *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 85, 2003, no. 1, pp. 71–117; Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger (ed.), *Was heißt Kulturgeschichte des Politischen*, Berlin 2005; Frank Bösch/Norman Domeier, *Cultural History of Politics: Concepts and Debates*, in: *European Review of History* 15, 2008, no. 6, pp. 577–586; Willibald Steinmetz/Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey/Heinz-Gerhard Haupt et al., *Writing Political History Today*, Frankfurt am Main 2013.

⁶² Mergel, *Propaganda nach Hitler*, p. 11.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lutz Raphael, *Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen als methodische und konzeptionelle Herausforderung für eine Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22, 1996, no. 2, pp. 165–193; Frank Bösch, *Werbefirmen, Meinungsforscher, Professoren. Die Professionalisierung der Politikberatung im Wahlkampf (1949–1972)*, in: Stefan Fisch/Wilfried Rudloff (eds.), *Experten und Politik. Wissenschaftliche Politikberatung in geschichtlicher Perspektive*, Berlin 2004, pp. 309–328; Anja Kruke, *Demoskopie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Meinungsforschung, Parteien und Medien, 1949–1990*, Düsseldorf 2007; Wim De

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 internationally⁶⁵, 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.⁶⁶ And the historiographical debate on French elections 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.⁶⁷ 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 Revolution⁶⁸ or the Third Republic⁶⁹) and those revisiting periods usually left out of republican narratives (particularly the restoration).⁷⁰ 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).⁷¹ 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.⁷² Moving beyond the continuing debate over periodisation⁷³, 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

Jong/Harm Kaal, Mapping the Demos. The Scientisation of the Political, Electoral Research and Dutch Political Parties, c. 1900–1980, in: *Contemporary European History* 26, 2017, pp. 111–138.

⁶⁵ *Pierre Rosanvallon*, *Le sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France*, Paris 1994.

⁶⁶ *Michel Offerlé*, *Le vote comme évidence et comme énigme*, in: *Genèses* 12, 1993, pp. 131–151, pp. 148f.

⁶⁷ *Maurice Agulhon*, *La République au village. Les populations du Var de la Révolution à la IIe République*, Paris 1970; see also his retrospective on this work and its reception two decades later, *Maurice Agulhon, 1848, le suffrage universel et la politisation des campagnes*, in: *Histoire vagabonde*, vol. 3: *La politique en France, d'hier à aujourd'hui*, Paris 1996, pp. 61–82.

⁶⁸ For instance *Michel Vovelle*, *La Découverte de la politique*, Paris 1992; *Malcom Crook*, *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789-1799*, Cambridge 1996.

⁶⁹ Most prominently (and controversially), *Eugen Weber*, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, Stanford 1976.

⁷⁰ *Christine Guionnet*, *L'apprentissage de la politique moderne: Les élections municipales sous la monarchie de Juillet*, Paris 1997.

⁷¹ *Déloye/Ihl*, *La sociologie historique du vote*; see also *Cédric Passard*, *Politisisation*, in: *Publictionnaire*, 18.9.2019, URL: <[http://publictionnaire.huma-num.fr/notice/politisation/](http://publictionnaire.huma-num.fr/notice/politisisation/)>, [23.7.2020].

⁷² *Michel Offerlé*, *Mobilisations électorales et invention du citoyen. L'exemple du milieu urbain français à la fin du XIXè siècle*, in: *Daniel Gaxie* (ed.), *Explication du vote. Un bilan des études électorales en France*, Paris 1989, pp. 149–174; *Peter McPhee*, *The Politics of Rural Life. Political Mobilization in the French Countryside 1846–1852*, Oxford 1992; *Gilles Pécout*, *La politisation des paysans au XIX siècle. Réflexions sur l'histoire politique des campagnes françaises*, in: *Histoire & sociétés rurales*, 1994, no. 2, pp. 91–126; *Laurent Le Gall*, *Des processus de politisation dans les campagnes françaises (1830–1914). Esquisse pour un état des lieux*, in: *Jean-Claude Caron/Frédéric Chauvaud* (eds.), *Les campagnes dans les sociétés européennes*, Rennes 2015, pp. 104–139.

⁷³ *Emmanuel Fureix/François Jarrige*, *La modernité désenchantée. Relire l'histoire du XIXe siècle français*, Paris 2015, pp. 231–280; *Michel Offerlé*, *Capacités politiques et politisations. Faire voter et voter, XIXe–XXe siècles* (2), in: *Genèses* 68, 2007, no. 3, pp. 145–160.

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.⁷⁴ Instead of focusing on traditional republican actors (elected officials, political parties, civil servants, 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.⁷⁵

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«. ⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ This went hand 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).⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ Key to this analysis is indeed the progressive autonomisation of a political field separating »professionals« from

⁷⁴ Offerlé, *Capacités politiques et politisations*, p. 157; Jean Vigreux, *Les campagnes françaises et la politique (1830-1914)*, in: *Parlement[s], Revue d'histoire politique* 5, 2006, no. 1, pp. 54–72.

⁷⁵ 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.

⁷⁶ Michel Offerlé, *Socio-histoire*, in: *Pascal Perrineau/Dominique Reynié (eds.), Dictionnaire du vote*, Paris 2001, pp. 850–856.

⁷⁷ Alain Garrigou, *Le vote et la vertu. Comment les Français sont devenus électeurs*, Paris 1992; Alain Garrigou, *La construction sociale du vote. Fétichisme et raison instrumentale*, in: *Politix* 6, 1993, no. 22, pp. 5–42; Offerlé, *Le vote comme évidence et comme énigme*.

⁷⁸ Yves Déloye/Olivier Ihl, *Légitimité et déviance. L'annulation des votes dans les campagnes de la IIIe République*, in: *Politix* 4, 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 Dompnier, *La clef des urnes. La construction socio-historique de la déviance électorale en France depuis 1848*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Pierre Mendès France, Grenoble, France 2002.

⁷⁹ Daniel Gaxie: *Introduction. Le vote comme disposition et comme transaction*, in: *idem (ed.): Explication du vote. Un bilan des études électorales en France*, Paris 1989, pp. 11–34.

»laypersons« and operating with its own logic and forms of knowledge.⁸⁰ 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 competent (or not).⁸¹ 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.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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).⁸⁴ 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

⁸⁰ Michel Offerlé/Paul Bacot (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 métissage politico-scientifique*, in: *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 19, 2012, 3, pp. 37–66.

⁸¹ Daniel Gaxie, *Le cens caché: inégalités culturelles et ségrégation politique*, Paris 1978.

⁸² François Buton/Patrick Lehingue/Nicolas Mariot, et al. (eds.), *L'ordinaire du politique. Enquêtes sur les rapports profanes au politique*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2016.

⁸³ See Patrick Lehingue's enlightening discussion of the manifest versus the latent function of elections, *Lehingue*, *Le vote*, pp. 77–88.

⁸⁴ James N. Retallack, *Red Saxony. Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918*, Oxford 2017.

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-west (p. 13).⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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

⁸⁵ See Kühne, *Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung*.

⁸⁶ Anderson, *Practicing Democracy*.

⁸⁷ Ralph Jessen/Hedwig Richter (eds.), *Voting for Hitler and Stalin. Elections Under 20th Century Dictatorships*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2011; *Daniel Siemens: Gegen den »gesinnungsschwachen Stimmzettelträger«: Emotion und Praxis im Wahlkampf der späten Weimarer Republik*, in: Richter/Buchstein (eds.): *Kultur und Praxis der Wahlen*, pp. 215–236.

democracy« past and present.⁸⁸ Asking about the transatlantic 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. Richter accordingly examines the struggle of Afro-Americans for suffrage and the beginning of the suffragist movement, which contested the restriction, reaffirmed at each election, of citizenship to white men (p. 227). 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«⁸⁹, 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.⁹⁰ 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 certainly brings conflictuality (including within

⁸⁸ *Hedwig Richter*, *Moderne Wahlen. Eine Geschichte der Demokratie in Preußen und den USA im 19. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg 2017; *Marcus Gräser*, Review of: Richter, *Moderne Wahlen*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 2019, no. 308, pp. 520–522; *Thomas Mergel*, Review of: Richter, *Moderne Wahlen*, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 64, 2019, pp. 585–589; *Hartwin Spenkuch*, Review of: Richter, *Moderne Wahlen*, in: *sehepunkte* 18, 2018, no. 5, URL: <<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2018/05/31290.html>> [25.11.2020]; *Hartwin Spenkuch*, Review of: Retallack, *Red Saxony*, in: *German Studies Review* 42, 2019, pp. 387–389; *Andrew G. Bonnell*, Review of: Retallack, *Red Saxony*, in: *European History Quarterly* 48, 2018, pp. 382–384. Debates which have recently been continued by Richter's new book on democracy as a »German affair«, *Hedwig Richter*, *Demokratie. Eine deutsche Affäre. Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, München 2020.

⁸⁹ *Richter*, *Moderne Wahlen*, p. 91.

⁹⁰ On the need to study elections together with other forms of expression and participation, see *Kühne*, *Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung*, p. 53. For a discussion of the democratization concept from minimalist to maximalist interpretations, *Charles Tilly*, *Democracy*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 12–14; *Jean Grugel/Matthew Louis Bishop*, *Democratization: A Critical Introduction*, 2013, pp. 5–11.

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«⁹¹, leaves us wondering about the place and the potential (open or hidden) resistance of »ordinary« citizens in these mass elections. If elites were the ones pulling the strings – though probably neither with full control of events nor in perfect harmony, to what extent were voters (irrespective of their social position) ready to be disciplined?

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.⁹² 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.⁹³ 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 twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁹⁴ Le Gall is interested in the many and potential contradictory ways in which the vote as an »individualized act under social constraint« (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.⁹⁶ 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 concept 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

⁹¹ *Garrigou*, *Le vote et la vertu*, p. 277.

⁹² *Déloye*, *Pour une sociologie historique de la compétence à opiner »politiquement«*; *Laurent Willemez*, *Interdisciplinarité ou invention d’une »offre« disciplinaire? Sociologie, histoire et science politique au risque du croisement disciplinaire*, *Carnet Zilsel*, 7.11.2015, URL: <<http://zilsel.hypotheses.org/2267>> [25.11.2020].

⁹³ *Laurent Le Gall*, *L’électeur en campagnes dans le Finistère. Une seconde république des Bas-Bretons*, Paris 2009.

⁹⁴ *Laurent Le Gall*, *A voté: une histoire de l’élection*, Paris 2017.

⁹⁶ *Simon Luck*, *Appropriation et transgression d’une norme institutionnelle. Le cas de l’abstentionnisme électoral à la Fédération anarchiste*, in: *Politix*, 2010, no. 92, pp. 145–164.

approaching the »electoral journey« (p. 20) of »ordinary citizens« over time, just as it helps to analyse the mobilisation pathways of activists.⁹⁷

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 recurring complaints about distance between citizens and politicians⁹⁸ and the various emotional economies expressed by citizens (e.g. in their letters), but also

⁹⁷ A rare attempt at oral history about female suffrage is *Bruno Denoyelle*, *Des Corps en élections. Au rebours des universaux de la citoyenneté : les premiers votes des femmes (1945-1946)*, in: *Genèses* 31, 1998, no. 1, pp. 76–98.

⁹⁸ *Christian Le Bart/Rémi Lefebvre* (eds.): *La proximité en politique : usages, rhétoriques, pratiques*, Rennes 2005; Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters. The Hustings in British Politics From Hogarth to Blair*, Oxford 2009, pp. 154–155; *Pierre Rosanvallon*, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity*, Princeton 2011, pp. 169-218.

employed by politicians to »connect« with voters.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ Yet this raises the question of who these expressive »citizens« were in politics and society. A 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 approaches¹⁰¹ have meanwhile given way both to comparative studies¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ In a manner similar 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.¹⁰⁴ By setting out to challenge two national narratives – that of an exceptional US democracy versus an impossible

⁹⁹ *Martin Francis*, *Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963*, in: *The Journal of British Studies* 41, 2002, pp. 354–387; *Harm Kaal*, *Popular Politicians: The Interaction Between Politics and Popular Culture in the Netherlands, 1950s–1980s*, in: *Cultural and Social History* 15, 2018, no. 4, pp. 595–616.

¹⁰⁰ See also *Bernhard Gotto*, *Enttäuschung in der Demokratie: Erfahrung und Deutung von politischem Engagement in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland während der 1970er und 1980er Jahre*, Berlin 2018; *Harm Kaal/Vincent van de Griend*, *Postwar Popular Politics: Integrating the Voice of the People in Postwar Political History*, in: *Harm Kaal/Danielle Sloopjes* (eds.): *New Perspectives on Power and Political Representation from Ancient History to the Present Day*, Leiden; Boston 2019, pp. 124–143.

¹⁰¹ *Offerlé*, *Le vote comme évidence et comme énigme*, p. 144; *Posada-Carbó*, *Electoral Juggling*; *Claudia Christiane Gatzka/Hedwig Richter/Benjamin Schröder* (eds.), *Wahlen in der transatlantischen Moderne, Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 23, 2013, no. 1.

¹⁰² *Anderson*, *Practicing Democracy*; *Eduardo Posada-Carbó* (ed.), *Elections before Democracy. The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America*, London/New York 1996.

¹⁰³ *Romain Bertrand/Jean-Louis Briquet/Peter Pels*, *Cultures of Voting: The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot*, London/Paris 2007; *Malcolm Crook/Tom Crook*, *The Voting Booth as a Universal Construct: The Globalization of the Secret Ballot in the 19th Century*, in: *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 43, 2011, no. 2, pp. 41–45; *Malcolm Crook/John Dunne*, *The first European Elections? Voting and state-building under Napoleon, 1802–1813*, in: *The Historical Journal* 57, 2014, pp. 661–697; *Malcolm Crook*, *L'avènement du suffrage féminin dans une perspective globale (1890–1914)*, in: *Landry Charrier* (ed.), *Circulations et réseaux transnationaux en Europe (XVIIIe–XXe siècles). Acteurs, pratiques, modèles*, Bern 2013, pp. 57–68.

¹⁰⁴ *Ulrich Sarcinelli*, *Politische Kommunikation in Deutschland. Zur Politikvermittlung im demokratischen System*, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 405.

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 essentialisation¹⁰⁵, 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 acknowledges, 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.¹⁰⁶ In this regard, discussions between election and campaign historians and scholars studying narratives of democracy in a transnational perspective might be enriched.¹⁰⁷ Swiss self-representation as an old, consensus-oriented, pre-professionalised political culture has thus served as an argument against the state-funding of parties and campaigns, since this was presented as a »foreign« problem.¹⁰⁸

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 North¹⁰⁹, historians might also shed light on what (post-)colonial connections do to representations of

¹⁰⁵ For an ethnographic critique of the concept, see *Romain Bertrand/Jean-Louis Briquet/Peter Pels*, *Towards a Historical Ethnography of Voting*, in: *ids.* (eds.), *Cultures of Voting*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁶ *Michael Werner; Bénédicte Zimmermann*: *Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity*, in: *History and Theory* 45, 2006, no. 1, pp. 30–50; For this reflexive dimension in a Franco-German setting, see *Mareike König/Élise Julien/Birgit Lamerz-Beckschäfer*, *Verfeindung und Verflechtung. Deutschland und Frankreich 1870–1918*, Darmstadt 2019, p. 41; *Mark Hewitson*, *National Identity and Political Thought in Germany. Wilhelmine Depictions of the French Third Republic, 1890–1914*, Oxford 2000.

¹⁰⁷ See *Jeppe Nevers*, *A History of Democracy beyond National Narratives*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44, 2018, pp. 416–429; *Anja Kruke/Philipp Kufferath*, *Einleitung: Krisendiagnosen, Meistererzählungen und Alltagspraktiken. Aktuelle Forschungen und Narrationen zur Demokratieggeschichte in Westeuropa*, in: *AfS* 58, 2018, pp. 3–20, here: p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ *Oscar Mazzoleni*, *Critique et légitimation de la professionnalisation parlementaire en Suisse*, in: *Politix* (75), 2006, pp. 163–184.

¹⁰⁹ *Perrot/Pommerolle/Willis*, *La fabrique du vote*; *Judith Green Kelley*, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and why it Often Fails*, Princeton 2012.

democracy and elections there. The argument that Western practices of voting have spread throughout the world because of their multiple functions¹¹⁰ or even that elections were part of »Westernisation« neglects not only about early experiences with voting and electoral innovations in colonies and newly independent nations¹¹¹, 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.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ 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 South¹¹⁴, election history 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.¹¹⁵ 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 *égo-histoire*,¹¹⁷ but also echoes the reflexive stance common in political anthropology, such as Florence Faucher documenting how her non-native

¹¹⁰ Gatzka/Richter/Schröder, *Wahlen in der transatlantischen Moderne*, p. 19.

¹¹¹ Eduardo Posada-Carbó, Introduction. Elections Before Democracy: Some Considerations on Electoral History from a Comparative Approach, in: Posada-Carbó, Eduardo (ed.): *Elections before Democracy: The History of Elections in Europe and Latin America*, London 1996, pp. 1–15; John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, New York 2009, pp. 457–483.

¹¹² For the French context, Anne-Christine Trémon, *Citoyens indigènes et sujets électeurs*, in: *Genèses* 91, 2013, no. 2, pp. 28–48; Frederic Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton 2014; Silyane Larcher, *L'autre citoyen : l'idéal républicain et les Antilles après l'esclavage*, Paris 2014.

¹¹³ Yves Combeau (ed.), Dossier thématique: 1958 et l'outre-mer français, in: *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire* 95 (358), 2008, pp. 7–145; Eric Savarese, *L'acte électoral revisité en situation coloniale*, in: *Pôle Sud* 44, 2016, no. 1, pp. 97–109; Liz Fink, *Institutional Terra Non Firma: Representative Democracy and the Chieftaincy in French West Africa*, in: Ed Naylor (ed.), *France's Modernising Mission: Citizenship, Welfare and the Ends of Empire*, London 2018, pp. 31–57; Justin Willis/ Gabrielle Lynch/ Nic Cheeseman, *Voting, Nationhood, and Citizenship in Late-Colonial Africa*, in: *The Historical Journal* 61, 2018, no. 4 pp. 1113–1135.

¹¹⁴ For instance Comi Toulabor, *Fraudes électorales et démocratie coloniale au Togo. Cas d'une implantation du vote en colonie*, in: Patrick Quantin (ed.), *Voter en Afrique. Comparaisons et différenciations*, Paris 2004, pp. 185–206.

¹¹⁵ Gatzka/Richter/ Schröder, *Zur Kulturgeschichte moderner Wahlen in vergleichender Perspektive*, p. 10; Richter/Buchstein, *Einleitung: Eine neue Geschichte der Wahlen*, p. 5.

¹¹⁷ For a recent collective experiment of *égo-histoire*, Yann Potin (ed.), *Générationnaires : XIXe-XXIe siècle*, Paris 2019.

perspective on Britain helped her ask different questions than a native observer when attempting to »exoticise« political rituals such as party conferences.¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰ Historians and sociologists may be wary of the temptation to look for clear-cut explanations for »democratisation« processes.¹²¹

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.¹²² 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.¹²³ 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 test 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. Avoiding moral judgements on actors' justifications should not mean mistaking them general causalities, as Richter tends to do when she conflates the link between fiscal policy and the emergence of modern political representation, or the long-standing argument tying suffrage rights to propriety and/or ownership on the one hand with the old debate over the economic »threshold« of democratisation

¹¹⁸ *Florence Faucher*, *Changing Parties. An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*, Basingstoke, Hants 2005, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ A research agenda discussed in *Giovanni Capoccia/Daniel Ziblatt*, *The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies. A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond*, in: *Comparative Political Studies* 43, 2010, pp. 931–968.

¹²⁰ Relations between French history and French political science are much closer, thanks in particular to the research agenda of socio-histoire, Willemez 2013. On the relationship between contemporary history and social sciences in the German-speaking context, *Rüdiger Graf/Kim Christian Priemel*, *Zeitgeschichte in der Welt der Sozialwissenschaften. Legitimität und Originalität einer Disziplin*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59, 2011, no. 4, pp. 479–508; *Jenny Pleinen/Lutz Raphael*, *Zeithistoriker in den Archiven der Sozialwissenschaften: Erkenntnispotenziale und Relevanzgewinne für die Disziplin*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 62, 2014, no. 2, pp. 173–196.

¹²¹ See the review of Daniel Ziblatt's recent book on the importance of conservative parties for democratisation by *Daniel Gaxie*, *Ziblatt (Daniel) – Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy*. – Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017 (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics). 433 p. Bibliogr. Index., in: *Revue française de science politique* 69, 2019, no. 2, pp. 369–371.

¹²² *Kühne*, *Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung*, p. 53; *Richter/Buchstein*, *Einleitung: Eine neue Geschichte der Wahlen*, p. 3; *Tim B. Müller/Hedwig Richter*, *Introduction: Histories of Democracy. Transnational Perspectives on Germany (1800–1933)*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 44, 2018, pp. 325–335.

¹²³ *Kruke/Kufferath*, *Einleitung: Krisendiagnosen, Meistererzählungen und Alltagspraktiken*, p. 13; *Sonja Levens*, *Autorität und Demokratie. Eine Kulturgeschichte des Erziehungswandels in Westdeutschland und Frankreich, 1945-1975*, Göttingen 2019; *Wim De Jong*, *Civic Education and Contested Democracy. Towards a Pedagogic State in the Netherlands post 1945*, Cham 2020.

on the other (p. 94ff.).¹²⁴ 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,¹²⁵ 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 contexts¹²⁶, election history can 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.¹²⁷ 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 centered its citizenship ideal on the individual.¹²⁸ Just like ideas, practices do not form coherent entities – which means that historians should be wary of absolutising the normative justifications of practice or its effects (intended or not) as its function in democracy.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰ 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

¹²⁴ For an overview of this debate in political science, *Barbara Geddes*, *What Causes Democratization*, in: *Robert E. Goodin* (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, Oxford 2011, pp. 593–615.

¹²⁵ *Isabela Mares*, *From Open Secrets to Secret Voting: Democratic Electoral Reforms and Voter Autonomy*, Cambridge 2015; *Dawn Teele*, *Forging the Franchise: The Political Origins of the Women's Vote*, Princeton 2018.

¹²⁶ 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.

¹²⁷ For a recent research discussion, *Matthew McCormack*, *A Man's Sphere? British Politics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, in: *Christopher Fletcher/Sean Brady/Rachel E. Moss* et al. (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, London 2018, pp. 247–264.

¹²⁸ *Anne Verjus*, *Le cens de la famille: les femmes et le vote, 1789-1848*, Paris 2002.

¹²⁹ 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.

¹³⁰ *Posada-Carbó*, *Electoral Juggling; Hélène Combes/Gabriel Vommaro*, *Sociologie du clientélisme*, Paris 2015.

criteria and best-practice handbooks used in election observation.¹³¹ While historians have warned against writing a history of »democratic fulfillment«¹³², 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.¹³³ 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 both in private and in the public sphere 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.¹³⁴ 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

¹³¹ *Nicolas Guilhot*, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order*, New York 2005; *Perrot/ Pommerolle/ Willis*, *La fabrique du vote*, pp. 9f.

¹³² *Paul Nolte*, *Jenseits des Westens? Überlegungen zu einer Zeitgeschichte der Demokratie*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 61, 2013, no. 3, 2013, pp. 280; *id.*, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München 2012, esp. pp. 16–20.

¹³³ *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.

¹³⁴ 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..

tend to overemphasise the rationality and efficiency of their corrective strategies.¹³⁵ The prism of »materiality« and »knowledge« can furthermore also be extended to the collection and transmission of electoral results¹³⁶ as well as to objects of electoral analysis and commentaries. Diagrams or electoral maps not only constitute representations and identities¹³⁷, 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.¹³⁸

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 on supposedly unruly and dangerous »masses« to be controlled and educated, not as revealing societal trends.¹³⁹ If political scientists and anthropologists struggle today to understand voting and non-voting behaviour and in general citizens' relations to politics¹⁴⁰, 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 statistics¹⁴¹, 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«.¹⁴² Beyond these connoted labels, the seemingly neutral concepts of »political interest« and »political competence« can also be historicised 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.¹⁴³ In other words, if the aim is

¹³⁵ Bernard Lacroix, La »crise de la démocratie représentative en France«. *Éléments pour une discussion sociologique du problème*, in: *Scalpel* 1, 1994, pp. 6–29.

¹³⁶ Michel Offerlé, Le nombre de voix, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 71, 1988, pp. 5–21; Thomas Stockinger, *Dörfer und Deputierte. Die Wahlen zu den konstituierenden Parlamenten von 1848 in Niederösterreich und im Pariser Umland (Seine-et-Oise)*, Oldenburg 2012.

¹³⁷ Richter, *Moderne Wahlen*, especially pp. 116–125.

¹³⁸ Michel Bussi, La carte électorale: miroir de la démocratie?, in: *EchoGéo* 20, 2012, URL: <<https://doi.org/10.4000/echogeo.13042>> [25.11.2020].

¹³⁹ Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors. Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, New Haven 1981; Yves Déloye, La peur du grand nombre : La »science électorale« contre la démocratie représentative dans la France de la IIIe République (1890-1930), in: Lisa Bogani/Julien Bouchet/Philippe Bourdin et al. (eds.), *La République à l'épreuve des peurs : De la Révolution à nos jours*, Rennes 2018, pp. 137–148.

¹⁴⁰ See with different methodologies, Céline Braconnier/Jean-Yves Dormagen, *La démocratie de l'abstention: Aux origines de la démobilisation électorale en milieux populaires*, Paris 2007; Martin Althoff, Der Nichtwähler: Ein noch immer »unbekanntes Wesen«, in: *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 61, 2020, pp. 151–174.

¹⁴¹ On this debate in French historiography, Melvin Edelstein, La participation électorale des Français (1789-1870), in: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 40, 1993, no. 4, pp. 629–642.

¹⁴² Zoé Kergomard, Knowledge on a Democratic »Silence«. Conflicting Expertise on the Decline in Voter Turnout in Postwar Switzerland (1940s–1980s), in: *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 4, 2020, pp. 231–261.

¹⁴³ Yves Déloye, Pour une sociologie historique de la compétence à opiner »politiquement«, in: *Revue française de science politique* 57, 2007, pp. 775–798; Lehingue, *Le vote*, pp. 207–232.

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, partisan and social capital). From a potential candidate to the final elected representative, the »sieve«¹⁴⁴ 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 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 representatives.¹⁴⁵ This approach thus echoes with the call by modern and contemporary historians to study representation as a communication process.¹⁴⁶ 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 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.¹⁴⁷ 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.«¹⁴⁸ Echoing Saward and building on Bourdieu's approach to political representation¹⁴⁹, French historian Michel Offerlé has also pointed

¹⁴⁴ *Mariette Sineau/Vincent Tiberj*, *Candidats et députés français en 2002*, in: *Revue française de science politique* 57, 2007, pp. 163–185, here: 163.

¹⁴⁵ *Michael Saward*, *The Representative Claim*, Oxford 2010; *Lisa Disch*, *The »Constructivist Turn« in Democratic Representation: A Normative Dead-End?*, in: *Constellations* 22, 2015, no. 4, pp. 487–499.

¹⁴⁶ *Harm Kaal/Daniëlle Sloopjes*, *Introduction: Repertoires of Representation*, in: *idem* (eds.): *New Perspectives on Power and Political Representation from Ancient History to the Present Day*, Leiden; Boston 2019, pp. 1–10.

¹⁴⁷ *Gareth Stedman Jones*: *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, Cambridge 1983; see also *Kühne*, *Historische Wahlforschung in der Erweiterung*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁴⁸ *Jon Lawrence/Miles Taylor*, *Introduction*, in: *id.* (eds.), *Party, State and Society. Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820*, Aldershot/Brookfield 1997, pp. 1–26, here: p. 18.

¹⁴⁹ *Pierre Bourdieu*, *La représentation politique: Éléments pour une théorie du champ politique*, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 36, 1981, no. 1, pp. 3–24; For a comparative discussion of Bourdieu's and

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.«¹⁵⁰ 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 categories, divides and cleavages with which citizens would or would not identify.¹⁵¹ Instead of merely wondering at the stability or lability of electorates over time, this perspective leads to asks how political entrepreneurs maintained, but probably adapted and recomposed, 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.¹⁵²

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 or substantial representation for minority groups.¹⁵³ Campaign archives are 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.¹⁵⁴

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

Saward's approaches, *Virginie Dutoya/Samuel Hayat*, *Prétendre représenter. La construction sociale de la représentation politique*, in: *Revue française de science politique* 66, 2016, no. 1, pp. 7–25.

¹⁵⁰ *Michel Offerlé*, *Les partis politiques*, Paris 2010 (first published 1991), p. 30.

¹⁵¹ *Harm Kaal*, *Constructing a Socialist Constituency. The Social Democratic Language of Politics in the Netherlands, c. 1890–1950*, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 53, 2013, pp. 175–201.

¹⁵² *Julian Misch*, *Faire la socio-histoire d'une institution en «crise»*. Enjeux et techniques d'une socio-genèse du déclin du PCF, in: *François Buton/Nicolas Mariot (eds.): Pratiques et méthodes de la socio-histoire*, Paris 2009, pp. 87–106.

¹⁵³ For an overview, *Suzanne Dovi*, *Political Representation*, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2018 Edition, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/political-representation/>>.

¹⁵⁴ For such an attempt, *Zoé Kergomard*, *De la représentation-mandat à la représentation-figuration? Les processus de sélection des candidat.e.s aux élections fédérales des années 1940 aux années 1980*, in: *Traverse*, 2018, no. 3, pp. 89–100.

(if only formal) equalitarian promise. Instead, elections have been said to mark an »almost intrinsic inequality between electors and elected«¹⁵⁵, 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.¹⁵⁶ Historians are thus able to shed light on the changing equilibrium between elitist, particularly epistocratic, 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«.

Asking about the legitimation, but also the contestation of representation in elections also 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 centuries¹⁵⁷, asking about the construction of this centrality and its consequences for political participation – but also its diverse appropriations in the public – could be a further step in »denaturalising« elections in the history of democracy.

¹⁵⁵ *Le Gall, A voté*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁶ *Bernard Manin, Principes du gouvernement représentatif*, Paris 1996.

¹⁵⁷ *Richter/Buchstein, Einleitung: Eine neue Geschichte der Wahlen*, p. 4; *Le Gall, A voté*, p. 45.