

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

by

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on

Jurgen Falter's

**PITFALLS IN SCIENTIFIC MODELING: UNEMPLOYMENT,  
THE UNEMPLOYED, AND THE NAZI VOTE 1930-1933**

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Papers like this make life tough for discussants. Professor Falter's analysis of the Nazi vote is so well crafted, anticipates so many possible objections and is such a riveting piece of work that I am hard pressed to discuss anything. If this paper came across my desk from a journal editor I would immediately and enthusiastically say: publish. It is a paper with a startling finding, one that will give its readers pause for thought and leaves them groping for ways to find faults.

To review the background of this analysis: few hypotheses seem so well proven, so rooted in laws of political economy, so much in accord with common sense as the one that mass unemployment of the late 1920's and early 1930's propelled the Nazi party from the lunatic fringe to the center of power in Weimar Germany. Quite simply, as the lines of the unemployed swelled, so did the ranks of the Nazi vote between 1928 and 1933. We can all recall the parallelity of the scenes from newsreels of the time. In statistical terms, the correlation over time between the unemployment rate and the Nazi share of the vote comes close to a perfect 1.0.

Now comes Professor Falter and tells us that in one important sense this relationship between unemployment and the Nazi vote is illusionary. Is this just another case of academics quibbling with the obvious -- something that should be quickly dismissed as baseless? Let us consider the credentials of this study. Professor Falter and his collaborators have assembled an enormous data set from the German census, combined electoral returns and economic

statistics for something like 865 local geographical units -- enough to compete with a typical sample survey these days -- diligently checked the various measures of unemployment, kept track of changing boundaries of their geographical units before finally regressing the Nazi vote on, among other things, the unemployment figures. The result is a startlingly negative coefficient for unemployment in each election from 1930 and to 1933. In other words, in areas in Germany where unemployment was high, the Nazis vote was low. It takes a while to absorb the shock of this finding. Falter presents us with enough variations and specifications to allow this finding to settle in and dispell some immediate doubts.

This analysis demonstrates that the unemployed themselves did not disproportionately flock to the brown-shirted pied piper; instead they flocked largely to the Communist party. Hence, they behaved in clientele fashion, but opted for the more radical alternative appealing to the working class, from which most of the unemployed came. This finding has a very plausible ring.

But plausible or not, Professor Falter's findings invite challenge. They contradict recent findings by Frey and Weck. Their study, however, suffers from an anemic data set. With only 13 units of analysis in each election, they are hard pressed to compete with Falter, who relies on 865. Yet even with his rich and meticulously assembled data set, he faces the perils of the "ecological fallacy." A study of voting returns from geographical areas is no fool-proof method of finding out how individuals voted.

Of course, surveys of individual voters are not available and if we want to learn anything about the voting in the late 1920's, we must take the plunge and try as best as we can to substitute assumptions for data, as someone once defined econometrics. Professor Falter is more careful than most others in this field and more versatile in using alternative methods. Nevertheless, my own little arithmetic leaves me a bit uncomfortable with some of his results.

For instance, from 1930 to July 1932, the ranks of the unemployed are reported to have risen by 3.6 million. Let us assume that through family members twice as many adults were immediate victims of unemployment; that would come to 7.2 million adults. During that same time span, however, the Communist vote inched up by a meager 0.7 million while the Nazi vote shot up by 7.4 million. It is hard to fathom how the Communist party between 1930 and 1932 could have absorbed the big bulk of the newly unemployed while the Nazis took only a less than proportional share. In general, according to my quick and dirty figuring, the Communist vote grew less strongly in the 1928-1933 years than did the (doubled) numbers of the unemployed; the Nazi vote, in turn, grew more strongly. Some incidental food for thought that the author may well have digested already.

Granted nevertheless that Falter is right, he must brace himself for the following question: which groups of voters, if not the unemployed, did disproportionately flock to the Nazis in the 1930-1933 elections? What on earth prompted people with jobs to

cast their lot with a bunch of misfits whose leader had served time in jail? In what sense did the fact that so many others were unemployed affect those who were still employed themselves to opt for the Nazis? Is it conceivable that they would have done so under any other circumstances? In other words, certain groups of people who stayed away from the Nazis prior to 1928 suddenly became quite enamored of them even though they apparently did not bear the brunt of the economic crisis engulfing Germany.

As for guesses, let me venture that economic concerns not tapped by unemployment may have affected German voters not thrown out of their jobs. Declining incomes may have prompted independent businessmen and merchants to abandon their traditional parties of the center and right for the more radical alternative provided by the Nazis. It may be premature perhaps to rule out economic considerations as a cause of the Nazi vote. This is certainly a path that needs to be pursued further before the book on economic effects and the Nazi vote can be closed.

Furthermore, let us consider the notion that voters typically do not respond so much to their own economic situation as to a view of general economic conditions. Beyond the hardship it inflicts on the individuals affected and their families, the loss of jobs signals a worsening of the overall economy. Sooner or later that misfortune may catch up with oneself and turn general misery into personal misery. How much concerns about the overall economy mattered to German voters in the late 1920's, we will never know for

sure. The Census did and does not ask such questions, and opinion surveys were not yet in vogue then. Indirectly, however, Professor Falter's analysis suggests that broader concerns over the economy, not necessarily rooted in loss for one's own job, may have nudged those not directly affected by unemployment to the Nazis.

One thing is certain: our understanding of the connection between mass unemployment and the Nazi vote has been much too simple-minded. In Germany, something else besides personal economic deprivation must have wooed voters away from system-supporting parties to the Nazi party. What were the latent attitudes that allowed support for such a totalitarian party to grow so rapidly at a time of economic crisis? By contrast, what protected voters in other countries suffering similar economic deprivation against the appeal of Nazi-like parties and leaders? To be sure, defeat in World War I, the loss of the crown, hyperinflation, foreign occupation, and the grey experience with an unloved republic, all these alone did not trigger what the depression triggered. Hence it would be fallacious to minimize its impact. But the way in which it fed on existing discontent and undermined confidence in the system parties remains to be illuminated more sharply. Professor Falter has given a fresh impetus to research on this most contemporary topic. I am confident his on-going efforts will pay handsome dividends for our understanding of how economic crises unsettle electoral patterns and pose hazards to a country's political health.