

MAKING SENSE OUT OF CONTRADICTIONS

by

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Discussion Paper

on

Jürgen W. Falter's

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

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Falter's paper "Pitfalls in Scientific Modeling: Unemployment of the Unemployed, and the Nazi Vote 1930-1933" is a fine piece of empirical historical social research. The following remarks attempting to point out some of the problems of data, model specification, and interpretation of findings in no way detract from the great progress made in this paper toward a more systematic and rigorous understanding of factors underlying the Nazi party's electoral success in the early 1930s.

One of the important contributions of Falter's paper is to have demonstrated the inadequacy of the data base of previous investigations. This is particularly true for the definition of unemployment. The official definition of the unemployment rate (unemployed over employed) accepted in the Frey/Weck study, to which Falter's paper directly refers, simply does not provide a valid indicator of the property that is to be measured. In the case of high unemployment it is badly biased upward, and its distribution is significantly distorted. Falter's study amply demonstrates the possible consequences of using flawed data of this kind.

However, there are some problems with some of his own data as well. Creating unemployment data for 865 administrative units ("Kreise") from data for 352 unemployment administration districts according to population proportions might have undesirable consequences. On the one hand, some observations are not independent from others. On the other hand, population proportions might not always adequately reflect the internal distribution of unemployment within unemployment administration districts. e.g. if one such district is composed of a city together with surrounding rural areas. It would have been useful to have the extent and the implications of such difficulties clarified.

Turning now to some substantive issues, it should be mentioned

first, that the paper could have been a little bit more specific as to the various forms of political responses to unemployment: be it personal, contextual, or general, the composition of the unemployed part of the work force, and the relationship between the two. In the part on ecological regressions to estimate individual voting of the unemployed from aggregate data the distinction of blue-collar vs. white collar is made, to be sure. However, sex, age, education, urbanization, type of industry etc. probably also are quite relevant for distinguishing different types of unemployed individuals in terms of their political behavior. The commentator's own research on the political effects of current unemployment in Germany clearly suggests that assuming uniform political response patterns to unemployment is unrealistic. Falter's paper takes the proper approach in this respect, most likely we need to go further.

Moreover, voting for the Nazis is just one way of reacting to unemployment. Instead, people might choose to stay at home, e.g. and this might be particularly frequent for some specific subgroups of the unemployed. Research on the political behavior of the unemployed in Germany in the 1980s finds that the older and less qualified the unemployed are the more likely they are to abstain, compared to analogously defined groups that have not been laid off. While the Falter paper is excellent in replicating the Frey/Weck study, it appears it could go further in abandoning the notion of some simple and general patterns of political consequences of unemployment. For the 1980s as well as for the 1930s we are talking about rather heterogeneous groups, and we need a systematic inventory of hypotheses, why what types of political behavior should be expected from what types of the unemployed. It is gratifying to see that Falter has turned into this direction in some other papers. His current effort demonstrates that the methodological tools to pursue appropriate empirical analyses within such a theoretical framework are there, even if one has

to rely solely on aggregate data.

A second major substantive comment has to address the fundamental contradiction between Falter's analysis and the Frey/Weck search. To this commentator it is not entirely clear that Falter's concluding statement that the Nazis "could profit from mass unemployment mainly in those regions where unemployment was lowest", which could not be detected by Frey/Weck, is a very fortunate way of summing up the matter. Both approaches should be described in terms of the spatial (level of analysis) and temporal (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal) domains and in terms of the types of political effects unemployment is assumed to exert. These can be classified as individual, contextual, and transfer effects, the latter denoting political responses that are due not to direct or indirect exposure, experience, or anxiety, but to ratings of governments or of types of political systems derived from their way of handling unemployment, assuming, of course, almost universal systemic attributions of responsibility.

Through ecological regression Falter shows that, cross-sectionally, the unemployed were less likely to vote for the Nazis than other comparable groups of the electorate. At the cross-sectional aggregate level this implies, of course, that unemployment and the Nazi vote are negatively correlated, provided transfer effects are the same everywhere and there are no strong countervailing (pro-Nazi) contextual effects. As empirical correlations indeed are negative, such contextual effects can exist, assuming uniform transfer effects. In cross-sectional aggregate data, therefore, the higher the unemployment the lower the Nazi vote, as the unemployed tended to prefer other parties above average, and as the remaining electorate was either insensitive to local unemployment or parallelly was less prone to vote for the Nazis with rising local unemployment. The story behind this scenery of Falter's results is, most likely, that

unemployment tended to be particularly high on the background of social and economic structures that were not very conducive to Nazi electoral success. Falter's analysis thus appears to demonstrate, apart from a negative individual effect of unemployment on the Nazi vote, a common dependence of regional unemployment and below-average Nazi vote percentages among the rest of the electorate upon regional social and economic conditions and structures.

The Frey/Weck study, on the other hand, proceeds from the parallel longitudinal increase of unemployment and Nazi success. The final figure of the Falter paper clearly demonstrates how the cross-sectionally negative aggregate correlation holding for four elections is overpowered by this simultaneous growth over time. In terms of the classification of political effects of unemployment introduced above this indicates the longitudinal importance of transfer effects. With unemployment rising to dramatic magnitudes support for the government and for the political system as a whole falls significantly as this is taken as an indication of inability to cope with the problem.

As this figure also shows, this breakdown of government system support, gauged by the Nazi vote percentage, occurs across the board, irrespective of regional unemployment, leaving cross-sectional patterns of negative aggregate associations between Nazi vote and local unemployment intact. The transfer effect of rising mass unemployment, the general loss of confidence, does not make the unemployed more favorable toward the Nazis when compared to other voters, and it does not turn the Nazi party's most fertile fields (with comparatively low regional unemployment) into barren land, and vice versa. Instead, on the background of stable cross-sectional associations the propensity all voters to turn out for the Nazi party is seen to increase.

evenly. Seen this way, the Falter and Frey/Weck results, w
not overinterpreted, are complementary rather than contradictor
There is no reason even to expect that unemployment should h
the same aggregate political consequences cross-sectionally
longitudinally.