Agricultural structure and the rise of the Nazi Party reconsidered

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A B S T R A C T

There is widespread agreement within academic literature that the NSDAP systematically and effectively targeted the rural areas beginning with the Agrarian Crisis in 1927/8. However, one issue is left unresolved: were specific levels of agricultural strata differently attracted to the Nazis, and if so, how? In light of the economic and political incentives offered to German peasants with differing farm sizes, we expect that regions characterized by middle peasants were most likely to have electorally swung in a distinct, asymmetric and relevant way towards the Nazis. In order to test this hypothesis, we have used a country-wide data set, which includes the original categories of 'parcel peasants' (0–2 ha), 'small-sized' (2–5 ha) and 'medium-sized' farmers (5–20 ha). These specific classifications were introduced and behaviorally legitimated by the Statistical Office of the Weimar Republic at that time. We present the first analysis applying generalized additive models (GAM) for the assessment of ecological relations. In order to account for the construction of political spaces – and therefore of spatial dependencies, we offer a new mechanism based on stipulations of the electoral system. Even after controlling for pre-established impact factors (Protestantism, urbanization, etc.) and for spatial effects, we identify a clear impact of the agrarian middle classes (5–20 ha) on the Nazi vote beginning with the election in July 1932.

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The rise of the Nazi Party on the country-side

The established scientific consensus is that by the end of the 1920s the Nazi party achieved a major electoral breakthrough in the rural parts of the Weimar Republic (see Brustein, 1996; Falter, 1991; Friedrich, 1937; Heberle, 1963, 1945; Waldman, 1973): "compared to the urban population, rural voters initially moved only slowly to the Nazis, from 1928 to 1930. They then moved much more rapidly to the Nazis from 1930 to 1933" (Shively, 1972: 1213). Peasant parties, some of them newly created in the course of the Agrarian Crisis, attracted about 1.39 million votes in 1928 and reached their peak with ca. 1.64 million votes in 1930. Comparing their results in 1930 with the one in the final democratic election in 1933, it turns out that they lost 1.44 million votes. Compared with the ca. 17 million voters for the NSDAP in March 1933, this would account for about 8 percent. Note that this constitutes a very 'conservative' estimate. Including peasantry-related losses of, e.g., the Economics Party (Wirtschaftspartei) or the Conservative and Liberal Parties,

the value would be very much higher. In short: in 1932, "the NSDAP had now clearly established itself as the most important peasant party" (Corni, 1990: 32). Thus, the gains in the countryside were an important contribution to the seizure of power.

Surprisingly, it remains unclear whether agricultural strata played a differential role in the electoral dynamics of the Nazi party, i.e.: Did agricultural strata have an impact? If so, which agricultural strata had an impact? Early research on the electoral breakthrough of the Nazi party asserted that administrative units (Kreise, in the following: counties) characterized by small- and middle-sized farms voted in large numbers for the NSDAP (see Heberle, 1963, 1945; Loomis & Beegle, 1946). In his famous analysis of Fascism as a specific type of middle class extremism, Lipset (1960: 140–149) considered both the old and new middle class as having been susceptible to the NSDAP propaganda. Later studies, however, denied the exclusive attraction of the middle class, and instead emphasized the fact that the Nazis succeeded in making inroads into other classes and segments of the population (see Falter, 1991: 364–374). More specifically, Falter rejected the rural middle class hypothesis. He argued that it was restricted to peculiarities of the regions investigated by Heberle and Loomis/Beegle and, therefore not generalizable to the whole Reich. The main results of his research are: a) the rural breakthrough of the NSDAP in a national sense only became visible in the July 1932 election; b) this

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Table 1
Categories of farm size.

Farms size (hectare: ha = 10 000 m^2)	Category
0–2 ha	Parcel farms
2–5 ha	Small farms
5–20 ha	Medium-sized farms
20–100 ha	Large farms
100 ha and more	Large estates

relationship was much stronger, or even only exclusively related to Protestant regions; and c) there was definitely no effect of specific rural strata, either in Protestant, or in Catholic regions. Due to their heterogeneous social foundations, the Nazis were called the "First German Volkspartei" (Falter, 1990). Despite the broad social appeal of the NSDAP being undeniable, some authors nevertheless continue to seek segment-specific appeal as well as regional variations in support (see Brustein, 1996; King, Rosen, Tanner, & Wagner, 2008; O'Loughlin, 2002; O'Loughlin, Flint, & Anselin, 1994). Due to the disastrous consequences of their electoral success it is still of enormous interest to fully understand how this party was able to form the political landscape (see Flint, 1998, 2001) and which specific economic interests it appealed in a distinguishable and asymmetric way (Brustein, 1996; King et al., 2008). Studies focusing on the spatial distribution of the Nazi vote found regional variations and hot spots indicating differential local and regional campaign effectiveness (see Flint, 1998, 2001; O'Loughlin, 2002; O'Loughlin et al., 1994).

Analyses taking an economic and incentive-oriented view provide evidence that it was the owners of small and medium-sized businesses who were attracted by the Nazi propaganda (King et al., 2008). This stratum was characterized by its fierce opposition to socialism and to large companies and rural estates. Brustein (1996: 63–109) delineates in detail the match between the material interests of these segments and the respective policy offered by some of the parties: small and mid-sized farmers were asymmetrically and distinctly hit by the Agrarian Crisis, i.e. by the decrease of agricultural prices, and of credit availability, and by bankruptcy. The pre-crisis party affiliations of this specific segment tended towards the liberal parties such as the DDP and DVP, as well as towards the conservative party DNVP, and towards the Catholic Center Party. These affiliations began to weaken in 1927 - due to the inconsistent position-taking and policy-making of these parties with regard to protective agricultural tariffs and subsidies. The peasants' attempt to organize agricultural movements and to establish new parties proved to be only partially successful during 1928. It was the distinctive change in programme of the NSDAP, together with their systematic infiltration of existing farmers' organizations which led to a large-scale absorption of small and mid-sized farms into the voters for the NSDAP, already visible with the election in 1930.

Actually, the size of farms constitutes the fundamental factor of rural stratification. After the abolishment of feudal estates in Europe, farm size determined to a large degree the social and economic status of peasants. Soil pecularities and the specialization with regard to agrarian products (livestock breeding versus cultivation of grains) may also have formed the material interests and income of peasants. But, it is the size of farms which provides a reliable proxy, and which reflects the incidence of very unbalanced agricultural policy-making in the Weimar Republic (for details see: Brustein, 1996: 64 ff). Therefore, the respective statistical classification is essential in determining socially and politically relevant rural strata. The Office of Statistics of the Weimar Republic distinguished the following categories. (see: Table 1, Source: Statistik des Deutschen Reichs, 1929).

In their early studies of the Nazi vote, Heberle (1963, 1945) and Loomis and Beegle (1946) closely followed the reasoning of the

Official Statistics of the Reich. They expected small (2–5 ha) and medium-sized (5–20 ha) farmers to be the politically most relevant strata with the highest likelihood to vote for the Nazi party. Heberle (1963, 1945) and Loomis and Beegle (1946) corroborated their hypotheses empirically — but only within specific, sometimes highly aggregated regions. Later, Waldman (1973) considered farm sizes 2–100 ha (Waldman, 1973: 181, FN.: 3, see also 198, Table 43) as so-called family farms and, therefore, as more politically relevant in regard to Nazi voting. Actually, this operationalization of Waldman is problematic, as most farms with 10–20 ha employed permanent wage workers. Even in the category of 5–10 ha, 20% of the farms employed permanent wage workers (see Geiger, 1932: 32). More generally, this shows also that the frequent equation: 'family farms = middle class farms' is wrong. Falter (1986, 1991), was the first researcher to use a fine-grained country-wide data set. In his analyses, he combined the categories of parcel peasants (0–2 ha), small farms (2–5 ha) and medium-sized (5–20 ha) farms into one single category which he labeled "medium-sized farms" (0–20 ha). Additionally, he also proposed a measure of a so-called "average farm size", i.e. the mean value of farm sizes in a county, as an indicator of medium-sized farms. Third, he used the indicator of the share of family workers as a complementary indicator for medium-sized farms. The respective correlations — shown in more detail below — are indeed small or non-existent, sometimes even negative. In summary, results relating to the (non-)impact of farm sizes, are in our view still inconclusive — theoretically as well as methodically.

Thus, more than 80 years after the destruction of the Weimar Republic, there remains a surprising puzzle: Was the rural Nazi vote, at least beginning with the election in 1930, indeed a phenomenon related to radicalized small and midsize farmers — as argued by Geiger (1932), Heberle (1963, 1945), Loomis and Beegle (1946), Lipset (1960), Linz (1976) and Brustein (1996)? Or was there an identical electoral appeal of the Nazis across all agrarian societal strata —as suggested by Falter? Considering the results of Gessner (1981) and Brustein (1996), we argue that the complex interplay between the specific economic interests of mid-sized farms in the German Reich, and of the dynamics of the agrarian political interest mediation after the Agrarian Crisis in 1927/28 led finally to the dramatic erosion of newly founded peasant parties, and to the absorption of their adherents by the Nazis.[1] In a highly strategic way, Hitler reacted programmatically to these developments and used the NSDAP's party machine to create favorable political spaces (see Flint, 1998, 2001) in the countryside. For the first time, we propose to identify political spaces along those institutions being relevant for 'making votes count' (Cox, 1997), i.e. along electoral districts (see Table 6 in the Online Appendix).

In order to test these hypotheses, we will use a new data set. This is the first country-wide study using the original classification of parcel peasants (0–2 ha), small-sized (2–5 ha) and medium-sized farmers (5–20 ha) from the Weimar Republic — i.e.: as introduced by the Office of Statistics of the Weimar Republic, and used by the classic regional study by Heberle (1963, 1945). Additionally, we will for the first time control for electoral districts and institutionally stipulated associations of such districts.

In the following, we will first provide a short overview of the literature detailing the agricultural crisis in the Weimar Republic. Then, we will briefly review the quantitative literature about the relationship between agricultural structure and the Nazi vote. Based on these insights, we will propose new hypotheses with regard to the rural basis of the Nazis. We will also suggest a new theoretical rationale for its systematic geographic variation. We will test our hypotheses for the first time using the fine-grained original classification of the Official Statistics. We will introduce data and present a new statistical approach to the study of the Nazi party called generalized additive models (see Keele, 2008). Finally, we