

**Discuss the reasons for Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925.**

An Examination of the Factors Contributing to Hindenburg's Ascendancy in 1925

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# 1 Introduction

The Weimar Republic (1919-1933), established in the aftermath of World War I, faced numerous challenges from its inception (Kolb, 2005). This tumultuous period in German history was marked by political instability, economic crises, and social unrest. The young democracy struggled to gain legitimacy and support among a population still suffering from the consequences of defeat and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles. As the republic entered its sixth year in 1925, despite experiencing a degree of stability, the political landscape remained fragmented, with various parties seeking for power. It was under such a condition, that Paul von Hindenburg, a figure deeply rooted in Germany's imperial past, emerged as a presidential candidate.

This essay examines the factors contributing to Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925. It argues that Hindenburg's rise to power was primarily the result of two forms of long-term public disillusionment: firstly, with the democratic system itself, which was perceived as ineffective in its nature; and secondly, with the incompetence of the Weimar government in addressing the nation's problems, public confidence in the system was further eroded. In the short term, political factions successfully exploited Hindenburg's reputation as a national hero, presenting him as a unifying figure with cross-partisan appeal. His image as a symbol of unity echoed powerfully in the politically fractured environment of the time, ultimately allowing for his electoral victory.

## 2 Political Instability and Fragmentation

Political instability and fragmentation characterized the Weimar Republic, setting the stage for Hindenburg's ascension to power. Frequent government changes, a divided Reichstag, and the weakening of democratic center parties are both causes and manifestations of political polarization. This division created an urgent need for a unifying symbol in the Weimar Republic, which ultimately laid a solid foundation for Hindenburg's success in the election campaign. (Schulze, 1983)

The Weimar Republic experienced frequent changes in government between 1919 and 1925, contributing to political instability. This rapid change in the government played a significant role in creating the political climate that aided Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925. Between 1919 and 1925, Germany witnessed an unprecedented succession of chancellors, with nine different individuals holding the office during this six-year period. They include Philipp Scheidemann, Gustav Bauer, Hermann Müller, Konstantin Fehrenbach, Joseph Wirth, Wilhelm Cuno, Gustav Stresemann, Wilhelm Marx, and Hans Luther. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024) Moreover, this period saw the formation and dissolution of twelve distinct coalition governments, involving various combinations of parties such as the SPD, ZP, DDP, and DVP. (Bendersky, 2000) This rapid change of chancellors and coalition governments had a significantly disastrous effect on the stability and effectiveness of the Weimar Republic. The average tenure of a chancellor during this period was approximately eight months, with some serving for even shorter durations. For example, Gustav Stresemann's chancellorship lasted a mere 102 days in 1923 (Bundesarchiv, n.d.), while Hermann Müller's first term spanned just 94 days in 1920 (Bundesarchiv, 2024). This created an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability in German politics. Such brief tenures severely prevented the government from implementing consistent policies or addressing the nation's pressing issues. The persistent instability in government leadership directly contributed to the political fragmentation that paved the way for Hindenburg's rise to power. The frequent of chancellors and coalition governments intensified the public's growing desire for a stable, unifying figure. In this context, a well-respected steady figure might offer a stark contrast to the rapid turnover in government leadership. For those who are seeking stability and consistency- qualities which were lacking in the Weimar Republic- it is hence natural to vote for such a figure. In this case, the figure can be referred to as Hindenburg. Thus, the frequent changes in government played a crucial role in creating the conditions that made Hindenburg's ascension to power both possible and appealing to a significant portion of the German electorate.

The Reichstag's extreme fragmentation among numerous political parties during the mid-1920s created an environment of political instability, making the formation of stable coalitions exceedingly difficult. (Halperin,

1963) This essay argues that this fragmentation played a crucial role in setting the stage for Hindenburg's rise to power. The May 1924 election results vividly illustrate the extent of this political fragmentation. Ten parties gained representation in the Reichstag, with the distribution of seats as follows: the Social Democratic Party (SPD) secured 100 seats (20.5%), the German National People's Party (DNVP) obtained 95 seats (19.5%), the Center Party won 65 seats (13.4%), the Communist Party (KPD) gained 62 seats (12.6%), the German People's Party (DVP) acquired 45 seats (9.2%), the German Democratic Party (DDP) secured 28 seats (5.7%), the German Völkisch Freedom Party (DVFP) obtained 32 seats (6.5%), the Bavarian People's Party (BVP) won 16 seats (3.3%), the Economic Party gained 10 seats (2.0%), and the Bavarian Peasants' League (BVBP) secured 3 seats (0.7%) (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2005). This extreme fragmentation meant that no single party could govern alone, necessitating the formation of complex coalitions between multiple groups with diverse and often conflicting ideologies. (Eyck, 1962) The situation did not improve in the subsequent December 1924 election, which saw even greater fragmentation with 14 parties gaining seats in the Reichstag. This political landscape led to the formation of unstable governments, exemplified by Hans Luther's minority cabinet in January 1925, which controlled only 39% of Reichstag seats (171 out of 493) and relied on the toleration of other parties to pass legislation. The precariousness of this arrangement is further underscored by the fact that the previous cabinet, led by Wilhelm Marx, had fallen after a mere 13 months in office. The root of this fragmentation lay in the fundamental ideological differences between the parties. For instance, the Communist Party (KPD) advocated for a Soviet-style revolution that will overthrow the rightist government (LaPorte & Hoffrogge, 2017). The German National People's Party (DNVP), on the other hand, sought to restore the monarchy (Kaufmann, 1973), claiming "We are deeply convinced that even in a new democratic constitution a monarchic head, as a uniting factor standing above all parties, will serve best all political interests." (Salomon, 1919) The Center Party and the German Democratic Party (DDP) supported the Weimar constitution but disagreed on religious issues. (Schulze, 1983) Meanwhile, the German People's Party (DVP) under Gustav Stresemann had shifted from opposition to cautious support of the Republic (Schelm-Spangenberg, 1964). These ideological divisions manifested in key policy disagreements, such as the approach to reparations payments, labor laws, and church-state relations. The long-lasting nature of this political fragmentation and the resulting instability had far-reaching consequences. It severely hampered effective governance and policy implementation, as coalitions were fragile and short-lived. This situation fostered an environment of political paralysis, where addressing the nation's pressing issues became increasingly challenging. As argued by Craig, G. A. (Craig, 1981), "The continuous alarms and excursions caused damage to property and loss of life, and that the government's inability to control them was an ominous indication that this violence might become prevalent enough to dissolve the fabric of society completely." A value of the content of this source is that many pri-

mary sources, such as the memorial of Scheidemann, are included. A limitation of the purpose of this source is that it is written to tell the general history of Germany from 1866-45. The persistent fragmentation of the Reichstag and the resulting political instability fueled public frustration with the parliamentary system. This contributed significantly to the growing disillusionment with Weimar democracy, creating an environment where Hindenburg could be effectively presented as a unifying figure standing above the partisan fray. The appeal of a strong, seemingly apolitical leader like Hindenburg grew in direct proportion to the public's fatigue with the ineffectiveness of the fragmented Reichstag, thus paving the way for his rise to power in 1925.

The political instability and division of the Weimar Republic, characterized by frequent government changes and a deeply divided Reichstag, thus created an atmosphere ripe for Hindenburg's rise to power.

### 3 Public Disillusionment with the Weimar Republic

Public disillusionment with the Weimar government's incompetence was driven by multiple factors. Persistent economic hardships, including hyperinflation and unemployment, undermined faith in the government's financial management. The perceived national humiliation from the Treaty of Versailles further eroded confidence in its ability to protect German interests. These compounding frustrations led to a widespread yearning for strong leadership, ranging from hopes for a more assertive democratic figure to, in some cases, outright support for an autocratic ruler. This spectrum of expectations set the stage for Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925, as he embodied the image of a strong leader capable of restoring order and national pride.

Economic hardships severely undermined public confidence in the Weimar government's competence and ability to manage the economy. The hyperinflation of 1923 devastated the German economy. At its peak in November 1923, one US dollar was worth 4.2 trillion marks (Allied, Powers, & Germany, 1919). Workers had to be paid twice a day, and many resorted to bartering goods. (Mitchell, 2003) This economic catastrophe eroded faith in the democratic government's financial management and stability. The impact of hyperinflation extended beyond mere economic concerns, potentially shaping political attitudes and social cohesion during this period. High unemployment rates plagued the early 1920s. Unemployment rose from 1.6 million in 1922 to over 2 million by 1923, representing about 10% of the workforce. In some industrial areas, unemployment reached 30-40% (Mitchell, 2003). This created widespread economic hardship and anxiety, especially among workers and the lower middle class, leading many to question the government's ability to create jobs and prosperity. **Evidence** The currency reform of 1924, while ending hyperinflation, brought its own set of challenges. The introduction of the Rentenmark in November 1923, with 1 Rentenmark equaling 1 trillion old marks, was followed by deflationary policies that led to a credit squeeze and economic contraction. Industrial production fell by 27% between 1923 and 1924. Approximately 16,000 businesses went bankrupt in 1924, and unemployment rose again to 2.7 million by early 1925 (Laidler & Stadler, 1998). This prolonged economic suffering and frustration with the government's policies further eroded public trust in the Weimar leadership's economic competence. **Evidence** Germany's dependence on foreign loans, particularly through the Dawes Plan of 1924, was seen by many as a sign of weakness. The plan provided an immediate loan of 800 million marks and restructured reparations payments. Annual reparations were set at 1 billion marks for the first year, rising to 2.5 billion by 1928. This financial dependence, coupled with the ongoing debate over reparations payments (which totaled 20 billion gold marks between 1919 and 1932), further highlighted the government's perceived inability to defend German economic interests (Hughes, 1988). These persistent economic hardships and the government's apparent inability to effectively address them contributed signif-

icantly to public disillusionment with the Weimar Republic. The stark economic data - from trillion-mark inflation to millions unemployed - tangibly demonstrated the government's failures to many Germans. According to Arthur Rosenberg (Rosenberg, 1936), "Then followed the mad days in Germany, when for a loaf of bread notes were paid whose face value ran into millions or even billions. The German currency had, in fact, lost all value." A value of the content of the source is that . However, a limitation of the origin of the source is that it is written by a Marxist historian, which makes him emphasize more on the nature of capitalism instead of the actual missteps of the government when analyzing the economy of the Weimar Republic. This erosion of confidence in democratic leadership created an environment where many Germans looked for alternative forms of governance, paving the way for Hindenburg's appeal as a strong, stable leader in the 1925 election. A comparative analysis of economic indicators and voting patterns across different regions could further elucidate the connection between economic hardship and political preferences during this period.

Public disillusionment with the Weimar government was driven by perceived national humiliation from the Treaty of Versailles, which eroded confidence in its ability to protect German interests. The Treaty of Versailles, particularly Article 231 known as the "war guilt clause", forced Germany to accept sole responsibility for causing World War I and all losses and damages of the Allied powers. This clause deeply wounded German national pride, as it contradicted the wartime narrative of Germany fighting a defensive war. During the conflict, German propaganda had portrayed the country as resisting encirclement by hostile powers. The stark contrast between this patriotic wartime rhetoric and the humiliating peace terms left many Germans feeling betrayed by their government. (Albrecht-Carrié, 1940) The Weimar leadership's acceptance of this clause was seen as a capitulation that tarnished Germany's honor. According to Möller (Möller, 2018), "This unfounded self-deception was introduced into the Republic by the nationalist and far-right enemies of Weimar, evolving into the so-called 'stab-in-the-back myth.' It resonated with the German people's heightened sensitivity and wounded pride following their defeat, leading them to believe they had always been in an 'undefeated position.'" A value of the origin of this source is that Horst Möller is a prestigious contemporary historian. He was deputy director of the Institute of Contemporary History (Munich) from 1979 to 1982. A limitation of the purpose of this source is that it centers on Weimar democracy, describing how democracy was gradually destroyed. This given narrative framework results in a relatively clear bias in its storytelling. The treaty imposed harsh terms on Germany, including the loss of 13% of its European territory (about 27,000 square miles) and 10% of its population, severe military restrictions (limiting the army to 100,000 men and banning submarines and military aircraft), and reparations initially set at 132 billion gold marks (Laidler & Stadler, 1998). These punitive measures were perceived as excessively harsh by many Germans, effectively



crippling the country economically and militarily. The territorial losses, particularly in the east to the newly recreated Poland, were viewed as a violation of national sovereignty. The military restrictions left Germany vulnerable and unable to defend itself, while the reparations were perceived as an impossible burden designed to keep Germany weak indefinitely. The government's acceptance of these terms, despite initial promises to resist, further eroded public trust in its ability to defend national interests. "The German public was thus totally unprepared for the peace conditions that the Allies handed to the German delegation at Versailles on 7 May 1919." (Mommsen, Forster, & Jones, 2017) The "stab-in-the-back" myth (Dolchstoßlegende) gained widespread popularity, claiming that Germany had not been defeated militarily but betrayed by civilian leaders, particularly socialists, Jews, and republicans (Vascik & Sadler, 2016). (Meinecke, 1950) This myth, propagated by military leaders like Hindenburg and Ludendorff, absolved the military of blame for the defeat while casting aspersions on the new democratic government. It suggested that the German army had been "undefeated in the field" and only lost due to a collapse of morale on the home front orchestrated by internal enemies (WHEELER-BENNETT, 1938). This narrative undermined the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic by portraying its founders as traitors to the nation. It fueled resentment against democratic leaders and provided a convenient scapegoat for Germany's defeat, making it difficult for the new government to gain widespread acceptance. The perceived humiliation from Versailles and the government's inability to resist its terms contributed significantly to growing disillusionment with the Weimar system. This widespread sense of national wounded pride and resentment set the stage for Hindenburg's appeal as a strong leader who could restore national honor and stand up to foreign powers. His status as a war hero untainted by the "stab-in-the-back" made him an attractive figure to those seeking to overcome the perceived shame of Versailles.

The multifaceted disillusionment with the Weimar Republic, fueled by economic turmoil and perceived national humiliation, created a fertile ground for the rise of leaders like Hindenburg who promised strength and stability in the face of Germany's complex challenges.

## 4 Hindenburg's Campaign and Public Image

Ultimately, this dual disillusionment was evident in the election campaign, which culminated in Hindenburg's victory. However, this outcome should not be regarded as inevitable. The long-term factors previously discussed were transformed into votes through the Reichsblock's propaganda efforts, solidifying the right-wing support as a reliable base. Additionally, the division among leftist forces at this critical moment served as a decisive blow, causing the candidate of the Volksblocks, Marx Wilhelm, to lose with only three percent of the vote.

The Reichsblock's effective propaganda campaign was crucial in transforming long-term public disillusionment into electoral support for Hindenburg, solidifying right-wing voters as a reliable base. The conservative coalition's strategic messaging played a pivotal role in Hindenburg's rise to power by effectively capitalizing on the widespread frustration with the Weimar political system. The Reichsblock consistently portrayed Hindenburg as a symbol of national unity and stability, positioning him above partisan politics. (Holl, 1969) Campaign materials frequently referred to him as "the symbol of the most loyal and selfless fulfillment of duty" and "the symbol of domestic peace." (Pyta, 2004) This messaging was further reinforced by prominent political figures, such as former German National leader Oskar Hergt, who declared, "Hindenburg is his own program." (Wheeler-Bennett, 1967) This carefully crafted image resonated strongly with voters who had grown disillusioned with the perceived ineffectiveness and divisiveness of Weimar party politics. By presenting Hindenburg as a figure who transcended the usual political fray, the campaign tapped into the widespread frustration with the existing political system, offering a seemingly unifying alternative. (Bracher, 1960) The conservative press played a significant role in amplifying Hindenburg's candidacy and reinforcing his image. Notable publications such as the *Kreuzzeitung* described Hindenburg as standing "head-and-shoulders above all programs" and "moved by the national will alone." (*Kreuzzeitung*, 1925) Similarly, the *Deutsche Tageszeitung* framed his candidacy as a "sign of a new spirit in Germany." (*Deutsche Tageszeitung*, 1925) This media strategy effectively reinforced Hindenburg's image as a unifying figure. It resonated with voters who were dissatisfied with the perceived failures of the Weimar political establishment, further solidifying Hindenburg's appeal as an alternative to traditional party politics. (Kolb, 2005) The campaign skillfully balanced Hindenburg's conservative appeal with a message of national reconciliation. In speeches delivered in Munich, Hindenburg called for a "Christian state" and rejected "Kulturkampf," (Wheeler-Bennett, 1967) while campaign materials emphasized his ability to unite all Germans regardless of party affiliation. Notably, the Reichsblock strategically avoided explicit monarchist rhetoric (Falter, 1990), instead focusing on themes of national pride and unity. This dual approach allowed the campaign to maintain its conservative base

while potentially appealing to centrist voters. By downplaying divisive monarchist themes and emphasizing unity, the campaign broadened Hindenburg's appeal beyond just the right wing, making him a more palatable option for a wider range of voters. This nuanced propaganda campaign was crucial in mobilizing right-wing support while also attracting some centrist voters, ultimately allowing Hindenburg to win a narrow victory (48.3% to Marx's 45.3%). (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2005) It demonstrated how the Reichsblock effectively channeled long-term disillusionment with the Weimar system into electoral success through carefully crafted messaging, solidifying the right-wing base as the foundation of Hindenburg's support. This strategic manipulation of public sentiment played a significant role in Hindenburg's rise to power As argued by historian Anna von der Goltz: "The critical mass of voters did not primarily respond to a particular policy programme in 1925, but to Hindenburg's image as a potential 'saviour' promising to restore social stability." (Von der Goltz, 2009) A value of the source's content is von der Goltz's extensive study of propaganda materials, photographs, and posters from the period, enriching her analysis with primary evidence. A limitation of the source's origin is that, as a modern scholar, von der Goltz faces challenges in accurately identifying the key factors that truly attracted voters within the complex relationship of propaganda-hidden variables-voting outcomes, due to the historical distance affecting the precise understanding of contemporary voter psychology.

The division among left-wing forces was a decisive factor in Hindenburg's victory, as it prevented a united front against the conservative candidate. This weakness in opposition played a crucial role in shaping the electoral landscape of 1925. The first round of voting on March 29, 1925, clearly demonstrated the fragmentation of the left. Wilhelm Marx of the Center Party secured 14.5% of the vote, while Otto Braun of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) garnered 29.0%. (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2005) This division critically weakened the left's position, preventing either candidate from advancing to the second round with a strong mandate. A simple arithmetic calculation reveals that a unified left could have potentially commanded over 43% of the vote in the first round, significantly altering the dynamics of the runoff. The failure to present a united front at this crucial juncture undermined the left's electoral prospects. For the second round on April 26, 1925, the left parties belatedly coalesced around Wilhelm Marx. However, this delayed unification proved insufficient to overcome the momentum Hindenburg's campaign had already gained. (Feuchtwanger, 1995) The right-wing factions had effectively utilized the intervening period to consolidate their support base and refine their campaign strategy. The left's tardy unification left them with inadequate time to mount an effective counter-campaign, further diminishing their chances of success. The final results of the second round saw Hindenburg emerge victorious with 48.3% of the vote, compared to Marx's 45.3% - a margin of merely 3%. (Schelm-Spangenberg, 1964) This narrow gap between the candi-

dates underscores the critical nature of the left's initial disunity. It suggests that a more cohesive left-wing campaign from the outset could have potentially altered the election's outcome. The closeness of the result emphasizes how pivotal the initial fragmentation of the left was to Hindenburg's ultimate triumph. This weakness and division among Hindenburg's opponents directly supports the thesis that short-term political maneuvering, specifically the exploitation of fractured political landscapes, was crucial in Hindenburg's rise to power. The inability of the left to present a united front early in the campaign created an opportunity that Hindenburg's supporters successfully capitalized on, turning long-term public disillusionment into electoral success. "The elections to the post of President that followed were a disaster for the democratic prospects of the Weimar Republic. The baleful influence of Weimar's political fragmentation and lack of legitimacy made itself felt here. In the first round, none of the candidates looked like winning." (Evans, 2004) This scenario exemplifies how the broader context of political instability and fragmentation in the Weimar Republic manifested in concrete electoral outcomes, ultimately facilitating Hindenburg's ascension to the presidency.

The short-term factors allowing for Hindenburg's victory in the 1925 presidential election were the result of effective right-wing propaganda and critical left-wing disunity,

## 5 Conclusion

This essay has examined the multifaceted reasons for Paul von Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925. It reveals that Hindenburg's rise to power resulted from a complex interplay between long-term public disillusionment and short-term political maneuvering.

Long-term factors contributing to Hindenburg's success were rooted in widespread disillusionment with the Weimar Republic's democratic system and its government's perceived incompetence. Political instability and fragmentation of the Reichstag undermined public confidence in the system. Economic hardships eroded faith in the government's ability to manage the economic problems. The perceived national humiliation from the Treaty of Versailles further undermined confidence in the government's capacity to protect German interests. Also, cultural factors reinforced such skepticism towards the new democratic system.

In the short term, these underlying factors were effectively exploited by political factions supporting Hindenburg. The Reichsblock's propaganda campaign successfully presented him as a symbol of national unity and stability, positioning him above partisan politics. The division among left-wing forces proved the final blow in the Volksblock's fiasco. The division of the left in both the first and the second rounds of voting prevented a strong coalition, allowing Hindenburg to win by a narrow margin.

In conclusion, Hindenburg's rise to power in 1925 was primarily the result of long-term public disillusionment with the democratic system and the Weimar government's perceived incompetence, coupled with the successful short-term exploitation of his reputation as a national hero who would be the savior of the republic. This combination of factors ultimately allowed for Hindenburg's electoral victory.

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