and tiered voting systems that overvalued the voices of elites. That permitted conservatives to run the country until the First World War, even without much of a popular mandate.

But their power in the Reichstag belied their organizational impotence. Lacking much central structure or electoral machinery, the party was a bottom-up affair, with local grandees getting out the vote and determining office nominations. And because it lacked facility in mass politics, the party refused to countenance slight measures to expand democracy.

It also rendered the German Conservative Party vulnerable to the predations of the outside interest groups it relied on for votes: the country’s Agrarian League and, far more dangerously, anti-Semites. Gaining leverage for a brief spell in the 1890s, that second constituency inserted a denunciation of Jewish “influence” into the party platform. Weakness on the right outlived the Second Reich, overthrown in 1918 and replaced with the Weimar Republic. And Ziblatt argues that, as much as structural forces, this failure to build a healthy right or center-right party created space for the Nazis to fill.

He posits that much of the divergence between German and British conservatives had to do with timing. The Tories laid the groundwork for their party structure in the middle of the nineteenth century, prior to the working class getting the vote and socialists incorporating them into their new political networks. German conservatives scrambled to organize themselves while facing an organized Social Democratic Party in the 1880s and 90s, a far more daunting prospect. Tories also had more incentive to adapt to the new age. Their leaders did not enjoy the capacity to coerce votes and rigged elections that ultimately damned German conservatives.

Ziblatt marshals an impressive set of evidence to argue his point, tallying statistical analyses, sorting through the ancient Tory political memos—even using bond rates to discern the attitude of old regime elites: volatility in markets for government securities, in his view, reflects elites’ level of confidence in the survival of a regime. As the British working classes began to demand greater rights in the 1890s, for example, the markets appeared far stormier than usual as Parliament enacted the First Reform Act expanding suffrage. A few decades later, the securities exchange hardly registered the Second and Third Reform Acts—which Ziblatt asserts bears out his thesis that the elites grew less worried about democracy as their ability to compete at the polls increased.

Previous writings have traditionally focused on other explanations to make sense of democratization, such as a rise in society’s wealth or the formal institutional design of a country’s political system. Ziblatt’s work adds to a nascent literature that explores how informal structures, i.e., parties and interest groups, exert strong influence over democratic evolution, and is part of an evermore critical field of political science: the study of democratic quality and transition.

Still, Ziblatt’s theory has its limitations. He emphasizes that differences in national wealth between Britain and Germany could not explain their variable outcomes for democracy, because both countries were almost equally prosperous. But his argument appears harder to sustain when he applies that logic to Western Europe writ large. He judges that Belgium, Holland, Britain, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark succeeded in their democratic transitions, whereas Italy, Germany, Portugal, and Spain failed. France, he avers, moved from the second to the first category in the 1880s.

But with the exception of Germany, an industrial powerhouse with a high standard of living, the second group was considerably poorer than the first, as southern European nations lagged their northern peers on most indicators of economic and social health. As Ziblatt himself acknowledges, his theory works best when it explains “specific and important anomalies” that a wealth-based account of democracy would not clarify. It might help us grasp disparities in democratic evolution between Germany and Britain, or Germany and Sweden. But the wealth explanation remains critical when examining Western Europe as a whole.

Ziblatt also comes up short in treating religious cleavages within Western Europe. Protestant sects dominated in Britain, Scandinavia, and Germany, while Catholicism was the religion of the vast majority in Portugal, Spain, Italy, and France. Religious establishments in these countries resisted the march of liberal democracy to various degrees. But it’s important as well to recall the Catholic Church’s unique role in stymieing and reversing democratic transitions in southern Europe. Pope Pius IX forbade Catholics to participate in the new Italian state’s parliamentary elections and denounced liberalism in the 1864 document known as the Syllabus of Errors. France’s post-1870s democratic consolidation owes significantly to the steps leaders took to remove the Church from its role as a provider of education and other services. More than a half-century later, Spanish clerics actively helped Francisco Franco overthrow republican government in the run-up to World War II.

Despite these gaps, Ziblatt’s book resonates in the present context of democratic retreat in Europe and the United States. As the author points outs, both “face a ferocious right-west populist politics, which threatens to swallow older, self-identified conservative political parties.” Calling this development “ominous,” Ziblatt expresses a hope that “the age of democracy’s birth may serve as a vital and cautionary tale for our age of democratic crisis.”

And indeed, it’s difficult for the contemporary reader not to see disturbing parallels between Donald J. Trump’s co-opting of today’s Republican Party and the far-right takeover of the turn-of-the-century German Conservative Party. But Ziblatt also reminds

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**Chapter & Verse**

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

**Orrin Tilevitz** is seeking the origin of “That’s right, Private Aberthistle, put my stump right over there, and give me a hand up.” He found the quotation in a letter from his late father-in-law, “a well-educated officer in Europe during World War II.”

“the thing which man will not surrender” (January-February). Jeanne Hei-

fetz sent word that this slightly misquoted phrase comes from the poem “Running,” by Richard Wilbur, A.M. ’47, JF ’50. It appears in part III, “Doddells Road (Cummington, Massachusetts).”

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via email to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.