

# Disenchanted Workers, Selective Abstention and the Electoral Defeat of Social Democracy in Germany

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## Abstract

The Bundestag elections of 2009 meant a crushing defeat for the German social democrats. Never before had a party faced losses at such a high percentage in post-war Germany. The paper argues that these losses were not incurred at the margin but at the core of the social democrats' traditional constituency: Many working class citizens did not turn out to the election as a culmination of a process of growing political alienation. Data from the German Social Survey (ALLBUS) indicate that the ability to form a party preference and the readiness to participate in Bundestag elections had already been in decline in this group in the preceding years. The paper also discusses how these trends have affected the electoral outcome of 2009.

## 1 Introduction

The Bundestag elections of 2009 meant a crushing defeat for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Never before had a party faced losses at such a high percentage in post-war Germany. After losing more than four percentage point in 2005 from a previous result of 38.52% in 2002, Social Democrats experienced an electoral nightmare by seeing their vote

share reduced by more than 10 percentage points from 34.25% to 23.03%. That is, they lost roughly one third of their electoral support. But the Bundestag election of 2009 does not only mark a decisive electoral defeat for the Social Democrats but also a clear decline in electoral turnout, which went down from 76.43% to 69,76%. This parallel changes invite to speculations about the role of the decline in turnout has played for this crushing defeat for German Social Democracy.

This paper however does not follow the temptation to engage in such speculations, but rather tries to put the result of 2009 into a longer-term perspective, based on the following premises: (1) Electoral turnout has been in decline in Germany for quite a while, from levels not far away from 90% in the early 1970s to levels more closer to 77% in recent elections. There are occasional surges in turnout, such as in 1998, when turnout rose above 80% again, but the decline seems unambiguous. (2) Although the belief is widespread that the impact of class on electoral behavior, it still is related to class (Evans 2000; Elff 2007) and Germany is no exception to this (Mochmann and El-Menouar 2005; Elff and Roßteutscher 2009). However, not only is class related to party choice, it is also related to turnout, especially in the United States (Evans 2000; Hout *et al.* 1995). (3) As a form of political participation, the crucial factors for individuals turning out for an election are resources, motives, and mobilization (Verba *et al.* 1995). Electoral participation may be low in the manual working classes in the United States (Evans 2000; Hout *et al.* 1995) because of the relative lack of political skills among their members, but it may also because of the absence of a socialist or social democratic left in the US, which would have mobilized them. There are some reasons why one may expect that members of the manual working class are less likely than in earlier decades to perceive the SPD as representing distinctively working-class interests. Since the early days of the Federal Republic of Germany, the SPD has moved to the center of the ideological spectrum, a ideological reorientation that culminated in adopting ideas from British New Labour and in seeking their electoral fortunes in a 'New Center' (*Neue Mitte*) (Patterson and Sloam 2006; Elff 2000). Also, the increasing financial problems of the German welfare state and the competitive pressures of globalization (Seeleib-Kaiser 2001; Streek and Trampusch 2005) forced the Social Democrats to accept, if not embrace, policies of welfare state retrenchment and labor market reform. It seems obvious, and is now widely believed, that these reforms, especially the so-called "Hartz IV" reforms, have hurt the SPD electorally (Padgett 2005; Hering 2008; Picot 2009) and have contributed to the recent successes of the former post-communist, now rather left-populist party *Die Linke* (or *Linkspartei* "Left Party") (Vail 2009).

Against this backdrop, this paper takes the following steps: After section 2, which presents the data used in this paper and the explains the measurement of party preference, electoral abstention, and social class, section 3 deals with the development of electoral abstention within the different social classes. This section examines whether class differences in electoral abstention exist in Germany and whether they have increased. Section 4 looks at parallel developments in terms of political efficacy and perceived responsiveness of politicians. It weighs the plausibility of two contrasting claims, (1) that the decline of electoral turnout is related to a parallel decline in motivational factors for participation and (2) that the decline is rather related to a growing disappointment or cynicism about the responsiveness of politicians. Section 5 examines the consequences of the increasing abstention for the electoral fortunes of the German parties, with special focus on the Social Democrats, while section 6 examines to what degree the result of the 2009 Bundestag election was a continuation of ongoing trends or a departure from them. Finally, section 7 gives a summary and discussions of the findings of this paper.

## 2 Data

This paper combines two major sources of data: the German General Social Survey and the first wave of the German Longitudinal Election Study. The German General Social Survey (“Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften” – ALLBUS) is used in preference for earlier German electoral studies, because in contrast to the former it provides the data necessary for the reconstruction of citizens’ class positions according to the Goldthorpe class schema (Erikson *et al.* 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), that is, fully coded occupation according to the ISKO88 coding scheme. The pre- and post-election surveys of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) for the Bundestag elections of the year 2009 are the first in the tradition of German general election studies to provide for the same kind of data about respondents’ occupations as the ALLBUS. This is one reason why the GLES data are combined here with the ALLBUS data, beside the obvious rationale of directly addressing voting behavior during the last Bundestag election, of 2009.

The version of the ALLBUS used here is the cumulated data set for the years from 1980 to 2008 (Terwey and Baltzer 2009). This data set already contains a variable indicating the respondents’ position in the Goldthorpe class schema. It is constructed based on the current occupation of economically active respondents, on the last occupation of unemployed and pensioners, or on their partner’s occupation, or, where appropriate, the partner’s last

Table 1: The original 11 category class schema and the reduced 8 category class schema used in the analyses of this paper

This paper	Ganzeboom
Farmer/agricultural	IVc Selfempl Farmer
	VIIIb Farm labor
Self-employed	IVa Self-employed with employees
	IVb Self-employed without employees
Higher service class	I Higher controllers
Lower service class	II Lower controllers
Routine non-manual	IIIa Routine Non-manual
	IIIb Lower sales and service
Manual Supervisors	V Manual Supervisors
Skilled workers	VI Skilled workers
Semi-/unskilled workers	VIIa Semi-/unskilled workers

occupation, if the respective respondents have never been economically active (Terwey and Baltzer 2009: 1142).

An analogous class variable was constructed for the purposes for this paper from the occupational codes contained in the GLES election data set. If respondents were economically active, their current occupation was used, for unemployed and pensioners the last occupation was used, and again, the respondents' partners' occupation or last occupation was used for those respondents that never have been economically active. The recoding from ISKO88 occupational codes into an eleven-category version of the Goldthorpe class schema followed the templates provided by Ganzeboom and Treiman (2001), translated into an R script file, available from the author of this paper upon request. For ease of analysis, the eleven-category version of the Goldthorpe schema used in the ALLBUS data set and obtained by the code from Ganzeboom and Treiman (2001) were further reduced to an eight-category schema shown in table 1.

The key dependent variable of this paper is party preference, either in the guise of vote intention, for the ALLBUS data and the pre-election component of the GLES Bundestag election study, or in the guise of vote recall, for the post-election component of the GLES study. In ALLBUS studies, respondents were asked which party they would vote for if a Bundestag election would take place on the next Sunday. In the pre-election study, respondents were asked which party they would vote for in the upcoming Bundestag election. In the post-election study, respondents were asked which party they voted for in the Bundestag election that just had occurred. It should be noted that vote intentions and vote choices were

obtained with respect to both the first (district candidate) ballot and the second (party list) ballot. In this paper only the vote intentions and choices for the second ballot are considered. Further the set of alternatives is reduced to the distinction between a preference for the SPD (social democrats), CDU/CSU (christian democrats), Greens, FDP (liberals), PDS (post-communists), and all other parties. Where the data use a more fine-grained set of categories, these are appropriately collapsed. All studies used as a filter responses to a question whether the respondent intended to turnout for the election at all or whether they actually had participated in the election. Those who stated that they would not or did not participate were assigned the category “None” for the party preference variable.

### **3 Electoral Abstention and Class in Germany**

In the ALLBUS surveys, respondents were asked whether they would turn out for a Bundestag election if one were held in the next Sunday, in the GLES pre-election survey, respondents were asked whether they would go to the polls on the upcoming Bundestag election, and in the GLES post-election survey, respondents were asked whether they voted in that election. Figure 1 shows the percentages of respondents from the eight occupational classes distinguished in the section above who answer these questions to the negative. Thus it shows how abstention from voting has developed over the years from 1980 to 2009 in West Germany and from 1990 to 2009 in East Germany. From sub-figure 1(a) it becomes clear that an increase in the tendency to abstain is present in all classes, but that the increases in the traditional social bases of the social democrats, the semi/unskilled workers, skilled workers and manual supervisors is especially marked ones as are the increases in the routine non-manual working class and among the farmers and agricultural workers. In the West German lower and higher service class and among the self-employed the increases are much more limited. East Germany shows only a slightly different pattern. In the East, the tendency to abstain increases only slightly in the routine non-manual class, at a higher pace among the farmer and agricultural workers, and seems to slightly decrease among the manual supervisors. Also, levels of abstention appear to be by and large higher in the East than in the West.

Table 2 presents estimates for a logit model of turnout (intended and, for the GLES post-election wave, reported) by class and time, with random effects of the ALLBUS and GLES surveys waves. The time variable is the date of the respective survey, standardized such that it is zero in 1990, and that the difference between the first and the last time point, that is between 1980 and 2009, equals one. The baseline category for the dummy coding of class is

Table 2: Trends in abstention from Bundestag elections (intended and reported), by class in West Germany and East Germany, 1980–2009; PQL estimates of a logit model with random effects of survey waves

	West Germany	East Germany
(Intercept)	−2.977*** (0.101)	−2.022*** (0.239)
Semi/unskilled worker/Lower service class	0.732*** (0.092)	0.494* (0.213)
Skilled worker/Lower service class	0.540*** (0.090)	0.205 (0.180)
Manual supervisor/Lower service class	0.188 (0.120)	−0.071 (0.263)
Routine non-manual/Lower service class	0.335*** (0.097)	0.204 (0.221)
Higher service class/Lower service class	−0.320* (0.131)	−0.545* (0.268)
Self-employed/Lower service class	0.261* (0.130)	−0.116 (0.316)
Farmer/agricultural/Lower service class	0.356* (0.156)	−0.231 (0.287)
Time	0.922*** (0.274)	−0.409 (0.580)
Semi/unskilled worker/Lower service class × Time	0.734** (0.236)	1.585** (0.503)
Skilled worker/Lower service class × Time	0.587* (0.233)	1.779*** (0.444)
Manual supervisor/Lower service class × Time	0.600 (0.318)	0.257 (0.691)
Routine non-manual/Lower service class × Time	0.301 (0.239)	0.994 (0.509)
Higher service class/Lower service class × Time	−0.234 (0.360)	0.578 (0.688)
Self-employed/Lower service class × Time	0.352 (0.346)	1.143 (0.739)
Farmer/agricultural/Lower service class × Time	0.748 (0.392)	3.226*** (0.647)
Var(Intercept)	0.069	0.074
Deviance	178.5	98.4
N	27212	8562

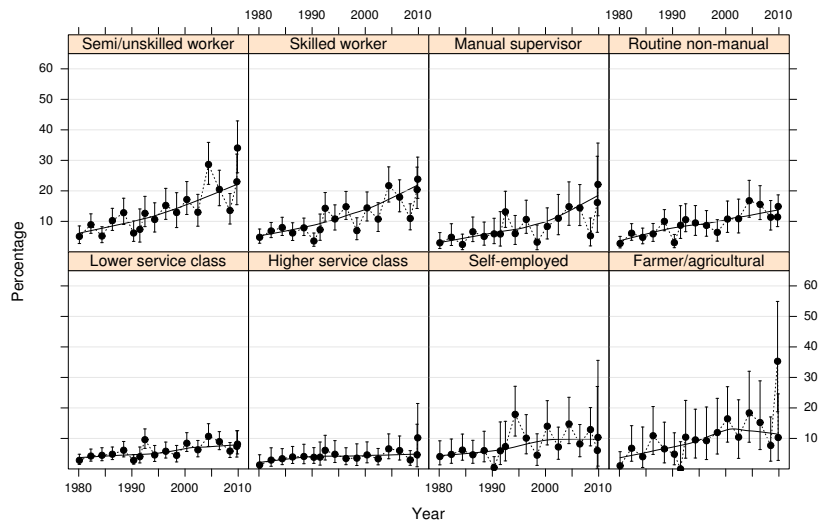
Note: PQL estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ . The model was fit to binomial counts, hence the deviance is much smaller than it would be if fitted to the raw binary response data.

the lower service class. The estimates convey a clear message: Most of the class differences in West Germany with respect to (intended or reported) abstention from Bundestag elections are statistically significant and some of the class differences are also statistically significant in East Germany. More importantly, in both parts of the country there are clear class-related differences with respect to the pace of the increase in electoral abstention: As the statistically significant coefficients of the interaction terms of the class-contrasts with the time variable the table suggest, abstention increases especially among the semi/unskilled and skilled worker classes. In West Germany the pace of the increase is faster among these manual working classes than in the lower service class. In East Germany an increase in abstention is statistically significant *only* among the semi/unskilled worker, skilled worker and farmer/agricultural classes.

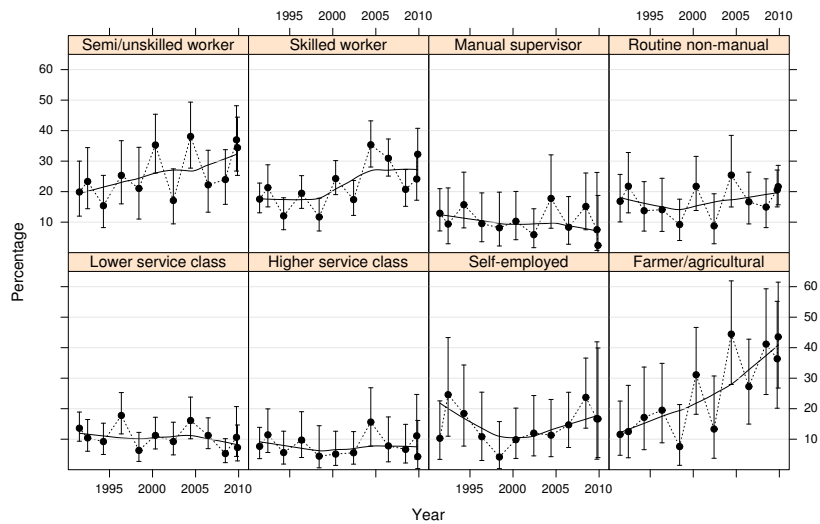
To summarize the results of this section: The decision to abstain from Bundestag elections is both related to socio-economic class and to the East-West division of post-unification Germany. In the East abstention is more widespread than in the West and, in addition, abstention is more widespread in the economically more vulnerable manual working classes (the classes of semi/unskilled and skilled manual workers). Furthermore, while abstention seems to increase in general, the social classes differ in the rates of this increase. These different rates of increase accentuate class-related differences in turnout that may have existed in the early 1980s to such a degree which may lead to the statement that, even if patterns voting had no longer been a class phenomenon (it still is, cf. Elff and Roßteutscher 2009), turnout to or abstention from voting clearly has obtained strong class-related patterns by the turn of the millennium.

Figure 1: Development of electoral abstention in Germany, 1980–2009: Percentages of respondents who report that they would not vote in an election, from ALLBUS surveys and the GLES pre-election survey, or did not vote from the GLES post-election survey, in a Bundestag election

(a) West Germany



(b) East Germany





## 4 Political Efficacy and Abstention

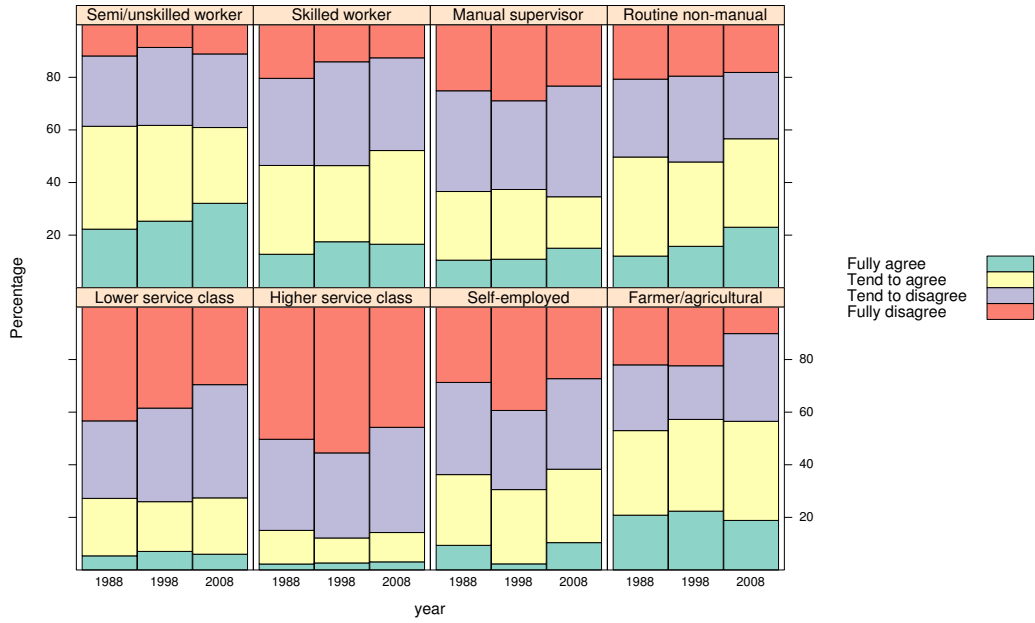
Different rates of political participation may be related to differences in the possession of civic skills conveyed by the educational system (Verba *et al.* 1995) and usually people with lower education may end up in the manual working classes. But the pace of decline in electoral participation of manual workers points to other possible explanations – it may be the result of a growing disenchantment and disappointment of manual workers with that party that traditionally is viewed as specifically presenting their interests. Yet since the Bundestag election of 1998, the SPD has openly changed its rhetoric and electoral appeal into a more “middle class” direction. With the political alternatives looking hardly more attracting in terms of welfare and labor market policies withdrawal from the voting booth could have been viewed as the only motivated reaction. To shed some light on the question whether electoral abstention is motivated by a sense of (possibly acquiescent) passivity or by political dissatisfaction, this section looks at to crucial motivational factors, subjective political efficacy and perceived responsiveness of political elites. Subjective political efficacy, the perception that one can make a difference, is a crucial component of the motivation to engage in politics (see for the German case Becker 2004). It seems quite unlikely that one gets politically involved if one feels not be capable of such an engagement or that any attempt to influence politics is futile because of a lack of responsiveness of public office-holders and politicians.

On three occasions, in its waves of 1988, 1998, and 2008, the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) questionnaire contains items related to political efficacy in Likert format. In these surveys, respondents were asked whether they would fully agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree or fully disagree with the statements “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” and “Politicians don’t care much about what people like me think.” The former item apparently corresponds to the concept of personal or “subjective” political efficacy, whereas the latter is a typical indicator of “objective” political efficacy or perceived responsiveness of the political sphere to personal concerns.

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution of the responses to the statement “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all.” A quick glimpse on the figure reveals striking differences between social classes in terms of their responses to this statement. Members of the lower and especially of the higher service class show a clear tendency to oppose this statement. However, the vigorousness of this opposition declines somewhat in the lower service class. Nevertheless, members of those strata that enclose the highly educated, seem rarely overwhelmed by politics or are at least

Figure 2: Percentages of ALLBUS respondents agreeing or disagreeing to the statement “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” in 1988, 1998, and 2008

(a) West Germany



(b) East Germany

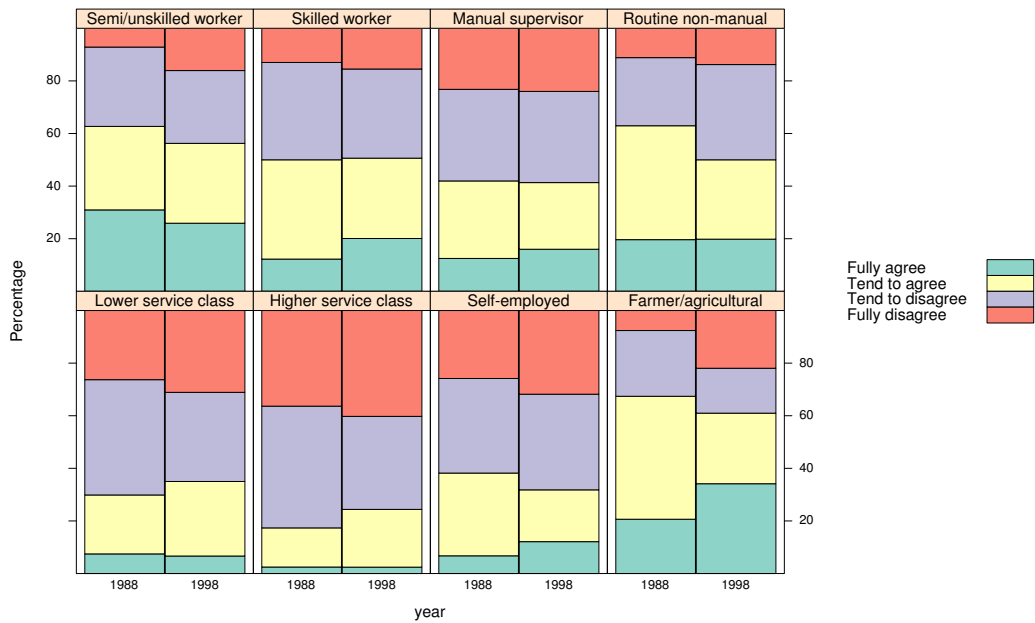
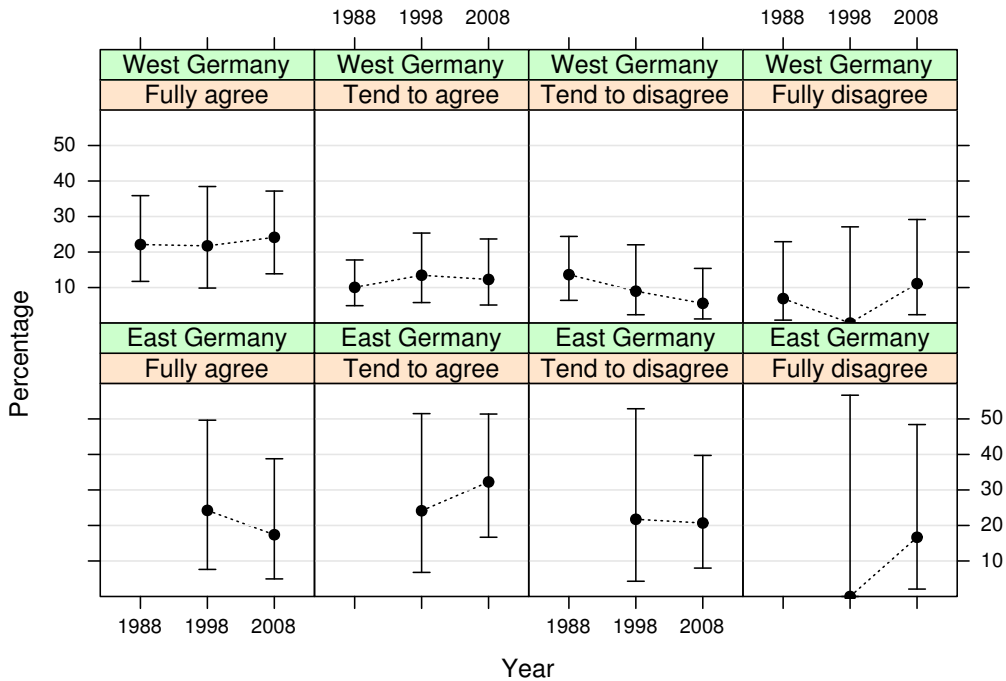


Figure 3: Subjective political efficacy and abstention in the semi/unskilled worker class: Agreement with the statement “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” and the reported intention to abstain from Bundestag elections (percentages) in 1988, 1998, and 2008



rarely ready to admit to be so. Not the less striking, however, is the absence of a clear increase in the agreement with this statement in the manual working classes and the routine non-manual working class that compares with the increase in the unwillingness to turn out to the polls for a Bundestag election (figure 1). In West Germany, the balance between agreeing and disagreeing responses does not show a trend, especially not in direction of agreement. Only among the semi-/unskilled workers, the agreement gets more intensive, that is, the percentage of those who fully agree increases at the expense of the percentage who only tend to agree. Even more, in East Germany, semi-/unskilled workers and routine non-manual workers show from 1998 to 2008 an increase in the tendency to disagree. Skilled workers and manual supervisors seem agree more intensively to the statement – if they agree – but the balance between agreement and disagreement seems hardly to change at all.

The previous considerations notwithstanding, in order to assess the plausibility of the attribution of the decline in electoral turnout among the manual working classes to a decline in (subjective) political efficacy, one also needs to inspect whether turnout is indeed lower among those who see themselves as politically not efficacious. Especially, one needs to inspect this relation among the group where the decline in turnout is the steepest, that is, among the class of semi- and unskilled workers. This relation is visualized by figure 3.

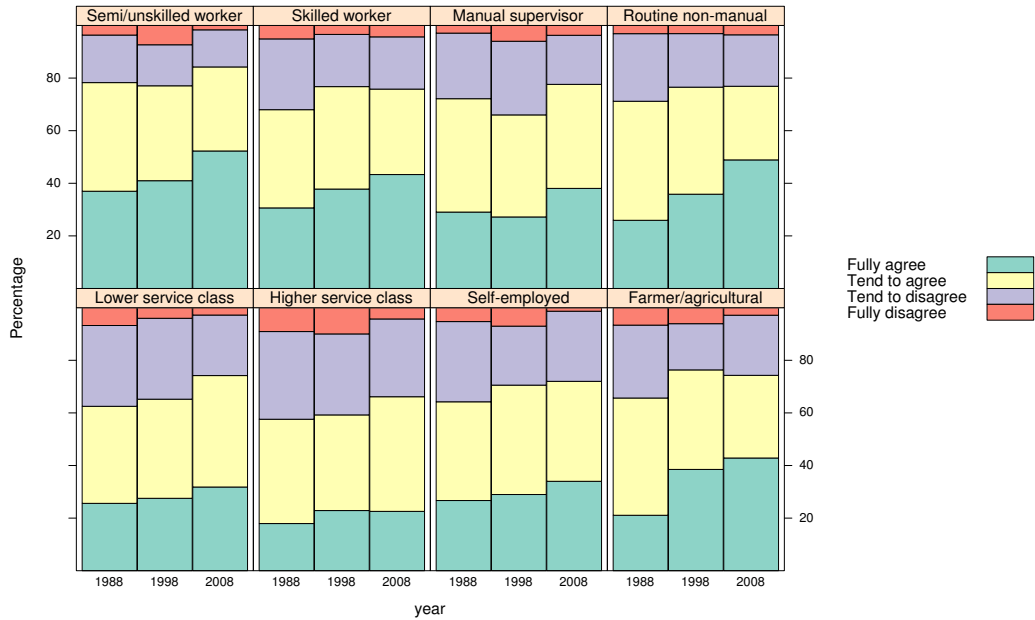
As this diagram makes clear, in West Germany the tendency to abstain from Bundestag elections is higher among those members of the semi- and unskilled worker classes who fully agree with the statement “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” than among those who only tend to agree or who disagree with this statement. Also there is no decline *within* those groups defined by the different degrees of agreement with the statement. There seems to be somewhat of a tendency of decline among those who tend to disagree with the statement, but this decline is not statistically significant. In East Germany, however, there is no evidence for a relation between agreement with the statement and (intended) turnout to Bundestag elections.

While the item questionnaire item discussed previously may be considered to refer to subjective political efficacy, responses to the statement “Politicians don’t care much about what people like me think” may be considered as indicator for the perceived responsiveness of political elites (usually an indicator of the so-called “objective political efficacy”). These responses are summarized, broken down by social class, in figure 4. Class differences with respect to agreement with this statement appear less striking than those class differences that were observable in figure 2, but nevertheless they are present. The tendency of members from the semi/unskilled worker class to agree with this statement is higher than in the lower and higher service class. Also the tendency to view politicians as non-responsive to ones’ ideas is more prevalent in East Germany than in the West. But what is more important for a potential explanatory factor for the decline in electoral turnout, one can additionally observe a change in the balance between agreement and disagreement to this statement among the semi/unskilled workers and the routine non-manual workers of West Germany, which is accompanied by a growing intensity of agreement. If one would also find a clear and stable relation between the agreement to this statement and electoral turnout then this would make a strong case for the notion that the decline in electoral turnout is driven by political dissatisfaction. Indeed this is what figure 5 bears out, at least for West Germany.

Figure 5 graphs percentages of respondents from the semi/unskilled worker class, who report that they intend to abstain from a Bundestag election, against year of survey and agreement or disagreement with the statement “Politicians don’t care much about what

Figure 4: Percentages of ALLBUS respondents agreeing or disagreeing to the statement “Politicians don’t care much about what people like me think” in 1988, 1998, and 2008

(a) West Germany



(b) East Germany

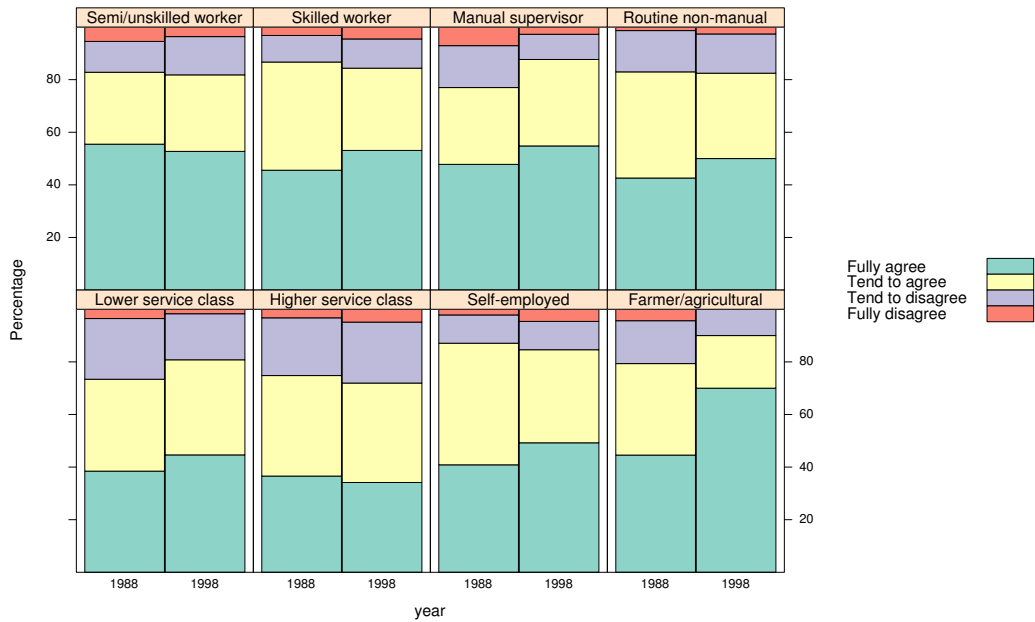
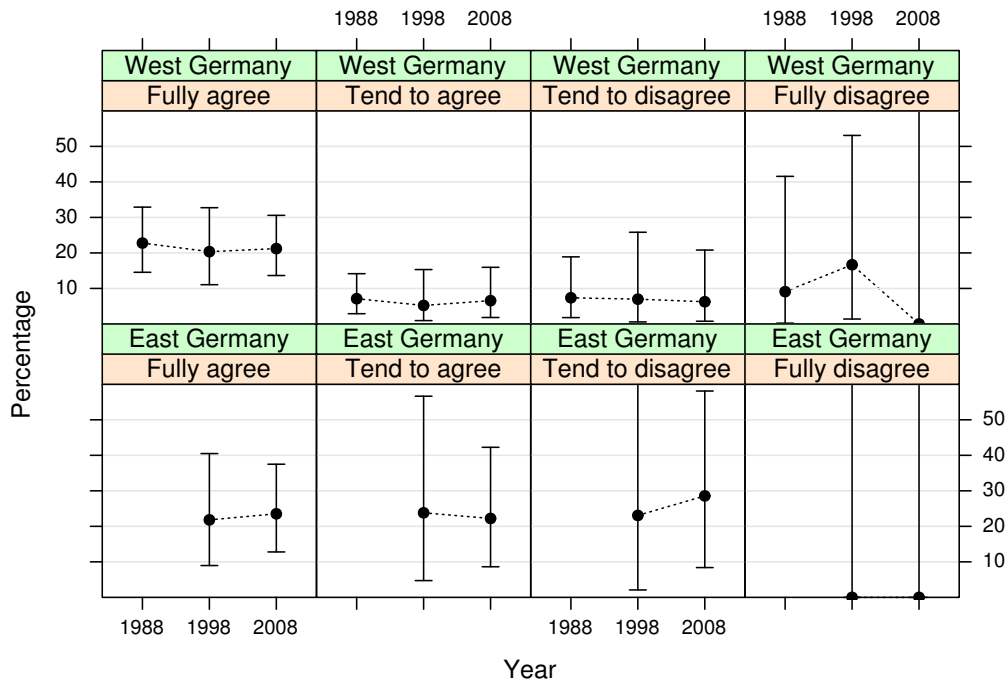


Figure 5: Perceived political responsiveness and abstention in the semi/unskilled worker class: Agreement with the statement “Politicians don’t care much about what people like me think” and the reported intention to abstain from Bundestag elections (percentages) in 1988, 1998, and 2008



people like me think” for West and East Germany. It becomes quite obvious from this diagram that the tendency to abstain from election increases with the agreement to this statement. Again, in West Germany the tendency to abstain from elections is clearly higher among those who fully agree with the statement than among those who only tend to agree with it or disagree, whereas in East Germany no such differences can be found. In that respect, the results depicted in figure 5 mirror those to be found in figure 3. That is, the notion that the decline in turnout in the semi/unskilled worker class can be related to an increased frustration about politicians’ responsiveness is as least as much supported as the notion that this decline is related to a decline in subjective political efficacy.

Of course, the two claims, (1) that a decline in electoral participation is related to a decline in subjective political efficacy and that (2) the decline in turnout is brought about or at least accelerated by an increase in political frustration, are not incompatible with each other,

Table 3: A binomial logit model of the effects of subjective political efficacy and perceived political responsiveness on (intended) abstention from Bundestag elections in the semi/unskilled worker class, 1988, 1998, and 2008

	West Germany	East Germany
(Intercept)	-2.172*** (0.224)	-5.603 (674.101)
Politics too complex: Tend to disagree-Fully disagree	0.469 (0.547)	0.589 (0.868)
Politics too complex: Tend to agree-Tend to disagree	0.114 (0.354)	0.390 (0.500)
Politics too complex: Fully agree-Tend to agree	0.572 (0.311)	-0.572 (0.530)
Politicians don't care: Tend to disagree-Fully disagree	-0.747 (0.782)	17.255 (2696.405)
Politicians don't care: Tend to agree-Tend to disagree	-0.145 (0.485)	-0.429 (0.649)
Politicians don't care: Fully agree-Tend to agree	1.241*** (0.331)	0.253 (0.496)
Year: 1998-1988	-0.172 (0.328)	
Year: 2008-1998	0.026 (0.340)	0.026 (0.433)
Deviance	45.494	26.863
Likelihood-ratio	33.841	5.410
N	570	144

Note: ML estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ . The model was fit to binomial counts, hence the deviance is much smaller than it would be if fitted to the raw binary response data.

however contrasting they appear. Different people may withdraw from electoral politics for different reasons. Also, a cynical view about the responsiveness of political elites may be an outgrowth of confusion about politics, which is also expressed by a low subjective political efficacy. Conversely, it may also be the case that many people believe that “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” *because* politics is no longer about matters that concern ordinary citizens. In order to assess whether dissatisfaction or apathy is the driving force behind declining turnout, or at least in order to assess which of these factors is the more important one, it is necessary to focus on the simultaneous influence of these factors on electoral turnout. Even more, if the relation between one of the factors with turnout vanishes, once the other factor is held constant, one may conclude that this other factor may be the driving force behind a change in both.

An assessment of the empirical viability of these considerations is made possible with the help of a binomial logit model, the estimates of which are presented in table 3. The model describes how subjective political efficacy and perceived responsiveness of politicians impinge on electoral turnout in the semi/unskilled worker class. It is estimated separately for West and East Germany. The coefficients so obtained support the notion that frustration about the responsiveness of political elites is the primary driving force for the decline in turnout rather than an increase in political apathy. Only of the contrast coefficients of perceived response coefficients one is statistically significant in West Germany, whereas none of the contrasts for subjective political efficacy achieves statistical significance. The lack of statistical significance may be a consequence of a strong relation between perceived responsiveness and subjective efficacy, which may inflate the standard errors, but the contrast between “fully agree” and “tend to agree” with the (non-)responsiveness statement is not only statistically significant but also larger in size than the corresponding contrast between “fully agree” and “tend to agree” with the (non-)efficacy statement. For East Germany, none of the coefficients attains statistical significance, which reflects the weak relation between efficacy and responsiveness and turnout, as already obvious from figures 3 and 5.

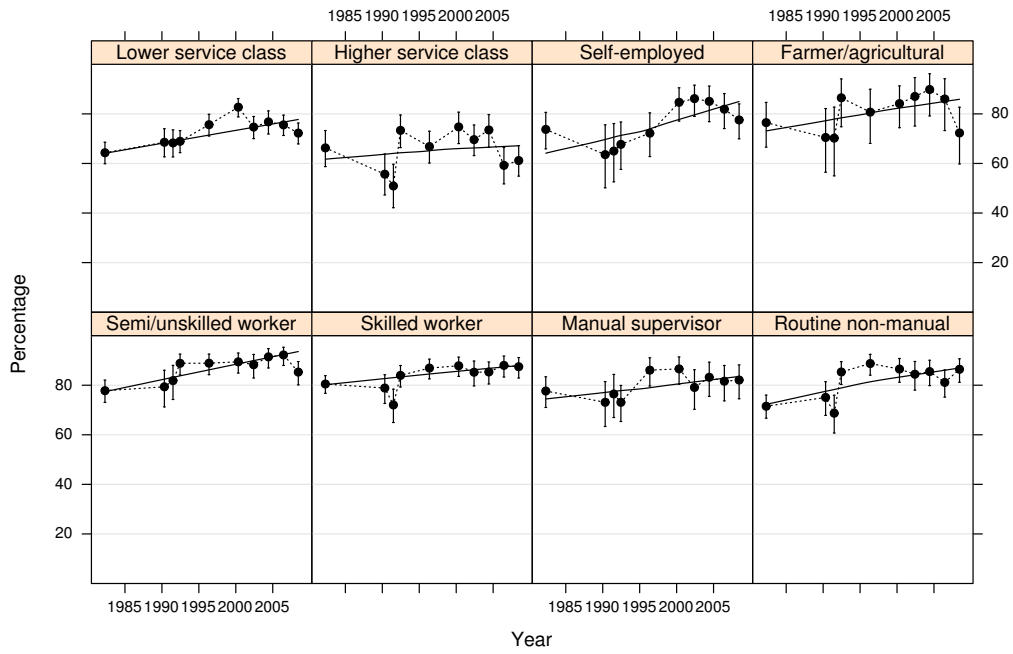
The results of the preceding analysis so far lend support to the notion that the decline in turnout is brought about by dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of political elites rather than by mere political passivity or apathy. But it may be argued that the evidence in favor for such a conclusion suffers from the quite limited number of points in time so far being taken into account: Data on agreement or disagreement with the statements “Politics is so complicated that somebody like me can’t understand what’s going on at all” and “Politicians don’t care much about what people like me think” are only available for up to three years, 1988, 1998, and 2008.

Fortunately, the role of perceived politicians’ responsiveness can be further explored by an item that is much more often used in the ALLBUS surveys. This item has been used – according to the ALLBUS codebook (Terwey and Baltzer 2009) – with the intention to measure the sociological concept of anomie, but it has a wording referring to responsiveness: The statement reads “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man.” The main difference between the wording of this item and the statement used for the item discussed before is that the alleged non-responsiveness now is towards “the average man” instead of “people like me”. Thus it emphasizes less the responsiveness to (hypothetical) input from the respondents than the responsiveness to their interests and problems. In a way it taps therefore not only perceived responsiveness but also the representation of the interests of the “common people.”



Figure 6: Percentages of ALLBUS respondents agreeing to the statement “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man”, 1982–2008

(a) West Germany



(b) East Germany

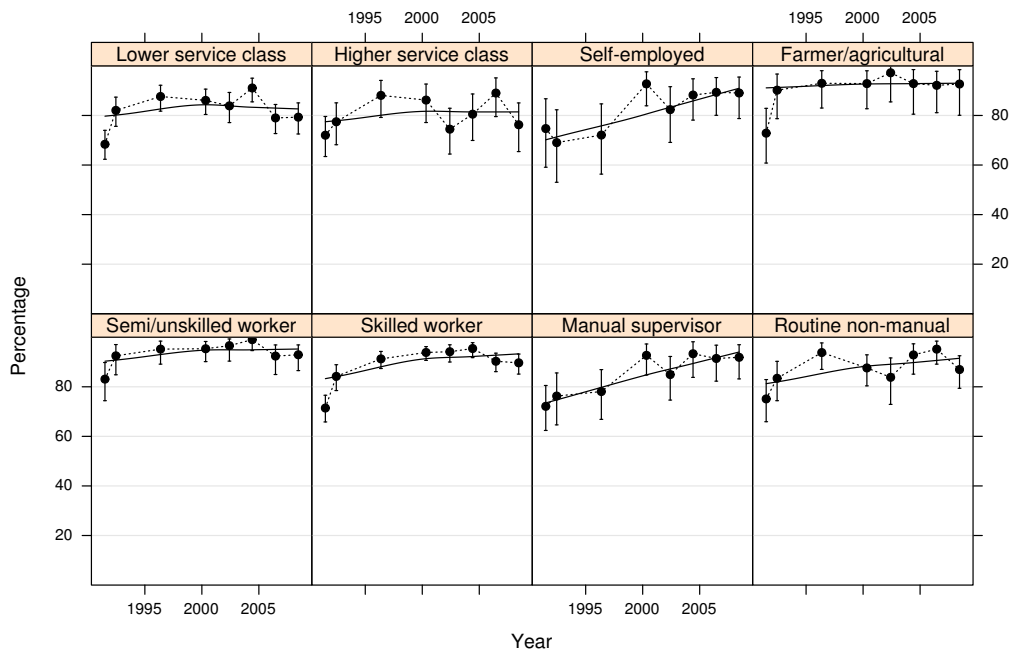


Figure 7: Perceived political responsiveness and abstention in the semi/unskilled worker class, 1982–2008: Percentages of respondents that intend to abstain from Bundestag elections by agreement or disagreement to the statement “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man.”

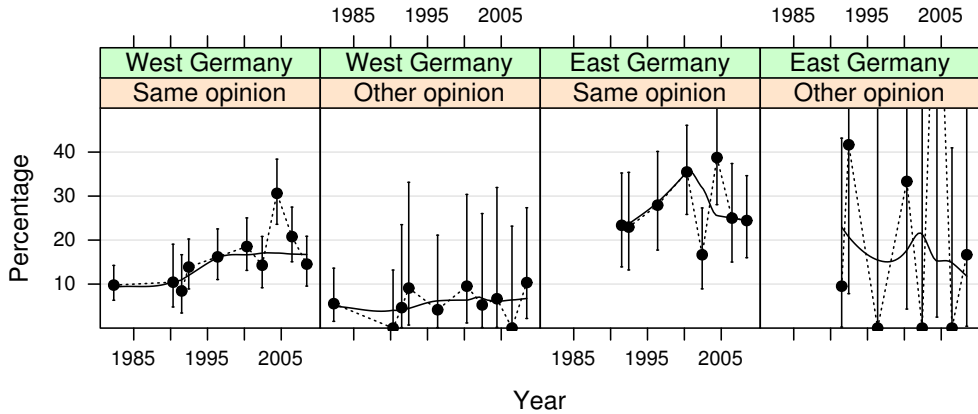


Figure 6 depicts the development of agreement to the statement “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man.” It reveals a high degree of political cynicism of the German population, when it comes to the impression of politicians responsiveness to the interests of the common people: In all eight classes in East and West Germany, the rate of agreement to the statement is already very high. With such high rates, it seems that agreement to this statement cannot be used as an explanation of an increase in electoral abstention because it lacks variance. Nevertheless it may add circumstantial evidence that political satisfaction plays a role in contributing to it. First, despite the high level, the level of agreement has even been increasing, with a moderate increase only in the higher service class in West Germany and the higher and lower service class in East Germany. Second, there is still room for some fluctuation, and indeed the level of agreement with the statement shows a peak around 2004 among the manual workers in West and especially East Germany, at the same time in which intended abstention from voting shows a peak.

Despite the little variance in terms of agreement to the statement “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man” there is evidence that those who agree to the statement more often abstain from Bundestag elections than those who disagree, as can be seen from figure 7 and table 4. Figure 7 shows the development of electoral abstention

Table 4: The effect of perceived political responsiveness to average people on intended abstention from Bundestag elections in the semi/unskilled worker class, 1982–2008; PQL estimates of a logit model with random effects of survey waves and agreement to the statement “Most politicians are not really interested in the problems of the average man” as independent variable

	West Germany	East Germany
(Intercept)	-3.035*** (0.295)	-1.614*** (0.466)
Politicians not interested	1.053*** (0.281)	0.537 (0.415)
Time	1.042** (0.349)	0.189 (0.624)
Var(Intercept)	0.048	0.067
Deviance	23.8	23.4
N	1830	639

Note: PQL estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\* =  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ . The model was fit to binomial counts, hence the deviance is much smaller than it would be if fitted to the raw binary response data.

among those from the semi/unskilled worker class who agree and among those who disagree with the statement.

For East Germany it appears impossible to detect differences between those who agree and those who disagree with the statement, not to mention any trends. Obviously, the distribution of the independent variable is so unbalanced here that it prohibits any results. Yet at least for West Germany, one can detect a difference as well as some telling over-time changes: Around 2004 the intended abstention from Bundestag election among those who agree that politicians are disinterested in the problems of common people shows the same peak that was observed in figure 1. This can be viewed as meaning that those fluctuations cannot be accounted for by changes in the attitude towards politicians’ responsiveness. That is, the propensity to turnout or abstain in Bundestag election is more flexible than more general orientations towards political elites. But this can also be viewed as showing that the variation in the independent variable here does not suffice to capture those changes in attitudes that are of relevance here.

Whatever the limits of the empirical results presented and discussed are, the evidence may be sufficient to weigh the plausibility of two contrasting claims: (1) The decline in

turnout in the working classes has to be attributed to a decline in their members' confidence in their personal political capabilities or (2) the decline is an outgrowth of political dissatisfaction with those politicians they expect to be responsive to their views and interests. The second claim seems more plausible against the background of a relatively stable level of confidence in political capabilities and an increasing level of cynicism with regards to politicians' responsiveness or representativeness.

## 5 The Consequences for the Support for the Social Democrats

Traditionally, the Social Democrats have been viewed as the German labor party, the political representation of the working class in Germany. If members of the industrial working class increasingly abstain from voting out of political frustration about their political representation, then this may have been caused by the Social Democrats' actions while in government. And if frustration about the Social Democrats' policies are the cause of abstention, then one may expect that it is especially the support for the SPD on whose expense the increase of abstention occurs.

Tables 5 and 6 give some hints on whether this expectation is borne out. Table 5 shows estimates for each of the eight classes in West Germany of a multinomial conditional logit model of respondents' vote intention and (for the GLES post-election survey) reported votes as dependent variable and party dummies and interaction terms of a time variable with the party dummies as independent variable. The baseline category of the dummy-coding of the party alternatives is no party, i.e. abstention. This conditional logit model is largely equivalent to a multinomial baseline logit model, except that it takes into account the different choice sets before and after 1990 in West Germany (the unification added the PDS to the parties from which voters could choose). Table 6 does the same for East Germany. Each column in the tables refers to the model to the respondents of one of the eight social classes. "I" refers to the class of semi/unskilled workers, "II" to the class of skilled workers, "III" to the class of manual supervisors, "IV" to the routine non-manual working class, "V" to the lower, "VI" to the higher service class, "VII" to the class of the self-employed and "VIII" to the class of the farmers and agricultural workers. The time variable is constructed in the same manner as the time variables present in the model of table 2.

In tables 5 and 6 the coefficients in rows labeled as "SPD", "CDU/CSU", "FDP", etc. indicate how much the respective parties' support was larger or smaller than the amount of abstention at in the year 1990 within the respective social class. The coefficients in rows

labeled as “SPD  $\times$  Time”, etc., express how the support of the respective party has decreased or increased throughout the period from 1980 to 2009.

There is not sufficient room in this paper to comment on all coefficient estimates in tables 5 and 6 and only a few of them are actually relevant for the purpose of this paper. The following conclusions can however be drawn from the coefficients in these tables. First, the post-communist “Left” is the only party that gains support while abstention increases. All other parties lose support while as abstention increases in West Germany, but the SPD appears to be the most severely and that especially in the classes of the semi/unskilled workers and of the skilled workers. This suggests that the increase in electoral abstention especially hurts the SPD and, as it seems, especially among the classes of the semi/unskilled workers and of the skilled workers. But it is difficult to justify such a claim exactly on the basis of the logit coefficients in the model, since they express party support *relative* to the amount of abstention, which cannot be represented by a coefficient since it forms the baseline category, or they express change in party support *relative* to the change in the amount of abstention. Since the coefficients of the model are so difficult to interpret, substantial conclusions can only be drawn with the additional help of a graphical representation of the model predictions, which represent a smoothed version of the development of vote intentions or votes and the amount of abstention that occurs in West Germany and East Germany. Such a graphical representation is given by figure 8.

Figure 8 illustrates how the increasing tendency of abstention within the manual working classes and the routine non-manual class occurs at the expense of the support for the Social Democrats. While the percentage of support for the SPD declines in classes of the semi/unskilled workers, skilled workers, manual supervisors and routine non-manual workers in West Germany (sub-figure 8(a)), the combination of the percentage of SPD supporters and abstainers shows a much slighter decline in these groups. While the support for the SPD shows a marked decline among the semi/unskilled and skilled worker classes, the increase in support for the center-right camp, for the CDU/CSU and FDP shows only a modest increase. In East Germany a similar phenomenon can be observed in the classes of the semi/unskilled workers, skilled, and routine non-manual workers (sub-figure 8(a)). At the same time when the support for the SPD shows a very marked decline an increase of electoral abstention can be observed. However, a comparison of the sub-figures 8(a) and 8(b) reveals the crucial role which the availability of the PDS/Left may play as a “legitimate” or “viable” alternative: In East Germany defection from the SPD to the PDS/Left may seem as common as the withdrawal to abstention.

Table 5: Abstention (intended and reported) and party preferences (vote intention or intended votes) and class, in West Germany 1980–2009; a multinomial conditional logit model of party preference (vote intention or reported vote), with party dummies that take abstention as baseline category. The column headed by “I” refers to the class of semi/unskilled workers, “II” to the class of skilled workers, “III” to the class of manual supervisors, “IV” to the routine non-manual working class, “V” to the lower, “VI” to the higher service class, “VII” to the class of the self-employed and “VIII” to the class of the farmers and agricultural workers.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
SPD	1.447*** (0.099)	1.667*** (0.111)	1.821*** (0.125)	1.636*** (0.108)	1.824*** (0.104)	1.896*** (0.132)	1.063*** (0.138)	0.846*** (0.151)
GDU/CSU	1.102*** (0.103)	1.303*** (0.115)	1.666*** (0.127)	1.624*** (0.108)	1.892*** (0.104)	2.239*** (0.129)	1.979*** (0.128)	1.973*** (0.137)
FDP	-0.672*** (0.150)	-0.424** (0.160)	0.019 (0.163)	0.222 (0.132)	0.682*** (0.118)	1.348*** (0.138)	0.537*** (0.151)	0.022 (0.177)
Greens	-0.794*** (0.156)	-0.132 (0.146)	0.173 (0.156)	0.111 (0.136)	0.883*** (0.115)	1.373*** (0.138)	0.188 (0.163)	-0.738*** (0.223)
PDS/Left	-5.463** (1.679)	-4.390*** (1.171)	-4.447** (1.515)	-3.775** (0.961)	-4.107*** (0.910)	-1.629* (0.746)	-1.528 (0.841)	-2.605 (2.217)
Other	-1.685*** (0.225)	-1.056*** (0.203)	-0.943*** (0.235)	-1.434*** (0.232)	-1.273*** (0.211)	-0.933*** (0.269)	-0.823*** (0.249)	-0.713 (0.407)
SPD × Time	-1.819*** (0.259)	-1.864*** (0.292)	-1.624*** (0.346)	-1.664*** (0.253)	-0.957*** (0.280)	-0.987** (0.374)	-1.391*** (0.388)	-1.378*** (0.394)
GDU/CSU × Time	-1.471*** (0.268)	-1.528*** (0.301)	-1.332*** (0.349)	-1.474*** (0.251)	-1.102*** (0.280)	-0.565 (0.364)	-1.395*** (0.351)	-1.338*** (0.344)
FDP × Time	-1.327** (0.416)	-0.832 (0.428)	-0.384 (0.446)	-0.762* (0.308)	-0.795* (0.323)	-0.157 (0.387)	-0.251 (0.408)	-0.863 (0.460)
Greens × Time	-1.317** (0.435)	-1.330*** (0.404)	-0.715 (0.436)	-0.509 (0.313)	-0.287 (0.307)	-0.099 (0.386)	-0.116 (0.441)	-0.470 (0.569)
Other × Time	-0.412 (0.577)	-0.540 (0.525)	-0.597 (0.663)	-0.187 (0.516)	0.369 (0.534)	-0.193 (0.730)	-0.557 (0.686)	-1.627 (1.131)
PDS/Left × Time from 1990	6.633* (2.770)	5.841** (1.947)	6.158* (2.585)	4.574** (1.561)	5.965*** (1.571)	2.037 (1.477)	0.070 (1.789)	1.281 (3.878)
Dispersion	2.462	3.132	1.574	2.272	2.505	1.362	1.391	0.983
Likelihood-ratio	3327.8	3555.2	1688.8	3067.4	4372.1	1812.0	1262.0	917.8
Deviance	244.5	313.3	154.6	228.8	266.8	131.3	135.0	90.2
N	3794	4613	2221	4404	6407	3054	1789	1015

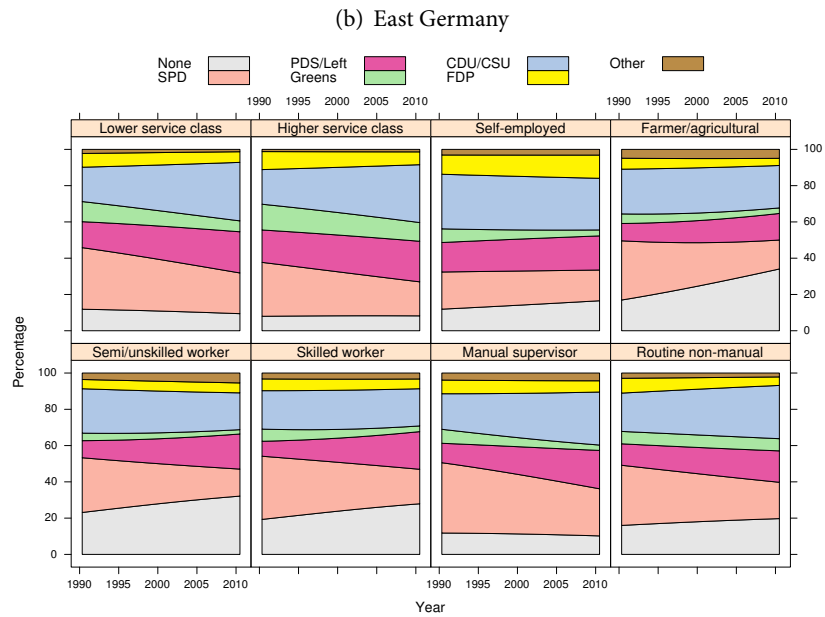
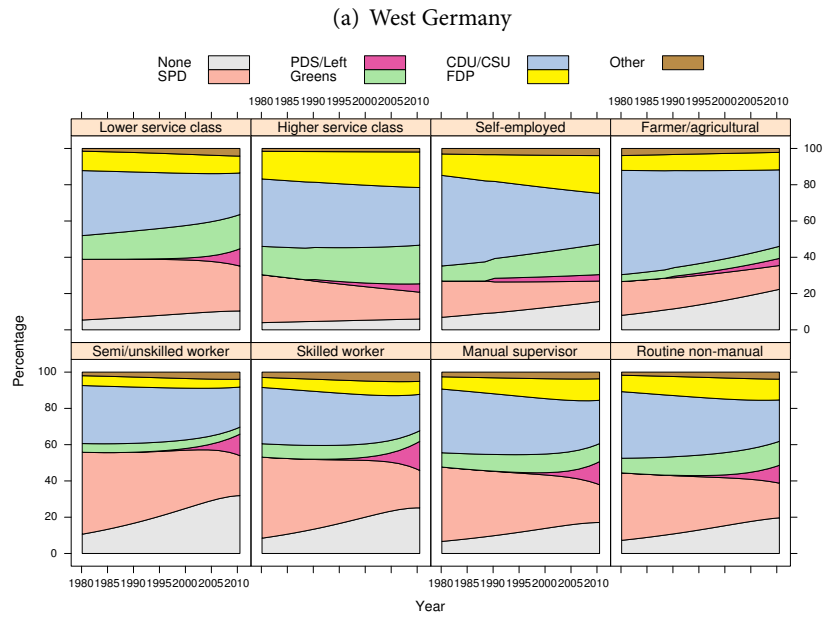
Note: ML estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \* \* \* =  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ . The model allows for overdispersion (hence the reported dispersion estimate) and was fit to multinomial counts, hence the deviance is much smaller than it would be if fitted to the raw binary response data.

Table 6: Abstention (intended and reported) and party preferences (vote intention or intended votes) and class, in East Germany 1990–2009; a multinomial conditional logit model of party preference (vote intention or reported vote), with party dummies that take abstention as baseline category. The column headed by “I” refers to the class of semi/unskilled workers, “II” to the class of skilled workers, “III” to the class of manual supervisors, “IV” to the routine non-manual working class, “V” to the lower, “VI” to the higher service class, “VII” to the class of the self-employed and “VIII” to the class of the farmers and agricultural workers.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
SPD	0.791*** (0.185)	1.084*** (0.187)	1.319*** (0.268)	1.092*** (0.238)	1.143*** (0.202)	1.564*** (0.309)	0.806* (0.347)	1.371*** (0.246)
CDU/CSU	0.319 (0.195)	0.297 (0.207)	0.233 (0.302)	0.220 (0.262)	0.081 (0.226)	0.628 (0.331)	1.122*** (0.327)	0.756** (0.259)
FDP	-1.381*** (0.329)	-0.809** (0.297)	-0.420 (0.377)	-0.285 (0.332)	-0.438 (0.279)	0.406 (0.367)	-0.041 (0.403)	-0.461 (0.398)
Greens	-1.271*** (0.355)	-0.487 (0.288)	-0.011 (0.367)	-0.735* (0.358)	0.126 (0.248)	0.753* (0.342)	0.133 (0.433)	-0.532 (0.427)
PDS/Left	-1.097*** (0.263)	-1.130*** (0.276)	-0.516 (0.349)	-0.387 (0.304)	-0.163 (0.240)	0.708* (0.333)	0.404 (0.387)	-0.437 (0.332)
Other	-1.920*** (0.387)	-1.598*** (0.393)	-1.240* (0.491)	-1.448* (0.658)	-1.499*** (0.435)	-1.930 (1.278)	-1.194 (0.824)	-0.903 (0.468)
SPD × Time	-1.560*** (0.269)	-1.467*** (0.277)	-0.384 (0.445)	-1.076*** (0.312)	-0.275 (0.329)	-0.739 (0.495)	-0.781 (0.495)	-2.129*** (0.354)
CDU/CSU × Time	-0.779** (0.266)	-0.605* (0.294)	0.820 (0.472)	0.178 (0.320)	1.150*** (0.342)	0.728 (0.501)	-0.579 (0.458)	-1.132** (0.350)
FDP × Time	-0.390 (0.444)	-0.838 (0.441)	-0.078 (0.619)	-1.152* (0.463)	-0.035 (0.450)	-0.557 (0.597)	-0.215 (0.561)	-1.690* (0.722)
Greens × Time	-1.326* (0.538)	-1.696*** (0.478)	-1.228* (0.721)	-0.344 (0.457)	-0.575 (0.420)	-0.526 (0.551)	-1.751* (0.696)	-1.881** (0.721)
PDS/Left × Time	0.589 (0.325)	0.834* (0.354)	1.246* (0.523)	0.257 (0.368)	1.043** (0.361)	0.293 (0.512)	-0.275 (0.531)	-0.407 (0.434)
Other × Time	0.145 (0.493)	-0.547 (0.570)	0.367 (0.808)	-0.774 (0.890)	-0.490 (0.787)	0.136 (1.891)	-0.470 (1.102)	-1.033 (0.698)
Dispersion	1.085	2.304	1.229	1.602	1.689	1.502	1.055	0.797
Likelihood-ratio	531.2	1128.4	333.9	474.3	782.0	290.0	169.3	193.4
Deviance	77.3	173.1	85.6	112.7	127.5	101.5	72.4	48.2
N	1022	2218	671	1149	1662	856	520	463

Note: ML estimates with standard errors in parentheses. \* \* \* =  $p < 0.001$ , \*\* =  $p < 0.01$ , \* =  $p < 0.05$ . The model allows for overdispersion (hence the reported dispersion estimate) and was fit to multinomial counts, hence the deviance is much smaller than it would be if fitted to the raw binary response data.

Figure 8: Predictions from the multinomial logit model of party preference





The parallelism between the decline of the support for the SPD and the increase in abstention (or more correctly: intended abstention) is highly suggestive that many voters within the classes of the semi/unskilled and skilled manual workers have withdrawn from participating in elections rather than having defected to other parties. With a series of cross-sectional surveys it is however only possible to show that such an interpretation is consistent with the observations. In order to examine movements from the support for specific parties to other parties or to abstention, one would need panel data. However, there are no panel data available that would enable to track those long-term changes that are in the focus of the present paper.

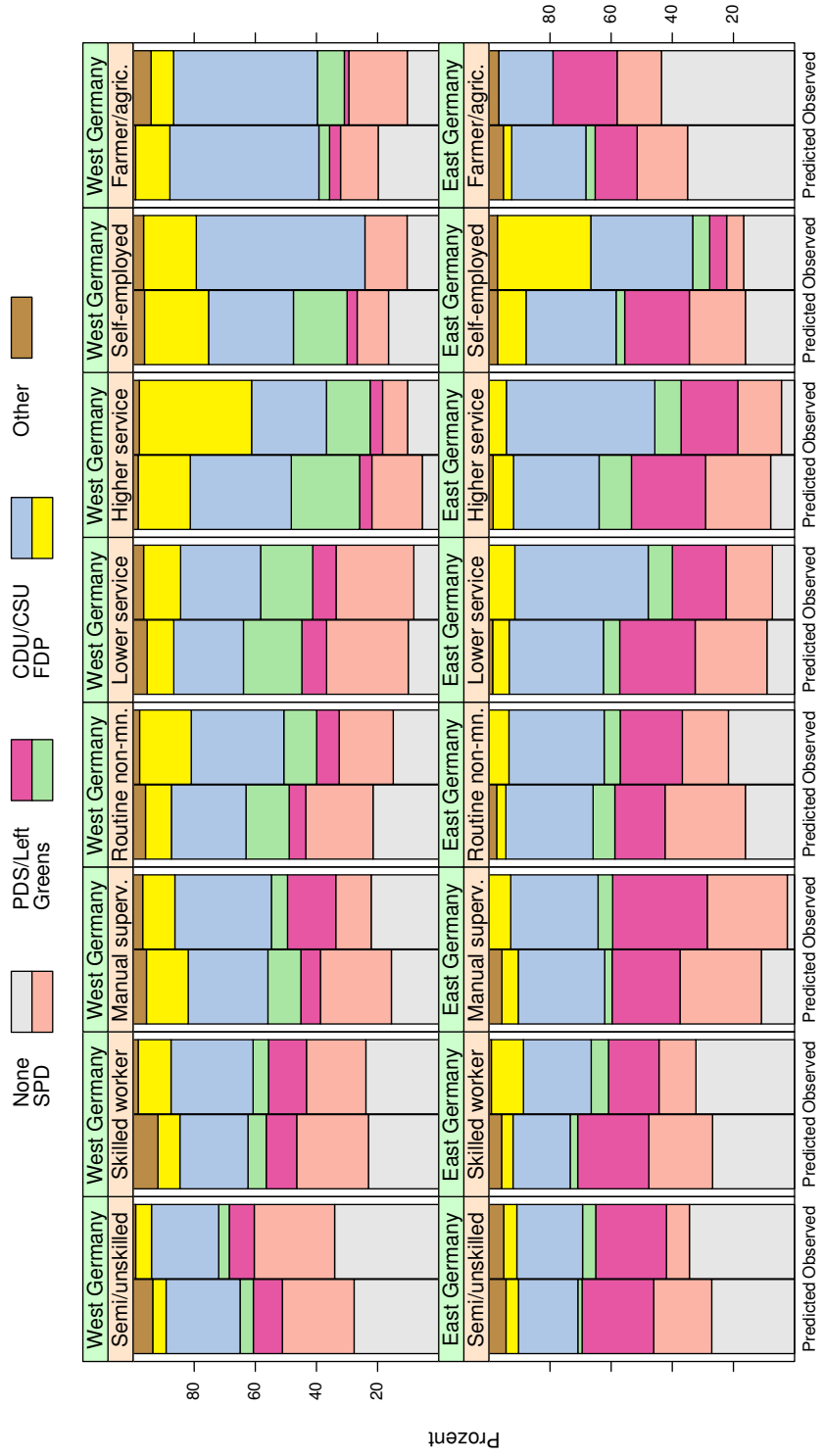
## 6 The Bundestag Elections of 2009 Reconsidered

Until the polls were closed on 27 September 2009, many observers expected that the Social Democrats would lose votes relative to the preceding election but they would still retain a vote share large enough so that the grand coalition would continue. Instead the SPD incurred losses hardly anticipated and were reduced to 23 per cent vote share, way below what was considered a psychological threshold of 30 per cent. While Social Democrats attained their worst electoral result since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany, turnout also reached a record low in 2009.

Given these unexpected losses, on the one hand, and the apparent relation between intended electoral participation and support for the Social Democrats, it seems worthwhile to examine whether the the 2009 electoral result was an outlier or a mere continuation of a trend that started already in the 1980s. For this reason, figure 9 compares predictions for the 2009 class-specific vote shares based on a multinomial logit model, fitted *excluding* 2009 with class-specific vote shares estimated based on the post-election wave of the 2009 German election study.

It is not easy to discover a pattern in figure 9. In some instances, the amount of abstention observed in the post-election study is larger than the predicted one, for example among the semi/unskilled workers in West and East Germany, in some other instances the observed amount is smaller than the predicted amount, such as in case of the West German self-employed. But in hardly any of the classes in East or West Germany is the observed vote share percentage of the SPD larger than the predicted one. Only one kind of pattern is more or less obvious, the abstention observed for the 2009 Bundestag election is larger than the predicted one especially in those instances where the predicted abstention already is high: in the the semi/unskilled manual worker class in East and West Germany and in the skilled

Figure 9: Voting and non-voting at the 2009 Bundestag election: Observed percentages and percentages predicted based on trends *excluding 2009*.



worker class and the class of farmers and agricultural workers in East Germany. So while the pattern is not overwhelmingly clear, there are at least some indications that the result of the 2009 Bundestag election is not a mere continuation of an ongoing trend but an accentuation of those processes that drive this trend.

## 7 Conclusion

To summarize, the findings of this paper are the following: (1) Abstention from voting shows a clear relation to class and is much higher in East Germany than in West Germany. (2) Abstention has increased during the last three decades. (3) The increase in abstention shows a relation with class, abstention has increased especially in the manual working classes. (4) It is more likely that the increases in abstention are associated with an increase in frustration about the responsiveness of politicians than that they can be attributed to a more personal motivational factor – subjective political efficacy – although the evidence for this is circumstantial at best. (5) The increasing tendency to abstain from voting in the manual working classes appears to have hurt especially the Social Democrats.

That a party in government loses support from marginal voters over time does not surprise avid political observers. Even in majoritarian systems, government activity may suffer from all kinds of institutional and non-institutional restrictions, which make it impossible to deliver on all pledges made in an electoral campaign. This is all the more likely in a political system where parliamentary elections are held using a system of proportional representation and coalition governments are much more likely than single-party governments. Parties in government will than be forced to make compromises with their coalition partners. Consequently, the longer a party is in office, the longer disappointments about its performance can accumulate, and the longer support may erode that was freshly gained by an electoral success that brought the party initially into positions of government.

What makes the findings of this paper notable is that in Germany the losses of governing Social Democrats were apparently not incurred by a shift of voters from the SPD to parties of the “other” camp but rather by a net shift of voters from the SPD to the non-voters. If one takes abstention in to account, the CDU/CSU and FDP have not gained as much as the SPD has lost votes (or rather vote intentions). And the losses of the SPD support to abstention but especially concentrated in those social strata that traditionally have been viewed as their core of support, the manual working classes. In 1998 the Social Democratic electoral campaign claimed to target the “New Center” of the social and political spectrum. Yet the erosion for

the support for the social democrats did not occur in this “New Center” of new, marginal voters, but within their own core constituency.

One should however not overlook the limits of the findings of this paper. One of these limits is its restricted focus on long-term changes in abstention and its impact. But there are indications that in 2009 also short-term factors may have consequences for abstention and the vote share of the SPD. If one compares percentages of intended abstention from the 2009 Bundestag election as stated by respondents in the GLES pre-election survey with the percentages of abstention reported by respondents in the post-election survey, one finds a sudden increase in abstention (see figure 1), in contrast to the mobilizing effect that one usually attributes to an electoral campaign (starting with Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1968 [1948]). This may be a statistical fluke, the effect of response-set, or a substantial effect. These possibilities clearly deserve further examination, but this would go beyond the scope and the space restrictions of this paper.

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