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When the world around you is changing: Investigating the Influence of Alienation and Indifference on Voter Turnout

Introduction

Every few years the citizens of democratic countries are called to the voting booth to determine which representatives shall speak on their behalf. Yet, not everybody answers this call and while some citizens decide to vote, others abstain. Acknowledging the paramount importance of elections in integrating a democratically organized society and in distributing the political power within it, many studies examine what induces eligible voters to cast a ballot or to refrain from this focal form of political participation. A first strand of research investigating the determinants of turnout decisions focuses on identifying individual predispositions such as cognitive resources and civic skills (Brady et al. 1995), values (Dalton 2009), personality traits (Dinesen et al. 2014), and even genetic dispositions (Klemmensen et al. 2012). Since predispositions are assumed to be more or less constant over time, the *predisposition approach* suggests that electoral participation is relatively stable both on the individual as well as on the aggregate level. Turnout rates, however, do vary over time. A second bulk of the literature on voter turnout addresses features of the constantly changing political environment (Blais & Dobrzynska 1998; Dalton 2008; Blais et al. 2014). Since no election is like the other, the *dynamic-contextual approach* argues that individual turnout decisions are influenced by the electoral context in which a voter is embedded when making the turnout decision. Phenomena like the declining turnout rates in many western democracies over the past decades (Dalton 2014) are then explained by the changing nature of the elections over time (Franklin 2004; Johnston et al. 2007) whereas scholars following the predisposition approach would point to a changing composition of the electorate due to generational replacement (see: Putnam 2000, Blais et al. 2004, Dalton 2009). The predisposition approach places little emphasis on political

context, focuses on differences between individuals and assumes a great deal of intra-individual stability. The dynamic-contextual approach, on the other hand, suggests inter-temporal variability in an individual's decision to turn out to vote as a consequence of transformations in the political environment.

One important source of contextual variation is the *political supply* by the competing political parties. This chapter investigates the amount of variability of individual turnout decisions over time and its dependence on the changing characteristics of political parties as one feature of the political context. Both the scholarly literature and the conventional wisdom of the public discourse frequently allude to the alleged importance of voters´ perceptions of the political parties and their offerings for turnout decisions at a given election. Whether and to what degree changes in the perception of political parties over the time have the capacity to mobilize previous abstainers to cast a ballot (or to demobilize previous participants) is investigated with data which combines observed changes in the political supply over time with actual reactions in the reported behavior of voters. Long-term panel data on German elections from 1994 to 2013 traces each voter over several years to document individual responses to variations in the political context. On the surface, the German party system´s structure remained unchanged insofar as no new political parties have gained parliamentary presence. However, on closer inspection, it is an excellent case for the study of consequences of shifting offerings by the political parties as all major parties flipped on key political issues and often changed their programmatic profile substantially (Linhart & Shikano 2009; Saalfeld & Schoen 2015). In the observed time period, the former socialist party changed its name to "Leftist Party" after merging with an electoral alliance that was formed in 2005 by dissatisfied social democrats (Paterson & Sloam 2006; Patton 2006). Its establishment can be understood as a reaction to a major policy shift towards "market social democracy" (Nachtwey 2013) by the coalition government of the centre-left parties SPD and the Greens. The coalition had taken office in 1998 and pursued a reform program which included cutting social benefits and the deregulation

of labor rights (Menz 2010). Furthermore, soon after taking office the formerly pacifist Green party had agreed to the German participation in the 1999 Kosovo war (Hyde-Price 2001). In a similar vein, the conservative union of CDU/CSU and FDP had flip-flopped on the issue of nuclear energy. Furthermore, the conservatives faced substantial internal divisions regarding the proper response to the euro-crisis. In the end, the euro-crisis resulted in the emergence of a new euro-sceptic and migration-sceptic party, the AfD (Arzheimer 2015).

The empirical analysis shows that, on average, these developments were perceived by the voters as modest changes in party positions over time. In line with the dynamic-contextual approach the study provides evidence for meaningful influences of the political parties´ offerings on turnout. In accordance with the predisposition approach, however, these effects of the political supply are limited to a small subgroup of the electorate while the electoral participation of the majority is characterized by inertia.

Voter Turnout and Political Supply

Individuals acquire and develop characteristics that shape their general propensity towards electoral participation through genetic inheritance and socialization by family, peers or the media (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980; Sapiro 2004). Yet, the decision whether to vote or not to vote is not fixed throughout the life-cycle. For each and every election, and therefore within a context which is undergoing constant change, the decision to turn out has to be renewed. The influence of stable predispositions and of changing context on turnout decisions *interact* on two dimensions. First, the political context might change with regard to how well a specific election matches a person´s general needs and preferences. Second, the strength of contextual effects on individual behavior will be moderated by one´s motivation and capacity to perceive and process the dynamics of the political environment. Nonetheless, how the perceived political environment of an election affects turnout behavior in interaction with individual predispositions is not properly understood.

A natural starting point for enlightening the context-dependency of turnout decisions are political parties and voters' perceptions of how these parties change their images and programmatic profiles over time. Political parties are highly visible actors on the political stage and serve a crucial „*linkage*"-function (Lawson 1980) between the government on the one hand and the citizens on the other hand. Giovanni Sartori (2005, S. 471) once claimed that „*citizens in Western democracies are represented through and by parties. This is inevitable*". Parties are the main gateway through which citizens interact with the state and influence the distribution of power within its legislative body. For this reason scholars have long attributed a significant role to a citizen´s attitude towards the political parties and their influence on his or her decision concerning electoral participation(Brody & Page 1973).

Political parties reduce complexity by structuring the menu of political options a voter can choose from. By doing so, parties act as *gatekeepers*, since citizens cannot vote for policies that are not offered by any of the political parties on the ballot. Whether voters face "*meaningful choices*" (Wessels & Schmitt 2008) depends on the positions the political parties choose to represent. The more similar the offerings of the political parties, the higher the probability that some voters will not find their views represented, a situation which would open up a "*representational deficit*" (Alvarez et al. 2014). Accordingly, the "*responsible party model*" (APSA Task Force Report 1950) urges the political parties to put forward distinct policy-platforms that differentiate them from another.

The mechanism by which parties are compared and evaluated, however, is not clear-cut. Although party-related effects on electoral participation are usually discussed in terms of *policies,* attitudes towards the political parties may result from a broad variety of sources, i.e. their personnel, the content and style of their communication, personal experiences with their members and further idiosyncratic factors. All of these factors shape a voter´s perception of the parties to a greater or smaller extent and may be incorporated in his or her judgement about

whether it is worth the effort of making the way to the voting booth. Party-related attitudes influence the turnout decisions through two basic mechanisms: First, when all parties in the voter´s choice set offer similar a similar profile, casting a ballot would not make a difference, the utility from voting would approximate zero (Downs 1957) and a citizen *"fails to vote because he does not have a clear preference between partisan objects"* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960: 97). This is referred to as *indifference*. Second, a voter is subject to *alienation* when his preferences are not met by any party in his choice set (Brody & Page 1973). While tendencies of alienation and indifference will both decrease with increasing diversity of the choice set, they are distinct concepts. *Alienation* describes comparisons of the voter´s preferences with each of the parties´ profiles and represents the closest match to any of the available parties. In contrast, *indifference* derives from the similarities of the parties´ platforms. In other words, while indifference results from the comparison of the parties' platforms with each other, alienation results from a comparison with the voter.

Previous studies which employed indifference and alienation to investigate the role of political supply and voter turnout from an economic (Plane & Gershtenson 2004; Adams et al. 2006; Hortala-Vallve & Esteve-Volart 2011) or from a social-psychological perspective (Wessels & Schmitt 2008; Blais et al. 2014; Rogowski 2014; Steinbrecher 2014) consistently reported effects of the political context on electoral participation. Compared to other predictors such as voting as a civic duty (Blais 2000) or get-out-the-vote-activities (Green & Gerber 2008), however, these effects are relatively small.[1] This points to the cascade of requirements that must be met for an individual´s choice set to influence turnout decisions (Brody & Page 1973). First, political parties must change significantly over time, which, secondly, needs to be recognized

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[1] Yet, the relationship between turnout intentions and issue congruence with political parties are strong when potential voters are surveyed right after using a voting advice platform, suggesting that the presumed mechanisms indeed are at work but attenuated by the limited knowledge and low salience of the parties´ policy stances, Dinas et al. (2014).

and memorized by the voter. Third, this has to be considered in a voter´s calculus of political participation.

These assumptions warrant further elaboration. They imply differing effects on turnout decisions, depending on the *criterion* by which the parties are assessed as well as varying effects depending on *individual characteristics* of the voter. Voters can base their voting decision only on events and facts they are aware of. Many citizens do not just lack the capacity but also the motivation for fully-informed political decisions. Only few citizens follow political news closely and are interested in the details of the political process (Luskin 1990). Regarding the distribution of political information in the electorate, Philip Converse (2000: 331) concluded that "*the mean level is very low but the variance is very high*". While voters can make up for a lack of factual knowledge by employing informational shortcuts, these heuristics also need to rely on a prior informational basis and therefore do not necessarily close the gap between low- and high-information citizens (Schoen 2006; Levendusky 2011). Accordingly, changes in the political context over time should exert stronger influences on turnout decisions among politically interested and sophisticated voters.

Voters´ limited knowledge about the political domain also leads to varying effects of the different criteria which are employed for party evaluations. Policy-based attitudes towards political parties are particularly demanding. They require crystallized opinions about specific political topics and concrete knowledge about the parties´ position on these issues. A large segment of the electorate does not meet one or both of these conditions (Achen & Bartels 2016). As a result, more generalized evaluations of political parties that also take more diffuse considerations into account (i.e. perceptions of candidates and communicative styles) are more like to be behaviorally relevant for the average citizen as they may incorporate information that requires less effort to acquire and to process (Lenz 2012).

To conclude, changes in how political parties are perceived from one elections to the next are hypothesized to play a role in a voter´s calculation whether to cast a ballot or not. This effect should be moderated by a voter´s cognitive mobilization, and stronger effects are expected for general party-related attitudes than for policy-based evaluations.

Data und methods

Narrowing down the political parties´ impact on individual turnout is challenging. The issue at stake concerns individual reactions to a political context which is changing over time. Accordingly, data is needed that traces voter attitudes and behavior over long time periods within a dynamics context. Besides some experiments in the lab (Hobolt & Wittrock 2011), however, the literature on indifference and alienation solely relies on cross-sectional data which takes a snapshot of attitudes at one point in time. With this type of data, the isolation of a causal effect against spurious associations is difficult as several assumptions must be met whose validity is unknown (Bollen 1989: 41; Halaby 2004). This study employs long-term panel data that observes voter´s perceptions of the changing political context and their behavior over a maximum of three elections. Compared to cross-sectional data which looks at *differences between individuals,* the analysis strategy pursued here considers *variation within individuals* over time. This drastically reduces the problem of unobserved heterogeneity (Levendusky 2011; but for a general counterargument see Bell & Jones 2015) and makes it possible to test whether changes in the political menu a voter chooses from actually lead to changes in turnout behavior.

To investigate this question the GLES long-term panels and their predecessors will be used (Falter et al. 2012; Rattinger et al. 2012; Rattinger 2012; Rattinger et al. 2014; Rattinger et al. 2015). Beginning with the 1994 federal election and overlapping with each other, the long-term panel-datasets follow voters over the course of three elections.[2] The five long-term panels were

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[2] The most recent long-term panel-dataset began with the 2009 federal election and will end in 2017.

merged and the analysis is run across the combined dataset in order to preserve a sufficiently large sample size allowing for multivariate analyses. 21,642 individuals were surveyed in total.. The contribution of several factors, however, lead to a drastic reduction of the original sample size which resulted in the inclusion of only a couple of hundred individuals in the expanded models.

The severe reduction of sample size is caused, first, by panel attrition which leaves us with 10,328 individuals that have been surveyed more than once. Panel dropout is usually associated with respondent´s characteristics and might therefore lead to an unrepresentative sample and to biased coefficients. For this reason, analyses on the association of panel attrition and turn out behavior will be reported later on. The second source of the drastic shrinkage in sample size are missing values generated by the aggregation of several surveys. Some variables were not included in every survey (see Table 1, Online-Appendix). If one variable had not been surveyed in one wave, every observation from that wave had to be removed from the analysis even though information on all the other attributes is available. Missing data because of omitted instruments reflects the decisions of the researcher and is therefore associated with his or her characteristics but not necessarily with the characteristics of the respondents. This makes the missing data different from other kinds of missing data which are the result of a respondent's decision against answering a single question or the survey as a whole. In the present case, "the probability of missing data on Y is unrelated to the value of Y itself or to the values of any other variables in the data set" (Allison 2001: 4). This type of missing data does not lead to biased coefficients. But it still leads to the massive reduction of sample size by almost 50%, and when the statistical power of an analysis is low, the probability of type-2 errors is inflated and true associations might be overlooked. Therefore, in addition to simple models which are based on listwise deletion and small sample sizes, models with imputed values were estimated to make use of all the information available and to increase the models´ efficiency (Ibrahim & Molenberghs 2009; Romaniuk et al. 2014). The multiple imputation procedure was conducted with the software

RealcomImpute (Carpenter et al. 2011), which is able to utilize the hierarchical nature of longitudinal data.[3]

Third, the reduced sample size is also a deliberate consequence of the chosen method of analyzing the outcome variable, reported voter turnout or turnout intention in the case of a pre-election survey. To account for the outcome´s binary nature and for the longitudinal type of data, *logistic conditional fixed effects regressions* are used (Allison 2009). The interpretation of the obtained estimates is less straightforward than the interpretation of linear fixed effect regressions. Still, logistic fixed effects likewise only consider intra-individual changes and cancel out all *the time-invariant heterogeneity*. The analysis only includes individuals whose turnout behavior changed over the observed time period. Restricting the analysis to cases whose dependent variable varies over time is sometimes viewed as a deficiency of fixed effects models (Nielsen & Alderson 1995: 685; Bell & Jones 2015: 139). Indeed, *prima facie* the resulting shrinkage of sample sizes leads to a lowered statistical efficiency. Still, this approach protects against biased parameter estimators and restricts the sample to cases that actually help investigating the research question, which is concerned with the identification of the factors that influence (=change) turnout behavior over time. Thus, the restricted sample size is not a bug, it is a feature (Halaby 2004: 523; Giesselmann & Windzio 2012: 149). Although the respondents who have always or never voted over the course of three elections and who are seemingly unmoved by shifts in the parties´ positions are excluded from the analysis, this does not mean that these individuals are principally immune to a changing political context. It is possible that more pronounced movements of political parties or the entry of new parties could have led some citizens to a different behavior. This strategy of analysis, therefore, reminds us

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[3] RealcomImpute uses a multivariate normal imputation model which is known to perform well even with binary and ordinary variables (Lee und Carlin 2010). 15 imputed datasets were created based on 7,500 iterations and a "*burn in*" period of 1,000 updates (Graham et al. 2007). Although the distribution of the observed variables violates the assumption of normality, following the methodological literature variable transformation was not used (Rodwell et al. 2014; Hippel 2013). Missing values on the dependent variable were not imputed. Although multiple imputation of longitudinal data is still subject to ongoing research and guidelines are sparse, evidence shows that analytical results are only modestly sensitive to imputation decisions (Romaniuk et al. 2014).

that the conclusions we can draw from the obtained results are contingent to the specific data we have observed which is in context of the German party system from 1994 to 2013.

Alienation and indifference towards political parties are the main explanatory variables. Since policy-related and more general evaluations of political parties were argued to be conceptually distinct and to function differently depending on the voters´ attributes, more than one indicator is included to measure alienation and indifference. To represent specific *issues,* questions on immigration and on nuclear power were used.[4] Self-placement and perceived party positions on a left-right-scale also measure position issues, but in the more generalized form of *ideological* orientations. In addition to these policy-related measures, *valence-based indifference* and *valence-based alienation* capture whether a voter assumes all parties to be equally well equipped for solving the country's most- or second-most important problem and whether a voter considers no party to be competent in solving these problems. Finally, general evaluation scores of the parties will be referred to as *summary evaluations*. In contrast to the former measures which require very specific pieces of knowledge, the voter has leeway in selecting and weighting considerations when constructing subjective summary evaluations of a political party. In the above order, therefore, these dimensions of party evaluations require decreasing levels of cognitive capacities and of political awareness. General evaluation scores represent the most diffuse measure of how well a voter and a party are matched, and policy-based items are assumed to be cognitively demanding and most unlikely to influence turnout decisions of the average voter.

Alienation was calculated as the difference between an individual and the party closest to it, and in the case of the summary evaluation it was calculated as the difference of the most liked

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[4] One problem with cumulated datasets are inconsistencies of the question format over time. In this case, the gravest inconsistency is the varying question format of an instrument on nuclear power that was replaced by a question on climate change in 2013 after Germany had abandoned nuclear power in an all-party-consensus. Both items aim to measure the perceived party´s stance on energy policy. No irregularities are apparent in the data structure due to the change of instrument (see Figure 1).

party's score to the scale´s maximum (Melton 2009; Steinbrecher 2014: 266–268). Indifference was calculated as the difference between the closest/most liked party and the second-closest/most liked party.[5] As fixed effects regression modelling is employed, all time-invariant heterogeneity is accounted for by design, and stable covariates such as sex or educational status do not need to be included. Yet, I further include party identification (dichotomous), satisfaction with democracy, and the acceptance of voting as a civic duty as control variables. As these variables might be influenced by party-related attitudes themselves in some cases, controlling for these covariates represents a conservative test of the influence of alienation and indifference on turnout decisions. Included in the analyses were those parties that were represented in the German parliament from 1994 through 2013.

Results

In a first step, we investigated if and to what magnitude individual turnout decisions change over time: Over the course of three elections only 1,382 (13.38%) of the 10,328 eligible voters in the dataset switched electoral participation at least once. The vast majority of voters either always or never cast a ballot. If we assumed turnout decisions to be completely random, one would predict a minority of 25% of the voters to have a straight participation record of either always or never voting after observing three election cycles. In reality, with a share of 87% the image is inverted and biased towards persistent inertia in voting behavior. The estimated portion of switchers might be biased in relation to the general public and to the initial first-wave-sample if stability in electoral participation was correlated with survey participation in subsequent waves. If individuals who consistently do not vote and individuals who always vote tend to drop out of the repeated surveys at higher rates than respondents who vote from time to time, then the share of switchers would have been overestimated due to panel attrition. A multivariate

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[5] Calculating the difference between the main parties competing for chancellorship (SPD and CDU/CSU) leads to similar results.

regression on those who responded to at least two survey-waves, however, showed that being an electoral switcher does not predict participation in the third survey wave (Figure 1, Online-Appendix), lending credibility to the reported share of switchers.[6]

Compared to the share of 40 percent of German citizens who vote for different parties from one election to the next (Schoen 2003; Dassonneville & Hooghe 2016), the decision whether to vote at all seems relatively stable and less context-dependent. This is the first substantively important evidence for understanding context-sensitivity. In the observed time period potential effects of the political context on electoral participation were limited to a small portion of the electorate, while the turnout decision of the majority of voters was unaffected by the political environment and remained unchanged. The estimated share of 14 percent being switchers can be seen as the upper bound of potential context-effects. Whether those voters who changed their turnout behavior did so because of dynamics in the profiles of the political parties is investigated in the following analyses.

Figure 1 reports the development of the mean perceived positions and evaluations of the main German political parties[7] that were represented in the German parliament between 1994 and 2013.[8] Visible *ideological party shifts* were only perceived by the voters only for the Left party and for the Greens. The policy shifts during the red-green coalition from 1998-2005 changed how the electorate perceived the parties´ ideological positions, yet more modestly than expected and surprisingly without any effect for the SPD. The Greens were seen to have moved to the centre, while mirror-avertedly the left party was perceived to have shifted to the party system´s

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[6] The well-known respondents´ tendency to over-report turnout rates, see Selb and Munzert (2013), is less a severe problem when fixed effects modeling is employed, but it might contribute to underestimating the share of switchers, if it leads switchers to polish their turnout record.

[7] The newly founded AfD was not included in the analysis to maintain consistency in including only parties represented in parliament. Furthermore, only a subset of indicators was surveyed on this party. Including the available indicators on the AfD in the analyses only marginally changes the results.

[8] The mean values were calculated for respondents which are included in later analyses and switched electoral participation at least once.

left margin. At the latest election this development was reverted and the parties left of the centre had returned to their 1998 positions.
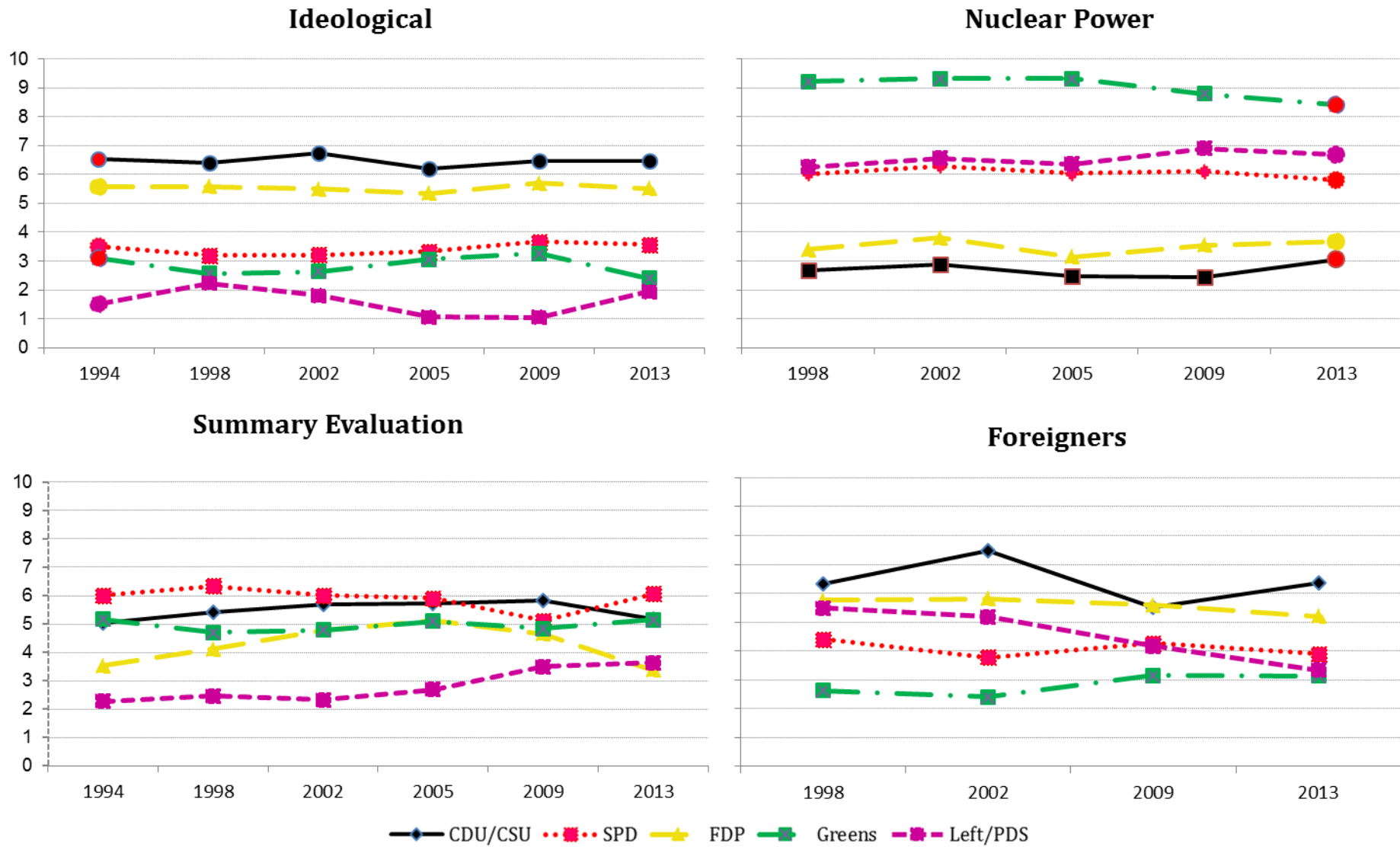
Ideological

Nuclear Power

Summary Evaluation

Foreigners

Legend: CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens, Left/PDS

Figure 1: Development of Political Parties´ Mean Evaluations and Perceived Positions, 1994-2013. Demographic Weight applied. Big round markers indicate the use of irregular items. Left-Right-Position in 1994 is based on GESIS Dataset ZA4909 (KAS 2009).

Political parties´ *summary evaluation*s varied stronger. The Free Democrats in particular experienced a massive electoral loss at the 2013 election. They lost most of the sympathy they had gained since 1994 and where outperformed by the Left for the first time. Looking at the two specific *issue* questions, one can witness a slightly growing concentration in the political centre. To conclude, within a stable framework and on a smaller scale compared to other countries´ party systems, the German political parties did shift positions between 1994 and 2013. The electorate recognized these movements although in a smaller magnitude than it was analyzed by scholars. Particularly, summary evaluations varied considerably among some parties. All in all, there is room for the changes in party-related attitudes from one election to the next to have influenced voters´ turnout decision.

 While the electorate's aggregated and averaged perception of the parties provides a first impression of changes in the party system, the adequate level of analysis is the individual level, specifically, intra-individual changes over time. Table 1 provides an overview of the explanatory variables and their temporal variation. The right-hand column reports the amount of changes over time and the distribution of the change score among the individuals, the middle column reports the absolute level on which these changes occur. Regard the example of alienation with the parties´ position on nuclear power: for the average voter, the distance to the closest party on a scale from 0 to 10 for that issue is 0.84 units. The standard deviation of 0.05 indicates a low variance of the alienation with parties´ position on nuclear power across individuals, i.e. for roughly 95% of the voters its level lies within the interval from 0.74 to 0.94. From one election to the next, alienation with the parties´ position on nuclear power increases or decreases by 0.1 points for the average voter. Yet, the degree of dynamics between elections varies widely across individuals. For 75% of the voters, this measure of alienation does not change at all. The upper fifth percentile of the highest change score has a change score larger than 0.52. The issue of nuclear power is exemplary for most independent variables and complements the earlier results of moderate temporal changes of the political parties: The

independent variables do vary over time. As a comparison with further political attitudes in the upper rows of Table 1 underscores, the intra-individual changes of party-related attitudes are nonetheless modest in magnitude.

	Level					Change between Elections			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N	Mean	SD	75th	95th
								percentile	
Civic Duty	2.80	0.05	0	4	847	0.32	0.33	0.67	1.33
Satisfaction with Democracy	1.91	0.04	0	4	830	0.29	0.33	0.40	1.33
Party identification	0.66	0.02	0	1	858	0.11	0.17	0.33	0.33
Political Interest	2.07	0.04	0	4	872	0.21	0.31	0.33	0.71
Alienation: Ideological	0.58	0.04	0	10	735	0.09	0.26	0.00	0.67
Indifference: Ideological	-0.89	0.04	-10	0	725	0.11	0.25	0.33	0.67
Alienation: Summ. Evaluation	2.47	0.08	0	10	864	0.49	0.73	0.67	2.00
Indifference: Summ. Evaluation	-1.59	0.06	-10	0	861	0.28	0.48	0.33	1.33
Alienation: Valence	0.36	0.02	0	1	751	0.08	0.16	0.00	0.33
Indifference: Valence	0.05	0.01	0	1	751	0.03	0.11	0.00	0.33
Alienation: Nuclear Power	0.84	0.05	0	10	788	0.10	0.31	0.00	0.52
Indifference: Nuclear Power	-1.15	0.06	-10	0	753	0.11	0.35	0.00	0.52
Alienation: Foreigners	1.20	0.07	0	10	702	0.09	0.31	0.00	0.52
Indifference: Foreigners	-1.43	0.08	-10	0	561	0.10	0.35	0.00	0.52

Table 1: Core Variables´ Distribution and Dynamics among Switchers.

In line with the development of party perceptions (Figure 1), the intra-individual changes of indifference and alienation do not follow a trend in any direction (Development of mean values: see Figure 3 and 4 in the Online-Appendix). As none of the indicators increased or decreased noticeably in the observed time period on the aggregate level, the political context is unlikely to have caused macro-level trends in declining or increasing turnout. Be that as it may, the necessary requirements for context effects on the individual level are met. Political parties shifted their positions over time, voters featured intra-individual malleability in the evaluation of the political supply, and a segment of the electorate changed turnout behavior over time. Whether dynamics in individual turnout behavior can indeed be interpreted as a reaction to party behavior will be examined in the next step. The regression analysis will investigate

whether intra-individual changes of a voter´s turnout decision go along with changes in the voter´s evaluation of the political parties.

Figure 2 reports the results of the conditional fixed effects regressions with intended and reported turnout as independent variable.[9] Reported are odds ratios and confidence intervals at a level of certainty of 95%. The red auxiliary line in both panels indicates odds ratios of 1, which equals no effect. Interpreting results from a conditional fixed effects regression follows the same logic as a simple logistic regression. An odds ratio of 0.5 of ideological alienation for example is to be interpreted as follows: When the distance between a voter and the political party closest to him/her grows by one unit on the 11-point left-right scale, then the voter´s probability of casting a ballot at the upcoming election drops by 50%. Note that for visual clarity the x-scales of both panels are logarithmisized.

The bivariate analyses (Fig. 2, Panel 1) show that most indicators of a voter´s changing perception of the political supply are unrelated to variations in electoral participation over time.[10] As anticipated, the different dimensions of parties´ positions do not influence voting behavior equally. The cognitively more demanding indicators that are conceptually closest to specific policies are not associated with electoral participation, while the more general orientations are. Only the valence-based indicators which measure the perceived competence of political parties regarding the solution of a country's problems as well as the two items indicating the summary evaluation of the individual parties are statistically distinguishable from zero.

Model I aims at disentangling the effect of each variable while controlling for the others.[11] When alienation and indifference are both included in the model, only the perception of not

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[9] Several figures in this chapter were created using Stata Ado –coefplot– by Ben Jann (2014) and the graph scheme –burd– by François Briatte.

[10] Regression tables of all the models shown with observed values can be found in the Online-Appendix.

[11] The issue-specific items were not included, because the bivariate analyses didn´t show any association with electoral participation and their inclusion would have reduced the sample size noticeably. The items are included in the imputed model.

being represented by the parties influences individual electoral participation. In that scenario, he perceived difference between the parties is not consequential.
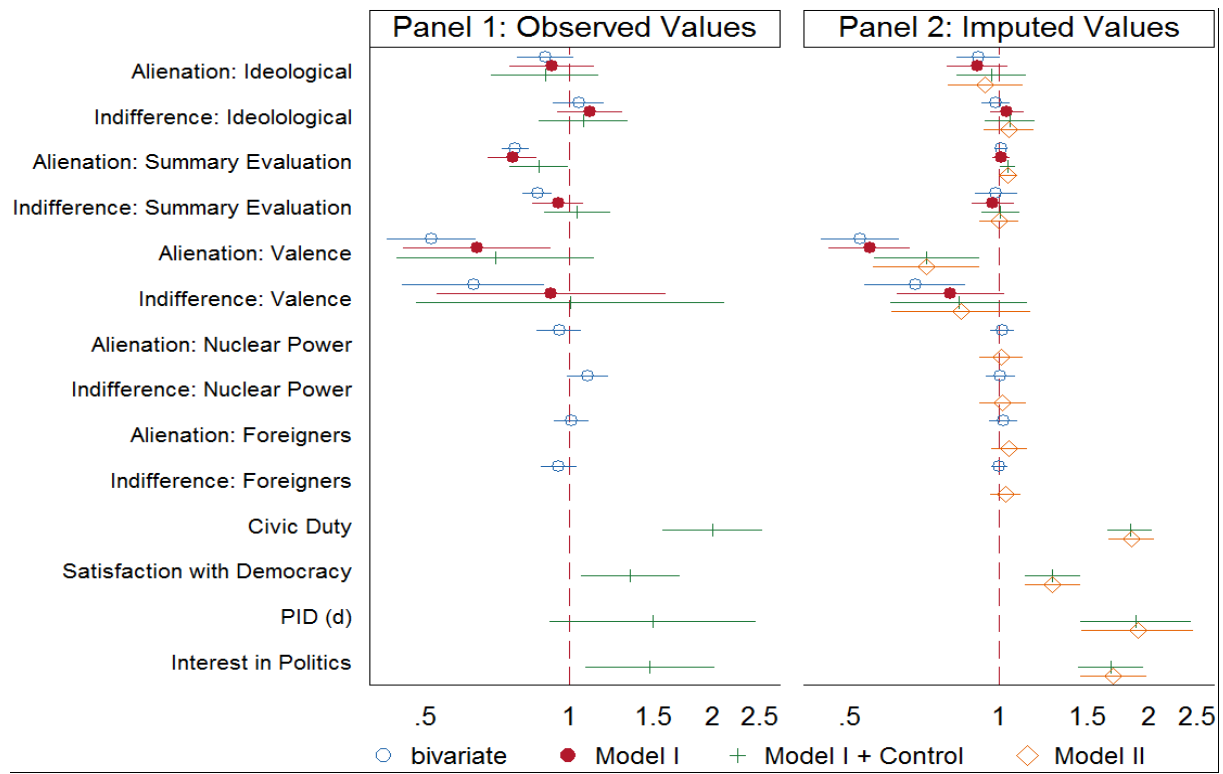

Figure 2: Conditional Fixed Regression of Turnout Behavior on Perceived Political Supply. Reported are log odds on a logarithmized scale with CIs at 95%-level. Samples Sizes, Observed Values: Model I (N=344, O=739), Model I + Control (N=277, 584). Samples Sizes, Imputed Values: Model I (N=1.028, O=2.364), Model I + Control (N=919, 2.097), Model II (N=919, 2.097).

Although fixed effect regressions account for all time-invariant heterogeneity, the next model includes covariates that are known to be highly predictive of abstention (Geys 2006) in order to additionally control for time-*variant* unobserved heterogeneity.[12] As a consequence, the standard errors of all variables increase noticeably and only the alienation coefficient of the summary evaluation is statistically distinguishable from zero with a 95% confidence interval.

So far, the discussion of the results focused on whether the perception of the parties by the respondents exerted any effect on turnout at all. Coefficients from logistic regression models are notoriously difficult to interpret and effect sizes are hard to compare. Usually researchers rely on a visual representation of predicted outcomes or marginal effects (Hanmer & Ozan

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[12] Since the control variables might be influenced by the political supply themselves and might mediate some of the political supplies indirect effect on turnout, this models follows a conservative design that possibly underestimates political supply´s influence.

Kalkan 2013). This cannot be applied in this case because conditional fixed effects models cancel the time-invariant elements that would be necessary for this effort out of the equation. Although this is a less straightforward procedure, we can calculate conditional probabilities.[13] It is possible to calculate the conditional probability that the dependent variable is equal to one (=casting the ballot) exactly once given the condition that the (dependent) variable is equal to zero in all other survey waves. In order to get a better understanding of a variable´s (relative) effect size, I manipulate the values of one independent variable of interest while holding the covariates constant, and estimate the change in conditional probabilities. What is calculated, speaking plainly, is the influence of a variable on persuading someone who did not vote before to cast a ballot. Each of the datasets comprises three waves. Given the assumption that a voter switches from abstention to turnout exactly once in the observed period of time, the a priory probability for the occurrence of this switch at a specific election is 1/3. This probability will serve as the reference value for a variable which has no observable effect on the outcome. This reference will be compared to a scenario where 1) the variable of interest changes by the sample´s average intra-individual change between two elections and 2) a higher/lower intra-individual change at one standard deviation above/below the average (Figure 3).

A voter´s conditional probability of turning out at one specific election drops to 31.1% when the summary evaluation of the political party closest to her or him decreases in a magnitude well above the average change from one election to the next, compared to a 35.6% chance of turning out when her or his evaluation of the political parties had brightened. The respective values for higher-than-average changes of valence-based alienation are 32.0% and 34.7%. To put these figures into perspective, if the sense of voting as a citizen´s duty changes by an equal magnitude, it raises the conditional probability of switching the electoral participation from abstention to turnout at this election from 26.1% to 41.4%.

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[13] I am grateful to Maria Preißinger for providing her user-written Stata-Code for this analysis.

Figure 3: Conditional Probabilities of Switching from Abstention to Casting a Ballot
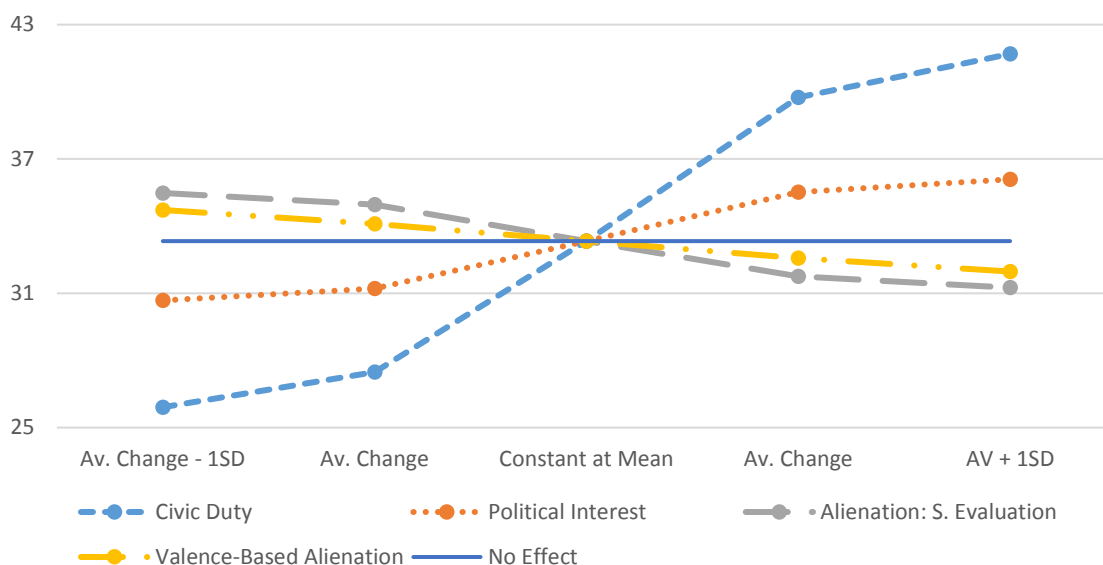
Summing up the results so far, we see that while indifference seems to be inconsequential for turnout, the perception of improved representation by the political parties compared to previous elections induces voters to cast a ballot who have not done so before. Yet, the changes in the political supply the average voter perceives exert a slightly weaker effect on turnout behavior than average changes in political interest and a noticeably weaker effect than similar changes in the sense of civic duty.

Due to missing values the standards errors grow remarkably with each additional variable included in the model. 1,382 individuals switched electoral participation and could in principle have been included in the analyses. However, Model I is based on 716 observations of 340 individuals only. The inclusion of control variables further reduces the sample size to 584 observations of 277 individuals.[14] To provide evidence that the above described results were not caused by listwise deletion of cases with missing data, I employed multiple imputation which makes use of all information available and reran the analyses.

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[14] When comparing these figures to the usual sample sizes in cross-sectional analyses, one needs to keep in mind that fixed effects analyses account for time-invariant heterogeneity by design.

Panel 2 in Figure 2 reports replications with imputed data of the models in Panel 1. Both panels paint a similar picture and bolster the confidence in the evidence presented above. Differences appear regarding valence-based alienation, and their effect is still statistically distinguishable from zero as a consequence of the higher statistical power in the imputed case. A second difference concerns alienation with the generalized evaluation of political parties, which even exhibits a small positive effect on electoral participation in the case of alienation. This appears to be the result of a suppressor effect, since alienation exerts no effect in the bivariate case and only does so when the four control variables are included in the model (see Figure 2, Online-Appendix).

The sample size of the imputed dataset also allows testing the hypothesis of stronger effects among cognitively mobilized voters. The expectation is that voters who are more interested in politics and have a higher level of formal education would have more information on the parties´ development at their disposal and would therefore be more likely to base their behavior on more sophisticated considerations. Contradicting this expectation, the effect of political supply on electoral participation is not stronger among cognitively highly mobilized voters than among voter with levels of education and interest below the average (Figure 4).[15] Furthermore, policy-based evaluations which were argued to be more demanding had not exerted detectable effects on the total sample. They do not exert any substantial effects among the subgroup of cognitively mobilized voters either. The hypothesis of cognitive mobilization moderating the transmission of perceived party movements into turnout behavior must be rejected.

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[15] The model has been estimated separately for the lower and upper half of cognitively mobilized.
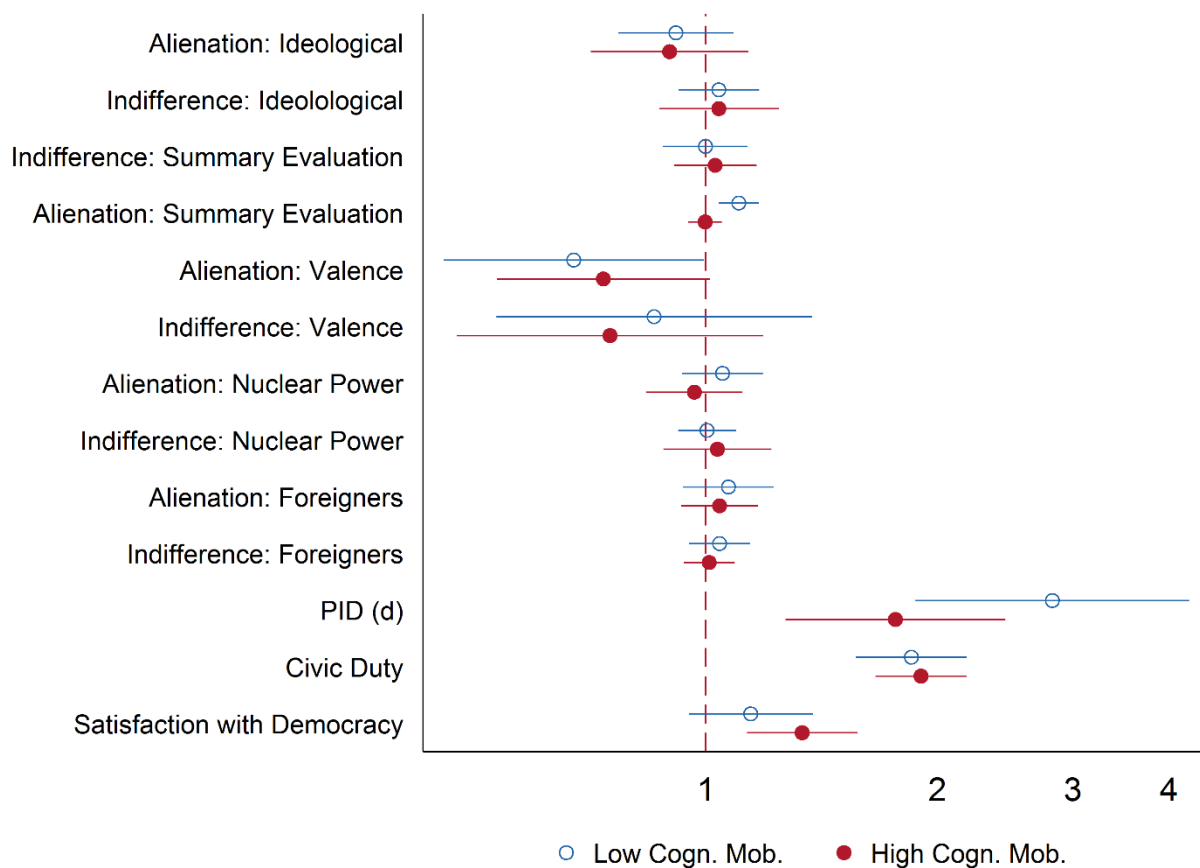
Figure 4: Effects of Political Supply among Subgroups of the Electorate. Reported are log odds on a logarithmised scale with CIs at 95%-level.

Conclusion

This study investigated the variability of individual turnout decisions over time and their dependence on dynamic characteristics of the political context. With respect to the German federal elections from 1994 to 2013, turnout behavior was found to be characterized by *inertia* for most eligible voters; in accordance with the predisposition approach to electoral participation only a minority of 14 percent of the electorate switched between abstention and turnout. Still, the dynamic-contextual approach which emphasizes the changing political environment in which a voter is embedded enlightens one factor in some voter´s consideration about whether to participate electorally or not. In the eyes of many public intellectuals as well as prominent scholars, political parties play an important role in turnout decisions. However, the dynamic perception of the menu of political offerings a voter can choose from as supplied

by the political parties has limited power in explaining changing turnout behavior. Among those voters who did switch, the transition in turnout behavior could not be explained by dynamics in alienation or indifference with the parties´ offerings in ideological or policy positions. Yet, in line with valence-theories of electoral behavior which stress the low-information rationality of voting, competence-based perceptions and summary evaluations have a substantial effect on turnout. This effect is mainly driven by *alienation*: when voters develop a more favorable view of the political parties than in the previous election in terms of the parties´ generalized evaluation or perceived competence, then voters are motivated to switch from abstention to voting (and vice versa). But the political parties´ leeway in lifting raising turnout rates is rather narrow compared to the influence of other determinants such as the perceived duty to vote.

This study employed long-term panel data that observed a voter´s behavior within a dynamic political context over several elections and his or her reaction to the changing political supply. Although this type of data poses specific problems (small sample sizes, missing values, inconsistent measures over time), in combination with fixed effects regression analyses it produces effect estimates of political supply on voter turnout that are more trustworthy than previous models because it guards against many forms of spurious correlations. These results, however, describe the average effects of six elections in one particular country. Future research could take different countries with diverse party systems into account. Furthermore, it might be worth investigating whether the effects of party perceptions vary with characteristics of a party or of the election. Above all, this study has shown that turnout behavior varies across elections among a significant minority of voters, but perceptions of political parties can only account for a small fraction of this dynamic. Future studies, therefore, should try to identify additional factors that explain what mobilizes previous abstainers to vote and what discourages former voters form casting a ballot.

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