

The Crisis of Social Democracy and the Political Demobilisation of the Working Class in Germany

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The Bundestag elections of 2009 meant a crushing defeat for the German social democrats and at the same time a low point in electoral turnout. Neither the level of turnout nor the support for the SPD has fully recovered in the last federal election of 2013. In fact, a long term comparison of changes in turnout and changes in the support for the SPD suggests that both are linked especially during the last few decades. The proposed paper tracks down this link to level of individual voting behaviour and voting intentions. Using Data from German election studies and the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS), it shows that the propensity for electoral turnout has been in decline particularly in the traditional core group of SPD voters, the members of the industrial working class. It further shows that a decline in subjective political efficacy is unlikely to be a cause of this decline, while political dissatisfaction with the personal economic situation appears to play a more important role. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for the role of social divisions in electoral behaviour.

1 Introduction

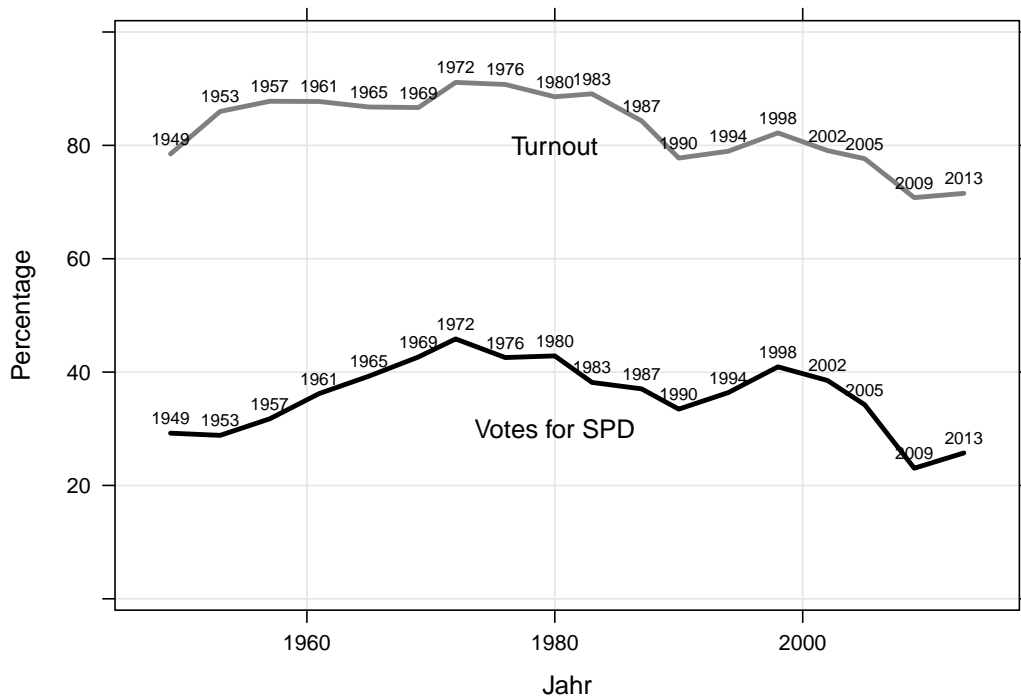
The Bundestag elections of 2009 meant a crushing defeat for the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Never before had a party faced losses at such a high percentage in post-war Germany. After losing more than four percentage point in 2005 from a previous result of 38.52% in 2002, Social Democrats experienced 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%. These parallel changes suggest that the decline in turnout has played a crucial part in this crushing defeat for German Social Democracy.

This paper 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 it is often held otherwise, electoral behaviour is still 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, Brooks and Manza 1995). (3) As a form of political participation, the crucial factors for individuals turning out for an election are resources, motives, and mobilization (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Electoral participation may be low in the manual working classes in the United States (Evans 2000; Hout, Brooks and Manza 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 centre 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 labour 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).

The following section focuses on aggregate electoral results, seeking to establish whether the simultaneous drop in turnout and SPD support is an isolated incident or whether there is a persistent connection between the two. The third section moves from aggregate data to survey data and examines the relation between electoral abstention and social class and checks whether the loss of support for the SPD is concentrated to those social strata where the tendency of increased abstention is the strongest. The fourth section looks at potential explanation for the increased abstention, and tries to find out whether abstention is related to a lack of subjective efficacy or political disappointment. The paper closes with a summary and conclusion.

Figure 1: Turnout and SPD vote share over time

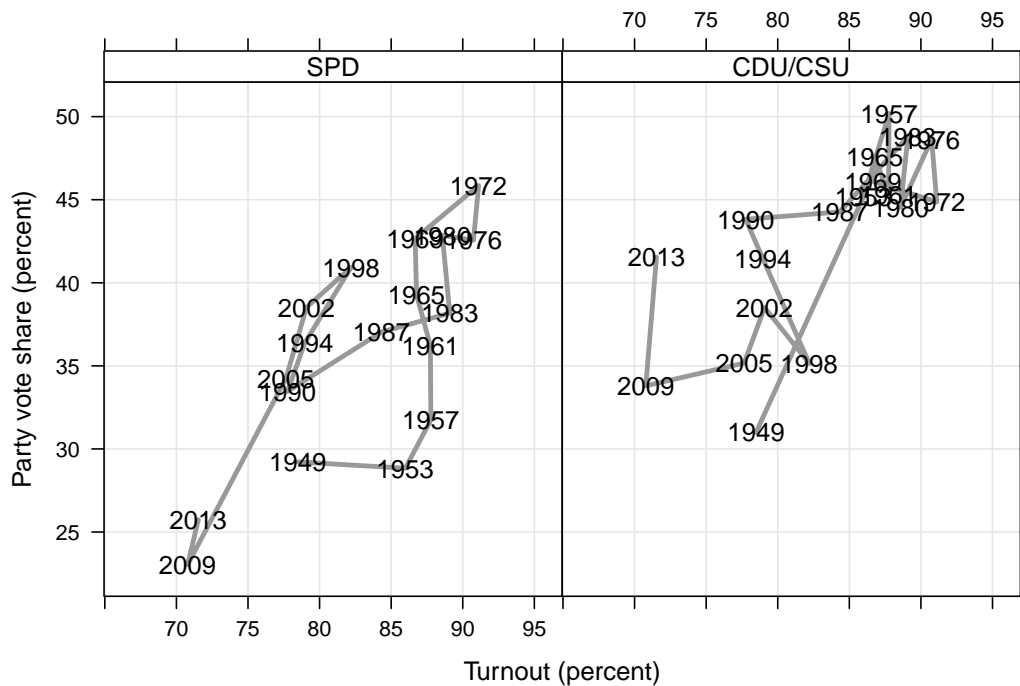


2 Development of Turnout and Support for Left Parties

As mentioned in the introduction, the Bundestag election mark a dual decline in turnout and vote share for the German Social Democrats. Whether this is a one-off incidence or an aspect of a more lasting phenomenon can be uncovered by looking at the development of turnout and SPD vote share through all elections since the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany. Figure 1 gives an impression of the parallel development of turnout and SPD vote share, suggesting that the two are related. This relation appears particularly strong after 1972, when both turnout and the support for the Social Democrats have reached a peak from which they decline throughout, except for a temporary reversal around 1998.

Of course it could be that the parallelism between turnout and party support affects not only the Social Democrats, but all major parties, as an expression of a general phenomenon of disenchantment with both politics (“Politikverdrossenheit”) and parties (“Parteienverdrossenheit”). If that is the case, one should find a relation between turnout and support for the Christian Democrats (CDU and CSU) similar to that between turnout and support for the SPD. As Figure 2 shows, this is not the case. The left panel reveals that turnout and SPD support are clearly unrelated until 1972, vary roughly proportional from 1972 to 1990, and show an almost perfect linear relation from 1990 on, with party support nevertheless varying more than turnout. This post-1990 pattern seems to suggest that whatever affects turnout

Figure 2: Turnout and vote share of the two major party groups over time



between 1990 and 2013, it affects the SPD even stronger. At first glance, turnout and support for the CDU/CSU also seem to be positively related. A closer look however reveals that the pattern of the relation is quite different from that between turnout and SPD support. Much of the apparent relation is created by turnout and CDU/CSU support being in 1949 both lower than thereafter and from 1990 (when the East German population entered the electorate) both lower than before. However, no pattern of relation is discernible between 1972 and 1990 and between 1990 and 2013 or at least none comparable to the quite obvious relation between turnout and SPD support. In particular the slump in turnout from 2005 to 2009 seems to have left the Christian Democratic parties of Germany unaffected.

If the vote share of the SPD goes up and down whenever turnout goes up and down suggests that the electoral fortunes of Social Democracy in Germany depend very much on the mobilisation of a certain reservoir of core voters and perhaps even more than on winning over marginal voters. But of course it would be an ecological fallacy to infer from relations between aggregates – such as turnout and vote share percentages – to relations between individual properties and/or activities – such as turning out to vote and voting for a particular party – as posited by the interpretation just mentioned. All that can be said at this point is that the aggregate pattern is consistent with an individual-level pattern, a pattern that is in need of further exploration. Such a closer examination of relations between turnout and SPD vote share is conducted in the next section.

3 Demobilisation of the Working Class and the Support for Leftist Parties

The present section examines the development of electoral abstention and the support for various parties in different social classes, with particular attention to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Left Party (*Linkspartei/Die Linke*). The main purpose is to highlight the relation between turnout and class and left-of-centre party support and class and the over-time in this relation. The discussion in this section draws from two major sources of data. The first source of data are the combined German election studies since 1994 (Falter, Gabriel and Rattinger 2004; Weißels 2006; Rattinger et al. 2012, 2014), which allow to employ a more or less coherent and continuous instrument to measure the social class position of respondents. This measurement instrument rests on the current occupations of respondents and their spouses, into eight major groups. These occupational groups are inspired by the Goldthorpe class schema, although they are not – as usually done in mobility studies on which this class schema is based (e.g. Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero 1979; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) – based on the various versions of ISCO codes of occupations. The second source are the cumulated waves of the German General Social Survey (*Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften*, ALLBUS), which have been conducted every second year from 1980 and the data of which are available as a cumulation file from the first wave until the most recent one of 2014 (GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften 2014, 2015). The ALLBUS surveys allow to construct at least three different measurement instruments for social class. The first of these instrument is based on the same occupational categories used in the German election studies just mentioned, for which data are available throughout the whole range of the ALLBUS series, that is from 1980 through 2014 (1990 through 2014 in the eastern part of Germany that joined the FRG after the German Unification). The second instrument is based on household meta-classification following Michael Terwey (Terwey and Baltzer 2009), based on ISCO-68 coded current and former occupations of respondents as well as their spouses and partners. This instrument is directly available in the ALLBUS cumulation file. The third instrument is based on a household meta-classification also by Michael Terwey (Terwey and Baltzer 2009) according to ISCO-88 coded occupations, which were then translated by the author of this paper into the Goldthorpe class schema, following the guidelines provided by Ganzeboom and Treiman (2001).¹ Both the major occupational categories and the categories of the Goldthorpe class schema were collapsed into a smaller set of eight categories that better serve the purpose of this section to highlight the development in the traditional social base of the SPD vote in Germany. These categories are (1) the *semi- and unskilled manual workers*, (2) the *skilled manual workers*, (3) the *lower grade routine non-manual workers*, (4) the *higher grade routine non-manual workers*, (5) the *lower service class*, (6) the *upper service class*, (7) the

¹Ganzeboom's website provides SPSS code for this translation. Since the analyses of this paper were conducted in R (R Development Core Team 2015), the SPSS code was recreated in R by the author.

self-employed, and (8) the *farmers and farm workers*.

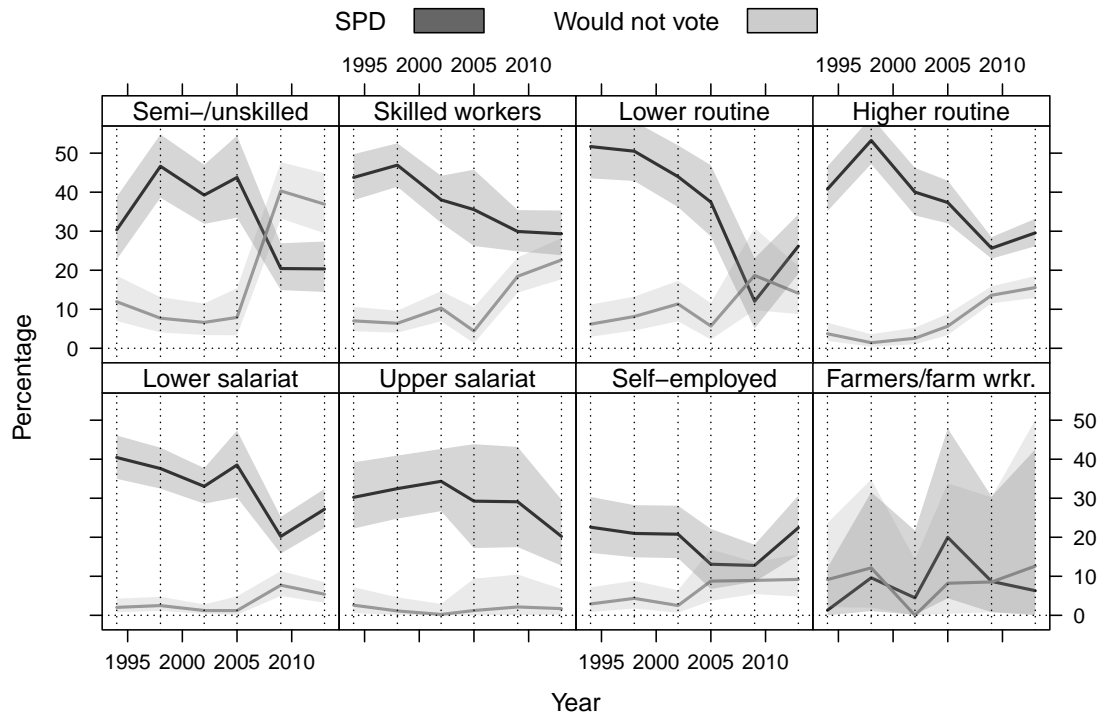
Figure 3 shows development of party support and abstention in West Germany as reflected in the data of the German election studies, broken down by social class, in the form of percentages (lines) with 95 percent confidence bands (gray areas). As the upper diagram makes clear, a development where a sudden decline of the SPD vote share is mirrored by an equally sudden increase of abstention in the 2009 Bundestag election – a development that is obvious in the electoral results discussed in the preceding section – is the most clearly apparent in the class of semi- and unskilled workers, but still discernible in the classes of the skilled workers and the lower-grade and higher-grade routine non-manual workers. There are some differences, in so far as the increase of abstention is somewhat less pronounced in these other classes and in so far as the decrease in the SPD vote share is less pronounced among the skilled workers and more pronounced in the class of lower-grade routine non-manual workers. It should also be noted that the SPD apparently was not able to increase their vote share in those groups that were not among its traditional supporters and thus not able to compensate its losses in their traditionally supporting strata. Its support also declines in the lower salariat, where its support had been somewhat lower than in the manual and non-manual working class categories and clearly has not increase in the upper salariat. There seems to be a slight increase among the self-employed in 2013 but given the width of the confidence bands, it is not sure whether this is just a sampling fluctuation.

The lower diagram shows that if there is any party that benefits from the decline in SPD support among the manual worker and higher-grade routine non-manual worker classes, it is its competitor further to the left of the economic policy spectrum, the *Linkspartei/Die Linke* (in the following abbreviating referred to as “The Left”). In the class of lower-grade routine non-manual occupation the turn to other parties is not confined to The Left, but then again the move towards this party appears roughly as pronounced as towards *all other* parties.

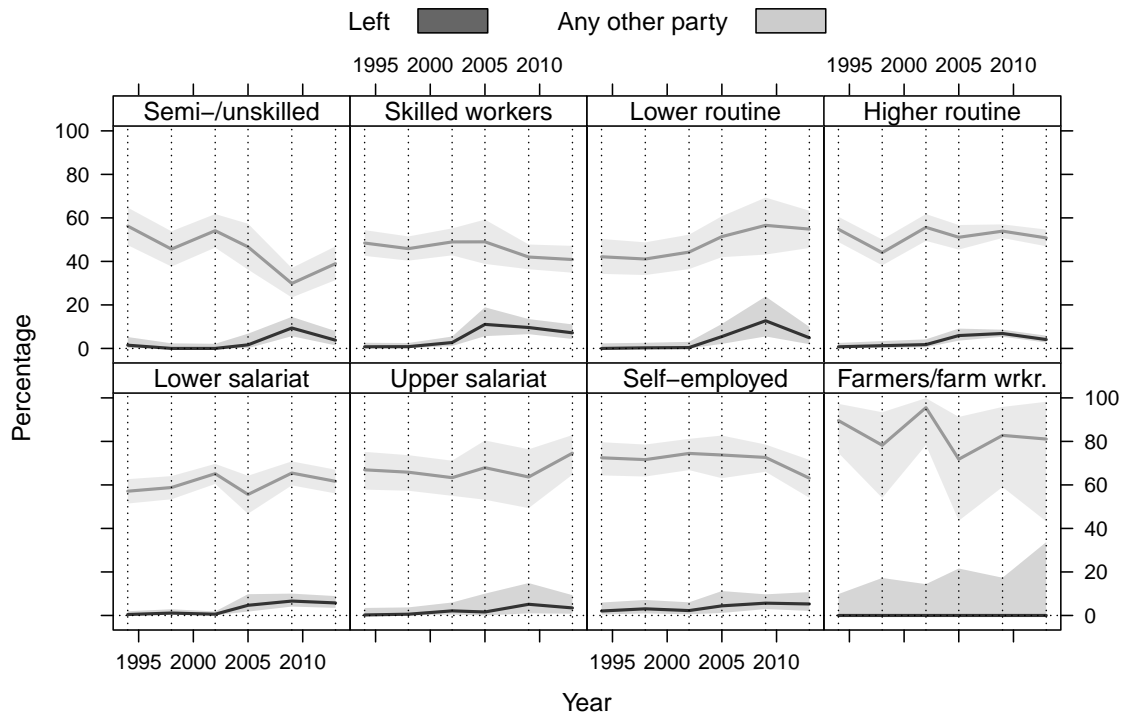
The developments in East Germany as reflected in election study data are shown in figure 4. Despite the fact that the East German party system is different from the West German one by its stronger presence of The Left, the development of SPD support and abstention is not dissimilar to the development in the west. The main notable difference seems to be that the drop in support for the Social Democrats among the semi- and unskilled worker class sets in one or two elections earlier, as does the increase in abstention. With regards to the support for The Left and other parties, the main difference to the west appears to be higher percentage of support for the former and the lower support for the latter. Nevertheless other parties than The Left do not appear to benefit from the loss of support for the social democrats in East German working class voters. The only notable other change is that the pattern of party support in the upper salariat becomes more similar to the West German pattern from 2002.

Looking at the the development of abstention and party support as reflected in the data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) has its advantages, but perhaps also some disadvantages. On the one hand the ALLBUS allow to look at long-term changes in a much clearer

Figure 3: Abstention and party support in West Germany by social class, based on occupational groups in German Election Studies, 1994-2013

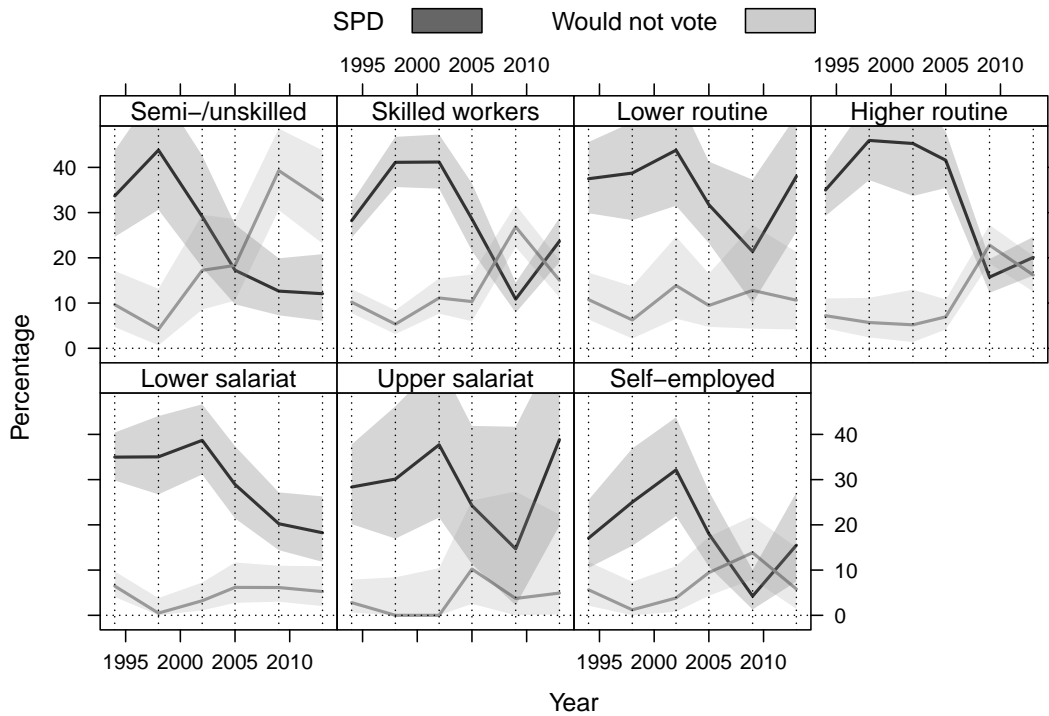


(a) Abstention and SPD support

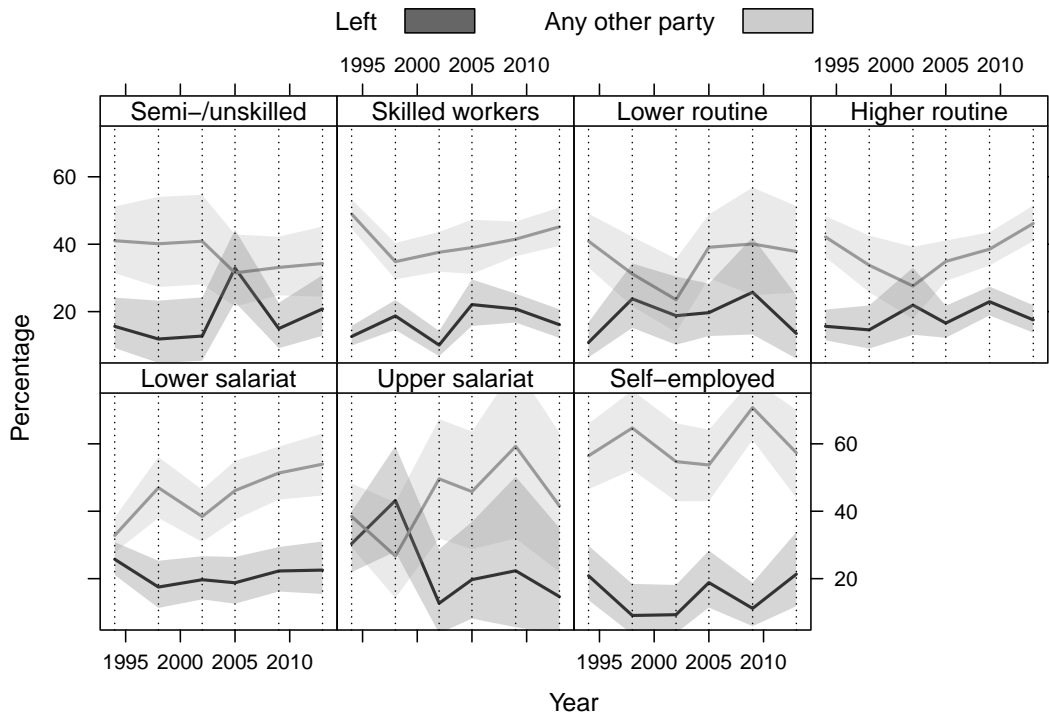


(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

Figure 4: Abstention and party support in East Germany by social class, based on occupational groups used in German Election Studies, 1994-2013



(a) Abstention and SPD support



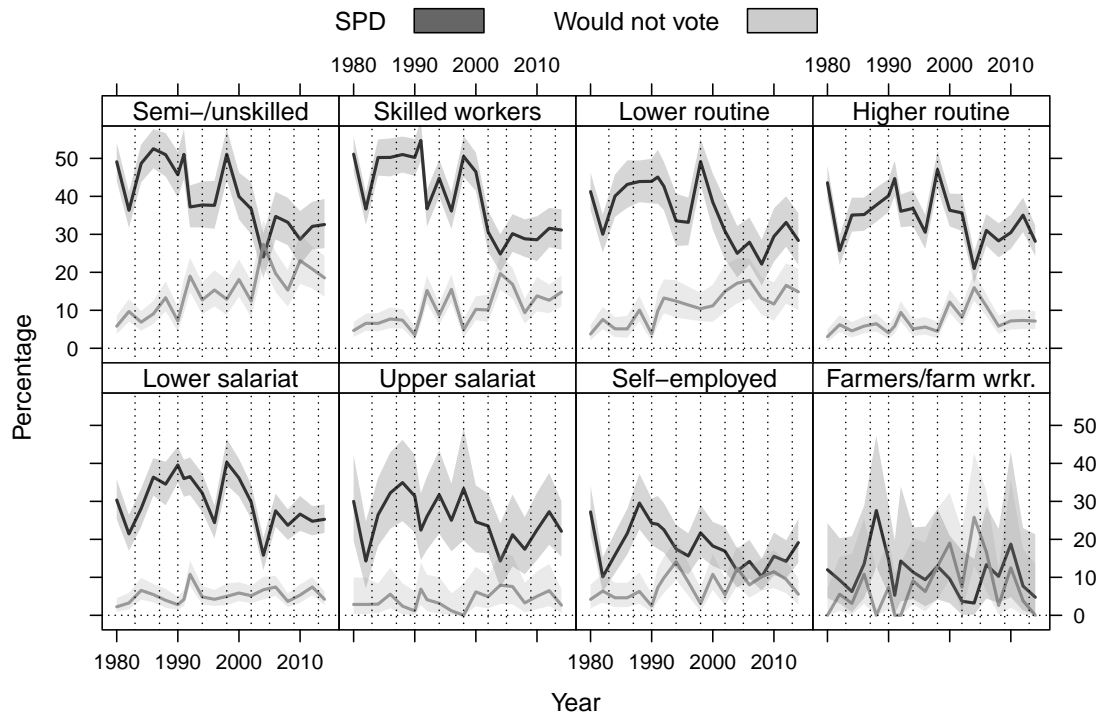
(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

way than election studies, since ALLBUS surveys span a much longer timespan and provide a high degree of continuity of both high quality measurement instruments and samples. On the other hand, they are usually not conducted in an election year. In contrast to election studies, where a question is asked about the intention to vote in the upcoming election (in pre-election waves) or about the vote actually cast in the election (in post-election waves), the question in ALLBUS surveys about voting behaviour is more hypothetical: respondents are asked what party they would vote for if there was an election on the next Sunday. Arguably, such respondents might be a less valid indicator of actual voting behaviour than questions asked in an election study, but they also might be less affected by the horse-race and hoopla of electoral campaigns and the appeal of party candidates and thus better suited to reveal long-term “glacial” changes.

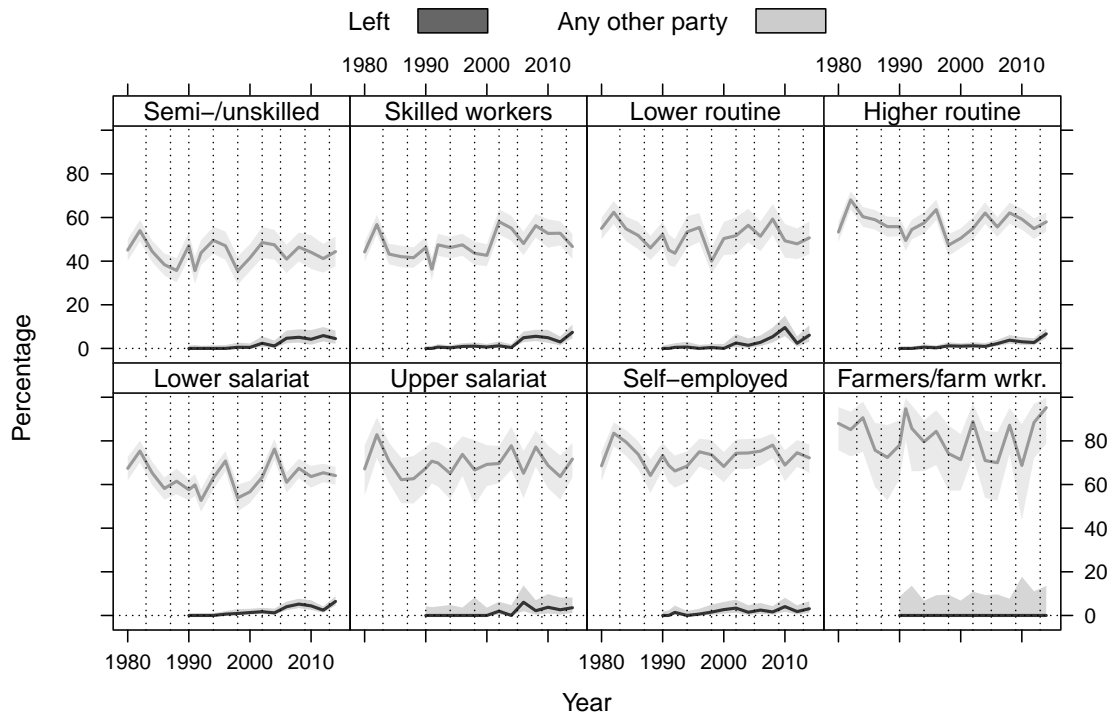
As mentioned earlier, the ALLBUS surveys allow to construct and use three different measures of social class position, which allows to check how much conclusions depend on the use of a particular one of these. Yet if the conclusions drawn from these measures hardly differ at all (as is the actually is the case) then it would be unnecessary tedious to discuss the findings based on each of these measures. Therefore, while figures 5 through 10 show the development of party support among ALLBUS respondents broken down by class according to the three measures based on main occupational categories, ISCO-68 occupational codes and ISCO-88 occupational codes, only the results obtained with the first of these measures are discussed in the following, with other figures presented as an opportunity for visual checks. The decision to focus on the results obtained with the first instrument based on main occupational categories has been made because it involves the same instrument as the election study results previously discussed and also allows to consider the longest possible timespan from 1980 through 2014. Using the ISCO-based measures would restrict the timespan of discussion: ISCO-68 codes are available in the ALLBUS data only up to 2010, while ISCO-88 codes are available only from 1992.

In contrast to figure 3 the development of party support and abstention in figures 5, 9, and 7 appears much more gradual. The abrupt decline from 2005 to 2009 in support for the SPD and the equally abrupt increase in abstention does not appear in these figures. In contrast, SPD support reached a low point and abstention reached a peak in 2004, the year just after when the reform of unemployment benefits – commonly referred to in Germany as the Hartz IV reform – were forged into law. SPD support seems even to have recovered somewhat in the class of semi-/unskilled manual labour, if not in the skilled manual labour and lower-trade routine non-manual labour classes. These results seem to be more in line with a common interpretation that it were the labour market reforms initiated and implemented in the second term of the SPD-Greens coalition headed by Gerhard Schröder that hurt the electoral fortunes and prospects of German Social Democracy, but they are not fully consistent with the actual electoral outcome and the findings based on electoral study data. Both the official electoral results and the election study data show that the most major losses by the SPD were

Figure 5: Abstention and party support in West Germany by social class, based on occupational groups in the ALLBUS surveys, 1980-2014



(a) Abstention and SPD support



(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

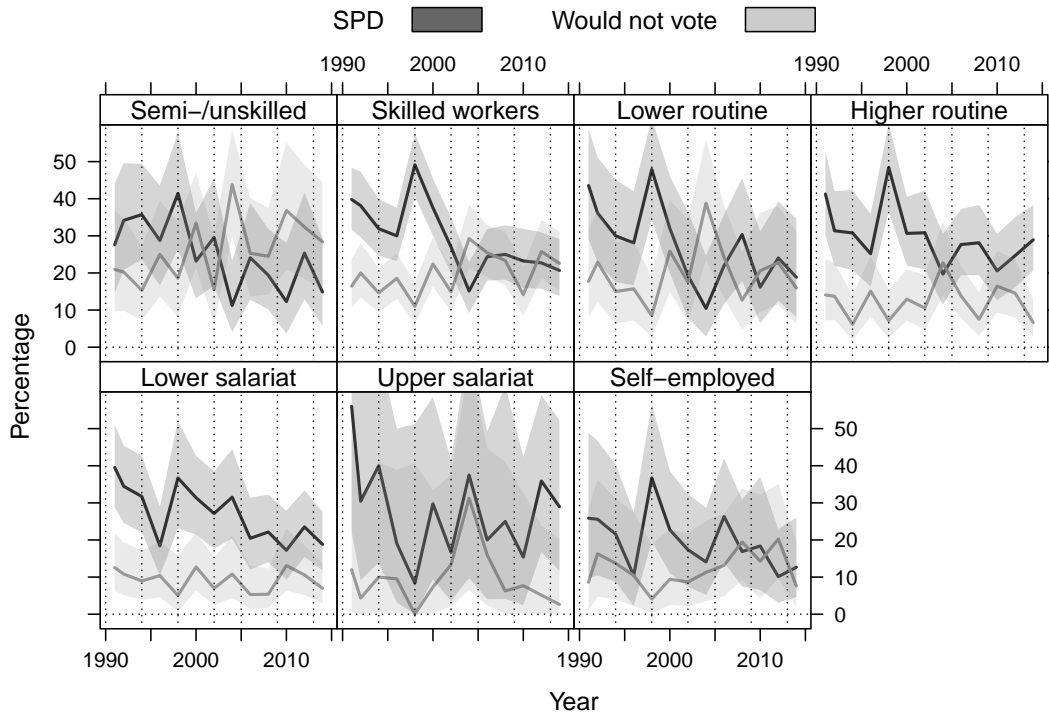
endured in 2009 and not 2005, as the ALLBUS data would suggest. This might indicate that vote intentions of ALLBUS respondents are a less valid indicator of actual voting behaviour than vote intentions and reported votes in election studies. But also a different interpretation is possible: The difference between ALLBUS findings and election study findings may suggest that actual voting behaviour is more responsive to short-term campaign effects than voting intentions formed outside the electoral season. The discussion of possible explanations for this divergence is deferred to the last section that offers a general discussion of the findings of this paper. What could give some more confidence in the validity of the vote intentions of ALLBUS respondents is that SPD support shows, like in the actual voting results and the election study data, a relative peak in 1998, when the ALLBUS survey coincided with the year of the election that led to the last time when the SPD changed from an opposition party to a party of government in a coalition that did not involve the Christian Democrats as the major partner. Another aspect of convergence between results of based on election study data and ALLBUS data is that the decline in SPD support and increase in abstention in members of the class of semi-/unskilled labour in East Germany. Here both electoral study data and ALLBUS data agree in that the decline of the SPD supports starts already before 2004 and that by the end of the timespan the amount of abstention surpasses the support for the SPD.

What the development of abstention and party support as reflected by ALLBUS data show more clearly than the election study data is that the decline in SPD support in its traditional working class constituency is not just or not only a sudden drop from 2005 to 2009, but a long-term gradual process that seems to have started in the late 1980s and that is accelerated from 1990 – with 1998 as a short intermission – and that the increase in abstention seems to have started even earlier. At the same time, a phenomenon observed with election study data also appears in the ALLBUS data, namely that the long-term downward trend of SPD support from 1980 through 2014 in its traditional constituency is mainly mirrored by an upward trend in abstention and support for The Left, even though there are some short-term changes in 1982 and from 2002 where losses of the SPD meant gains for other parties than The Left. Nevertheless the results so far obtain suggest that political and economic satisfaction is what leads members of the various ranks of the working class to withdraw from electoral politics.

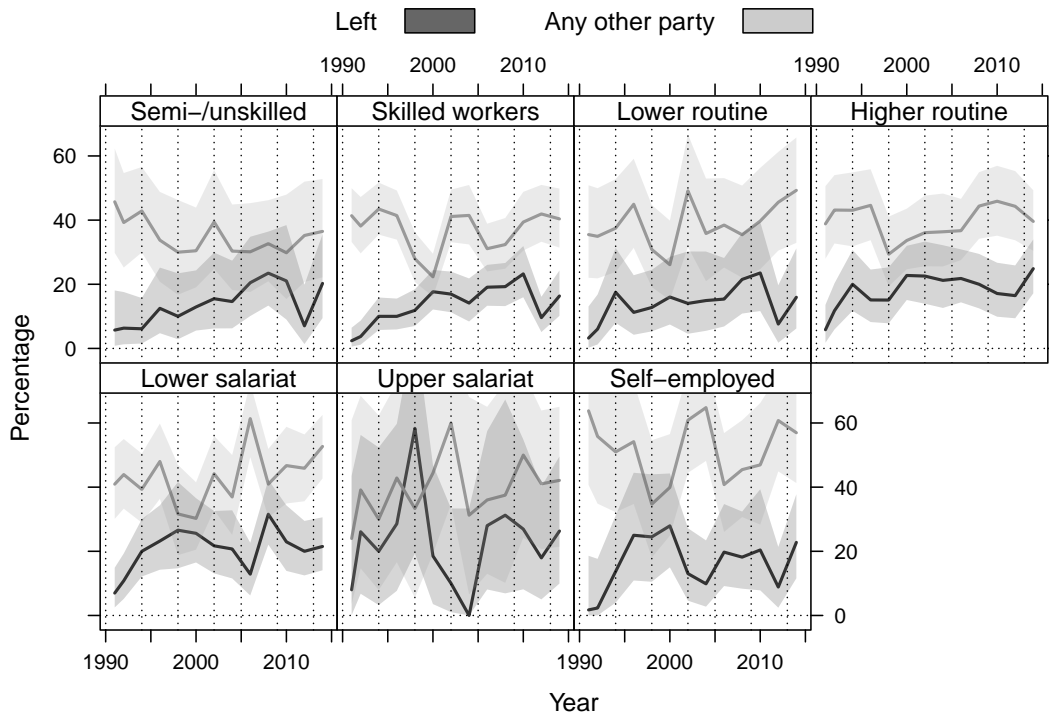
4 Potential Explanatory Factors for the Demobilisation of the Working Class

The discussion of the development of electoral abstention and party support in the two previous section raises two questions: The first question is: Why electoral abstention has increased, especially in the various ranks of what could be called the working classes? The second question is: Why it mainly seems to affect the support for the Social Democrats? Although these two questions are logically separate, it appears quite plausible that there is a single an-

Figure 6: Abstention and party support in East Germany by social class, based on occupational groups in the ALLBUS surveys, 1990-2014

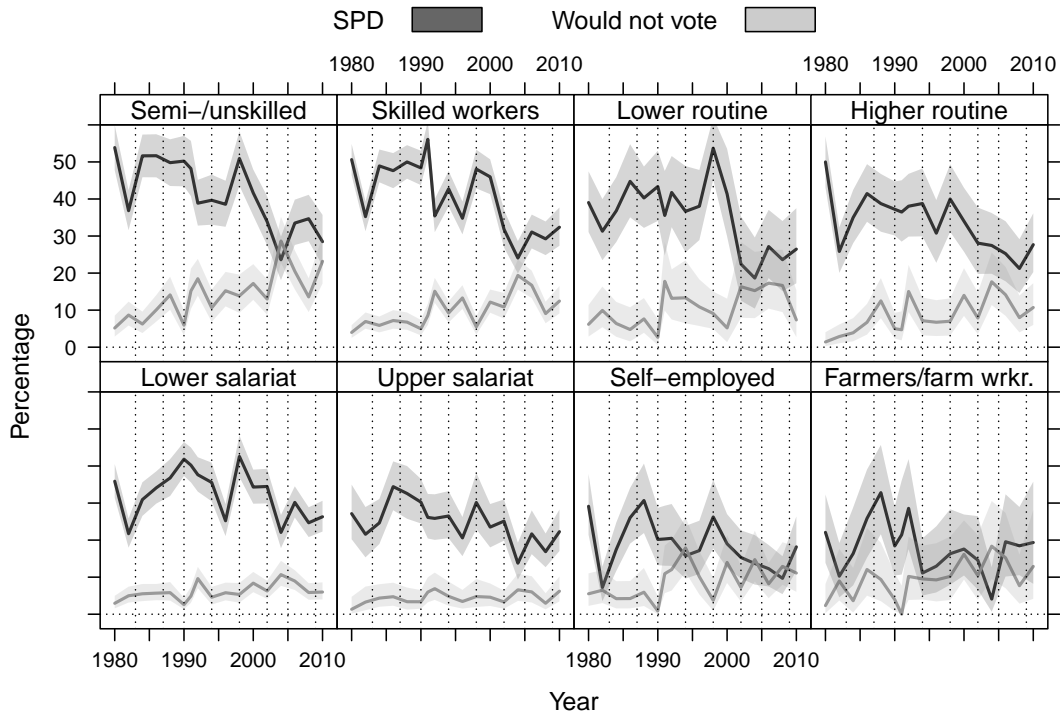


(a) Abstention and SPD support

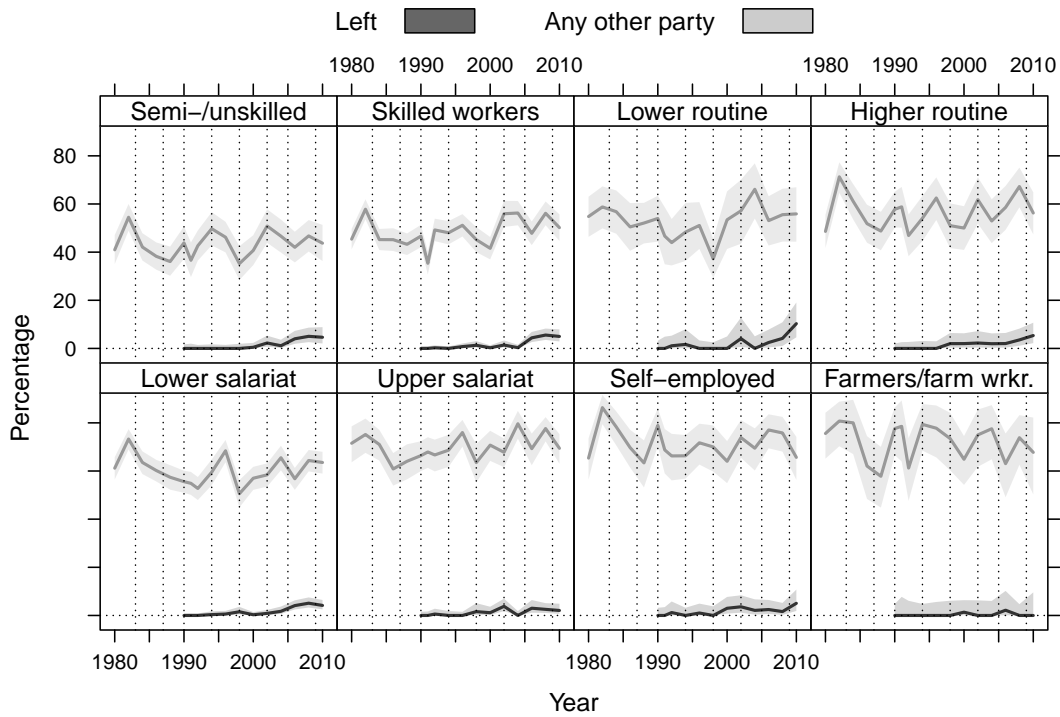


(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

Figure 7: Abstention and party support in West Germany by social class, based on ISCO-68 codes used in the ALLBUS surveys, 1980-2010

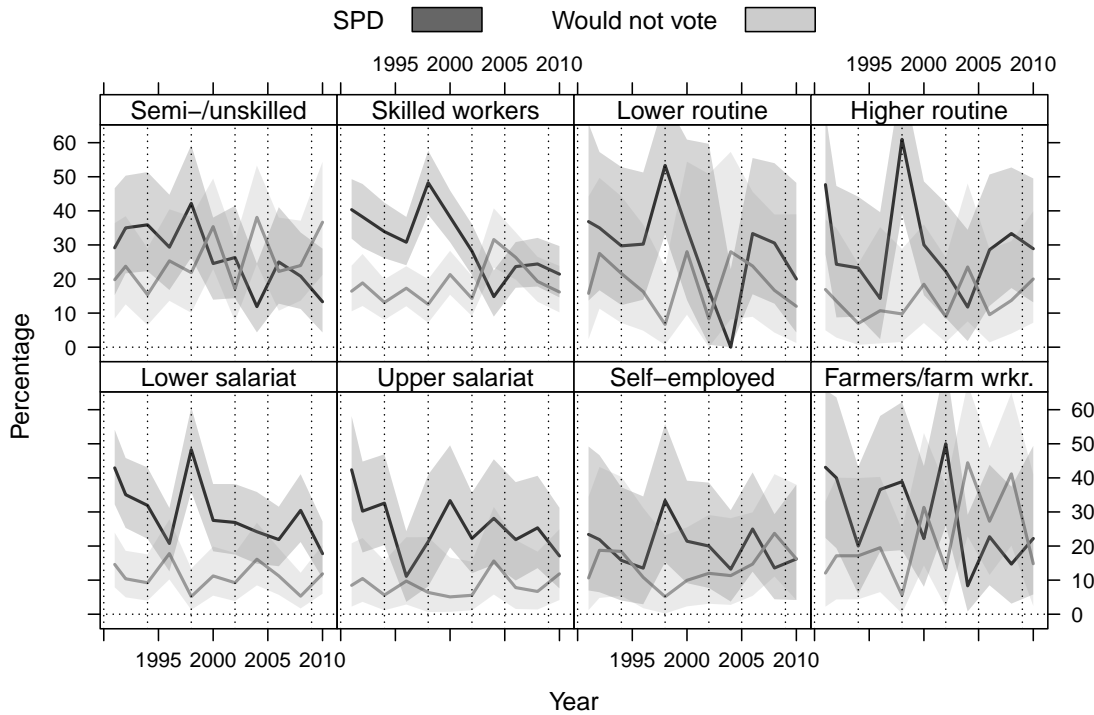


(a) Abstention and SPD support

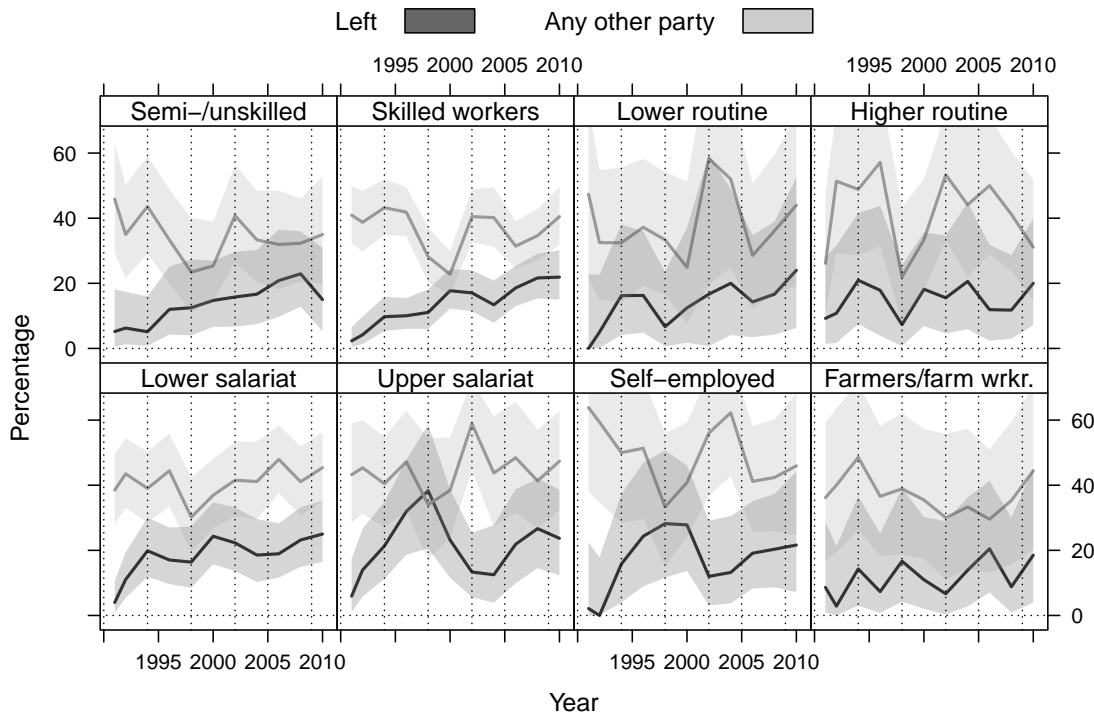


(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

Figure 8: Abstention and party support in East Germany by social class, based on ISCO-68 codes used in the ALLBUS surveys, 1990-2010

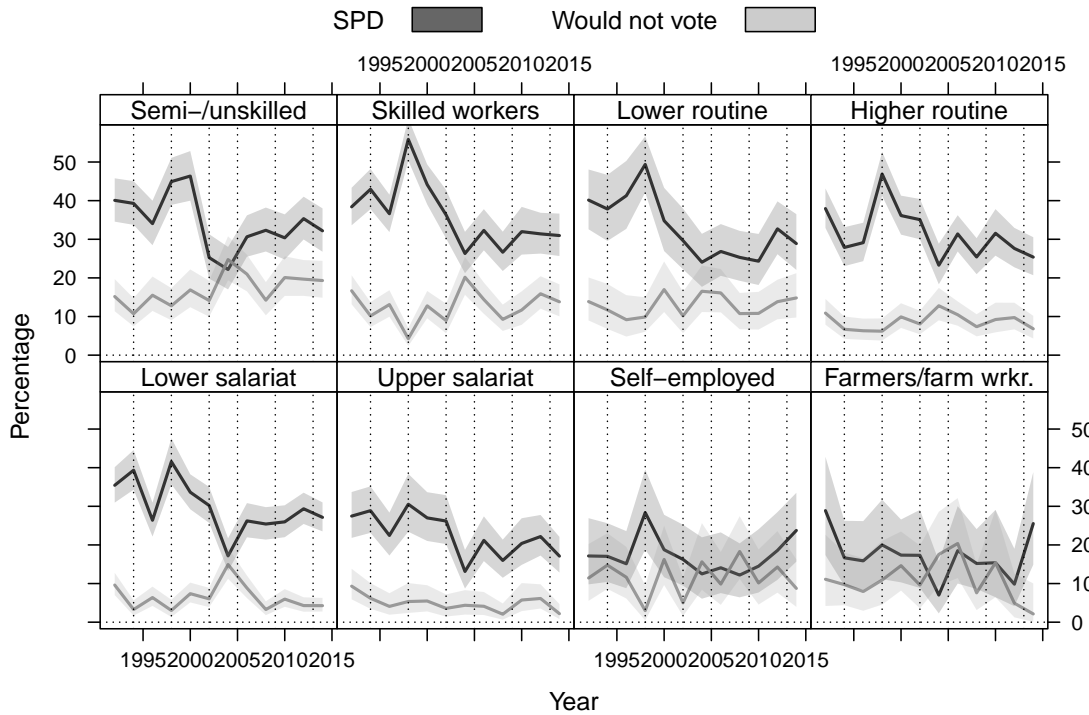


(a) Abstention and SPD support

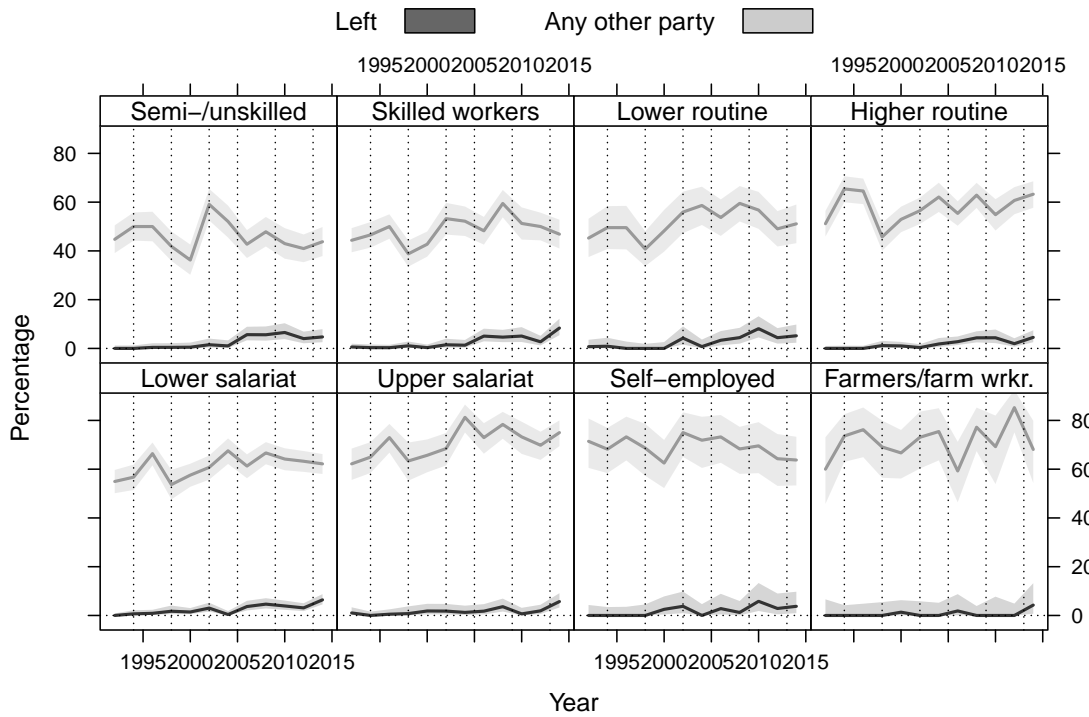


(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

Figure 9: Abstention and party support in West Germany by social class, based on ISCO-88 codes used in the ALLBUS surveys, 1992-2014

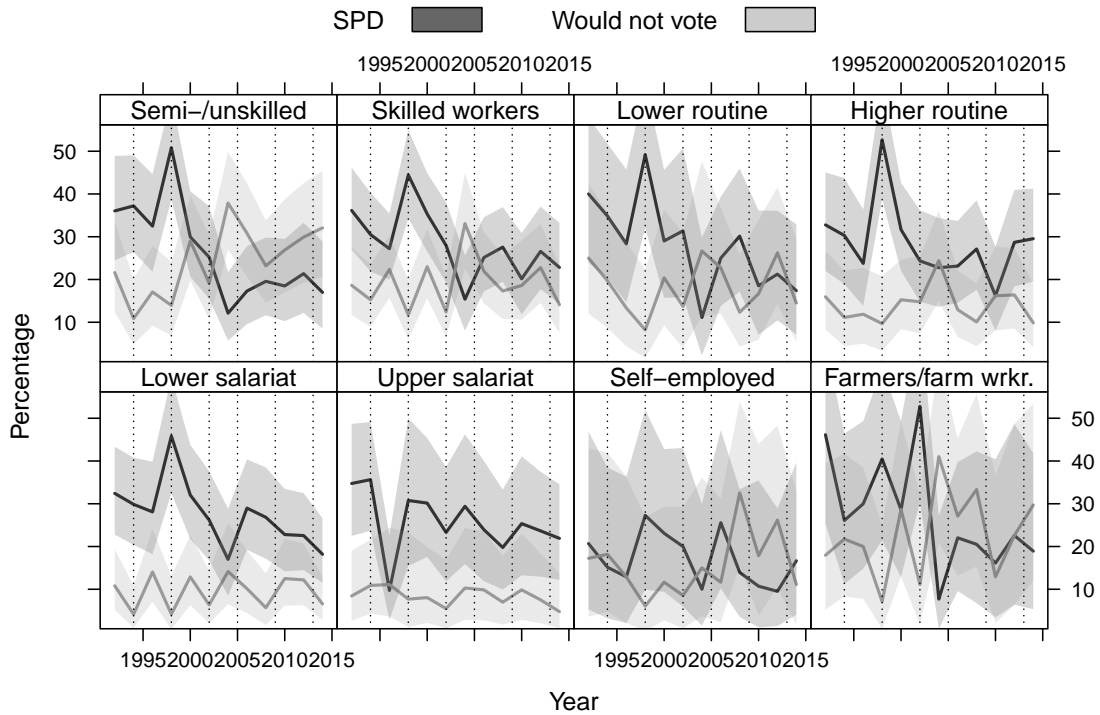


(a) Abstention and SPD support

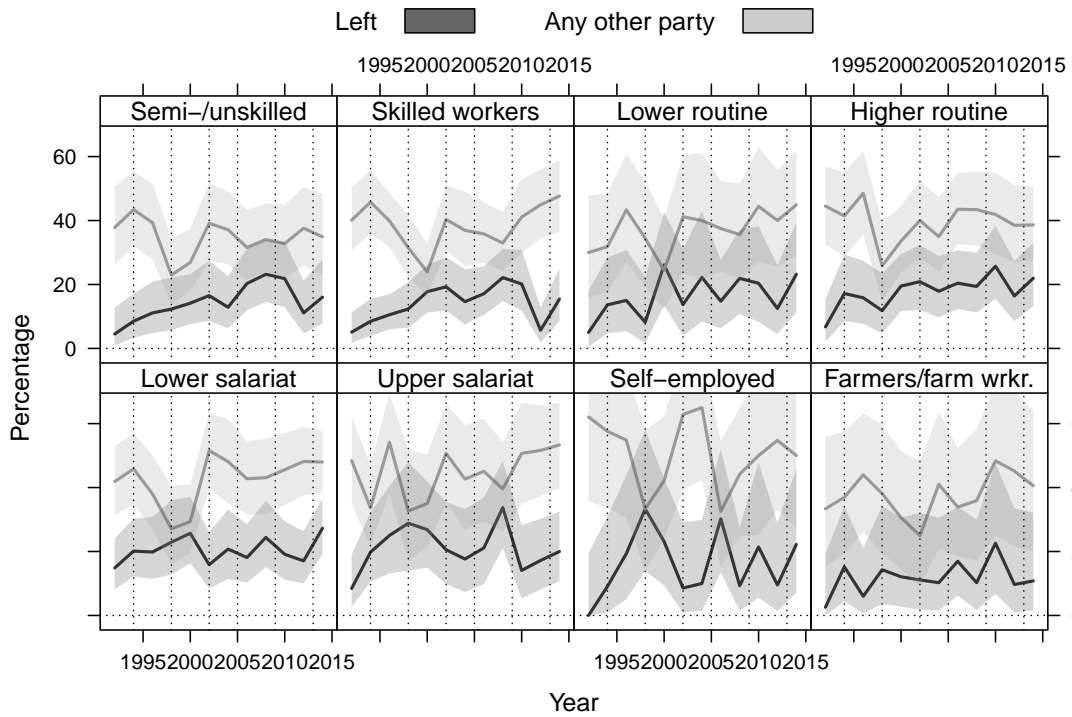


(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

Figure 10: Abstention and party support in East Germany by social class, based on ISCO-88 codes used in the ALLBUS surveys, 1992-2014



(a) Abstention and SPD support



(b) Support for *Linkspartei/Die Linke* and other parties

swer to both questions – an answer that would explain why working class voters turn away from the Social Democrats and withdraw from politics. Plausible candidate for such an explanation is that working class voters become more and more disappointed with an SPD that more and more moves to the political centre on issues related to economic policies – especially labour market policies as evidenced by the so-called Hartz reforms – and welfare state policies. Because there is appears no viable or legitimate alternative the SPD on the left of the political spectrum, at least not in West Germany, working class voters have no other alternative than to abstain from elections. A *legitimate* left-wing alternative seems to be absent in the minds of many of these non-voters because, first, the Green which are often considered to be standing on the left of the social democrats are not primarily a party that emphasises traditional socialist politics and have governed in coalition with the SPD when the labour market reforms were enacted and, second, other parties on the left have been tainted by their past as communist or former communist and thus as proponents of the dictatorship and failed planned economy of the pre-Unification German Democratic Republic. However, it is quite difficult to establish empirically such an explanation. To show that individual voters turn from SPD support to non-voting would require panel data that spans the entire period from the 1970s to the present. For obvious reasons, such data is not available. Another problem is that the questionnaires used by the ALLBUS – the primary data source for tracking long-term changes in social and political attitudes – do not include items that can be used as indicators for a selective disappointment with a particular party. Therefore, in the following only some circumstantial evidence can be provided, partly by ruling out alternative explanations.

The main strategy employed in this paper to check for the existence of said circumstantial evidence and for ruling out alternative explanation rests on examining whether the trends in abstention and party support among the ranks of the working classes can be “explained away” by adding the appropriate variables into a basic model of abstention and vote intention. The dependent variable in this basic model the vote intention that ALLBUS respondents state as an answer to the question on what party they would vote for if there were a Bundestag election on the next Sunday. Since the dependent variable in this model is categorical, it takes the form of a multinomial baseline logit model. In order to limit the complexity of the model and to be able to represent the patterns exposed in the previous section, the dependent variable in this model is constructed by collapsing the original responses to the vote intention question into four categories: *SPD*, *The Left*, *Other Parties*, and *Abstain*. For the analysis of West Germany, the voters of The Left were included to avoid numerical issues arising from the fact that The Left entered the party system only after the Unification in 1990. Since the proportion of the support of other parties is relatively stable in the classes of semi-/unskilled manual, skilled manual, and lower-grade routine non-manual workers, the category of *Other Parties* is chosen as baseline category in the formation of the logits. The basic model contains two independent variables, time and generation. The *time* variable is the ALLBUS survey year transformed as $T = (Y - 1990)/10$ so that it is centred around 1990 and its unit step is a decade. Obviously it is used

Table 1: The development of party support and electoral abstention within three social classes – maximum likelihood estimates of multinomial baseline-logit models based on ALLBUS data

	Semi-/unskilled			Skilled workers			Lower routine		
	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain
(Intercept)	-0.024 (0.033)	-5.862*** (0.442)	-1.376*** (0.054)	-0.054 (0.029)	-5.461*** (0.312)	-1.747*** (0.054)	-0.311*** (0.035)	-5.844*** (0.438)	-1.868*** (0.066)
Time	-0.125*** (0.032)	1.779*** (0.226)	0.336*** (0.044)	-0.207*** (0.027)	1.521*** (0.165)	0.250*** (0.043)	-0.078* (0.034)	1.730*** (0.226)	0.379*** (0.052)
Log-likelihood	-4732.1								
Deviance	9464.2								
N	4635			6339			4059		
(a) West Germany, 1980–2014									
	Semi-/unskilled			Skilled workers			Lower routine		
	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain
(Intercept)	-0.123 (0.139)	-1.703*** (0.206)	-0.709*** (0.152)	0.098 (0.076)	-1.659*** (0.118)	-0.852*** (0.093)	0.207 (0.132)	-1.338*** (0.193)	-0.630*** (0.158)
Time	-0.204 (0.112)	0.584*** (0.138)	0.342** (0.109)	-0.279*** (0.060)	0.490*** (0.078)	0.193** (0.067)	-0.444*** (0.104)	0.229 (0.131)	-0.025 (0.114)
Log-likelihood	-1424.4								
Deviance	2848.7								
N	1083			3283			1080		

Standard errors in parentheses, *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

to describe the over-time change in party support and abstention, its coefficients describe the change in the logits relative to the baseline category per 10 years. This basic model then was fitted to ALLBUS respondents from the semi-/unskilled manual, skilled manual, and lower-grade routine non-manual labour classes. Table 1 shows the estimates of this model fitted to these groups. The estimates of the coefficients of the time variable reflect the trends uncovered in the previous section: relative to all other parties, the support for the SPD decreases over time, and abstention increases, as does the support for The Left in all three working class categories.

Traditional research on political participation focuses on resources and opportunities. Important resources are time, money and political skills, while opportunities are provided by organisers of collective action. However, these factors are more relevant for the relatively high-cost forms of participation other than electoral turnout. Casting a ballot in a general election is not particularly costly in time and money and does not even require the skills to form one's own opinion on complicated political topics, since one could either follow one's own voting habits or the suggestions of opinion leader members of one's reference group or the cues of organisational actors such as trade unions. Nevertheless it could be argued that forming a voting decision does take some effort or at least the feeling to be able to form such an decision. That is, a certain degree of *subjective political efficacy* seems necessary to participate in a general election such as the election to the Bundestag. On the other hand, a political disappointment as just discussed may be reflected in the belief that parties or politicians lack responsiveness to one's grievances or demands, that is, it may be reflected in a lack of a certain aspect of *external efficacy*. Fortunately, the appropriate questionnaire items were included in ALLBUS surveys, but unfortunately they were used only on three occasions, in the 1988, 1998, and 2008 waves. These items were the question about their agreement to the statements "Politics is too complicated for me to understand" and "Politicians do not care about us". Originally the response categories were "Completely agree", "Tend to agree", "Tend to disagree", and "Completely disagree", but they were collapsed into the two categories "Agree" and "Disagree". Church attendance, with original categories collapsed into "Never", "Seldom", "Several times a year", and "Several times a month", was added as a control variable, since in analyses reported elsewhere (Elff and Roßteutscher 2015) indicate that church attendance affects both party support and electoral abstention. Since only maximally three points in time are available for the analysis of the relevance of political efficacy, time was translated into two dummy variables, coded such that their coefficients express differences in logits between two successive time points. The estimates of this model are shown in tables 2 and 3.

The model in tables 2 and 3 do not convey a fully unambiguous answer to the question whether the decline in support for the SPD and turnout can be attributed to a decline in political efficacy. On the one hand, the efficacy items attain at best only a 5 percent level of significance and in general the estimates of the responsiveness item coefficient are larger in absolute value than the estimates of the subjective efficacy items in the logit equation of ab-

Table 2: Political efficacy, party support and electoral abstention within three social classes in West Germany – maximum likelihood estimates of multinomial baseline-logit models based on ALLBUS data, 1988, 1998, 2008

	Semi-/unskilled		Skilled workers		Lower routine	
	SPD	Abstain	SPD	Abstain	SPD	Abstain
(Intercept)	0.678* (0.300)	-0.923* (0.463)	0.198 (0.198)	-1.753*** (0.374)	-0.268 (0.265)	-1.635*** (0.430)
Wave: 1998-1988	-0.121 (0.223)	-0.193 (0.338)	-0.108 (0.168)	-0.635 (0.366)	0.155 (0.194)	0.240 (0.327)
Wave: 2008-1998	-0.885*** (0.247)	-0.216 (0.345)	-0.832*** (0.187)	0.403 (0.364)	-1.199*** (0.249)	-0.315 (0.346)
Churchat: Seldom	-0.458 (0.289)	-1.033** (0.366)	-0.065 (0.199)	-1.012** (0.353)	0.463 (0.261)	-0.204 (0.338)
Churchat: Several times yrly	-1.333*** (0.261)	-1.938*** (0.338)	-0.669*** (0.189)	-1.200*** (0.316)	-0.383 (0.243)	-1.499*** (0.352)
Politians don't care	0.573* (0.224)	0.932* (0.396)	0.255 (0.160)	0.623 (0.346)	0.139 (0.199)	0.817* (0.389)
Politics too complx	-0.271 (0.194)	0.456 (0.303)	-0.370* (0.145)	0.292 (0.273)	-0.128 (0.177)	0.280 (0.287)
Log-likelihood	-569.3		-793.7		-595.0	
Deviance	1138.6		1587.4		1190.0	
N	620		924		664	

Standard errors in parentheses, *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 3: Political efficacy, party support and electoral abstention within three social classes in East Germany – maximum likelihood estimates of multinomial baseline-logit models based on ALLBUS data, 1998, 2008

	Semi-/unskilled			Skilled workers			Lower routine		
	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain
(Intercept)	-0.889 (0.600)	-0.999 (0.698)	-0.667 (0.551)	-0.305 (0.332)	-0.682 (0.411)	-1.235** (0.431)	-0.568 (0.516)	-1.602 (0.820)	-2.202* (1.086)
Wave: 2008-1998	-0.927* (0.436)	0.663 (0.552)	-0.079 (0.475)	-0.759** (0.236)	0.327 (0.297)	0.601* (0.303)	-0.397 (0.382)	0.500 (0.477)	0.480 (0.571)
Churchat: Seldom	-0.272 (0.621)	-1.334 (0.861)	-0.076 (0.621)	0.285 (0.275)	-0.739 (0.389)	-0.461 (0.363)	0.773 (0.440)	-0.534 (0.654)	-0.694 (0.847)
Churchat: Several times yrly	-1.102 (0.575)	-0.889 (0.733)	-1.132 (0.645)	-0.411 (0.357)	-1.434* (0.568)	-0.910 (0.495)	-0.413 (0.587)	-1.810 (1.094)	-0.525 (0.860)
Politicians don't care	0.903 (0.592)	1.494* (0.724)	0.017 (0.538)	0.393 (0.320)	0.335 (0.409)	0.391 (0.410)	0.622 (0.501)	1.262 (0.813)	1.530 (1.089)
Politics too complx	0.488 (0.460)	-1.330* (0.522)	0.743 (0.499)	0.167 (0.235)	0.043 (0.292)	0.805** (0.295)	0.121 (0.379)	0.180 (0.481)	-0.294 (0.570)
Log-likelihood	-201.1			-581.6			-201.7		
Deviance	402.2			1163.3			403.4		
N	163			460			169		

Standard errors in parentheses, *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

stention in West Germany. In East Germany, the subjective efficacy plays a somewhat stronger role in predicting abstention. On the other hand, here the SPD seems to have a viable alternative to the left, which is able to attract those who believe that politicians do not care about the citizens. On the other hand, the efficacy items are not able to “explain away” the decline of the support for the Social Democrats from 1998 to 2008.

If one accepts, despite the somewhat weak evidence given by tables 2 and 3, that it is a disappointment with parties’ responsiveness to economic grievances, then one may ask whether more particular indicators of such grievances can be used to explain the decline in SPD support and turnout. For the purpose of answering the question, some other items are considered that have been employed regularly in ALLBUS questionnaires from 1990. The first set of items are responses to the questions whether respondents agree that they get a fair share of the standard of living and agree that politicians don’t care for the situation of common people. As preliminary analysis not reported here indicate, the feeling to obtain a fair share decreases in the various ranks of the working classes, while the feeling that politicians don’t care for common people increases. The second set of items are the responses to questions about respondents’ perceptions about their own economic situation. If the blame of the Social Democrats for personal economic problems is a motivation for withdrawal from voting, the assessment of one’s own economic situation should also be able to predict abstention. Therefore the basic model was extended, along with Church attendance, by these indicators of political and economic grievances and the resulting estimates are shown in tables 4 and 5

The model estimates tables 4 and 5 indicate that political disappointment and economic grievances can contribute to a considerable degree to explaining the increase in abstention throughout the period of observation, perhaps with exception to the semi-/unskilled workers in East Germany. With exception of this group, the time coefficient in the logit equations for abstention does not reach statistical significance. In West German samples the perception of getting less than a fair share of the standard of living attains a statistically significant positive coefficient in the logit equation of abstention for the semi-/unskilled and lower-grade routine non-manual worker classes. The perception that politicians do not care for common people obtains a statistically significant coefficient throughout. Further, the assessment of one’s own economic situation also appears to affect the tendency to abstain. The coefficients of the contrasts between adjacent categories attain, with one exception, statistical significance in the sample, and point in the direction that the more pessimistic the perception of one’s own economic situation, the stronger the tendency to abstain. In East Germany the situation seems to be slightly different: The perception of getting less than a fair share of the standard of living does not get a statistically significant coefficient, while the perception that politicians do not care for common people affects not only the tendency to abstain, but also the tendency to vote for The Left. Like for West Germany, there is evidence that a pessimistic perception of one’s own economic situation affects the tendency to abstain from elections, however it is more ambiguous. The evidence of the effect of economic perceptions in the skilled manual

Table 4: Social grievances, economic perceptions, party support and electoral abstention within three social classes in West Germany – maximum likelihood estimates of multinomial baseline-logit models based on ALLBUS data, 1982–2010

	Semi-/unskilled			Skilled workers			Lower routine		
	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain
(Intercept)	0.233 (0.227)	-18.204 (339.863)	-1.198*** (0.348)	-0.084 (0.170)	-6.960*** (1.183)	-1.340*** (0.271)	-0.181 (0.243)	-7.151*** (1.405)	-1.542*** (0.416)
Time	-0.341*** (0.094)	2.159*** (0.544)	-0.138 (0.121)	-0.418*** (0.075)	1.685*** (0.371)	-0.188 (0.107)	-0.460*** (0.101)	2.241*** (0.544)	-0.145 (0.148)
Churchat: Seldom	-0.344* (0.161)	-0.862* (0.435)	-0.687*** (0.192)	0.081 (0.122)	-0.887* (0.347)	-0.644*** (0.157)	-0.364* (0.181)	-0.690 (0.410)	-1.132*** (0.234)
Churchat: Several times yrly	-0.728*** (0.149)	-2.625*** (0.643)	-1.123*** (0.181)	-0.280* (0.123)	-1.646*** (0.422)	-1.088*** (0.166)	-0.612*** (0.172)	-2.122*** (0.545)	-1.378*** (0.222)
Less than fair share	0.232 (0.126)	0.037 (0.423)	0.459** (0.164)	-0.001 (0.101)	0.895** (0.344)	0.263 (0.140)	0.356* (0.143)	0.465 (0.400)	0.450* (0.201)
Pltns don't care common ppl	0.292 (0.175)	13.059 (339.861)	1.001*** (0.300)	0.287* (0.127)	1.897 (1.021)	0.914*** (0.234)	0.616*** (0.182)	1.750 (1.033)	1.309*** (0.364)
Econ situation: Partly-Good	0.143 (0.136)	0.914 (0.609)	0.436* (0.189)	-0.031 (0.103)	0.186 (0.378)	0.175 (0.152)	0.115 (0.145)	0.597 (0.453)	0.586** (0.220)
Econ situation: Not good-Partly	-0.212 (0.164)	0.217 (0.429)	0.368* (0.183)	-0.147 (0.156)	0.529 (0.371)	0.453* (0.181)	-0.036 (0.204)	0.073 (0.469)	0.492* (0.243)
Log-likelihood	-1616.2								
Deviance	3232.5								
N	1537			2325			1296		

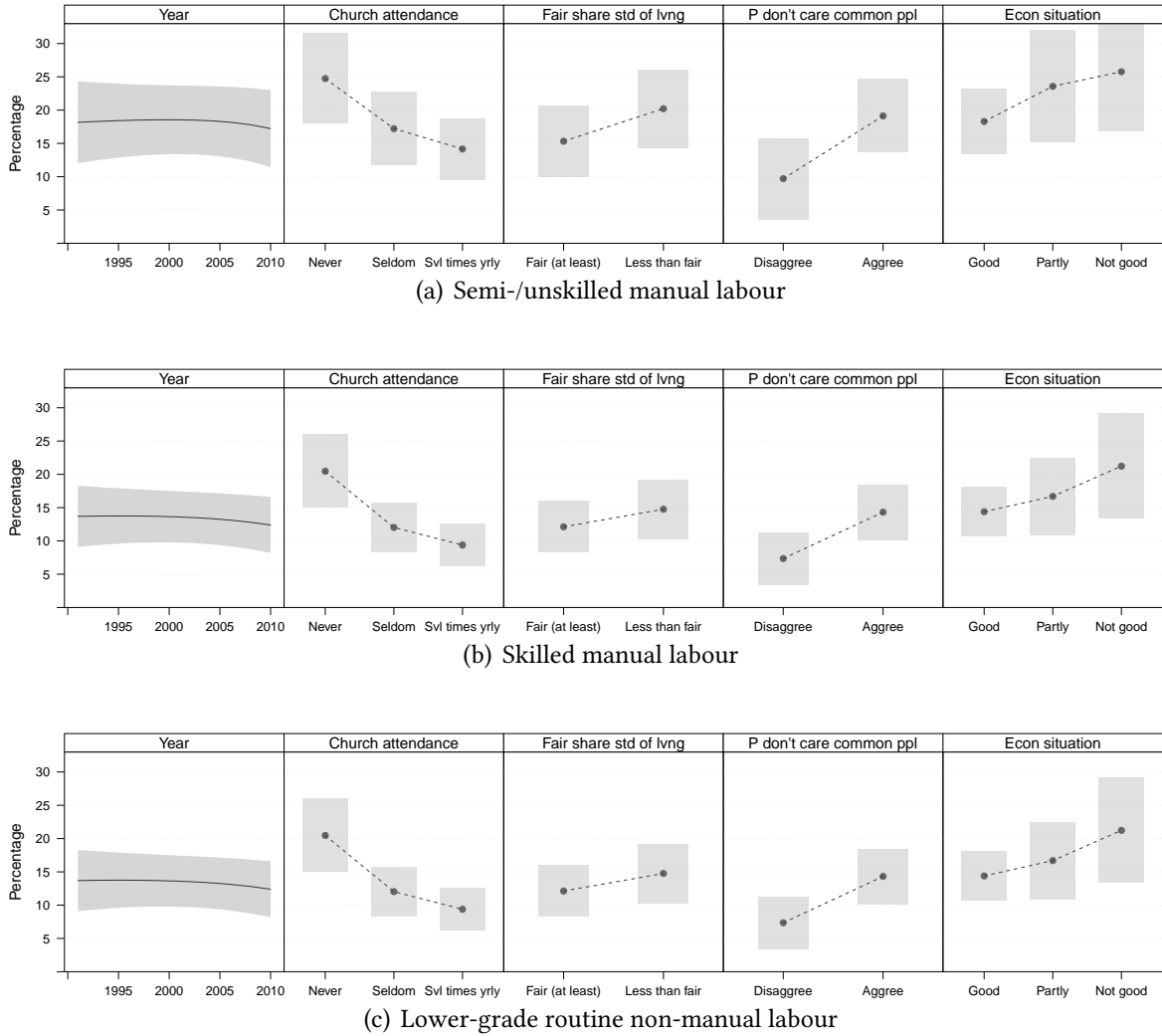
Standard errors in parentheses, *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 5: Social grievances, economic perceptions, party support and electoral abstention within three social classes in East Germany – maximum likelihood estimates of multinomial baseline-logit models based on ALLBUS data, 1990–2010

	Semi-/unskilled			Skilled workers			Lower routine		
	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain	SPD	Left	Abstain
(Intercept)	-0.125 (0.417)	-2.696*** (0.707)	-1.118* (0.468)	-0.122 (0.180)	-3.084*** (0.340)	-1.847*** (0.284)	0.212 (0.349)	-2.236*** (0.560)	-1.305*** (0.481)
Time	-0.195 (0.163)	0.824*** (0.208)	0.352* (0.162)	-0.248** (0.085)	0.934*** (0.123)	0.146 (0.098)	-0.599*** (0.157)	0.608** (0.210)	-0.013 (0.173)
Churchat: Seldom	-0.476 (0.247)	-1.123*** (0.319)	-0.566* (0.239)	-0.117 (0.127)	-0.254 (0.169)	-0.536*** (0.155)	-0.228 (0.230)	-0.476 (0.293)	-0.517* (0.261)
Churchat: Several times yrly	-0.944** (0.305)	-1.901*** (0.463)	-1.338*** (0.336)	-0.836*** (0.167)	-1.090*** (0.246)	-1.182*** (0.217)	-1.013*** (0.270)	-1.555*** (0.411)	-1.499*** (0.340)
Less than fair share	-0.165 (0.259)	0.132 (0.332)	0.070 (0.280)	0.001 (0.127)	0.230 (0.176)	0.289 (0.161)	-0.277 (0.228)	0.221 (0.300)	0.196 (0.274)
Pltns don't care common ppl	0.357 (0.357)	1.345* (0.636)	0.699 (0.398)	0.340* (0.154)	1.110*** (0.290)	1.294*** (0.254)	0.689* (0.286)	0.866 (0.466)	1.149** (0.412)
Econ situation: Partly-Good	-0.400 (0.253)	0.086 (0.319)	0.580 (0.296)	0.099 (0.122)	0.675*** (0.172)	0.671*** (0.157)	0.292 (0.229)	0.426 (0.297)	0.573* (0.274)
Econ situation: Not good-Partly	-0.025 (0.256)	-0.121 (0.284)	0.486* (0.227)	-0.266 (0.153)	-0.107 (0.178)	0.425** (0.149)	-0.009 (0.271)	0.046 (0.324)	0.526 (0.272)
Log-likelihood	-896.8			-2752.8			-860.7		
Deviance	1793.7			5505.6			1721.5		
N	710			2201			694		

Standard errors in parentheses. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

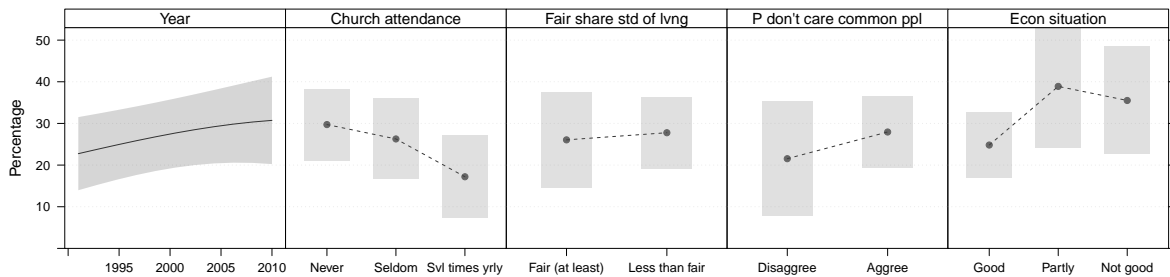
Figure 11: Marginal predictions of intended electoral abstention, West Germany 1990-2010



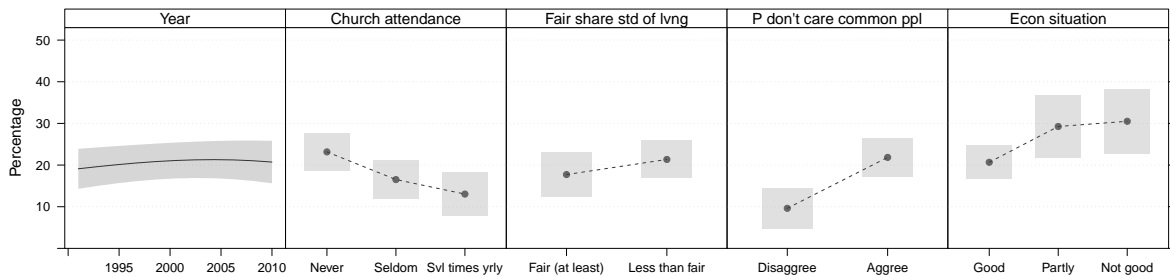
worker class is quite strong, while at least one contrast coefficient fails to attain statistical significance in the classes of semi-/unskilled manual and lower-grade routine non-manual labour.

A problem with the interpretation of coefficients in multinomial baseline-logit models is that coefficients do not directly translate into changes in the expected value of the dependent variable, but express differences in logits relative to the baseline category. For example, if we obtain a zero coefficient of time in the logit equation of abstention it indicates an unchanging level of abstention only *relative* to the baseline category. If – after all other independent variables are taken into account – both abstention and voting for other parties increases over time, this may also result in a zero coefficient of abstention. As a check whether small estimates of the time coefficients in tables 4 and 5 actually imply a constant level of abstention, average marginal predictions are created with respect to the independent variables of the models. These average marginal predictions are created through the following steps: First for each individual,

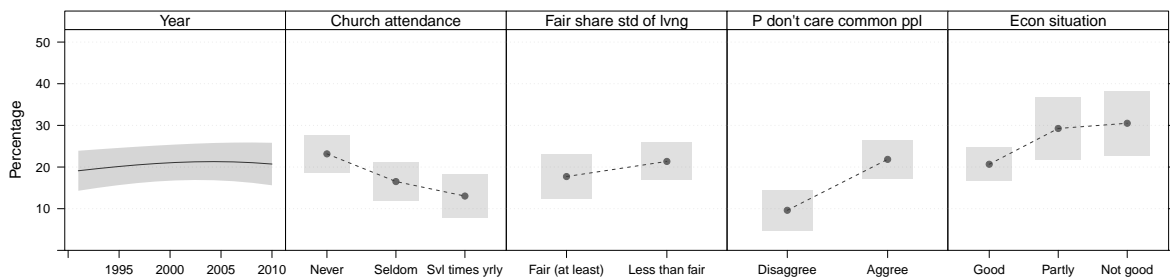
Figure 12: Marginal predictions of intended electoral abstention, East Germany 1990-2010



(a) Semi-/unskilled manual labour



(b) Skilled manual labour



(c) Lower-grade routine non-manual labour

the values of the independent variable of interest are varied along its range, while all other independent variables are held constant. Second, for each of the assigned values of the independent variable of interest, the average predicted probabilities are computed by taking the mean over the sample. Thus the generated average predicted probabilities are a bit more realistic than those generated by the common practice of generating predicted probabilities with other independent variables set at their sample means, which is infeasible anyway if some of the independent variables are categorical (for a discussion of this procedure see Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013). These average marginal predictions are shown in figures 11 and 12 together with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 11 makes clear that indeed after taking into account church attendance, the perceived share at the standard of living, attitudes towards politicians responsiveness, and perceived personal economic situation, abstention does not increase among the ranks of the working class in West Germany. Figure 12 conveys an only slightly different message: The increase in abstention can be explained by the grievances considered here in the skilled manual and lower-grade routine non-manual labour classes, but not in the semi-/unskilled manual labour class.

5 Summary and Conclusions

The point of departure of the present paper were the dual losses in electoral turnout and in party support for the for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in 2009, which led to the question whether these two phenomena were linked. An examination of aggregate results of elections to the Bundestag, the German lower house of parliament, exposed a correlated long-term decline in turnout and SPD support that emerged in the 1970s and grew especially strong from 1990, suggesting that the decline in turnout and in SPD support that occurred in 2009 is a culmination of this process, rather than an isolated accident. The analysis of cumulated data from German election studies and from the German General Social Survey showed that the tendency to abstain from election increases in particular among the ranks of the working class, the traditional social voter base of the SPD, and that the increase in abstention hurt the prospects of this party in particular. The survey data analysis also showed that there has not been any strong tendency of defection of working class voters to non-left parties or any such tendency at all, which suggests that if the SPD loses votes in the working class then it is because working class voters do not turn out to elections. Further analysis showed that the increase in abstention is likely to be attributable to a dissatisfaction with one's own economic situation and the political response to economic hardships experienced by the less well-to-do.

There is one inconsistency between the results obtained with electoral study data and with data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS). While electoral study data revealed a sudden drop in SPD support and turnout, a drop that also obvious in the aggregate electoral

results, this drop does not surface in the ALLBUS data. A possible explanation, which could not be established in this paper, is that electoral studies data are gathered closer to an election so that – in pre-election surveys – it is more likely that respondents already have formed a vote intention or – in post-election surveys – they already have acted on this intention, while outside the electoral seasons many respondents have not yet made their mind up. Therefore it is possible that a substantial proportion of respondents who in the end abstain from a Bundestag election is concealed in the category of “Don’t know” responses to the question about the vote intention in a hypothetical general election on the next Sunday. ALLBUS respondents who give such a “Don’t know” response have been excluded from the analyses of the preceding sections and time constraint prevented an extension of these analyses to the “Don’t know” category. All that can be stated here is therefore that preliminary yet unreported analyses done for Elff (2013) indicated that the proportion of “Don’t know” responses increased in particular in the working class, parallel to the stated intention to abstain from an election.

The declining support for the Social Democrats in the working class could be easily mistaken for yet another morsel of a grand process of declining class politics (Clark and Lipset 1991, 2001) or of a weakening if not disappearance of social cleavages (Franklin et al. 1992; Lane and Ersson 1997). This once popular narrative rests on three arguments: The first is that the relative size of “traditional cleavage groups” is in decline so that social cleavages lose political relevance (Dogan 1995; Best 2011). The second is that it has been the achievement of post-war democracy and the welfare state to appease social conflict thus taking the edge from social cleavages (van der Eijk et al. 1992), while the third is that unprecedented material security enjoyed by modern societies has led to a substitution of economic conflicts of interests to value based divisions (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart and Rabier 1986; Van Der Waal, Achterberg and Houtman 2007). Yet despite first appearances, the developments discussed in this paper do not fit well with this narrative. While the vote share of the SPD is in decline, consistent with a notion of a declining working class voter base, the vote share of the CDU/CSU has remained more persistent. After a second glance this seems paradoxical, however, since the the industrial working class has not decline as much in size as has the proportion of people regularly attending church, as shown elsewhere (Elff 2013). If social stratification is less politically potent because the underlying conflicts have been appeased by the welfare state, we should find that working class members who turn away from the Social Democrats and withdraw from politics should be more materially satisfied than those who stay with the SPD, in direct contradiction to the findings of this paper. How the findings of this paper speak to the fourth argument is a bit less straightforward, because it also involves parties’ agency (Elff 2007). Value politics should lead to a decline in class politics if class-based parties de-emphasise traditional material issues and actively seek their fortunes in groups holding the new “post-materialist” or libertarian value priorities (Kitschelt 1994), which means that an emergence of value cleavages *per se* cannot be an explanation of a decline in social cleavages.

Przeworski and Sprague (1986) once argued that in an era of post-industrialisation, working

class-based social democratic parties face a dilemma: As their traditional social constituency, the working class declines in relative size, these parties will try to seek new sources of support beyond their original voter base in order to maintain their electoral strength, but that such a strategy has the cost of diminishing support from this original base. If the change in the patterns of electoral turnout and voting uncovered in this paper is a reaction to the German Social Democrats strategy to extend its electoral base beyond the working class, by moderating their aims in the domain of economic policy – a moderation epitomised by the talk of a “New Centre” in the context of the SPD campaign of 1998 –, by accepting and promoting policies of welfare-state retrenchment – in the form of labour market reforms under the heading of “Hartz IV” –, then this strategy seems to have utterly failed: While it seems to have been accompanied by an alienation of the working class – of course this could not be proved here, but the evidence in this paper is nevertheless strongly suggestive – it did not reap the benefits of winning over voters in the growing ranks of the salariat – while the support for the SPD has declined in the former it has *not* increased in the latter. Rather, the decline of SPD vote share that can be observed since 1998 in the working class is accompanied by a decline in the salariat, even though this decline is more moderate from an already moderate level of support, while the gains the SPD made in 1998 were not restricted to the middle classes (see also Elff 2000).

There are several potential explanations for the failure of the SPD to compensate its losses within the working class by gains elsewhere. The first potential explanation may be sociological: The rise of the salariat was a result of upward mobility from the ranks of the working class and many of the younger-generation members of the salariat may have been aware that they owe their social advance by the enabling features of the welfare state. A second potential explanation refers to values and ethical beliefs. One should remember that the appeal of social democracy was never only one of pure material self-interest of the working class but often one based on ethics, this is why Social Democracy had its roots not only in labour movements but also in ethically motivated intellectuals from the middle classes (Kitschelt 1994). As a consequence, a political moderation that may even question the left-wing identity of a Social Democratic party might not only disappoint working class members for reasons of economic interest, but also ethically motivated members from the middle classes that used to support the Social Democratic politics and policies for ethical reasons. A third potential explanation is that if the SPD were to tap a new electoral potential in the left-libertarian sections of the middle classes, than this was prevented by the formation of the Green Party, which presented itself as a genuine political embodiment of these sections. The initial reluctance of the SPD to accept the so-called “New Social Movements” and their political embodiment in the Green Party as an ally, might not helped much in this respect. A fourth potential explanation is a combination of a sociological and a political perspective. Class never has been the only social division that could be mobilised (or exploited) politically. Religion is another one. Although the religious-secular divide does not fully cross-cut class-related divisions, since ranks of the

working class seem to be less prone to attend church than those of the middle class, it certainly limited the potential of Social Democracy to make inroads in the middle class beyond its secular and libertarian segments. On the other hand, the SPD's main contender, the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU could rely on a very loyal voter base that allowed them the move to the centre in terms of economic and welfare-state policy without incurring electoral losses (see also Elff and Roßteutscher 2011, 2015). Of course, assessing these potential explanations is beyond the scope of this paper and should be rather considered as questions for further research.

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