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**Franchise Extensions and the
Development of Voter Turnout in German Local Elections, 1978-2019**

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Abstract

Low and declining turnout challenges not only the inclusiveness and representativeness of elections, but also the input-legitimacy of a democracy. One response proposed to address this participatory and representational challenge is electoral reform. Contemporary electoral reform projects extending the franchise to new groups of voters are usually aimed at two goals – increasing democratic representation of the newly enfranchised and increasing the overall level of participation in the population. We distinguish two types of franchise extension (to EU-nationals and to 16- to 18-year olds) and analyse their effects on voter turnout in the context of German local council elections over a period of 25 years. The country's federal system enables us to compare 13 different local electoral regimes from the 1980s until 2019 to explain changes in (local) voter turnout. Controlling for period and unit effects as well as other relevant institutional changes, we find that the horizontal franchise extensions to citizens from other EU-countries following the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 is associated with a subsequent drop in overall turnout at German local council elections. By contrast, vertical franchise extensions to 16- and 17-year-olds do not affect turnout at local council elections.

Keywords:

Local elections, Voter turnout, Franchise extension, Teenage vote, Right of foreigners to vote,

Introduction

Until very recently, voter turnout has declined almost continuously across the advanced industrialized democracies (Blais and Rubenson, 2013). This is not only the case for elections at the national level but also for most local elections across Europe (Van der Kolk, 2019). And it questions the quality of inclusion and representation in today's local and national democracies. One response proposed to address this challenge is electoral reform aimed at enfranchising additional groups of voters to injecting new life into a mode of political participation that is in danger of ossification and stagnation and to increase inclusion and representation. Enfranchising the hitherto disenfranchised is also normatively desirable, since maximum inclusion is needed to "satisfy the requirement that all the members are equally entitled to participate in the association's decisions about its policies" (Dahl 1998, 37; 1989). This has led Dahl to identify inclusion as one of five criteria of a democratic process: "All permanent adult residents must enjoy full rights of citizenship."

Since the second half of the 19th century, successive extensions of the franchise to less propertied and/or less educated males and eventually to females have gradually shifted actual inclusion toward this ideal, intending to increase the congruence between the set of people entitled to participate in the making of collectively binding decisions and the set of people bound by these decisions by virtue of living in a certain area (town or city, region or country). With only a few exceptions, like Switzerland, major franchise extensions were largely completed after World War II in the Western democracies (Nohlen, 2004, 39-41). In 1992, however, a major electoral reform swept across all member states of the European Union. With the Maastricht Treaty (1992) all of them had to grant the franchise to non-national EU citizens in local elections. Several countries including Ireland, Scotland and Wales even have chosen to

enfranchise *non*-EU foreign residents in the context of local elections¹, with further countries debating such reforms.

In addition, after the 1970s, when voting age was lowered from 21 to 18, extending the franchise to younger citizens has recently experienced a second wind when the lowering of the voting age to 16 has begun to be debated, and in several countries like Austria or Germany already been implemented especially at the local level. While there is broad agreement that younger generations are less interested in politics, less inclined to conceive of voting as a civic duty, and therefore more often abstain from voting than older generations (Dalton, 2015; Blais and Rubenson, 2013; Goerres, 2009; Arzheimer, 2006; Blais et al., 2004; Wattenberg, 2002, 2016; Miller and Shanks, 1996; Topf, 1995) recent research took a more differentiated look at the youngest group of voters: For Austria Aichholzer and Kritzinger (2020: 86-7; cf. also Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014) show that turnout among the youngest voters (16-18 years) is higher than among those a bit older (“leaving the nest”). Similarly, Leiniger and Faas (2020, 155-6) show for Germany that turnout among citizens younger than 21 is higher than among citizens in the next age group (21 years of age or older). However, their analyses remain inconclusive regarding further turnout differences between the 16- to 18- and the 18- to 21-year-olds. Finally, Franklin (2020) concludes from South American and Austrian data that at least in the long run lowering the voting age to 16 should stimulate turnout (see also Bronner and Ifkovits 2019 for Austria). In sum, although lowering voting age from 18 to 16 might on the one hand show higher turnout rates among this youngest voters compared to their following age group, and help to (comparatively) increase turnout in the long run, it may on the other hand lower general turnout in the short run due to the broadly confirmed trend of younger generations in general showing far lower turnout rates than older cohorts do. In fact, the literature on the short- and

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/right-to-vote-extended/>; <https://senedd.wales/en/newhome/pages/newsitem.aspx?itemid=2065>.

long-term effects of these two major contemporary franchise extensions to hitherto disenfranchised groups on voter turnout is still limited and inconclusive.

In the present paper, we investigate and compare the short-term effects of both major types of contemporary franchise extensions on turnout, using the case of German local elections. As in other countries, participation in German local elections is lower than in federal elections (Vetter 2009a; Steinbrecher et al., 2007; cf. Tab. A1 in the appendix). Until the end of the 1980s, local voter turnout averaged around 70 percent. But since then until 2016, average turnout in local elections across all German states has fallen to around 50 percent. While during the same period turnout has also declined at German federal elections (about seven percentage points), decline in local election turnout was far more pronounced (around 20 percentage points). Only during the latest local elections, the declining trend has come to a halt and even reversed. So far, empirical studies trying to explain changes in turnout over time are rarer. Some of these studies focus on generational changes in societies (cf. Topf, 1995; Blais et al., 2004; Achen and Wang, 2019), or declining mobilizing efforts from political parties or unions (Gray and Caul, 2000). We focus on institutional reforms and investigate whether the recent franchise extensions have played a role in this development. In addition to contributing to research on the effectiveness of electoral reforms, analysing franchise extensions at German local elections is essential to understanding current challenges to the legitimacy and representativeness of local democracy in Germany. But we expect that similar effects should be visible regarding local voter turnout in other EU countries. This way we aim to contribute to a small but pivotal literature on the effects of institutional change, especially franchise extension, on voter turnout. In addition, our findings have implications for the wider literature on turnout in local elections across Europe as well as in elections at higher levels of government. Finally, the analysis contributes to the

current reform debates on extending the vote at local and regional elections to younger citizens as well as to non-EU non-nationals.

Methodologically, studying electoral decline at local elections in Germany enables us to study turnout change in a manner approximating a real-world experiment: Due to the federal structure of the German political system, the decline in local election turnout can be analysed comparatively over time and for 13 states in which the institutional context of local elections differs. Investigations into the effects of electoral reform would ideally be conducted on time series data. However, as appropriate data are hard to come by hardly any longitudinal studies exist. With our case study of the enfranchisement at local elections of 16- and 17-year-olds as well as of non-national EU citizens as a consequence of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, we contribute to this literature analysing official longitudinal aggregate-level data being based on 89 local elections in 13 German territorial states that took place between 1978 and 2019.

After a review of extant research on the effects of franchise extensions on turnout (2.) and a description of our data (3.) we show evidence supporting the expectation that the franchise extensions implementing the Maastricht Treaty significantly depressed turnout in local elections (4.). However, this did not happen when 16- and 17-year olds were enfranchised to cast their ballots in local elections. We conclude by summarizing the findings and discussing their implications for the literature and for the legitimacy of representative democracy (5.).

The Theoretical Framework: Franchise Extensions and Turnout

For many decades, levels and cross-sectional variation in voter turnout have been well researched and understood (for overviews cf. Smets and van Ham, 2013; Stockemer, 2017a; Schmitt-Beck, 2019). All the while, theories explaining turnout *change* are much rarer, focusing

on effects from generational change, changes in mobilizing agencies or institutional reforms (cf. Topf, 1995; Blais et al., 2004; Achen and Wang, 2019; Gray and Caul, 2000). Regarding institutional reforms, successive historical waves of enfranchisement have been identified as potential explanations for the observed decline of voter turnout in major democracies (Kleppner, 1982; Berlinski and Dewan, 2011). The last wave of major franchise extensions across the western democracies was the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 during the 1960s and 1970s – this has been studied extensively. Franklin (2004) and Franklin et al. (2004) identified this wave as a major contributor to long term decline in turnout.

At present, further franchise extensions are discussed in several European countries regarding 16- and 17-year-olds. Regarding age effects, an established hypothesis holds that younger people are less likely to vote than older ones (e.g. Gallego, 2009; van der Brug and Kritzing, 2012; Arzheimer 2006; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980). Younger generations are both less interested in politics and less inclined to conceive of voting as a civic duty (Topf, 1995; Blais et al., 2004; Dalton, 2015; Goerres, 2009; Arzheimer, 2006; Wattenberg, 2002, 2016; Miller and Shanks, 1996). Indeed, Blais and Rubenson (2013) have produced robust empirical evidence for the view that young voters are less inclined to vote because their generation is less prone to construe voting as a moral duty and is more sceptical about politicians' responsiveness to their concerns. They have shown that the most recent generation is more likely to abstain, even after controls for life cycle effects, that they have a weaker sense of duty and external political efficacy, and that these attitudes affect turnout. However, Aichholzer and Kritzing (2020; also Zeglovits and Aichholzer 2014) have shown for national elections in Austria that 16- to 17-year-olds turn out in higher proportions than 18- to 20-year-olds. Similar patterns have been reported for a major referendum in Scotland and for German state and municipal elections (Electoral Commission 2014, p. 64; Leininger and Faas, 2020). Regarding elections in Austria,

Wagner et al. (2012) show that citizens under 18 do not lack the abilities and motivations to participate effectively in an election. And Franklin (2020), when analyzing the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year-olds in South America and Austria has found that these reforms have led to a long-term net increase in turnout that is mainly due to the increased participation of the cohort of voters whose voting age was lowered from 18 to 16. Indeed, proponents of lowering the voting age argue that enfranchisement at the age of 18 is actually too late within a person's lifecycle, when young voters "leave the nest" (Bhatti and Hansen 2012).

In whatever way young voters may differ from older ones, it has been argued that their initial voting experience has a durable impact on their subsequent turnout. According to this argument, - the formative years of adolescence and early adulthood lay the foundation on which citizens build their political attitudes and behaviours later on in their later lives (cf. Strate et al., 1989; Highton and Wolfinger, 2001; Plutzer, 2002). By the same token, young citizens are conceived to be less set in their political outlook and are hence more easily influenced by external factors (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Flanagan and Sherrod, 1998, Sears and Levy, 2003). In this vein, Franklin has argued that the way in which young voters react to the character of an election is crucial to this incoming cohort's future turnout levels (Franklin, 2004, 65). Short-term characteristics of elections may thereby influence younger citizens turnout decisions while having much less impact on the decisions of older voters, as these have already established a habit of voting or abstaining (Franklin, 2004, 80). Thus, the act of voting for the first time may leave an imprint and therefore has been argued to be decisive for the decision to go to the polls or not in the future (Franklin, 2004; Franklin et al., 2004).

Whether or not first-time voters actually turn out to their first election is subject to a variety of factors affecting the cost-benefit ratio of participating in an election. On the benefit side, they

include changes in the size of the electorate, the voting system, or characteristics of a single election, such as its competitiveness. The cost side includes factors like the day of the election, the ease of becoming informed, or voter registration. While the benefits are usually characteristics of an election the costs vary by social group – in particular as identified by age. Teenagers may find it difficult to become informed about the issues, parties and candidates at stake in an election. And 18-21-year-olds often face the additional challenge of a fairly transitional phase of life – perhaps having moved into their own home for the first time, starting their first job, or being away from their family home at college /university with their entry in the electoral register out of date. Franklin (2004) and Franklin et al. (2004) argue that such short-term effects may shape the socialization of newly enfranchised voters, thereby affecting in the long-term their inclination to vote: Lower levels of voting among recent cohorts reflect a “footprint” of the elections when these newly enfranchised individuals were casting their first votes. These elections happened to be less competitive, therefore failing to stimulate higher turnout. Historically, where these less beneficial or more costly elections coincided with a lowering of the voting age, they caused a new cohort to experience their first election under these unfavorable circumstances. As a result, many of these young voters failed to develop a habit of participation. Thus, the low level of voting among recent cohorts may be the result of the characteristics of elections that affect new voters more than experienced ones. The more experienced voters, by contrast, have acquired a habit of voting or abstaining, hence they continue voting (or abstaining) rather independently of what happens in the context of a given election.

We refer to the enfranchisement of younger citizens as *vertical franchise extension*. These have taken place in many European countries in the 1970s (lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18). They have recently experienced a second wind when the lowering of the voting age to 16

has begun to be debated and to be implemented in some countries like Germany and Austria especially at the local level. Due to the effect of education and the more conducive personal situation of 16 and 17-year-olds compared to 18-21-year-olds, it may be expected that lowering the voting age to enfranchise the former group would lead to a boost in turnout. Indeed, Bronner and Ifkovits (2019) have analysed voting behaviour and habit formation among 16-year-old voters at national elections in Austria, for which the voting age was decreased in 2007. They have found that eligible 16-year-olds are more likely to vote in future elections. However, in the context of local elections we are dealing with second-order elections marked by low levels of campaigning and turnout levels that are already low and declining. Because these recent vertical franchise extensions have taken place in an especially local low turnout environment, we expect them to leave a footprint in aggregate turnout analogous to the ones identified by Franklin et al. (2004) for noncompetitive elections. We expect that

H1: The first local council election for which the franchise was extended to 16- and 17-year-olds is marked by a drop in voter turnout.

At the same time, even less is known about the effects of franchise extensions to new groups regardless of age. With the enfranchisement of women completed since the 1970s, remaining group criteria other than age currently concern non-national resident. Extending the franchise to other social groups without regard to age, is best thought of as *horizontal franchise extension*. While horizontal franchise extensions to women largely seem to have been consigned to the history books, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) has compelled member states of the EU to grant the franchise to non-national EU citizens in local elections. In addition, several countries including Ireland, Scotland and Wales have chosen to enfranchise *non-EU* foreign residents in the context of local elections², with further countries debating such reforms. Even though this group is much more relevant to Dahl's criterion of inclusiveness ("all permanent adult

² <https://www.gov.scot/news/right-to-vote-extended/>: <https://senedd.wales/en/newhome/pages/newsitem.aspx?itemid=2065>.

residents”; Dahl 1998, 37; 1989).) it is considerably less well researched than franchise extensions to younger nationals. In fact, the literature is virtually silent of the effect of this dimension of extending the vote to non-national EU residents.

Yet, historical experience and research on the introducing of the female suffrage suggest theoretical expectations. Earlier research on the effects of female enfranchisement on aggregate turnout suggests that footprints are also left by horizontally enfranchised groups. Analyzing the effects of female suffrage in the US in the 1920s, Kleppner (1982) argued that the female participation rate was low to begin with as for many decades the idea of voting as a civic duty was widely considered a specifically male duty. Female turnout was then further lowered by weak electoral stimuli, whereas male voters, already in the habit of participating, were relatively unimpressed by any decline in the competitiveness or salience of elections. Combining this insight with the expectation that newly enfranchised individuals tend to become immunized against changing their minds about whether to vote already within a relatively small number of consecutive elections would explain why fifty years passed by since the introduction of female suffrage before the gender gap in U.S. turnout finally closed (Franklin et al. 2004, p. 120).

These arguments apply analogously to EU-non-nationals as a new horizontally enfranchised groups – especially with respect to local election turnout. While data on turnout of non-national EU citizens in local elections across Europe are limited, one of the rare analyses shows that non-national EU-voters in Germany hardly exercise their right to vote: According to Diehl and Wüst (2011) – based on local electoral data from Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg and Stuttgart – at a maximum of 27 percent – turnout of EU foreigners is significantly lower than turnout of German citizens. These first-time voters are less socially embedded in local society as well as less connected to the local political systems. Hence, their inclusion should be lower and, when

added to the electorate as a whole, lead to a one-off, yet largely irreversible, drop in overall turnout. We therefore expect that:

H2: The first local council election for which the franchise was extended to citizens from other EU-member states is marked by a drop in voter turnout.

Data and Measurement

Germany's two-tier local government system (counties with smaller municipalities belonging to a county as well as larger "county-free" municipalities) is embedded within a multilevel system of government comprising the federal level and the level of the states (*Länder*). Legally, local government forms part of the executive of the *Länder* the municipalities are located in. Article 28 of the German Basic Law grants municipalities the right to regulate all local affairs autonomously within the limits of federal and state law. Thus, local government in Germany enjoys a high degree of control over fiscal and policy matters (Ladner et al., 2019; Vetter, 2007, 2010; Hesse, 1991). However, owing to Germany's federal structure, the institutional framework of local government varies from state to state: Each state has its own local government constitution (*Gemeindeordnung*), which defines the structure and functioning of local government and politics (Knemeyer, 1999). Other state laws, like the local electoral law, add to these local constitutions. Within each state, local council elections in the German states are held on the same day. However, election days and electoral cycles differ between the states. To protect the independence of local elections from political trends at higher levels of government, there is no concurrence of local council with federal or state elections, but there is frequent concurrence of local and European elections: In 1979, two states (Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate) started to hold local council elections on the same day as elections to the European Parliament. Today, local council elections coincide with elections to the European Parliament in eight respectively nine out of 16 states (see Table A1 in the appendix).

Local council elections in this study refer to municipal council elections in “county-free” municipalities, and to county council elections.³ Since there is no central data source on local election turnout, aggregate data have been collected by contacting the statistical offices in the states. The data used in the following analyses are official turnout figures. Hence, they are not distorted by over-reporting, which is usually the case with survey data. Voter registration in all states is automatic. Therefore, the number of eligible voters and the number of registered voters is virtually the same. Turnout is measured as the percentage of eligible voters who cast a vote. We use aggregate turnout data for the 13 territorial states covering the years 1978 to 2019.⁴ During these 41 years, 103 local elections have taken place across the 13 states.⁵

Turnout at local council elections in Germany has declined sharply across all states in the 1990s until the early years of the new millennium (cf. Figure 1 and Table A1 in the appendix). In the 1950s, average turnout at local council elections across the *Länder* was about 77 percent (Vetter, 2019). In the end of the 1980s, local electoral turnout still averaged above 70 percent. In the 1990s, however, turnout started to fall. Between 2013 and 2016, average participation at local elections across the West German states was 51.6 percent. At 47.2 percent, average local election turnout in the East German states was somewhat lower. Overall, voter turnout at German local elections has fallen by almost 20 percentage points since the beginning of the 1990s. By contrast, turnout in the federal elections only fell moderately from 78.4 percent in

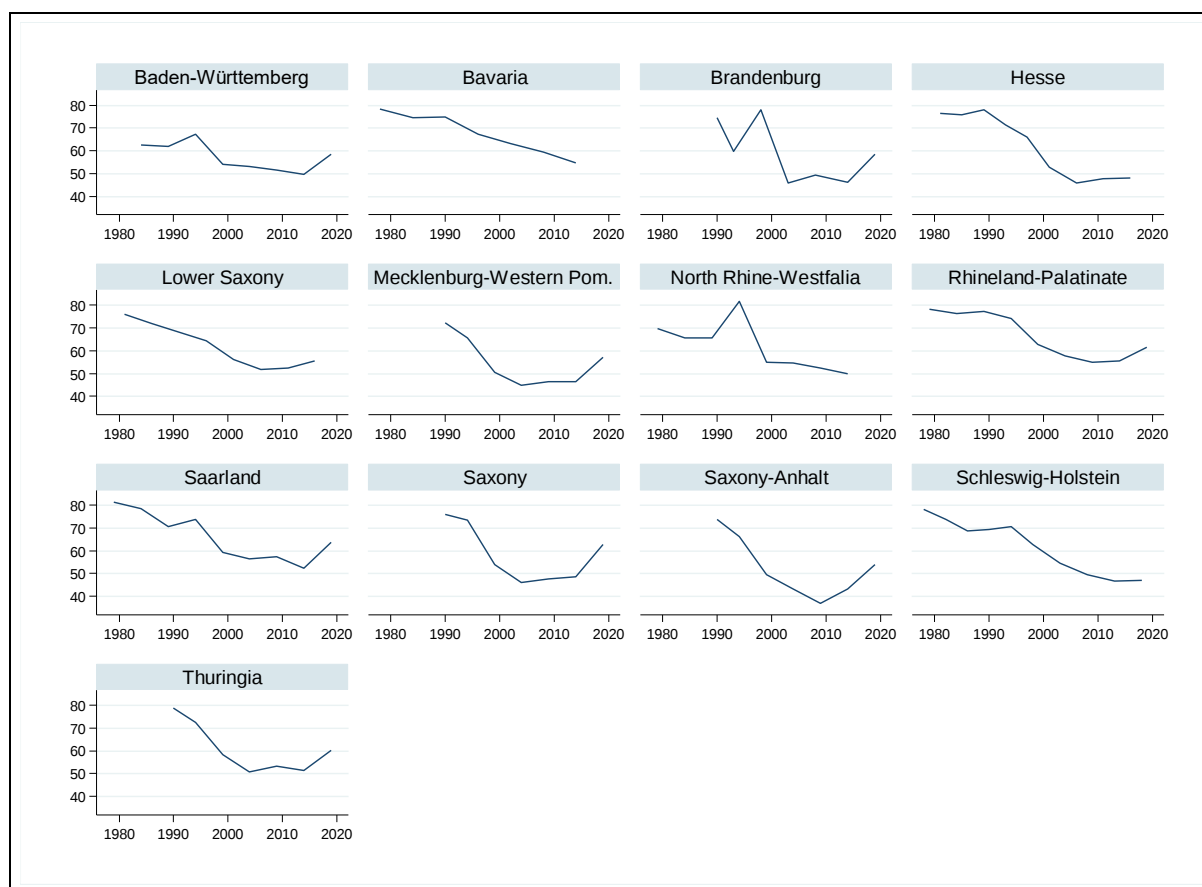
³ Baden-Württemberg is the only exception. Here local council elections refer to “county free” municipalities and to municipalities belonging to a county.

⁴ Germany consists of 16 states. Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen are municipalities and states at the same time. Therefore, we exclude them from our analysis.

⁵ All data and do-files used in this paper are uploaded as supplementary files and will be made publicly accessible on our server after acceptance of the paper.

1994 to 71.5 percent in 2013 and then rose again in 2017 to 76.2 percent. An increase in turnout has also been observed recently at local level: In May 2019, when eight out of 13 states held local council elections on the same day as elections to the European Parliament, turnout at local council elections that day was about 10 percentage points higher than at the elections in 2014 (see Figure 1). By now, the decline seems to have come to a halt and possibly reversed. This can be attributed, firstly, to the relatively high salience of the 2019 EP elections, which mobilized a higher percentage of voters in Germany to go to the polls than any EP elections after 1989. Second, we find rising trends in turnout also for the latest federal and state elections, possibly reflecting increased politicization in particular with respect to issues like “immigration”, “climate change”, or the debate about the “future of Europe”.

Figure 1: Trends in Local Council Turnout by State, 1980-2019



Source: Own collection of data from the statistical offices of the *Länder*. The two peaks in North Rhine-Westphalia (1994) and Brandenburgia (1998) are due to the fact that local and federal elections were exceptionally held the same day.

Dependent Variable

Different measures have been proposed to gauge changes in turnout. Gray and Caul (2000) calculate turnout change as the percentage point difference between a single election and the average level of turnout in the first two post-1950s elections in a given country. Topf (1995) measures change as the difference between turnout for a respective national election, and the overall mean level of turnout for the post-war period in that country. We define turnout in an election as the number of voters as percent of all eligible voters (as voter registration is automatic in Germany).⁶ Our dependent variable is the *relative change in turnout* between two local elections in a state measured in percent, i.e. the absolute change in turnout between two subsequent local elections as percent of the level of turnout at the first of these two elections: Formally measured as $((\text{turnout } t_{1j} - \text{turnout } t_{0j}) / \text{turnout } t_{0j}) * 100$. For example, in Baden-Württemberg local turnout increased from 49.6 percent in 2014 to 58.6 percent in 2019, which is a relative change of 18.1 percent. This way of calculating the dependent variable renders our time-series cross-sectional data stationary and helps to avoid problems associated with correlated error terms.

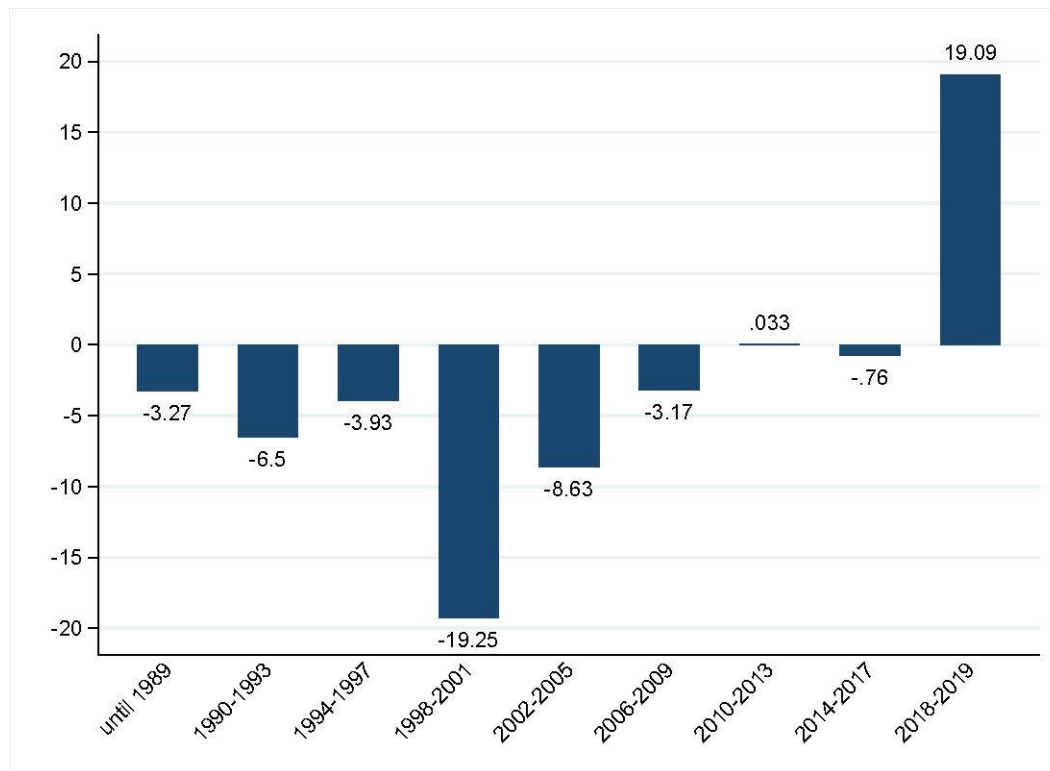
⁶ Voter turnout can be measured in different ways. In Europe, voter turnout is generally calculated as the proportion of those who actually voted to the number of voters registered to vote (Stockemer, 2017b). Voter turnout, therefore, depends on the composition of those entitled to vote. It may change not only when the number of eligible voters changes but also when their composition changes. Hence, turnout will change as soon as the newly enfranchised voters do not behave the same way as those who had already before been allowed to cast their ballots.

Since we analyse the relative change in turnout from one election to the next, in each state the first election in our sample period is omitted. Additionally, two elections were exceptionally held together with federal elections (North Rhine-Westphalia 1994 and Brandenburg 1998). By holding local and federal elections on the same day, turnout in local elections was boosted significantly (cf. Figure 1). When analysing turnout change, these two elections as well as the respective subsequent elections are excluded from the analysis.⁷ Thus, 86 out of 103 cases remain for regression analyses.

Figure 2 shows the relative change in voter participation over time (see also Table A4 in the appendix). To illustrate this, four-year periods were formed for the years from 1990 onwards. The year 1990 was chosen as the starting point because the East German states have only existed since 1990. The figure illustrates the fluctuations in turnout, which are most pronounced around the turn of the millennium and during the last two years of the period under study. We take these fluctuations into account in our regression model by using the four-year periods as dummies (the reference category being the years up to 1989). This strategy reduces the risk of our hypotheses being corroborated on the basis of coincidence. This would be the case, for example, if franchise were extended at a time when turnout was falling, for whatever other reason.

Figure 2: Relative Change in Turnout by Period in Percent

⁷ The subsequent election was also excluded because the change in voter turnout is also distorted in this election: A sharp increase in turnout in the local election, which was held in parallel to the Bundestag election, was followed by a sharp decline in the next local election. This effect can be seen in Figure 1



Source: Own collection of data from the statistical offices of the *Länder*.

Main Independent Variables

The number of eligible voters for German local and federal elections rose steadily from about 31.2 million in 1949 to 61.5 million in 2017. This increase is the cumulative effect of a series of franchise extensions: a) a lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years in 1972, b) a considerable immigration by pre and post-war ethnic German re-settlers (*Aussiedler* and *Spätaussiedler*) from formerly Soviet countries especially in the 1980s and 1990s who were automatically entitled to vote, and c) German reunification in 1990. However, neither of these developments can account for the disproportionately strong decline in local voter turnout in the 1990s. Empirical studies show that voter turnout among (late) ethnic German immigrants is only minimally lower than that of Germans born in Germany (Wüst, 2004, p. 348; Diehl and Wüst, 2011, p. 49). And while voter turnout in East Germany is generally lower than in the Western part of the country, reunification cannot explain the sharp decline that occurred

similarly in local elections in West Germany. However, local elections across Germany were affected by two extensions of the franchise in the 1990s – a horizontal and a vertical one:

Following the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, citizens from other EU countries have become entitled to vote at local elections at their place of residence in all member states of the European Union.⁸ The corresponding directive was adopted by the EU Council of Ministers in 1994 and transposed into law by the German states by the end of 1995 (Table A3 in the appendix lists the election years in which EU-citizens were allowed to vote for the first time for each state). As a result of this horizontal extension of the franchise, residents possessing the citizenship of any member state of the European Union are eligible to vote and to stand as candidates in German local elections across all states. To capture this institutional change, we use a dummy variable that takes on the value of 1 for the first election following the enfranchisement of non-national EU-citizens.

Additionally, a vertical extension of the franchise took place in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium when in eight out of the 13 states we study voting age at local elections has been lowered from 18 to 16 years. The proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds in the total population is about 3 percent. Empirical studies have shown that turnout in the youngest age group is somewhat higher than in the slightly older age cohorts (Arzheimer, 2006)⁹ but is nevertheless well below the general average. We use a dummy variable to indicate those elections for which voting age has been lowered to 16 years for the first time.

⁸ See also the amendment of Article 28 (1) sentence 3 in the German Basic Law in December 1992.

⁹ See also <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/bundestagswahlen/205686/wahlbeteiligung-nach-altersgruppen>; accessed November 2020.

Controls

To estimate the effects of horizontal and vertical franchise extensions on turnout, we have to consider other factors that might have contributed to short-term changes in local election turnout.

Additional Institutional Reforms

In 1990, local government institutions in most German states changed from a more party-oriented towards a more citizen-oriented model of local democracy (Vetter, 2006, 2009b). The citizen-oriented institutional pattern is characterized by four important features: the direct election of mayors, local council elections with open lists, opportunities for ticket-splitting, and the availability of binding local referendums (direct democracy). At least two of these reforms – the direct election of mayors and changes in the electoral systems – might account for a decline in local election turnout during the 1990s.¹⁰ Reif and Schmitt (1980; Reif, 1984; Heath et al., 1999; Lefevere and Van Aelst, 2014) introduced the concept of first- and second-order elections (FOEs and SOEs), with lower turnout levels being a common observation in European elections. Because citizens perceive that there is “less at stake” in SOEs compared to FOEs, their willingness to vote is lower. This line of reasoning can also be applied to local elections when trying to explain declining turnout at local council elections: Due to the introduction of directly elected mayors, municipal councils may have lost their leading role in local policy-making.¹¹ Because of its lower salience in the policy-making process, local council elections might therefore be perceived as less important, which in turn might depress turnout.

¹⁰ We do not consider the referendums (*Bürgerbegehren* and *Bürgerentscheide*) here, as their use is still limited to certain municipalities.

¹¹ During the 1990s, direct elections of mayors has been implemented in 11 out of 13 states. In the two remaining states (Bayern and Baden-Württemberg), mayors are directly elected already since the 1950s.

Additionally, as the number of elections has increased (separate election of local councils, mayors, and the additional possibility of using referenda), at least some voters might abstain due to voter fatigue (Klein, 2018). We therefore include a dummy variable to indicate the first local council elections held separate from the direct election of the mayor (10 out of 86 elections).¹²

Concurrent Elections

Holding several elections simultaneously should increase electoral participation, as the cost of voting is lowered for each concurrently held election. Research has shown that turnout for less important elections increases when these elections are held together with first-order elections (Frandsen 2002, p. 865, Vetter, 2009a, Schakel and Dandoy, 2014). This was also the case for local council elections in North Rhine-Westphalia in 1994 and Brandenburg in 1998, which were held the same day as elections for the Bundestag. Leininger et al. (2018, 523) found, that this also holds for concurrent mayoral and European elections, increasing turnout above the level of any of the two SOE elections. In 1979, two German states began holding local council elections on the same day as European elections (cf. Table A1 in the appendix). Five more states followed in 1994. Today, local council elections are held simultaneously with EP elections in eight out of the 13 states we study. We therefore include a dummy variable indicating local elections that were held on the same day as EP elections for the first time or that resumed concurrence after a break from this practice.

¹² Changes in the electoral systems may also affect citizens' costs and benefits when casting their ballots in elections. For example, with reunification, the five newly established East German states used open list PR systems for local elections. Since we analyze the relative change in turnout, the first election in each state (and thus also the first free election in the East German states) is not considered. As a result, only two elections remain in our data set after a reform of the local electoral systems (Rhineland-Palatinate 1984 and Hesse 2001), which makes the use of a separate variable not seem reasonable.

Changes in the size of municipalities

Size is an essential aspect when it comes to questions of political efficiency and democratic quality in local politics. At the local level, there are contradictory expectations concerning the effect of size on turnout. On the one hand, citizens in smaller municipalities might feel more embedded in the local community, be more aware of what is going on in their community, feel closer to their representatives, or feel that their vote is more decisive – and hence be more likely to vote in local elections. On the other hand, larger municipalities might offer voters more relevant issues to decide upon via elections, and therefore have a greater mobilizing effect on turnout (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Dahl 1994). So far – at least at subnational levels – negative effects of municipal size have been confirmed but scholars have been unable to disentangle the causal path (Cancela and Geys, 2016; Frandsen, 2002; for Germany Vetter, 2008; with more ambivalent findings cf. Denters et al., 2014, 234). Especially in East Germany the number of municipalities had been reduced by more than 65 percent owing to amalgamation during the years following reunification (Wollmann, 2010; cf. Table A2 in the appendix).¹³ We therefore include major changes in municipal size as a control. In 81 of the 86 elections in our dataset, the relative change in municipal size (number of inhabitants) is between -5.4 percent and +11.7 percent. However, in five elections in East Germany, the average size of the municipality increased by 42.9 to 340.5 percent due to amalgamation. We include a dummy variable identifying these five cases.¹⁴

¹³ In West Germany considerable amalgamation took place in the beginning of the 1970s, when the number of municipalities was reduced by more than 60 percent.

¹⁴ Data on local autonomy in Germany regarding political discretion (institutional depth and effective policy discretion) and financial autonomy (fiscal autonomy, financial self-reliance and borrowing autonomy) show no significant changes between 1990 and 2014 (Ladner et al., 2019, 268-269). We therefore do not control for changes in local autonomy affecting turnout levels over time.

Finally, we control for a potential effect of rising unemployment on turnout by including the change in the unemployment rate in the election year compared to the previous year in percentage points. And we include four-year period dummies in the analysis. The periods are defined as described in section 3.1. The dummies record the average change in the elections of the respective period and enable us to control for unobserved factors influencing turnout, such as changes in political interest or declining adherence to social norms. Most importantly, however, the period dummies capture the trends in our dependent variable and thus prevent the predictors from showing an effect due to coincidence. This means that we subject our hypotheses to a particularly rigorous test. Summary statistics for all variables used in the multivariate analysis are reported in Tables A5 in the appendix.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we use OLS regression with cluster-corrected standard errors (by state). We proceed in four steps: Model 1 incorporates only the period dummies. In model 2 and 3 each of the two franchise extensions are added separately. The full model 4 contains both franchise extensions and all control variables. Model 1 confirms the impression from Figure 2: The relative decline in turnout is particularly pronounced around the turn of the millennium, and this trend continues, albeit to a lesser extent, until 2005. In 2018 and 2019, the downward trend is stopped and even reversed.¹⁵ The period dummies alone account for 71 percent of the variance in the dependent variable, which raises the bar for additional predictors to exert significant effects, making this a hard test for our hypotheses.

¹⁵ The coefficients have to be interpreted in relation to the reference category (the years before 1990): Until 1989, the average relative change in turnout was -3.27 percent (i.e. constant). Compared to this value the relative change in voter turnout was +22.36 percent in the last two years of the sample period. Hence the relative change in turnout in the last period was 19.09 percent (22.36-3.27, see also figure 2).

In model 2 we add the indicator for the first election in which EU citizens were allowed to participate. This franchise extension is associated with a statistically significant drop in relative turnout by 4.6 percent, supporting hypothesis H2. At the same time and compared to model 1, the period effect 1998 to 2001 is downsized from -15.98 to -12.32 percent. In combination with the unchanged R-Squared value, the estimates for model 2 therefore suggest that the extension of the franchise to EU citizens accounts for some of the decline in turnout during this period.

Model 3 contains an indicator for the vertical franchise extension to 16- and 17-year-olds. The coefficient has the expected sign but is not statistically significant. Thus, the estimates provide no support for our first hypothesis (H1). Model 4 confirms both our findings concerning the effect of the horizontal franchise extension and our non-finding regarding the vertical franchise extension. In the first local council elections where EU citizens were allowed to participate, the decline in turnout due to the franchise extension was significant and of considerable magnitude.

Controlling for a number of institutional changes as well as a host of unobserved influences captured by the period effects, the extension of the franchise to non-national EU citizens is significantly associated with a relative change in turnout of -5.4 percent. Finally, none of the control variables exerts a significant influence on the relative change in turnout beyond the period effects. To control for potential differences between East and West Germany, a dummy was included in the final model (see model 1 in Table A-6). We also control for potential unit effects by including state-dummies (see model 2 in Table A-6), these additional controls do not affect our findings.

Table 1: Explaining relative change in local election turnout (OLS-regression)

	1	2	3	4
Constant	-3.27* (1.18)	-3.27* (1.19)	-3.27* (1.19)	-3.29* (1.19)
Period dummies [†]				
1990-1993	-3.23 (4.26)	-3.23 (4.29)	-3.23 (4.29)	-1.72 (2.91)
1994-1997	-0.66 (2.59)	0.59 (2.77)	-0.43 (2.56)	2.99 (3.07)
1998-2001	-15.98*** (2.25)	-12.32** (3.07)	-15.24*** (2.05)	-12.16** (3.04)
2002-2005	-5.36* (1.91)	-5.36* (1.92)	-5.36* (1.92)	-5.89* (2.15)
2006-2009	0.10 (2.64)	0.10 (2.66)	0.10 (2.66)	-0.38 (2.89)
2010-2013	3.30 (1.98)	3.30 (1.99)	3.30 (1.99)	3.26 (2.19)
2014-2017	2.51 (2.22)	2.51 (2.24)	2.92 (2.29)	1.84 (2.18)
2018-2019	22.36*** (3.04)	22.36*** (3.06)	22.63*** (3.20)	22.33*** (3.35)
1 st election EU citizens		-4.58* (1.79)		-5.35* (1.97)
1 st election Voting age 16			-2.46 (2.33)	-0.06 (2.42)
1 st election directly elected mayors				-3.79 (2.79)
1 st election with concurrent EP poll				2.00 (3.94)
Big change in size of municipality				3.88 (6.53)
Change in the unemployment rate				-0.17 (0.99)
R-Square	0.71	0.71	0.71	0.73

N=86, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p< 0.001, cluster-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

[†] reference category: years before 1990.

Discussion and Conclusions

Turnout at local elections in Germany has declined dramatically since the beginning of the 1990s, much more so than turnout at federal (Bundestag) elections. In this paper we have shown that the franchise extension to citizens from other EU-countries following the Maastricht Treaty

in 1992 significantly contributed to this decline. A glance at a historical example of horizontal franchise extension highlights the costs to democratic representation: Analyzing the considerable extension of the vote to the (male) unskilled urban population achieved in 1867 by the Second Reform Act in the UK, Berlinski and Dewan (2011) found that an immediate consequence of changing the electoral rules was a slight dampen of turnout in those areas most affected by the reform. By contrast, we could not find any support for our expectation that the franchise extension to 16- and 17-year-olds had a negative effect on turnout in German local council elections.

What do these findings imply for strategies of making (local) representative democracy more inclusive? Political inclusion by participation especially in elections is at the heart of representative democracy (Verba et al., 1995, 1). Yet, we have to distinguish between democratic entitlement and democratic practice. Normatively, the quantitative dimension of democracy improves whenever the ratio between the number of people affected by decisions and the number of those affected that have effective rights of participating in the making of these decisions approaches 1 (Hyland, 1995, p. 67). Sociologically, such franchise extensions are intended to increase political inclusion and political representation. However, their effects do not always follow the expectations. Our findings help shed light on identifying franchise extensions that do and those that do not meet the expectation that extended rights of participation lead to extended levels of participation. While in the context of contemporary local council elections, horizontal franchise extensions lead to a decline in turnout, we have not found a similar significant negative effect for the vertical franchise extensions.

Thus, we infer that the horizontal franchise extension following Maastricht significantly reduced turnout. However, our empirical model leaves a large proportion of the decline in local

voter turnout unexplained. While we have controlled for several other relevant explanations and used period dummies to capture further possible explanations not explicitly modelled as controls, a number of open questions remain: Why – apart from the horizontal franchise extension according to Maastricht – did turnout in local elections decline so massively in the beginning of the new millennium? Further comparative research using macro and micro data is needed to address this question. Franchise extensions can only explain a part of the story, and our aggregate-level analysis is not detailed enough to show who and how many of the newly enfranchised EU-citizens end up using or not using their right to vote.

Finally, how lasting should we expect the depressing effect of horizontal franchise extension on turnout to be? While the effects of a vertical franchise extension might have the potential of accumulating, especially of successive elections that are characterized by low mobilization features, the effects of a horizontal franchise extension might eventually peter out. We could therefore conclude that the studied horizontal franchise extension to non-nationals might have only led to a temporary drop in turnout, although we do not know how long the effect will last, since our data stop in 2019. Specifically, we do not know whether the positive period effect of 2018-19, arguably capturing times of re-politicization, warrants valid inferences. However, should issues of high salience for the newly enfranchised groups gain in relevance during electoral campaigns, as was the case in the most recent local and supra-national elections in Germany, turnout might recover. Recently enfranchised non-nationals and young age cohorts might well become mobilized by election campaigns emphasizing issues such as “immigration”, “nationalization”, and the “future of Europe”. However, at present we do not have individual-level data to investigate this possibility. Further research is therefore necessary to investigate both “petering out” mechanisms in the long run as well as the micro-level determinants of the participation or abstention of the newly enfranchised. Finally, while we

expect that similar effects should be visible regarding local voter turnout in other EU countries, it is left for future research to expand the present analysis to other countries. Given the importance of the consequences of franchise extensions on voter turnout for the inclusiveness of electoral participation in modern democracies, we believe that this would be a promising enterprise.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix:

Tab. A1: Turnout for local council elections by state, 1978-2019 (in percent)

Years	1978-1981	1982-1985	1986-1990	1991-1994	1996-1999	2002-2006	2008-2011	2013-2016	2017-2019	<i>Diff.</i> 1991-2016	<i>Diff.</i> 2017-2019
Fed. Election	88,6	89,1	84,3	78,4	82,2	78,4	70,8	71,5	76,2	-6,9	4,7
EP-Election	65,7	56,8	62,3	60,0	45,2	43,0	43,3	48,1	61,4	-11,9	13,3
Local BW	62,6	61,8	61,4	66,7	53,0	52,0	50,7	49,1	58,6	-17,6	9,5
Local BY	78,3	74,7	75,0	-	67,3	63,2	59,6	55,0	-	-12,3	
Local HE	-	76,3	76,9	71,3	59,5	45,8	47,7	48,0	-	-23,3	
Local NS	-	76,2	72,1	68,3	60,4	51,8	52,5	55,5	-	-12,8	
Local NW	69,9	65,8	65,6	81,7	55,0	54,5	52,3	50,0	-	-31,7	
Local RP	78,4	76,3	77,2	74,1	62,9	57,6	55,1	55,6	61,7	-18,5	6,1
Local SL	81,3	78,6	79,1	73,9	59,3	56,3	57,3	52,5	63,6	-21,4	11,1
Local SH	78,3	73,8	68,7	70,5	62,8	54,4	49,4	46,7	47,1	-23,8	0,4

Local BB	-	-	74,6	59,7	77,9	46,0	49,4	46,2	58,6	-13,5	12,4
Local MV	-	-	72,5	65,7	50,5	44,9	48,9	46,3	57,6	-19,4	11,3
Local SA	-	-	73,8	66,2	49,6	42,1	36,9	43,1	53,6	-23,1	10,7
Local SN	-	-	76,0	70,1	53,8	46,1	47,6	48,9	62,6	-21,2	13,9
Local TH	-	-	78,6	72,3	58,1	50,6	53,3	51,4	60,4	-20,9	9,0
Mean	74,8	72,9	73,2	68,9	59,2	51,2	50,8	49,9	58,2	-19,0	8,3
Mean West	74,8	72,9	72,0	70,7	60,0	54,5	53,1	51,6	57,8	-19,1	6,2
Mean East			75,1	66,8	58,0	45,9	47,2	47,2	58,9	-19,6	11,7

Sources: Verband Deutscher Stdtestatistiker: Politische Wahlen in 65 Grostdten und in Bundeslndern 1949-1987, Duisburg: Amt fr Statistik 1987;

Own collection from the statistical offices of the German states.

Bold print indicates that local elections took place the same day as federal elections (1994 in NW, and 1998 in BB). Italics indicate that local elections were held the same day as European Parliament elections.

Tab. A2: Years of Franchise Extensions and Number/Sizes of Municipalities across States

	Franchise for EU-citizens (law) ^{a)}	First local election with franchise for EU-citizens	Year of lowering voting age from 18 to 16	First local election with voting age 16	Number of Municipalities 2016	Change since 1990 in %	Average Size of Municipalities (in 1,000 Inh.) 2016	Change since 1990 in %
Baden-Württemberg	1995	1999	2013	2014	1.101	-1%	9,9	16%
Bavaria	1995	1996	-	-	2.056	0%	6,3	16%
Hesse	1995	1997	-	-	426	0%	14,6	11%
Lower Saxony	1995	1996	1996	1996	945	-8%	8,4	20%
North Rhine-Westphalia	1995	1999	1998	1999	396	0%	45,2	6%
Rhineland-Palatinate	1995	1999	-	-	2.305	0%	1,8	11%
Saarland	1995	1999	-	-	52	0%	19,2	-6%
Schleswig-Holstein	1995	1998	1998	1998	1.110	-2%	2,6	14%
Brandenburgiaia	1995	1998	2011	2014	417	-77%	6,0	302%

Mecklenburg-Pommerania	1995	1999	1999	1999	753	-33%	2,1	22%
Saxony	1998	1999	-	-	422	-74%	9,7	220%
Saxony-Anhalt	1995	1999	1998	1999	218	-84%	10,3	367%
Thuringia	1995	1999	2015	2019	849	-50%	2,5	61%
Total					11.054	-31%	7,5	53%
West-Germany					8.394	-1%	8,3	12%
East-Germany					2.659	-65%	4,7	136%

Sources:

Franchise Extension: <http://www.wahlrecht.de/kommunal/index.htm>; accessed 13 March 2019, a) KOM(2002)260.

Number/Size of Municipalities: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Publikationen/StatistischesJahrbuch/Bevoelkerung.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

Tab. A3: Institutional Context Variations of Local Council Elections across States and Changes 1990-2016

			First election after reform	Local Elections parallel with EU- Elections	Local Elections parallel with EU- Elections (since ...)	First local election after introduction of directly elected mayors
	Voting System	Number of Votes				
Baden-Württemberg	PR with open lists	Max.	-	Yes	1994 a)	-
Bavaria	PR with open lists	Max.	-	-	-	-
Hesse	PR with open lists	Max.	2001	-	-	1993
Lower Saxony	PR with open lists	3	1977b)	-	-	1996
North Rhine- Westphalia	PR with closed lists	1	-	-	2014 a)	1994
Rhineland-Palatinate	PR with open lists	Max.	-	Yes	1979	1994
Saarland	PR with closed lists	1	-	Yes	1979	1994

Schleswig-Holstein	Personalised PR with closed lists	As much as direct mandates	-	-	-	1998
Brandenburgia	PR with open lists	3	1990	Yes	2014	1993
Mecklenburg-Pomm.	PR with open lists	3	1990	Yes	1994	1994
Saxony	PR with open lists	3	1990	Yes	1994	1994
Saxony-Anhalt	PR with open lists	3	1990	Yes	1994	1994
Thuringia	PR with open lists	3	1990	Yes	1994 a)	1994

PR = Proportional Representation; Maximum = as many votes as there are seats in the local council.

Source: <http://www.wahlrecht.de/kommunal/index.htm>; accessed 13 March 2019.

a) Exceptions: TH in 2004; BW in 1999; NW in 2019.

b) The voting system in Lower Saxony had already changed in 1977. Before the elections of 1956 and since the elections of 1977, voters were and are allowed to cast three votes. In between only one vote was allowed.

Table A4: Relative change in turnout by period

	Mean	Std.Dev	N
Until 1989	-3.27	3.63	13
1990-1993	-6.50	8.54	5
1994-1997	-3.93	6.34	11
1998-2001	-19.25	5.12	10
2002-2005	-8.63	4.95	10
2006-2009	-3.17	7.23	13
2010-2013	0.03	4.97	3
2014-2017	-0.76	7.02	12
2018-2019	19.09	8.69	9
All	-3.20	11.19	86

N=86

Table A5: Summary statistics

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Relative Change in turnout (local elections)	-26.9	28.7	-3.20	11.19
1 st election EU citizens	0	1	.13	.34
1 st election Voting age 16	0	1	.08	.28
1 st election directly elected mayors	0	1	.12	.32
1 st election with EE	0	1	.07	.26
Big change in size of municipality	0	1	.06	.24
Change in the unemployment rate	-1.8	2.7	-0.11	.72
1990-1993	0	1	.06	.24
1994-1997	0	1	.13	.34
1998-2001	0	1	.12	.32
2002-2005	0	1	.12	.32
2006-2009	0	1	.15	.36
2010-2013	0	1	.04	.18
2014-2017	0	1	.14	.35
2018-2019	0	1	.10	.31

N=86

Table A-6: Robustness checks (OLS-regression)

	(1)	(2)
Constant	-3.30* (1.18)	-1.45 (1.80)
Period dummies†		
1990-1993	-1.68 (2.84)	-0.78 (3.65)
1994-1997	3.21 (3.13)	3.28 (3.54)
1998-2001	-11.98** (3.13)	-12.20** (3.48)
2002-2005	-5.51* (2.21)	-5.68* (2.53)
2006-2009	-0.07 (2.87)	-0.10 (3.16)
2010-2013	3.22 (2.19)	3.90 (1.85)
2014-2017	2.12 (2.31)	1.87 (2.51)
2018-2019	22.84*** (3.82)	22.67*** (4.27)
1 st election EU citizens	-5.47* (2.07)	-5.56* (2.13)
1 st election Voting age 16	0.21 (2.35)	0.63 (3.24)
1 st election directly elected mayors	-3.40 (2.44)	-3.77 (2.58)
1 st election with concurrent EP poll	2.14 (3.98)	1.49 (4.72)
Big chang in size of municipality	4.60 (7.67)	4.85 (9.70)
Change in the unemployment rate	-0.31 (0.89)	-0.10 (1.19)
East Germany	-1.05 (1.85)	
Unit dummies††		
Brandenburg		-3.37 (2.66)
Bavaria		-3.16* (1.31)
Hesse		-2.17 (1.26)
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania		-1.84 (1.15)
Lower Saxony		-1.07 (1.69)
North Rhine-Westphalia		-1.17 (0.79)
Rhineland-Palatinate		-1.31 (1.24)
Schleswig-Holstein		-4.14**

		(1.22)
Saarland		-1.00
		(1.22)
Saxony		-1.95
		(3.32)
Saxony-Anhalt		-3.12
		(2.10)
Thuringia		-3.43
		(1.66)
R-Square	0.73	0.74
N=86, * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p< 0.001, cluster-corrected standard errors in parentheses.		
† reference category: years before 1990, †† reference category: Baden-Württemberg		