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Really ‘Two Deeply Divided Electorates’? German Federal Elections 1990–2013

TOM MANNEWITZ

It has become both a tradition and a key feature of electoral studies after 1990 to frame the debate about German voting behaviour in terms of East and West. To study national voting patterns has become a synonym for comparing both parts of the country. The corresponding findings are frequently interpreted as an answer to the recurring question whether the Germans (still) form a disunited electorate or not. However, the comparative look at electoral results in East and West conceals regional fragmentation within both areas – the key for evaluating the relevance of East–West frictions. By analysing those aspects, which are widely believed to yield deep East–West gaps, the article shows that only left-wing voting and electoral turnout indicate two unchangingly distinct voting habits for the complete post-unification time. Right-wing voting (divergence) and volatility (convergence) in turn were subject to major shifts.

INTRODUCTION

Anniversaries, particularly political ones, are moments of academic self-assurance. This might explain why on the silver jubilee of Germany’s unification in 2015, political science has taken stock of the political, economic and social transformation the tectonic shift of 1990 entailed.¹ One of the profession’s undisputed conclusions is that ‘Germany’s electorate is deeply divided between East and West’.² However, as anniversaries are also good opportunities to review generally accepted truths, this article asks if East and West Germans really differ fundamentally in voting behaviour. On the one side, in 2015 the very question might appear anachronistic to some; on the other side it can be argued that by disregarding frictions on a lower sub-national level the conventional paired comparison of East and West is inappropriate to test hypotheses concerning an alleged gap between both parts of the country. It is thus unclear whether post-unification Germany really consists of, or has ever consisted of, two electorates with utterly different behavioural patterns.

An alternative path is therefore taken here: the article intends to figure out if Germany has, or ever had, two electorates by analysing those aspects of the federal elections since 1990 on the state level which are widely deemed to exhibit a deep East–West gap. This question requires two aspects to be considered equally: the first is intra-regional homogeneity; that is, the fact that eastern states are alike and that western states are alike. The second is inter-regional heterogeneity; that is, the fact that East and West differ categorically. Only in the case of intra-regional homogeneity *and* inter-regional heterogeneity appears the claim of two deeply divided

electorates to be justified. Alternatively, the term of one electorate or a variety of electorates would be more appropriate.

With this said, it is particularly eastern and western 'exceptive states' or 'outliers' which provide for intra-regional heterogeneity and which are of particular interest. New Länder displaying typical western peculiarities and old Länder exhibiting typical eastern peculiarities urge caution when speaking of two separate German electorates; besides, they expose the transfer of regional characteristics to all states belonging to the respective regions as a fallacy. Last but not least they question the causes of regional variation.

After outlining selected dimensions of voting behaviour the article highlights three pitfalls inevitably connected to the social scientific comparison of East and West Germany. As most electoral behaviour studies rest on a contrast like this, the methodical critique is a matter of evaluating the validity of the mentioned East–West theses. On the basis of the federal elections after 1990 and by means of longitudinal comparisons these assertions are then re-assessed one after another, including a brief discussion of case-specific causes for 'odd' eastern and western Länder, before the main findings are summarised.

WHAT DO WE (THINK WE) KNOW ABOUT EAST AND WEST GERMAN VOTING BEHAVIOUR?

German elections over the last 25 years have regularly raised the question among professional observers as to whether Willy Brandt's dictum ("Now what belongs together will grow together") has eventually come true - at least in electoral terms. That explains why social-scientific measurements of the electorate's 'inner unity' by means of East–West comparisons belong to federal elections like election night parties. Over the course of time this has led to a vast – and still increasing – stack of literature.³ Manifold differences in results and interpretations notwithstanding (as, for instance, to longitudinal trends or to relevant causes), a broad consensus on four facts has emerged:

1. Taking into account far left and right parties' vote shares, eastern voters are considered to be significantly more radical than western ones.⁴ Yet, whereas the results of the far left in the guise of Die Linke speak for themselves, closer inspection reveals that – at least on the federal level – a distinctive East German preference for right-wing parties became apparent as recently as 1998. In the preceding years, the far right had performed better in the West than in the East, as measured by the results of Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), Republikaner (REP), Deutsche Volksunion (DVU), and – in 2013 – the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). What is more, in its simplicity the assertion of a 'radical right East' (and a 'democratic West') does not apply to other elections without further ado: after 1990 right-wing parties commemorated five entries into West German parliaments – compared to seven entries into East German parliaments.⁵
2. An East German peculiarity inextricably linked with the first one is the electorate's disposition to left voting, as measured by results of Die Linke (formerly known as PDS). Unlike the Social Democrats, the Post-Communists have performed

TABLE 1
EAST AND WEST GERMAN VOTING: FEDERAL ELECTIONS SINCE 1990

| | 1990 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2005 | 2009 | 2013 |
|--|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>Electoral performance Die Linke and its predecessors (in %)</i> | | | | | | | |
| East | 11.1 | 19.8 | 21.6 | 16.9 | 25.3 | 28.5 | 22.7 |
| West | 0.3 | 0.9 | 1.2 | 1.1 | 4.9 | 8.3 | 5.6 |
| <i>Electoral performance of right-wing parties (in %)</i> | | | | | | | |
| East | 1.6 ^a | 1.3 ^b | 5.0 ^c | 1.7 ^a | 4.2 ^a | 3.5 ^c | 8.7 ^d |
| West | 2.6 ^a | 2.0 ^b | 2.8 ^c | 0.9 ^a | 1.7 ^a | 1.7 ^c | 5.6 ^d |
| <i>Volatility (Pedersen Index)</i> | | | | | | | |
| East | – | 15.9 | 11.6 | 10.7 | 12.3 | 12.4 | 15.7 |
| West | – | 5.6 | 6.4 | 6.5 | 7.0 | 13.7 | 15.5 |
| <i>Turnout (in %)</i> | | | | | | | |
| East | 74.5 | 72.6 | 80.0 | 72.8 | 74.3 | 64.7 | 67.6 |
| West | 78.6 | 80.5 | 82.8 | 80.6 | 78.5 | 72.2 | 72.4 |

Source: official electoral statistics.

^a REP, NPD; ^b REP; ^c REP, NPD, DVU; ^d REP, NPD, AfD.

significantly and constantly better in the East than in the West since 1990,⁶ giving rise to the term of a 'red East'⁷ as a legacy of socialist rule. See Table 1.

- Furthermore, electoral habits in the new Länder are often regarded as scarcely predictable: with the exception of 2009, East Germans turned out to be consistently more erratic than their western neighbours – sometimes to a larger degree (1994), sometimes to a smaller degree (2013).⁸ Yet, the assertion of a volatile East cannot be generalised, as European elections illustrate. In 1999, 2009 and 2014 volatility in the West out-valued volatility in the East. Moreover, in recent years the West has approached the East slowly but surely.
- Finally, being attributed to regional disparities between East and West in unemployment, class affiliation and income, the abstention rate is consistently higher in the East than in the West – not only with respect to federal, but also to local, state and European elections.⁹ Yet, like other peculiarities, this needs to be treated with caution as well. The elections for the European Parliament in 1994 and 1998 may serve as a warning illustration.¹⁰

PITFALLS OF THE EAST–WEST COMPARISON

What we (think we) know about East and West German similarities and differences is to a large extent based on comparisons of both parts of the country with the old Länder on the one side and the new Länder on the other.¹¹ This goes hand in hand with three shortcomings.

First, the contrast is grounded in and virtually unthinkable without the tacit assumption of two homogeneous regions in terms of voting behaviour. This implicit premise explains both areas' status as the essential units of analysis. It, however, deserves support if and only if voting frictions within the East and within the West turn out to be smaller than between these areas, which in turn calls for intra-regional comparisons (the states within both parts of the country) as supplements to inter-regional comparisons (East and West).

Second, by taking for granted a homogeneous East and West, the paired comparison is incapable of detecting regional diversity within both parts of the country. Instead of asking for the quality and quantity of geographic gaps in voting behaviour, electoral research usually confines itself to the plain yes–no question as to whether and why there is an East–West disparity. That in turn boosts the risk of overlooking trends that might seriously impinge on the democratic process – such as a regional leap in electoral abstention or geographically limited gains of extremist parties in a federal election.

Third, there are hardly any transparent or objective benchmarks that could determine the relevance of East–West disparities. Hence, electoral research usually leaves decisions like the following to the individual power of judgement: do turnout gaps of about four percentage points between East and West (as was the case in 2013) speak for two electorates or not? Does a difference of 2 per cent in the FDP's result in 2005 signal a deep divide or unity? Whereas it is no big deal to determine if East and West have grown together over the course of time, it provides a serious challenge to say if, at a given time, both parts of the country formed a unified whole or not.

Electoral research has taken several actions to overcome the deficits mentioned, with Falter's and Arzheimer's modification of the Pedersen Index being the most important one.¹² By adding East–West differences of all election results (incl. the abstention rates) and dividing them by two, their measure ranges between 0 (no East–West differences) and 100 (exclusive East and West parties). A second frequently used measure to detect regionalisation is the deviation of several state election outcomes from the whole-nation or East/West German mean.¹³ If, for instance, the Christian Democrats' result in Saxony and the Social Democrats' result in Brandenburg deviate from the mean in the East by between 15 and 25 per cent, this indicates that both results are regionalised, with the SPD's electorate being even more regionalised than that of the CDU. The most recent attempt to quantify regionalisation stems from Niedermayer. He applied the variation coefficient in a sub-national analysis.¹⁴

To cut it short, by turning a blind eye to the conditions within both parts of the country, the conventional East–West comparison (not only of voting behaviour, but also attitudes, opinions, values and the like) tends to overlook facts that provide key evidence of the unification process of the German society. The measures recently brought forth by electoral research in turn are laudable as they specify the degree of (electoral) regionalisation. At the same time, they either fall back into old patterns (by comparing East and West) or offer no criterion that would allow a well-founded statement about the integration status of East and West. Hence, they provide no effective remedy. This is not to say that electoral sociology has not addressed itself to the study of electoral geography, particularly to the question of regional variation in voting behaviour. Research concerning comparative analyses of eastern and western voting peculiarities has, however, staggeringly rarely reverted to this information in order to test its basic assumption of two electorates. This holds especially true for voting behaviour in federal elections.

SUB-NATIONAL VOTING PATTERNS FROM 1990 TO 2013

Since 1990, are there or have there ever been two cleft electorates in Germany – a red, more radical, volatile and abstinent East and a less red, moderate, steady and participative West? Or do some states (and: how many, which ones, for what reasons?) undermine the assertion of disparate voting habits? If this is the case, one cannot simply transfer typical eastern or western peculiarities to the states within.

In order to shed light on the degree of intra-regional homogeneity, one can draw on the federal states or the election districts as units of analysis. The comparative advantage of districts clearly is their large degree of internal social homogeneity and the higher resolution of the electoral map one gets. However, it is not intended to portray regional variation in voting behaviour, but first and foremost to clarify the notion of two homogeneous, disparate electorates; and the federal states suffice this purpose. The concentration on nationwide – that is, federal elections (instead of state elections) – ensures similar general conditions for all cases, because it neutralises a large part of distortive region-specific effects, such as regional issues and top candidates.

How can the extent of intra- and inter-regional heterogeneity in voting behaviour be quantified? The most common way to drill down on the co-occurrence of one interval scale variable (the four abovementioned factors) and one binary variable (the regional affiliation of a state: East or West) is by means of a point-biserial correlation.¹⁵ As the analyses repose on population instead of random sample data, lack measurement error and because the correlations are intended to describe (not explain) the strength of association, significance levels are irrelevant and therefore missing.¹⁶ If correlation values differ considerably from zero (and approach ± 1), one can assume intra-regional homogeneity and inter-regional heterogeneity, and therefore the existence of two electorates. Cohen's conventions for the interpretation of effect sizes provide assistance.¹⁷ Complementarily, the following tables also display the ranges of regional electoral outcomes, which – due to their sensitivity to outliers – bring deviant cases into focus. On their basis, one can easily figure out the longitudinal trends concerning electoral homogeneity in both parts of the country.

Right-Wing Voting: Two Voting Patterns since 1998

It has been frequently stated that East German voters have a stronger disposition to radical voting than West German voters – to the advantage of parties like Die Linke, DVU, REP, NPD and – since 2013 – the AfD, the latter being (due to the lack of nativist and anti-democratic elements in its manifesto) clearly not an extremist, but surely a far-right party.¹⁸ However, because Die Linke is the largest far-left party that will be considered in the next section, I am instead concentrating on regional vote shares for far-right parties here.

If the first all-German election in 1990 serves as the point of reference, one easily finds that – regarding the results of the right-wing party family as a whole – the western Länder have soon become (and thereafter remained) quite similar to each other, whereas the eastern Länder have slightly drifted apart over the course of time, especially after the year 2000. Besides that, at no time has the friction within both parts of the country become exorbitantly large. In the light of this, when and why does it make sense to speak of two separate electorates in terms of right-wing

voting? In a nutshell: not until 1998. Following Cohen's suggestions, 1998 is the first election when the states' regional affiliation and right-wing voting exhibit a strong association ($>.500$). In combination with Table 2 which presents two (almost) non-overlapping ranges since then, this points towards two largely disparate electorates. A regular regional outlier is Berlin, with its atypically low right-wing vote share. The multicultural federal capital thereby corroborates electoral geography's finding that the contact hypothesis largely applies to East Germany with its recent immigration experience, but not to West Germany, where the population has already become familiar with cultural and ethnic heterogeneity through the immigration wave of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁹

As for 1990 and 1994, electoral sociology frequently points to the fact that voters in the West showed a slightly stronger inclination towards the REP and the NPD than their eastern neighbours, prior to the situation becoming inversed.²⁰ This is what both parties' overall result in the two regions (1.6. versus 2.6 per cent), along with the minus-sign before the correlation values, suggest. However absolute correlation values of .298 and .427 (in Cohen's terms 'moderate effects') create doubt about this notion. In fact, far-right election results in 1990 and 1994 make it hard to find a common denominator for the new Länder on the one side and the old Länder on the other – the results in East and West varied significantly. Therefore, whereas electoral sociology's thesis of a right-leaning East and a more moderate West is confirmed by the federal elections since 1998, the inverse thesis for 1990 and 1994 (rightist West, moderate East) bears no close examination.

That the overall picture changed between 1994 and 1998 might have been accounted for by shifts in the far-right party spectre. In the early 1990s the REP

TABLE 2
ELECTION OUTCOMES OF RIGHT-WING PARTIES 1990–2013 (IN %)

| | State | 1990 ^a | 1994 ^b | 1998 ^c | 2002 ^a | 2005 ^a | 2009 ^c | 2013 ^d |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| West | Baden-Wuerttemberg | 3.8 | 3.1 | 4.8 | 1.4 | 2.2 | 2.1 | 6.6 |
| | Bavaria | 5.2 | 2.8 | 3.3 | .9 | 2.3 | 2.2 | 5.6 |
| | Bremen | 2.5 | 1.7 | 2.7 | .7 | 1.5 | 1.6 | 4.8 |
| | Hamburg | 2.0 | 1.7 | 2.8 | .3 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 4.8 |
| | Hesse | 2.7 | 2.4 | 3.6 | 1.2 | 2.0 | 1.8 | 7.0 |
| | Lower Saxony | 1.3 | 1.2 | 1.6 | .6 | 1.3 | 1.3 | 4.6 |
| | North Rhine-Westphalia | 1.5 | 1.3 | 2.0 | .6 | 1.1 | 1.3 | 5.0 |
| | Schleswig-Holstein | 1.5 | 1.0 | 3.3 | .4 | 1.0 | 1.1 | 5.3 |
| | Rhineland Palatinate | 2.0 | 1.9 | 3.1 | 1.4 | 2.4 | 2.1 | 6.3 |
| | Saarland | 1.2 | 1.6 | 2.4 | 1.1 | 1.8 | 1.3 | 6.9 |
| | <i>R</i> | 4.0 | 2.1 | 3.2 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 1.2 | 2.4 |
| East + Berlin | Berlin | 2.6 | 1.9 | 4.9 | 1.3 | 2.1 | 2.0 | 6.5 |
| | Mecklenburg-Western Pom. | 1.7 | 1.2 | 4.3 | 1.1 | 3.5 | 3.5 | 8.4 |
| | Brandenburg | 1.9 | 1.1 | 5.2 | 1.5 | 3.2 | 3.7 | 8.8 |
| | Saxony | 1.5 | 1.4 | 5.7 | 2.4 | 5.3 | 4.3 | 10.2 |
| | Saxony-Anhalt | 1.2 | 1.0 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 6.4 |
| | Thuringia | 1.5 | 1.4 | 4.5 | 1.7 | 4.4 | 3.6 | 9.6 |
| | <i>R</i> | 1.4 | .9 | 1.1 | 1.4 | 3.2 | 2.3 | 3.8 |
| | <i>Point-biserial correlation</i> | -.298 | -.427 | .761 | .599 | .768 | .815 | .749 |

Note: ^a REP, NPD; ^b REP; ^c REP, NPD, DVU; ^d REP, NPD, AfD.

Source: official electoral statistics.

had dominated the scene – a party with strong roots in the western BundesLänder, and a lack of roots in the East. With the implementation of Udo Voigt's ambitious four-pillar strategy in 1997 (fight for the parliaments, the streets, the minds and the organised will) that included the creation of local networks and tying in with informally organised nationalist circles ('*Freie Kameradschaften*'), the NPD eventually succeeded in getting a firm foothold in the East, particularly in Saxony. Its endless efforts, which fell on fertile ground in the East with its multifarious post-transformation problems such as leaping unemployment rates, income losses and social insecurity, permitted the NPD to put an end to the REP's electoral dominance in the far-right camp. Its strategy turned out to be particularly successful in the rural areas of Saxony.²¹

However, things changed once more in 2013, when the AfD entered the stage. On the one side the right-wing party family as a whole profited from the new entrant as it received its best federal election result after 1990 – in East and West. In Saxony, where the far right had been traditionally strong it even won double-digits. The 'professors' party' thereby confirmed (and marginally increased) the negligible regional variation in the East, racking up victories where far-right parties were known to have been strong (Saxony) and doing badly where similar parties had always performed feebly (Berlin). It thus seems as if it was able to build on the same milieu the NPD had benefited from previously. The West in turn lacks such a distinct pattern. With the appearance of the AfD Hesse and Saarland superseded two of the traditional right-wing strongholds (Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria). The party therefore might address different electorates in East and West. Yet, it is too early to identify a trend from this single alteration.

On the other side it seems that the highest right-wing results in a federal election so far presumably came about at the expense of the extremist exponents of this political sphere; that is, the NPD and the Republikaner. Unfortunately, exit polls and election surveys do not break down shifts of votes on the state level, when it comes to federal elections. Yet, several aspects point towards a severe competition between the NPD and the AfD: both parties did well in the same constituencies and a side glance at the shift of votes in the 2014 Saxonian state elections shows that the AfD gained no less than 13,000 voters from the right-wing extremists.²² Ironically, as a consequence it hampered the entry of a liberal party (FDP) as well as an anti-democratic party (NPD) into the Landtag of Saxony. Regardless of whether this rivalry had already been in place one year before at the Bundestag election, the AfD apparently bowls the NPD out as the dominant force in the right-wing camp. If it is additionally capable of absorbing former NPD voters, the AfD does not necessarily work to the disadvantage of democracy – given both parties' disparate stances on democratic values and institutions. Instead, the AfD has the potential not only to integrate the disenchanted into the political process, but also to crucially debilitate extremists at federal elections and to keep them out of state parliaments – provided that its own positions on democracy do not shift fundamentally. That it contributes to the spread of far-right ideology, competes with the Union and thereby undermines the strength of integrative catch-all parties is another topic.

Left-Wing Voting: Two Voting Patterns Throughout

Unlike right-wing voting, left-wing voting has been subject to a striking East–West divide throughout the complete post-unification era. Only in 2005 and 2009 have the results of the largest left-wing party in a western state surpassed those in an eastern state. However, these rare exceptions cannot really call the East–West divide into question. Basically, they were attributable to the ability of the Linkspartei/Die Linke to gain an extraordinary vote share of roughly 20 per cent in the state of Saarland – more than in Berlin, albeit negligibly. With his sudden candidature on the list of the Linkspartei (2005) and Die Linke (2009) respectively, Oskar Lafontaine – former SPD chairman, chancellor candidate and Minister-President (with the reputation of a father figure) of the Saarland 1985–98 – made a major contribution to this selective success in the West. The pre–post comparison of the election results in 2002 and 2005 (Δ 17.1 percentage points) underscores that the Linkspartei benefited massively from the home advantage of the popular populist Lafontaine in the smallest area state.

But aside from these two geographically limited exceptions that trace back to the ‘Lafontaine factor’, a wide gap between old and new Länder pertains to all federal elections. The otherwise non-overlapping ranges of the results on the state level as well as the point-biserial correlations leave no doubt about the existence of two electorates: a red East and a non-red West. This is not surprising, considering the political and regional origin of the party in the GDR. In the decade after unification the post-communists have been mainly voted by elderly and better-educated people with a favourable opinion of the GDR and the idea of socialism, as well as a high degree of dissatisfaction with democracy.²³ From a socio-structural perspective the core clientele consisted of the former GDR nomenclature, which had abruptly lost its societal function and its political *raison d’être* in 1989/90 – that the PDS acted as the agent of the former elites led to its electoral strength in East Germany.

However, that the East has remained a stronghold (and the West a diaspora) of Die Linke to the present day should not hide the fact that meanwhile things have changed significantly under the surface. The electoral alliance with the Arbeit & soziale Gerechtigkeit - Die Wahlalternative (WASG) in 2005 – a by-product of the early elections the SPD called – as well as the subsequent organisational merger of both parties in 2007 shook off the image of a ‘Stasi party’ and thereby paved the way for a considerable socio-structural transformation of the party electorate and a modest western expansion. Socially disadvantaged people and modernisation losers have become over-represented among the party’s voters in West and East.²⁴ Owing to the sheer regional distribution of this electoral clientele, Die Linke turned out to be more successful at asserting itself in the East. This points towards a change in perception, especially among those left behind who traditionally have cast their ballots in support of the SPD. Both parties had thus become competitors by no later than 2005–15 years after the PDS had entered the stage of federal politics in Germany.

As a consequence, the party’s character has shifted from a home of the former GDR elite to an advocate of the ordinary people – the less well-educated people, the working class and the workless. Although applying both to East and West, the trend made itself felt particularly in the old Länder. Having said that, the shift has not enabled Die Linke to align the results in the West with those in the East, but only to reduce the gap

between both parts of the country. The opening for new constituencies may have improved its situation – especially in the urban heartlands of the social democrats, Hamburg and Bremen, but this could not shake the regionalist character of Die Linke. It is and has always been an East German party. What has altered meanwhile is its role in the regional party systems of the West. From a *non-established* small party it has mutated into an *established* small party. The new Länder are red, indeed, but the old ones have become considerably redder over time. See Table 3.

Swing Voting: Two Voting Patterns No Longer

The society in East Germany has the reputation of being a fickle electorate due to the communist regime's forceful mitigation of socio-economic and religious conflicts in the society, which barred the establishment of steady voting patterns after 1990. Widespread, long-term party affiliations which in the Federal Republic had developed in a long democratisation process, could not quickly unfold in the East after 1990 – not least because the western party system had been simply transferred to the new Länder.

Do these assertions bear close examination when the election results on the state level are taken into consideration? Are there two distinctive voting patterns? As to the West, the range of the volatility has fluctuated unsystematically from one election to another. That is, the old Länder have (with the exception of 2005) become neither more nor less alike in the course of time. All in all, they have remained close together, displaying a single-digit range throughout. By moving in the same direction – increasing volatility – they additionally confirm the growing relevance of partisan de-alignment in western societies through the shrinkage of traditional social milieus as well as the receding relevance of the social structure for voting.²⁵

TABLE 3
ELECTION OUTCOMES OF DIE LINKE AND ITS PREDECESSORS 1990–2013 (IN %)

| | State | 1990 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2005 | 2009 | 2013 |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| West | Baden-Wuerttemberg | .3 | .8 | 1.0 | .9 | 3.8 | 7.2 | 4.8 |
| | Bavaria | .2 | .5 | .7 | .7 | 3.4 | 6.5 | 3.8 |
| | Bremen | 1.1 | 2.7 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 8.4 | 14.3 | 10.1 |
| | Hamburg | 1.1 | 2.2 | 2.3 | 2.1 | 6.3 | 11.2 | 8.8 |
| | Hesse | .4 | 1.1 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 5.3 | 8.5 | 6.0 |
| | Lower Saxony | .3 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 4.3 | 8.6 | 5.0 |
| | North Rhine-Westphalia | .3 | 1.0 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 5.2 | 8.4 | 6.1 |
| | Schleswig-Holstein | .3 | 1.1 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 4.6 | 7.9 | 5.2 |
| | Rhineland Palatinate | .2 | .6 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 5.6 | 9.4 | 5.4 |
| | Saarland | .2 | .7 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 18.5 | 21.2 | 10.0 |
| East + Berlin | <i>R</i> | .9 | 2.2 | 1.7 | 1.3 | 16.1 | 14.7 | 6.3 |
| | Berlin | 9.7 | 14.8 | 13.4 | 11.4 | 16.4 | 20.2 | 18.5 |
| | Mecklenburg-Western Pom. | 14.2 | 23.6 | 23.6 | 16.3 | 23.7 | 29.0 | 21.5 |
| | Brandenburg | 11.0 | 19.3 | 20.3 | 17.2 | 26.6 | 28.5 | 22.4 |
| | Saxony | 9.0 | 16.7 | 20.0 | 16.2 | 22.8 | 24.5 | 20.0 |
| | Saxony-Anhalt | 9.4 | 18.0 | 20.7 | 14.4 | 26.6 | 32.4 | 23.9 |
| | Thuringia | 8.3 | 17.2 | 21.2 | 17.0 | 26.1 | 28.8 | 23.4 |
| | <i>R</i> | 5.9 | 8.8 | 10.2 | 5.8 | 10.2 | 12.2 | 5.4 |
| | <i>Point-biserial correlation</i> | .969 | .978 | .977 | .983 | .902 | .895 | .963 |

Source: official electoral statistics.

In a sense, 2005 stands out against all other federal elections because of the exceptionally diverse degrees of volatility in the West. Compared against 2002, in Saarland no less than 18.7 per cent of all votes have shifted from one party to another. The cause was the appearance of the electoral alliance of the PDS and the WASG with its frontrunner Oskar Lafontaine, who profited from his local popularity. The alliance attracted 17.1 per cent of the votes cast, primarily to the disadvantage of the social democrats who reported a fall of 12.7 percentage points. Therefore, 2005 must be regarded as an exception that harks back to very specific, non-recurrent political circumstances.

With respect to the East, volatility followed a slightly u-shaped line after 1990. Through to 2002 the trend suggested that voting behaviour would consolidate after a period of widespread disillusionment with the way things had developed politically and economically (as was the case in many East European countries). After a leap in volatility in the 1990s voting behaviour appeared to normalise in each and every state. Yet, by yielding an unexpected (and continuing) trend reversal the federal election in 2005 put things right. The consolidation of voting behaviour suddenly gave place to an increase in volatility. By now, it has reached almost the same level it had started from in the early 1990s, corroborating the de-alignment thesis in the East.

So altogether, both East and West have evolved rather coherent volatility patterns, which initially differed fundamentally. In 1994 the correlation between region (East–West) and volatility was almost perfect, and even in 1998 the association between both factors indicated two deeply divided electorates. Since then, however, the West has increasingly aligned with the East. Although the correlation in 2013 was negative for the first time, this should not mislead the observer into seeing yet another trend reversal. On the one hand it is too early to link a trend to this snapshot, on the other hand the absolute value is not far from zero, pointing at the emergence of a single, highly volatile electorate, which the East has served as a model for. See [Table 4](#).

Voter Turnout: Two Voting Patterns Throughout

Owing to its quantitative irrelevance, for a long time the German non-voter has been the ‘unknown being’ to electoral sociology. When academics finally turned towards this phantom, they soon found out that it was hard to conceive due to their electoral absence – non-voters elude exit polls, they tend to decline social surveys and, when they take part, they fib every now and then. That is why surveys systematically over-rate electoral turnout. Anyhow, over the course of time electoral research has been able to compile a range of characteristics that shape the social profile of typical non-voters in Germany:²⁶ non-voters tend to originate in lower social strata, have inferior educational qualifications as well as lower incomes and they are to a larger extent unemployed. What is more, non-voting has been found to have somewhat contagious qualities, because people who live in neighbourhoods with low electoral turnout tend to stay away from the poll as well – and vice versa. It therefore comes as no surprise that turnout is frequently reported to be lower in constituencies with rampant unemployment rates, lower purchasing power and humble standards of education.

All these factors constitute pieces in the puzzle determining why during federal elections after 1990, eastern turnout levels have been constantly lower than western ones. Despite continual efforts to overcome the socio-economic differences caused

TABLE 4
VOLATILITY 1994–2013 (IN %)

| | State | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2005 | 2009 | 2013 |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| West | Baden-Wuerttemberg | 5.8 | 6.1 | 5.2 | 7.4 | 14.6 | 15.3 |
| | Bavaria | 4.0 | 4.5 | 10.8 | 9.0 | 13.3 | 12.4 |
| | Bremen | 6.9 | 5.9 | 3.6 | 7.9 | 11.7 | 12.1 |
| | Hamburg | 7.9 | 6.9 | 5.8 | 5.9 | 11.1 | 11.1 |
| | Hessen | 4.3 | 6.2 | 3.7 | 7.8 | 10.8 | 12.9 |
| | Lower Saxony | 5.7 | 9.0 | 2.1 | 7.4 | 13.2 | 13.3 |
| | North Rhine-Westphalia | 5.9 | 4.5 | 4.6 | 4.9 | 11.7 | 12.1 |
| | Schleswig-Holstein | 5.9 | 6.7 | 3.2 | 5.8 | 14.7 | 14.2 |
| | Rhineland Palatinate | 5.6 | 3.7 | 4.1 | 9.7 | 11.9 | 14.6 |
| | Saarland | 4.5 | 4.9 | 6.9 | 18.7 | 8.6 | 16.9 |
| | <i>R</i> | 3.9 | 5.3 | 8.7 | 13.8 | 6.1 | 5.8 |
| East + Berlin | Berlin | 11.7 | 7.1 | 5.2 | 6.9 | 12.9 | 12.3 |
| | Mecklenburg-Western Pom. | 11.2 | 9.2 | 9.3 | 9.8 | 14.5 | 13.5 |
| | Brandenburg | 19.8 | 5.4 | 5.7 | 11.7 | 9.5 | 13.8 |
| | Saxony | 12.5 | 12.2 | 6.4 | 11.1 | 11.1 | 11.8 |
| | Saxony-Anhalt | 17.4 | 10.2 | 8.4 | 14.1 | 15.1 | 14.9 |
| | Thuringia | 16.7 | 11.3 | 6.5 | 12.7 | 11.8 | 11.4 |
| | <i>R</i> | 8.6 | 6.8 | 4.1 | 7.2 | 5.6 | 3.5 |
| | <i>Point-biserial correlation</i> | .899 | .665 | .413 | .363 | .085 | -.170 |

Source: official electoral statistics and own calculations on basis of the Pedersen index. For reasons of comparability, the federal election in 1990 is excluded.

by the past German division, even 25 years after re-unification the East still lags behind the West.²⁷ the GDP per capita in the East amounts to 67 per cent of the West, unemployment is about four percentage points higher, real wages reach 78 per cent of the western level, the equivalence-weighted net annual income is little more than 80 per cent of the old Länder and the rate of people at risk of poverty is about 10 percentage points higher. At the same time, without the endless political efforts in the last two-and-a-half decades to harmonise living conditions in both areas of the country, the socio-economic East–West gap would be even larger. Instead, it has continuously narrowed over recent years and in part has given ground to new intra-regional frictions in the East and in the West, which are, however, still smaller than the difference between both areas.

Such fundamental frictions in living conditions are known to foster frictions in political attitudes and opinions, such as political interest and confidence, expected political responsiveness and effectiveness, the acceptance of voting as a civic duty, party identification as well as political alienation, all of them achieving rather critical levels in the East and – as a consequence – promoting systematically lower turnout levels. However, despite clearly being a legacy of the GDR's disastrous economy, disadvantageous economic conditions can in principle occur in other political contexts, as in the western city state of Bremen with its startling unemployment rates illustrates. As a consequence, with regard to electoral participation among the western states the Hanseatic city periodically finishes last.

Additionally, low turnout levels in the East should be regarded as an indirect consequence of the state socialism at most. It is not the socialist rule or the command economy per se that has led to low turnout levels but probably the interplay of a

range of poor economic decisions before 1989/90, the comprehensive transformation process thereafter as well as parallel global economic challenges (e.g. globalisation and the emergence of the Single European Market), all of them exacerbating the socio-economic backwardness of the eastern states and – as a consequence – electoral absenteeism.

All in all, this allows the assumption that the future convergence of the eastern and the western turnout levels is – to a high degree – determined both by the effectiveness of political measures to align socio-economic living conditions in the East with those in the West as well as the fortune of the East German economy to catch up with its western counterpart. However, at the same time both parts of the country are and will be subject to internal economic differentiation – a process that has begun to shape the western economic landscape decades ago and that is now commencing in the East as well. Therefore, you do not have to be a prophet to anticipate that turnout levels will differentiate regionally in the foreseeable future – with the more prosperous areas at the top and the less fortunate ones at the bottom of the ranking. Chances are that this dividing line will not coincide with the former inner-German border. See [Table 5](#).

CONCLUSION – CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

This article was dedicated to a retest of the notion that there are two ‘deeply divided electorates’ in Germany. Keeping in mind that such an enterprise would actually require a whole range of election types – local, state and European elections – to be taken into account equally, this article was meant to be nothing more than a

TABLE 5
TURNOUT 1990–2013 (IN %)

| State | | 1990 | 1994 | 1998 | 2002 | 2005 | 2009 | 2013 |
|---------------|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| West | Baden-Wuerttemberg | 77.4 | 79.7 | 83.1 | 81.1 | 78.7 | 72.4 | 74.3 |
| | Bavaria | 74.4 | 76.9 | 79.2 | 81.5 | 77.9 | 71.6 | 70.0 |
| | Bremen | 76.5 | 78.5 | 82.1 | 78.8 | 75.5 | 70.3 | 68.8 |
| | Hamburg | 78.2 | 79.7 | 81.1 | 79.6 | 77.5 | 71.3 | 70.3 |
| | Hesse | 81.1 | 82.3 | 84.2 | 80.1 | 78.7 | 73.8 | 73.2 |
| | Lower Saxony | 80.6 | 81.8 | 83.9 | 81.0 | 79.4 | 73.3 | 73.4 |
| | North Rhine-Westphalia | 78.7 | 81.9 | 83.9 | 80.3 | 78.3 | 71.4 | 72.5 |
| | Schleswig-Holstein | 78.6 | 80.9 | 82.4 | 80.7 | 79.1 | 73.6 | 73.1 |
| | Rhineland Palatinate | 81.7 | 82.3 | 83.9 | 80.0 | 78.7 | 72.0 | 72.8 |
| | Saarland | 85.1 | 83.5 | 84.8 | 80.0 | 79.4 | 73.7 | 72.5 |
| East + Berlin | R | 10.7 | 6.6 | 5.6 | 2.7 | 3.9 | 3.5 | 5.5 |
| | Berlin | 80.6 | 78.6 | 81.1 | 77.6 | 77.4 | 70.9 | 72.5 |
| | Mecklenburg-Western Pom. | 70.9 | 72.8 | 79.4 | 70.6 | 71.2 | 63.0 | 65.3 |
| | Brandenburg | 73.8 | 71.5 | 78.1 | 73.7 | 74.9 | 67.0 | 68.4 |
| | Saxony | 76.2 | 72.0 | 81.6 | 73.7 | 75.7 | 65.0 | 69.5 |
| | Saxony-Anhalt | 72.2 | 70.4 | 77.1 | 68.8 | 71.0 | 60.5 | 62.1 |
| | Thuringia | 76.4 | 74.9 | 82.3 | 74.8 | 75.5 | 65.2 | 68.2 |
| | R | 9.7 | 8.2 | 5.2 | 8.8 | 6.4 | 10.4 | 10.4 |
| | Point-biserial correlation | -.564 | -.846 | -.635 | -.882 | -.755 | -.844 | -.666 |

Source: official electoral statistics.

piece of a larger puzzle. By conducting a longitudinal analysis of all federal elections since 1990, it was intended to re-analyse four often-cited theses about East and West German voting peculiarities – that the East votes more radically (in both political directions: left and right), is more volatile and votes to a lesser extent than the West.

At the end of the day, whereas the conception of a redder and more inactive East (in terms of *Die Linke*'s electoral results and voter turnout) proved to be true for the complete period of consideration and therefore corroborated the theory of 'two deeply divided electorates' throughout, the situation is somewhat different with far-right voting and volatility.

Electoral sociology is correct when professing that, compared to the West, today far-right parties perform considerably better in the East – not least because of the NPD's successful long-time strategy and the socio-economic rigours of the re-unification and the transformation. Hence, with regard to right-wing voting Germany consists of two electorates today. It is, however, certainly not true that in the early 1990s far-right parties' results in the West systematically out-valued those in the East as claimed.²⁸ Instead, far-right voting in federal elections took on similar proportions in both parts of the country. It has taken some time before the new *Länder* right-wing parties were able to grow vital roots and the re-unification frenzy made way for widespread disillusionment. Time will tell if, how and to what extent the newly established *AfD* will be able to reshuffle the pack. If the trend of 2013 stabilises, the right-wing party family's political relevance can be expected to increase nationwide, albeit to the detriment of its extremist elements. It is, however, unlikely that the newcomer will rejig the electoral map.

With regard to the distribution of electoral volatility, the idea of a highly erratic East German voter, and a firm West German voter, proved to be obsolete. It may be applicable to the first federal elections (1994 and 1998), but not to the more recent ones. East and West do not differ any more categorically since 2002 and can be regarded as displaying virtually the same level of volatility since 2009. Admittedly, this harmonisation has not been caused by a process of mutual convergence of both parts of the country, but rather by the 'Easternisation' of the West, which revealed a constantly growing volatility in each federal election since 1994. Here, the thesis of 'two deeply divided electorates' is unequivocally behind the times.

Taking one step back, the consideration of electoral results on the state level apparently bears some telling information about the existence of two divided electorates. It therefore should be taken into account whenever notions of an East–West gap in Germany – be it electoral, attitudinal, social and so on – are about to be re-assessed. The related answer for post-unification German voting behaviour is, as the comparisons show, not a matter of yes and no, but many-faceted and contingent both on the moment of observation and the specific parameters. Instead of a global process of divergence or convergence, East and West have undergone various, partly opposed trends in the last years. For this reason, the idea of two distinct electorates is sometimes more, sometimes less accurate. It fits best the 1998 federal election (and to a smaller extent 2002), when inter-regional contrasts among all considered factors were striking. Today, the disparities turn out to be largest where the underlying parameters are known to be related to socio-economic determinants. This applies both to radical voting and turnout. It is therefore mainly the economic development that will shape the future

direction of the (alleged) two electorates. Socio-economic fragmentation will involve electoral fragmentation, just as an economically two-speed Germany is likely to reinforce the East–West voting gap.

Despite the nuanced picture the test of the East–West thesis yields, the sheer amount of outliers the state comparisons have brought to light is surprising. All too often the four variables were not characterised by similar developments in each area, but by regional peaks and abysses. One core finding is that, paradoxically, Germany's electoral geography is abundant with onetime (e.g. overwhelming successes of Die Linke in Saarland thanks to Oskar Lafontaine, the former strength of right-wing parties in Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg) and long-term exceptional cases (e.g. strength of far-right parties in Saxony, a certain deviation of the city states). Such aspects – that is, regional variation in terms of electoral behaviour, but also political values, attitudes and opinions – are still remarkably under-represented in the academic debate on whether the two parts of Germany have grown together.

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From 2006 to 2009 Tom Mannewitz studied politics and communications in Dresden. He obtained his doctorate degree on left-wing extremist parties in Europe in 2012 and afterwards carried out a postdoc-research project on the regionalisation of political culture in Germany, funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Since 2014 he holds an appointment as Juniorprofessor for Research Methods in Political Science at TU Chemnitz.

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NOTES

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