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German elections 2017 – Low voter turnout in the context of the upcoming European elections 2019

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Abstract

For years, voter turnout has been low at all political levels in Europe. This is alarming because the social imbalance of low voter turnout across the European Union for national and European elections threatens the ideal of political equality and is thus directly linked to the democratic deficit of the European Union. This paper offers a small-scale analysis of this worrying phenomenon by zooming into the 2017 German elections and various European cities during the 2014 European elections.

Introduction

In 2017, 76 % of the electorate participated in the German federal elections. This constitutes the third lowest figure in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany (the lowest so far being 70.8 % in 2009). This trend is alarming because – as we will show – a low voter turnout renders the election result less representative.

Our contribution will focus on the diverse socio-economic factors involved in the 2017 German European electoral process, which will subsequently be put in the broader context of the upcoming 2019 European elections by zooming into a number of European cities during the 2014 European elections.

The social and political bias of voter participation

A voter turnout of less than 80 % has become something of a national standard in Germany, Europe and beyond.

Whereas for a long time a low turnout was not regarded as specifically problematic by political science, eventually the opinion prevailed that a low turnout and the factors responsible for this constitute a danger for one of the fundamental ideas of modern representative democracy, i.e. political equality.

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Political equality can only be safeguarded if all socio-economic groups are showing an equally high voter turnout. But we know that different socio-economic groups are heading very differently to the polls. Political equality is thereby closely related to social equality (cf. Pesson et al. 2013, p. 173).

According to Swedish researcher Herbert Tingsten, there is a "law of dispersion", by which lower turnout also leads to more unequal electorates. (Tingsten 1975, p. 230). The so-called social bias of low voter participation thereby designates a certain type of non-voter whose numbers undermines the ideal of political equality (Kaeding et al 2016; Schäfer 2015).

The uneven spread of individual, contextual or institutional factors throughout society (e.g. differences in educational levels, social conditions, precarious employment) determine a social inequality that leads to a low voter participation of specific groups, thus turning into political inequality.

The analysis of various recourses, especially those of socio-economic relevance, will be the focus of this contribution and will be examined in several respects within a European context.

The impact of socio-economic factors across German regions...

The 2017 German federal election revealed a variety of differences with regard to voter participation. Looking at the 299 constituencies in Germany more generally, a particular pattern occurs. The difference between the "old" states

and the territories of the former German Democratic Republic is striking (Haußner and Kaeding, 2019). A lower quota of participants is usually found in the east of the Federal Republic (Becker 2004, p. 317).

If one relates voter turnout with the structural data of the various constituencies (the Chief Election Official 2017), such as the rate of employment or the average income, one observes differences between constituencies that are socio-economically stronger or weaker even within different Länder.

With a few exceptions (Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia) the link between the rate of unemployment and voter turnout is a negative one. The more citizens in a constituency are unemployed, the lower the rate of polling tends to be. This connection is particularly notable in Bavaria, Brandenburg, and Schleswig-Holstein.

It thereby becomes evident that during the 2017 German federal elections the socio-economic situation of the constituencies and the living conditions of their citizens had a prominent bearing on voter turnout. Constituencies which are worse off have a remarkably lower turnout than those with a better social infrastructure. All in all, the rate of unemployment is a particularly strong indicator for lower turnout rates (Gallego 2007).

...and cities

Zooming into four German cities (Berlin, Cologne, Munich and Rostock), the negative relationship becomes even more apparent.

In the [first diagram](#) each dot represents a district in one of the four cities under consideration. On the x-axis the factor “unemployment” in the district is made operational, and on the y-axis the official voter turnout in the 2017 federal election.

The result is striking: The higher the rate of unemployment in a particular city district, the stronger the mechanisms of social disintegration becomes effective and accordingly lower the voter participation is likely to be (see [Graph 1: the influence of unemployment at district level in German cities](#))

This relationship holds for all four cities: the higher the respective reading of unemployment, the lower the tendency to vote in the 2017 German federal election in Berlin, Cologne, Munich and Rostock, constituting a danger to the ideal of equal political representation.

The 2017 German federal election in the context of the European election of 2019

The social bias of the low voter turnouts does not only manifest itself in Germany but throughout Europe. [Graph 2](#) illustrates the relationship between unemployment and voter turnout in four European capitals for the 2014 European election (see [Graph 2: the influence of unemployment at district level in European capitals](#)).

It is remarkable that in all these European cities the findings are the same as for the German cities: the higher the unemployment in the

respective city district, the lower the voter turnout at the 2014 European election.

Whereas the difference is less pronounced in Vienna, the bias is particularly noticeable in Budapest. Although the unemployment rate only differs by a very small percentage, the voter turnout differs by about 25 %.

Even in Bratislava, with only a small number of districts and relatively small socio-economic differences, the negative relation becomes evident. Additionally, the voter turnout in this case is an extremely low one, with only one single district with a participation of over 25 %.

Conclusion

In sum, the interrelatedness of the social structure of certain areas and voter turnout is not just a German but a Europe-wide phenomenon.

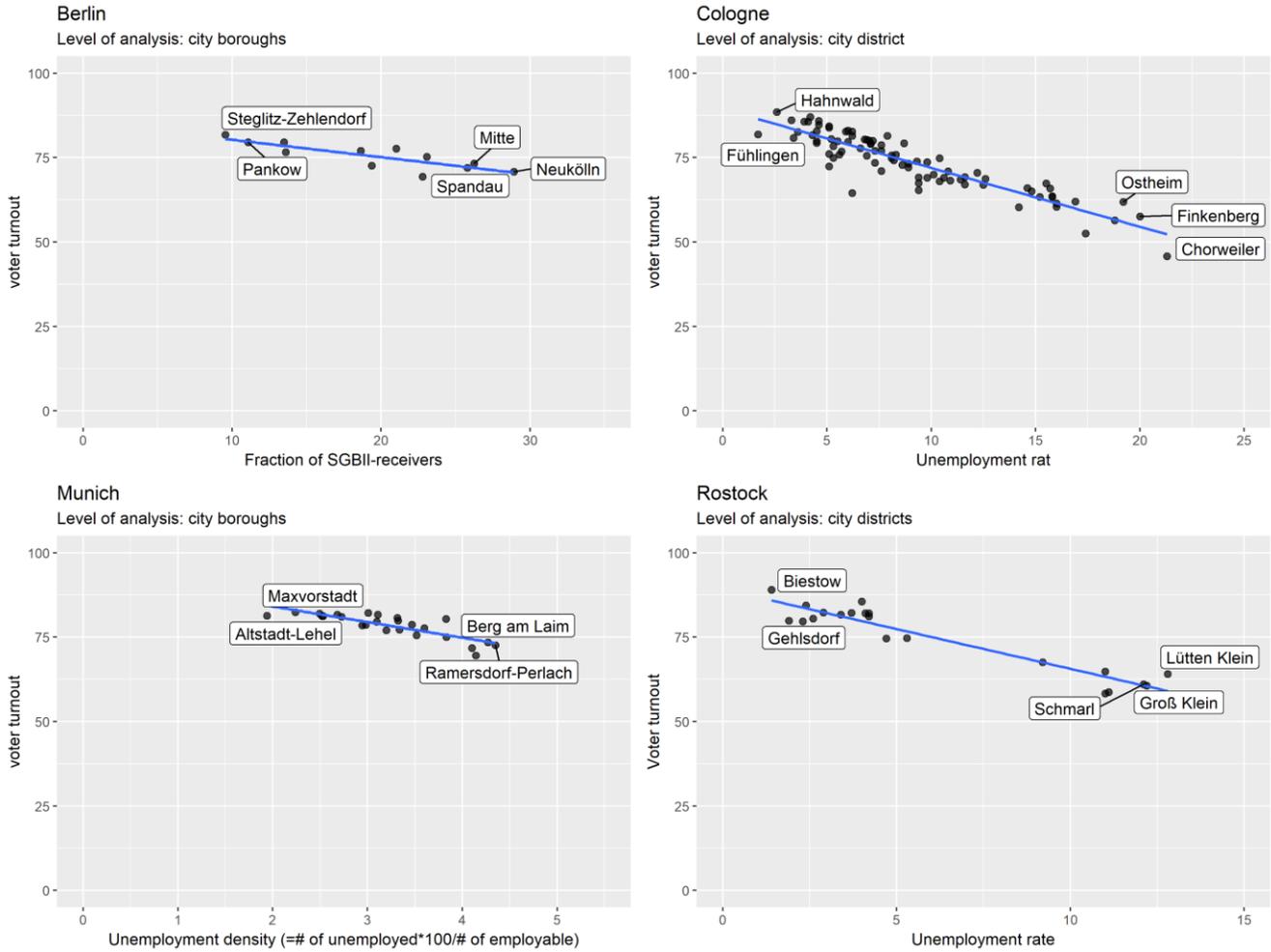
The relation between the rate of unemployment and voter turnout is a negative one. The higher the number of citizens in their respective constituencies that are unemployed, the lower the voter participation tends to be across the board.

However, such differences endanger the ideal of political equality in all of Europe. It is therefore important to realise the relevance of these insights which hold true beyond Germany, as well as their Europe-wide causes and consequences in order to draw the necessary conclusions for the upcoming 2019 European election campaign.

Graphs

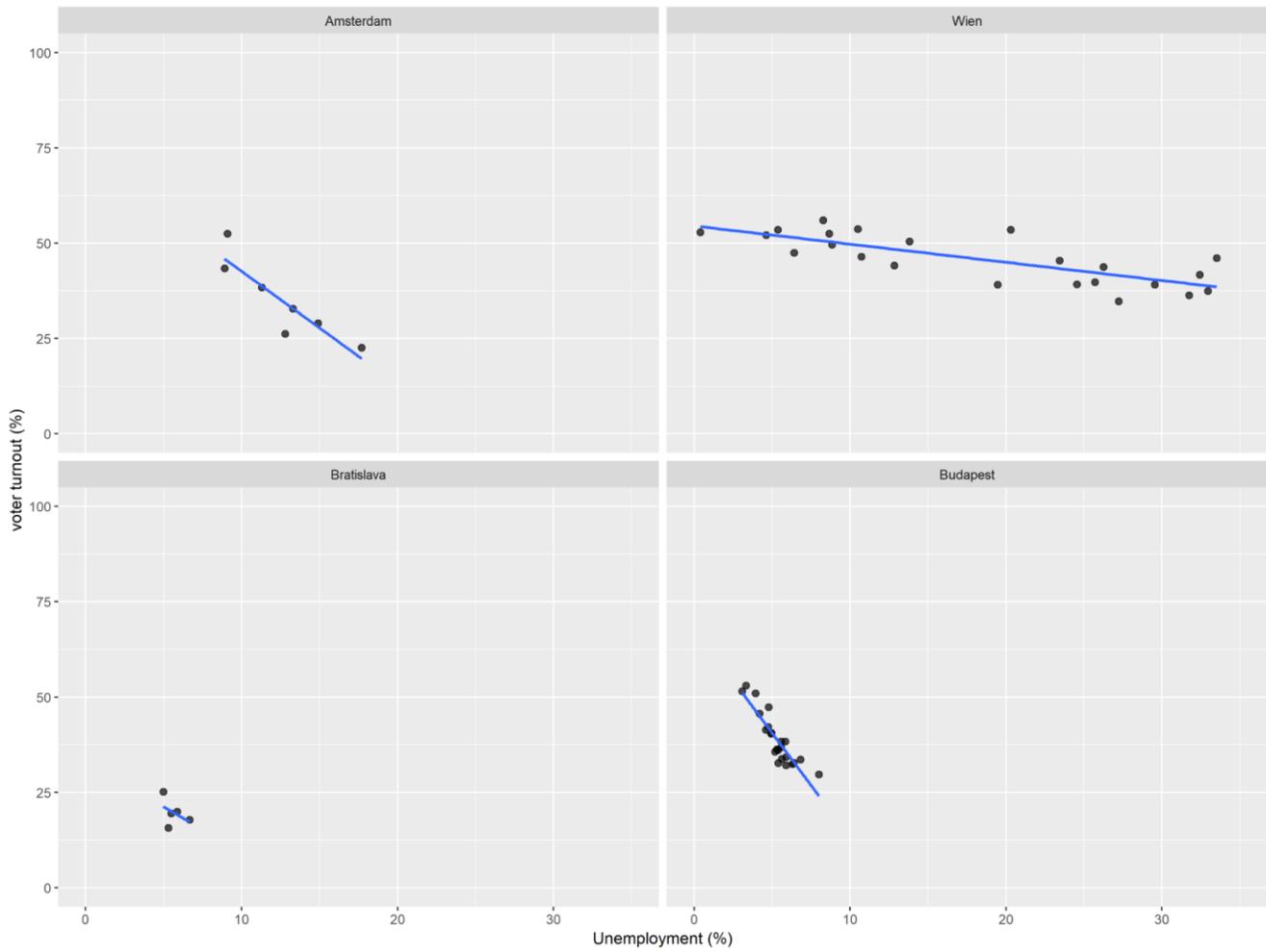
Graph 1: The influence of unemployment at district level in German cities

Source: Authors' own representation based on data supplied by the statistical offices of the cities concerned



Graph 2: The influence of unemployment at district level in European capitals

Source: Authors' representation based on data supplied by the statistical offices of the cities concerned



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