



Is there an intrinsic duty to vote? Comparative evidence from East and West Germans



Aram Hur

New York University, Wagner School of Public Service, 295 Lafayette Street, Third Floor, New York, NY 10012, United States

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ABSTRACT

The duty to vote is a strong predictor of turnout, but little is known of its source, leaving much ambiguity around the nature of the motivation. This article shows that a powerful pathway lies in the ethical commitment many individuals feel to their nations. When the state is seen as an extension of one's national community, this national obligation is politicized toward state affairs, including the duty to vote. Conversely, when this linkage is weak or absent, an intrinsic duty to vote is weakened. By revising a key assumption in the traditional calculus of voting, I derive a statistical model to identify a nation-based, intrinsic duty to vote. The model is tested in Germany, where different experiences with unification in the East versus West yield contrasting predictions on an intrinsic duty to vote. The findings suggest new strategies for get-out-the-vote efforts to target the nationalistic source of the duty to vote.

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1. Introduction

Turnout is “one of the most important behaviors for scholars of democratic politics to understand” (Aldrich, 1993, 246). Yet it continues to pose a paradox, since the costs almost always outweigh the direct benefits. To make sense of the millions of citizens who still show up to the polls, scholars have offered a range of explanations. Some have expanded benefits to include expressive rewards (Fiorina, 1976), considered the altruistic benefit to others in addition to oneself (Fowler, 2006), or identified institutional factors that reduce costs (Highton, 1997). A common assumption across these explanations is that turnout is the result of net positive incentives.

Yet a growing body of work on the duty to vote suggests that individuals also vote out of an intrinsic commitment not based on payoffs. Empirically, the duty to vote certainly behaves differently from incentives. For instance, during rainfall, individuals who feel a duty to vote are more likely than those who do not to still show up to vote (Knack, 1994). In surveys, standard cost and benefit variables poorly predict turnout for those who say they believe voting is a duty (Blais, 2000). The duty to vote is quite stable even when individuals move to different places with different political payoffs (Campbell, 2006). These observations are consistent with a long

line of normative and behavioral scholarship that argues that ethical obligations play a distinct role in politics (Sears and Funk, 1990; Stoker, 1992).

Little is known, however, about the source of an intrinsic duty to vote. This gap has led to much theoretical ambiguity on how to explain and subsequently model the duty to vote. As Barry (1970) points out, to say that individuals vote because they are intrinsically committed says almost nothing. To avoid this circularity in logic, scholars of political behavior have often described the duty to vote as another kind of psychic incentive and treated it as such in models of turnout (Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Citrin and Green, 1990). Under this framework, there is no conceptual difference between the duty to vote and the excitement from receiving a voter pin. Thus, a large inconsistency persists between our empirical versus theoretical understandings of one of the strongest documented predictors of turnout.

This article aims to clarify the intrinsic nature of the duty to vote by proposing and testing a systematic theory about its source. Drawing on insights about group obligations from political theory and behavioral psychology, I argue that one powerful pathway lies in the ethical commitment individuals feel to their nations. For many, the nation belongs to a special category of groups that can instill, without coercion or incentives, an intrinsic commitment to the collective welfare. When the state is seen as representing “my” national community, this obligation is politicized toward a duty to contribute to state affairs, including the duty to vote. Alternatively,

E-mail address: aram.hur@nyu.edu.

when the linkage between the state and nation is weak or broken, as is the case in many transitional democracies, an intrinsic duty to vote is diminished. This conditional identity theory simultaneously explains why we often see a positive correlation between national identification and turnout, but also why this relationship varies significantly across different democratic contexts.

I test the theory in Germany where, within a single state, the identity politics of unification yields contrasting predictions on the intrinsic duty to vote by region. A rapid and unilateral unification led by the West left perceptions of a broken nation-state linkage in the transitioning East, but kept a close linkage in the West. Curiously enough, a sizeable regional turnout gap has persisted since unification. To identify the presence (and absence) of a nation-based, intrinsic duty to vote, I derive a revision to the D-term in Riker and Ordeshook (1968)'s original calculus and test the model with data from the Germany General Social Survey (GGSS).

The findings suggest a new direction for policies aimed at increasing electoral participation. Most existing strategies, such as voter registration drives, information outreach, or targeted campaign messages, focus on providing better incentives to “pull” citizens into political engagement. This article shows that fostering national identification with the state can be a complementary “push” factor that motivates participation from within.

2. Nationalistic source of an intrinsic duty to vote

The duty to vote has been a powerful predictor of turnout since the earliest studies of voting (Campbell et al., 1960; Verba et al., 1995). Recent works using panel data and experiments suggest that this relationship is not just cheap talk, but likely causal (Campbell, 2006; Gerber et al., 2008; Blais and Achen, 2010).

When we observe a relationship between the duty to vote and turnout, however, two scenarios are possible. On one hand, the individual may truly feel an intrinsic commitment to vote, regardless of the payoffs she expects from that election. On the other hand, the individual may fulfill the duty to vote for the bundle of psychic and social rewards it entails – a boost in self-esteem, social praise, or expressive satisfaction. In the former, the duty to vote functions as a distinctly ethical obligation; in the latter, it functions as just another source of indirect benefit. Empirically, the two scenarios are difficult to distinguish since they are a matter of unobserved intent. Theoretically, while a rational explanation exists for the latter, scholars have yet to identify a convincing explanation for the former. From where does an intrinsic commitment to vote arise? This section develops a theory based on the ethical pull of special groups.

Individuals belong to various types of communities. For some groups, individuals are often socialized into membership so as to experience it as an integral and inseparable part of their identities. Family, hometown, or ethnic groups are common examples, but for different individuals and at different points in life, special communities can also include groups such as *alma maters*, professional societies, or religious groups.

Communitarian political theorists have long recognized the power of such memberships to instill an ethical commitment to the collective welfare of the group, even in the absence of coercion or incentives (Sandel, 1984; Walzer, 1990). There exists a “special concern and loyalty” that explains why it is that “for some communities we are disposed to sacrifice a minute of our time; for the members of others, our lives” (Yack, 2012, 4). This claim has been widely confirmed across empirical studies in behavioral psychology. Individuals often go out of their way to act on behalf of or more cooperatively toward their religious or other in-groups, even in experimental and other contexts where there are no material gains to be had from doing so (Bellah et al., 1986; Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

My claim is that the nation is one such special group for many modern individuals. The nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) that sees itself as a singular political collective and shares “the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage one has received in undivided form” (Renan, 1990[1882], 19). National memberships are constructed and even selectable at times (Gellner, 1983; Laitin, 1998), but for many, they are blended continuously into everyday life so as to feel “as if” natural (Verdery, 1993; Billig, 1995). For such individuals, Anderson (1983, 144) notes how the properties of intrinsic ties extend to the nation:

“...in these ‘natural ties’ one senses what one might call ‘the beauty of *gemeinschaft*.’ [...] for most ordinary people of whatever class, the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices.”

I argue that under certain conditions in democracies, ethical ties to the nation motivate an intrinsic duty to the state, including the duty to vote. When the state is seen to represent one's nation, the welfare of the state ultimately feeds back to “my” national community. Thus, citizen activities that contribute to state affairs, such as voting in federal elections, invoke an intrinsic commitment.

What happens when the perceived linkage between nation and state is weak or broken? Especially in transitional democracies, the psychological boundaries of one's nation and the political community supported by the new state may no longer align due to territorial displacement, abrupt regime change, or nationalist secessions. When citizens see the state to represent “the other” nation, federal elections should invoke little intrinsic duty to vote. In fact, for citizens who see their nation as not only different from, but directly threatened by the state in which they live, national commitments may even motivate an intrinsic duty to abstain.

That national identification might relate to higher turnout is not a new insight (Huddy and Khatib, 2007). But exactly what part of nationalism accounts for this relationship, and why, has never been fully specified. The contribution is to explicate the causal mechanism behind the observed correlations for the first time. A nationalistic theory of the duty to vote not only explains why the pattern holds robustly in most established democracies, but also why it varies or breaks down in many transitional democratic contexts. It can also predict, given the unique identity politics of a democratic state, the nature of motivations that sustains its electoral turnout.

The theory can easily be extended to electoral participation at levels above and below federal elections. The most relevant special community will depend on the scope of governance at stake in the election. For instance, in municipal elections, how strongly an individual sees the city to be significant to her identity – as “my” city – should most affect her intrinsic duty to vote. This logic does not preclude the individual from identifying strongly with other communities at the same time.

Ethical ties to the nation are not the sole pathway to an intrinsic duty to vote in federal elections, but they deserve attention as a nearly universal and particularly powerful source. The next section develops a statistical method to identify the presence and absence of this nation-based commitment.

3. Empirical strategy

Intrinsic commitments are difficult to demonstrate because they are a matter of unobserved intent (Broockman, 2013). To overcome this challenge, identification relies on two steps.

First, an important revision to Riker and Ordeshook (1968)'s original calculus of voting leads to a statistical model that captures the intrinsic duty to vote. Equation (1) shows the original calculus,

where R is the net reward of turnout, P is the probability of being the decisive voter, B is the differential benefit from one's preferred candidate winning, C is the cost of voting, and D includes to the duty to vote as well as other kinds of indirect "satisfactions":

$$R = PB - C + D \quad (1)$$

The original calculus does not distinguish between the intrinsic versus payoff-based motivations that can coexist within D . In fact, by defining the duty to vote as "the satisfaction from compliance with the ethic of voting" (28), the authors implicitly assume that individuals fulfill the duty to vote for psychic benefits. Say we make this assumption explicit, where D represents only the payoffs gained from fulfilling the duty to vote, denoted by D_p . Then R becomes a pure utility function (denoted by R_p), where D_p is an additively separable term. The individual's net motivation to vote can be written probabilistically as follows:

$$\Pr(R_p > 0) = \Pr(PB - C > 0) + \Pr(D_p > 0) \quad (2)$$

Now say D represents a purely intrinsic commitment to vote based on national identification (D_I). If the individual feels no intrinsic commitment ($D_I = 0$), then her turnout will depend solely on the R_p utility function. Alternatively, if she feels a nation-based commitment to vote ($D_I = 1$), then she should vote regardless of payoffs. In this case, R no longer represents the net expected rewards from turnout, but the strength of intrinsic commitment to vote (denoted by R_I) and is solely a function D_I . We can combine both scenarios probabilistically into a single equation as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(R_p + R_I > 0) &= \Pr(D_I = 0) \times \Pr(PB - C > 0) + \Pr(D_I = 1) \\ &= [1 - \Pr(D_I = 1)] \times \Pr(PB - C > 0) + \Pr(D_I = 1) \\ &= \Pr(PB - C > 0) - \Pr(D_I = 1) \times \Pr(PB - C > 0) + \Pr(D_I = 1) \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

Relaxing the assumption that intrinsic commitments can only be binary, I model it as a continuum of strength. Substituting with a continuous probability, we arrive at the following:

$$\Pr(R_p + R_I > 0) = \Pr(PB - C > 0) - \Pr(D_I) \times \Pr(PB - C > 0) + \Pr(D_I) \quad (4)$$

The difference between Equations (1) and (4) is the negative interaction term, $-D_I \times (PB - C)$. This term captures a unique and observable property of intrinsic commitment: when present, cost and benefit calculations of voting should matter less and their explanatory weight reduced. The original calculus did not differentiate between the possible sources of the D -term and therefore conflated payoff-based and intrinsic motivations. That is, it was underspecified. The addition of the interaction term takes seriously the possibility that an intrinsic duty to vote exists.

In the present context, R is measured by the observed strength of duty to vote, which includes both payoff-based and intrinsic intents ($R_p + R_I$). Since we cannot observe an intrinsic commitment, $\Pr(D_I)$ is proxied by the strength of national identification, its theorized source.¹ I treat $\Pr(PB - C > 0)$ as the net positive incentives to vote. Then for individual i , her duty to vote can be specified as follows based on Equation (4):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{duty to vote}_i &= \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{national})_i + \beta_2(\text{incentives})_i \\ &\quad - \beta_3(\text{national} \times \text{incentives})_i + \beta_4(\text{controls})_i + \varepsilon \end{aligned} \quad (5)$$

Of course, negative interactions can also result from ceiling effects. To ensure that an observed negative interaction is due to the theorized mechanism and not a feature of the data, the second part of the identification strategy relies on case selection. Depending on the nature of nation-state linkage, the theory predicts conditional variation in the presence of an intrinsic duty to vote. Tracing this ideally requires two cases that contrast in the nature of nation-state linkage, while holding constant as much of the electoral context as possible.

The comparison of the duty to vote among East versus West Germans after unification serves as a fitting case. The identity politics of German unification resulted in a rare setup, where a regional contrast in the perceived degree of nation-state linkage coexists under shared electoral institutions. Moreover, Germany is one of only a handful of democracies with reliable and concurrent survey data on both the duty to vote and detailed measures of national identification. The next section provides a brief historical analysis of how nation-state linkage became regionally bifurcated during the unification process and introduces the turnout context in Germany.

4. Empirical setting: Politics of unification and turnout in Germany

What is most remarkable about Germany's unification is how quickly it happened. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 after growing economic protests in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) seized the opportunity. Under the banner of economic urgency, his party won the first free Volkskammer elections in the GDR and pushed for a speedy unification under Article 23, which would preserve the Western constitution and add the Eastern territory as new Länder. On October 3rd, 1990, less than a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the GDR went from a troubled to a non-existent state.

The rapid pace of unification meant that East and West Germans entered the union with different nationalist socializations from their former states largely intact. The official rhetoric of the FRG emphasized a singular German nation, referring to East Germans as "the brothers and sisters over there" (Krisch, 1999, 37). Official documents and public speeches were imbued with language about pan-German solidarity (Gray and Wilke, 1996; xxi). Even with significant contestations over how to internalize the horrors of Nazism (Mueller, 2000), the Western understanding of the German nation was never about the exclusion or separation from the East.

In contrast, for almost half a century, East Germans were socialized into a uniquely Eastern identity, defined precisely by differentiation from the West. The GDR touted itself the better Germany, recasting Germany's cultural icons as socialist and specifically Eastern heroes. History textbooks left out events and political figures that did not fit nicely with the anti-fascist, pro-socialist reconstruction of the German nation. Each state had "[strived] to create their own version of the German nation, hence two separate nations" (Howard, 1995, 54–55).

The Western dominance in the unification process only further emphasized the identity differences between East and West Germans. The aggressive and unilateral implementation of Western institutions and social customs alienated many East Germans, who suddenly comprised only one fifth of the new state. East German party members were closely monitored by Western leadership

¹ I assume that the strength of ethical commitment to the nation increases monotonically with the strength of psychological identification with that community.

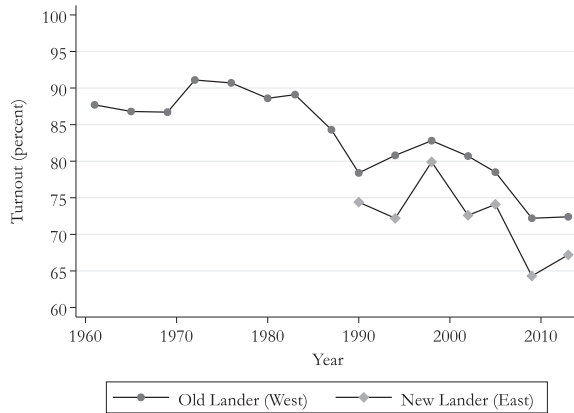


Fig. 1. Federal Election Turnout Rates by Old and New Länder.

(Yoder, 1999), cherished social traditions such as the *Jugendweihe* lost state funding, and many East Germans found themselves to be uncompetitive in the new capitalist market. The overall experience led to the widespread impression among East Germans of being “colonized” by, rather than united with, the West (Baylis, 1999, 136).

The Wall had fallen, but the “wall in the mind” had grown (Howard, 1995). Many East Germans began to feel *ostalgie* – nostalgia for the Eastern life. In fact, the GGSS shows that the percentage of East Germans who strongly identify with former East Germany actually *increased* from 43 to 69 percent between 1991 and 2000. The “psychological unification process” (Winkler et al., 1994, 121) did not reflect the territorial unification:

“On the level of social and personal relations, of customs and everyday life, integration and incorporation of the East are clearly limited. In these respects, one can still speak of two different societies, and awareness of this split seems to grow.” (Kocka, 1994, 186)

Under a single state, the perception of nation-state linkage therefore remains bifurcated. For most West Germans, the unified state is a continuation of the FRG and its nationalist vision of Germany. In contrast, many East Germans see the same state to primarily represent “the other” German nation. The claim is that the weak or absent nation-state linkage in the East blocks an important pathway to the intrinsic duty to vote.

Turnout patterns since unification appear to be consistent with this prediction. As Fig. 1 shows, East Germans have always voted less than West Germans in federal elections.² Initially lower turnout rates in the post-Communist East are unsurprising, but all that we know from political socialization predicts that the gap should narrow as democratic exposure builds (Greenstein, 1965; Langton and Jennings, 1968). Yet for over a quarter century, the turnout gap has remained quite stable at about 6 percentage points.

During this time, a regional gap in the duty to vote has also remained steady. In years 1998 and 2008, the GGSS asked respondents how strongly they agreed with the statement that “in a democracy, every citizen has the duty to vote in elections.” In 1998, 71 percent of West Germans agreed, but only 54 percent of East

Table 1
Individual-level predictions of the duty to vote in Germany.

Duty to vote	All	West	East
National identification coefficient	$\beta_1 \text{ all} > 0$	$\beta_1 \text{ west} > \beta_1 \text{ all} > 0$	$\beta_1 \text{ east} \leq 0$
Interaction coefficient	$\beta_3 \text{ all} < 0$	$\beta_3 \text{ west} < \beta_3 \text{ all} < 0$	$\beta_3 \text{ east} \geq 0$

Germans did – a 17-point gap. A decade later in 2008, the duty to vote gap still remains at 20 percentage points. Appendix 1 shows that the duty to vote predicts turnout to a similar extent in both the East and West, and more powerfully so than factors highlighted by popular accounts based economic evaluations or democratic trust (Rattinger and Kramer, 1998; Kleinhenz, 1998; Becker, 2004). A duty to vote deficit exists in the East, one that accounts for a large part of the persistent turnout gap.

To what extent is the lower duty to vote in the East driven by a weaker intrinsic commitment based on national identity? If the theory holds, we should observe contrasting relationships between national identification and the duty to vote in the West versus East. Table 1 shows the individual-level hypotheses based on Equation (5). In the pooled sample, since West Germans comprise the majority, β_1 – the coefficient of national identification – should be weakly positive. Importantly, if national identification functions through an intrinsic commitment, then β_3 should be a negative interaction term. When subset by region, the relationships should sharpen, but in opposite directions. The West sample should have larger and more precisely estimated coefficients in the same signs as the pooled sample. In contrast, in the East, both coefficients of interest should be close to zero. In fact, if enough East Germans see the unified state as not only different from, but directly opposed to the welfare of “my” nation, then β_1 may even be negative.

5. Data and findings

The GGSS periodically includes an identification battery that measures strength of identification with different communities, including the nation. The only year in which the survey included both the identification battery and duty to vote question was 2008.

The specification model, based on Equation (5), tests whether stronger national identification motivates an intrinsic duty to vote. The dependent variable is the strength of *duty to vote*, for which I make no *a priori* assumption about its nature. The independent variable is strength of *national identification* with “Germany as a whole and its population,” as understood by the respondent. Among a variety of payoff-based motivations for voting, I consider one that is prominent in the literature on post-Communist participation: satisfaction with *government performance*. The logic is that those who are more satisfied expect greater material, reciprocal, or expressive payoffs from voting.³ Additionally, I control for well-known attitudinal and demographic correlates of turnout: *political interest*, *partisan identification*, *education*, *income*, *age* and *age-squared* to capture the non-linear effect of aging on the ability to vote. *Female* and frequency of *church attendance* are included as significant predictors of the duty to vote (Blais, 2000). Table 2 shows ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with standard errors clustered by Land. Alternative functional forms, including logistic and stereotype regressions, are shown in Appendix 2 and produce the same substantive results.

In Model (1) with both West and East Germans, on average,

² While “East Germans” ideally refers to individuals who resided in former East Germany before unification, in aggregate data, I use the term interchangeably with “citizens currently living in the East.” Official turnout rates are from the Federal Returning Officer and exclude data from Berlin, which was divided between the former states.

³ The opposite is also possible: those who are less satisfied might feel greater motivation to vote to change the system and increase their future payoffs. However, the results support the prediction in the text.

Table 2
National identification and the duty to vote in unified Germany.

Duty to vote	All	West		East	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
National identification	0.12*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.19*** (0.04)	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.07)
Government performance	0.23*** (0.07)	0.24*** (0.08)	0.22*** (0.08)	0.27 (0.19)	0.29 (0.19)
National x performance	−0.09 (0.10)	−0.17* (0.09)	−0.14 (0.11)	0.05 (0.30)	0.06 (0.26)
Political interest	0.22*** (0.03)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.28** (0.08)	0.28*** (0.06)
Partisan identification					
Other	0.09**	0.06*	0.05	0.13*	0.14
PDS	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.10**	0.12***
SPD	0.15***	0.12***	0.11***	0.16*	0.15***
CDU	0.09***	0.05**	0.05**	0.15***	0.16***
Greens	0.10***	0.07*	0.07**	0.18	0.20**
Education	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.17* (0.06)	0.16*** (0.06)
Church attendance	0.15*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.14** (0.07)	0.12* (0.07)
Age	0.18 (0.12)	0.28 (0.22)	0.25* (0.14)	−0.03 (0.25)	−0.01 (0.23)
Age-squared	−0.09 (0.15)	−0.16 (0.22)	−0.12 (0.17)	0.19 (0.34)	0.18 (0.27)
Female	0.03* (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Income	0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.009 (0.03)	0.15 (0.09)	0.17** (0.06)
Constant	0.30*** (0.04)	0.34*** (0.04)	0.36*** (0.04)	0.20** (0.07)	0.18*** (0.06)
Clustered Standard Errors	√	√		√	
Land Fixed Effects			√		√
R-squared	0.13	0.11	0.11	0.16	0.16
N	2845	1907	1907	938	938

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10. OLS regressions with all variables rescaled 0–1.

stronger national identification is associated with a greater duty to vote. The negative interaction indicates the presence of an intrinsic commitment: as national identification strengthens, payoff considerations matter less. Separating by region reveals a stark contrast in the presence of this nation-based intrinsic duty to vote. For West Germans only in Model (2), the national identification coefficient is almost twice as large as it is in Model (1). Importantly, the negative interaction term is larger and more precisely estimated.⁴ For a West German, stronger national identification reduces the explanatory weight of satisfaction with government performance by two-thirds.⁵ In contrast, for East Germans only in Model (4), the national identification coefficient is essentially zero and no detectable interaction emerges with satisfaction with government performance.⁶ These patterns are consistent with the prediction that for many Easterners, a weak or absent linkage between nation and state blocks an important pathway to an intrinsic duty to vote.

Fig. 2 shows the key predictions from Models (2) and (4). For West Germans, stronger national identification takes the predicted duty to vote from 0.68 to almost 0.85 on a 0 to 1 scale. Also, the

⁴ The substantive import of an interaction term is best assessed visually, as in Fig. 2, and not by the statistical significance of the coefficient alone (Brambor et al., 2006).

⁵ The negative interaction is not a ceiling effect. Appendix 2 shows that the negative sign remains unchanged on the logistic scale, which eliminates floor and ceiling effects.

⁶ The first column of Appendix 3 shows that the East-West difference in the national identification coefficient is statistically significant (−0.22, p-value < 0.001).

unique implication of an intrinsic commitment is shown in the bottom left: as national identification strengthens, the marginal effect of satisfaction with government performance on the duty to vote decreases from about 0.25 to zero. In contrast, for East Germans, both relationships are essentially null, indicating a near absence of a nation-based, intrinsic duty to vote.

The contrasting results are not due to differences in the distribution or level of the national identification variable, which are statistically indistinguishable between regions. Nor are the results specific to the particular incentive considered; Appendix 3 shows that the key relationships remain substantively unchanged with different incentive measures. Land fixed effects in Models (3) and (5) in Table 2, which absorb all unobserved Land characteristics that may confound the main relationship, barely change the estimates. In light of these checks, a stunted intrinsic duty to vote due to weak or absent nation-state linkages in the East emerges as a parsimonious explanation.

As a further check, I leverage part of the identification battery that asks about attachment to the old FRG and former GDR separately for West and East Germans. Neither national community exists anymore, but if the main results are driven by the proposed theory, then these former national ties should elicit patterns similar to those in Table 2. For West Germans, national commitments to the old FRG should still motivate the duty to vote under the unified state that Kocka (1994, 188) describes as “an enlarged version of the old Federal Republic.” In contrast, the exclusivity of the former GDR nation was nullified by unification. Identification with the former GDR should therefore provide no intrinsic commitment to vote under the unified state. In fact, for East Germans who see the unified state as the reason for the erosion of the East German nation, greater national identification may even reduce the intrinsic duty to vote.

Table 3 shows that using identification with the former national communities produces parallel results to Table 2. For West Germans, national identification with the old FRG is associated with an 8 percent higher duty to vote, while for East Germans, the relationship is actually negative. The interactions with satisfaction with government performance are unsurprisingly noisier, given that the models use identification with former national communities. But in each region, they are in theoretically predicted directions.⁷ The use of former national communities, with historically contrasting relationships to the unified state, confirms that the regional gap in the duty to vote in contemporary Germany owes largely to the lingering nationalist socializations of the past.

6. Alternative explanations

To what extent are the results an artifact of Communism instead? Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011) distinguish between two types of “Communist shadow.” The first is psychological, and refers to how Communist socialization – the experience of living through Communism – alters how individuals see politics. The second is structural, and refers to the distinct sociodemographic landscape left behind by Communism.

The proposed theory is not incompatible with, and in fact supported by, the first kind of Communist effect. Communism – its ideology, values, and social practices – served as the basis for legitimizing a distinctly East German national identity, separate from the West. Even after unification, its collective memory helped

⁷ The sign reversal on the interaction term in the East is theoretically consistent. In this case, since national identification relates to a weaker intrinsic duty to vote, as national identification strengthens, the payoff-based motivation should increase in explanatory weight – a positive interaction term.

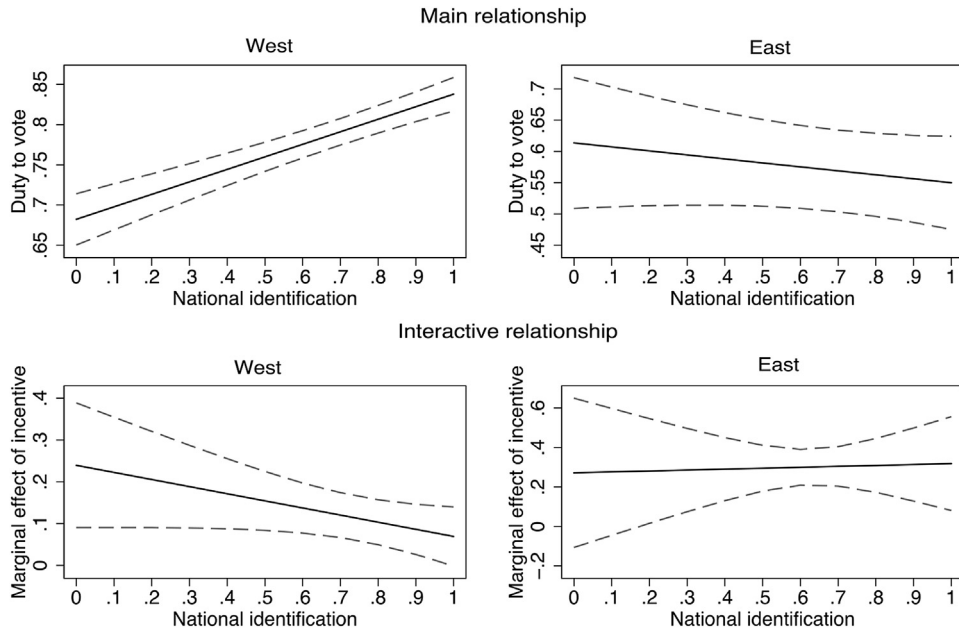


Fig. 2. A Nation-based Intrinsic Duty to Vote among East versus West Germans. Marginal predictions calculated using actual values of the covariates in the model, not their means. Dotted lines mark 95% confidence intervals.

Table 3
Identification with former national communities and the duty to vote.

Duty to vote	Former West Germany			Former East Germany		
National identification	0.08* (0.04)	0.08 (0.05)	0.08** (0.04)	-0.10* (0.06)	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.10* (0.05)
Government performance	0.14** (0.07)	0.14 (0.11)	0.14** (0.07)	0.21* (0.12)	0.21** (0.08)	0.22* (0.12)
National x performance	-0.005 (0.10)	-0.005 (0.16)	-0.003 (0.10)	0.12 (0.18)	0.12 (0.13)	0.15 (0.18)
Constant	0.41*** (0.04)	0.41*** (0.05)	0.42*** (0.04)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.19* (0.09)	0.18*** (0.06)
Controls	√	√	√	√	√	√
Clustered standard errors		√			√	
Land fixed effects			√			√
R-squared	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.16	0.16	0.16
N	1793	1793	1793	929	929	929

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10. OLS regressions with variables rescaled 0–1. Same set of controls as Table 2.

sustain widespread perceptions of national difference. This account highlights the role of political culture in democratic development, but departs in an important way from theories of cultural determinism. In the current theoretical framework, political culture matters to the extent that it helps or hinders nationalist socialization vis-à-vis the state, rather than serve as a causal force of its own. The implication from the findings is not that Communist culture itself depresses the duty to vote, but rather that, when positioned to fuel nationalist socialization against a state, it could pose similar democratic impediments elsewhere.

In contrast, the second kind of Communist shadow – its structural aftermath – poses an inferential challenge to the findings. Communist rule in the East resulted in vast differences from the West in the distribution of socioeconomic variables such as religiosity, education, and income. Since neither the strength of national identification nor the duty to vote is randomly assigned, it is possible that the different regional compositions confound the results.

To test for this possibility, I use propensity score weighting to

isolate the effect of being from the East on the duty to vote, conditional on the sociodemographic variables that differ significantly by region (Imbens, 2000). Weights were constructed by designating selection to the East as the “treatment,” generating propensity scores based on church attendance, income, education, and age, then weighting observations by their inverse probability.⁸

If the main results are reducible to the structural imprints of Communism, then the weighted estimates should look very different from those in Table 2. On the other hand, if the causal lever is indeed differentially politicized identities, then the estimates should remain mostly unchanged. The propensity-weighted results in Table 4 support the latter. Even after accounting for the socioeconomic differences between regions, national identification is

⁸ To eliminate outsized effects from extreme weights, I standardized the weights to sum up to the N of the sample so that the weight is 1 for each subject when unweighted. Then, weights larger than three times the median were replaced with that exact value (=2.59).

Table 4

Assessing the structural effects of Communism: Propensity score weighted models of the duty to vote.

Duty to vote	West	East
National identification	0.19*** (0.03)	-0.09 (0.11)
Government performance	0.21** (0.08)	-0.12 (0.22)
National x performance	-0.14 (0.10)	0.56 (0.34)
Constant	0.34*** (0.04)	0.28** (0.10)
Controls	✓	✓
Clustered standard errors	✓	✓
R-squared	0.11	0.17
N	1907	938

***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.10. OLS regressions with variables rescaled 0–1. Same set of controls as Table 2.

still associated with a 19 percent higher duty to vote in the West, while its effect is negligible in the East. In fact, the size of the coefficients is nearly identical to the unweighted estimates in Table 2. Appendix 4 shows that matching analysis, where optimal East-West pairs were selected to match on the key socioeconomic characteristics, also points in the same direction.

Arguably the most severe structural gap after Communism was the level of economic development by region, which did not speedily narrow as expected after unification. In this context, an alternative explanation for the findings could be differing expectations of long-term economic payoffs, not ethical ties to the nation. Since the Western Länder have always been better off, most West Germans may see commitment to the welfare of the unified state – including voting in federal elections – to be in “my” national interest, while most East Germans do not. If this were the case, then when we compare only Länder that have been similarly poor in the East and West – where the difference in economic incentives is diminished – the regional contrast in the effect of national identification should disappear. However, Appendix 5 shows just the opposite; in fact, the regional contrast holds up consistently through all economic strata. These results are more consistent with the presence of an identity-based, intrinsic commitment.

The German case demonstrates how differing politicizations of national identity can lead to contrasting levels of intrinsic duty to vote, even within a single state. Participation in federal elections is ethically and nationally charged in the West, but more than a quarter century after unification, still carries little such significance for many in the East. At the fall of the Berlin Wall, Willy Brandt famously remarked: “Now what belongs together will grow together.” As far as electoral participation is concerned, it appears that Brandt took too much for granted. In order to grow together, we must first belong together.

7. Conclusion

Among the strong predictors of turnout, the duty to vote has received surprisingly little theoretical attention. Like most intrinsic motivations, exactly how the duty to vote works and why individuals feel it is difficult to explain. Thus, as rational approaches to turnout became dominant, the duty to vote was often mischaracterized as another source of psychic benefit and modeled as such, despite a long line of normative scholarship that suggested otherwise.

The aim of this article was to unpack the causal black box of the duty to vote by developing and testing a systematic theory about its

source. I argued that the ethical pull of the nation motivates an obligation toward state affairs, including voting in federal elections, when the identities of one’s nation and state are closely linked. The identity politics of Germany’s unification provided a rare opportunity to demonstrate when this nation-based pathway is open, but also when it breaks down within the same electoral context.

The findings from Germany help shed a different light on electoral patterns elsewhere, especially in other transitional democracies. The common lag in levels of democratic participation in post-Communist areas has often been portrayed as the result of “disadvantaged and powerless” citizens (Heine, 2013). Instead, this study suggests paying attention to the identity schisms that often accompany post-Communist transitions into democracy. Particularly for democracies borne out of abrupt regime change or nationalist secessions, such as Ukraine or Taiwan, weak nation-state linkages similar to that experienced by many East Germans persist for substantial portions of the citizenry. Brubaker (1999) hypothesized that in such cases with “counter-state nationalisms,” a sense of political commitment to the state is bound to suffer. A cross-national, empirical assessment of this claim is a natural next step in expanding our understanding of how electoral participation develops. The case of Germany provides strong internal validity for a theoretical framework to guide such future extensions.

The implications of this study also extend to the political assimilation of new citizens in established democracies. An identity-based account of the duty to vote challenges a longstanding assumption in political socialization theory, namely that more time and experience should eventually lead to greater participation rates among newcomers. But as the persistent turnout gap in Germany and the stunted turnout rates of Asian Americans and other immigrant groups in Western Europe suggest (Wong et al., 2011; Just and Anderson, 2012), catching up is often not a linear process. Increasing rates of global migration mean that newcomers often constitute individuals whose national identities that do not naturally align with that of their new state. This article suggests that if left unaddressed, such weak or absent identity linkages to the state have tangible democratic costs.

How, then, can an intrinsic duty to vote be fostered? In conventional approaches to turnout, group identity usually factors as a way to amplify political payoffs. For instance, stronger group identification leads to greater altruistic benefits, clearer political returns, or higher relative benefit from voting for one candidate over another (Miller et al., 1981; Fowler, 2006). Thus, the bulk of get-out-the-vote efforts use identity instrumentally, as a way to target the political incentives of turnout.

In addition, this article shows that identity also exerts a direct, intrinsic effect on turnout through the duty to vote. Especially for turnout in federal elections, national identification and how it is politicized vis-à-vis the state is an important driver. Get-out-the-vote efforts would therefore benefit from strategies that strengthen or realign national identification for its own sake, especially for youth, immigrants, or marginalized nationalities. Policies such as periodic celebrations of naturalization, media campaigns on inclusive nationalism, and a civics curriculum that expands the boundaries of national community toward newcomers can be cost-effective, long-term strategies for developing an intrinsic duty to vote.

Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.11.006>.

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