

Electoral Turnout in West-European Democracies

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Abstract

This paper investigates voting participation in three countries in Western Europe - Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway - from the 1960s to the late 1990s. Results show that there is no general trend of decline in turnout. However, aggregate turnout figures show somewhat lower levels in more recent elections. Turning to the individual level, the influence of demographic and attitudinal factors is investigated. Political interest shows the strongest impact on electoral participation, generation the second largest. Education has effects in the expected direction. These results point to a “puzzle of electoral participation”: from turnout statistics one would conclude that political interest should have gone down. However, this is not true. This “puzzle” points to the fact that context has to be taken into account. This is done here by relating the judgments about political supply of political parties to turnout. Using the classical rational choice notion of alienation and indifference reveals that for example judgments about political offers are related to turnout, also when controlling for educational level. That this relationship is not just subjective but is related to what parties offer in election campaigns is demonstrated by relating programmatic polarization and differentiation to alienation and indifference. The main conclusion to be drawn from our analyses is, that many variables are related to turnout. However, even if they show to have effects consistently over time and across countries it is obvious that their explanatory power altogether is rather weak. This probably has to do with the fact that electoral participation has a low-cost, low benefit nature. Under such circumstances neither an approach concentrating on resources like the SES model nor rational choice considerations can contribute considerably to the explanation of turnout. On the other hand, these variables obviously matter considerably for turnout, given the differences between different socioeconomic groups, or between those being alienated or not. Since the strength of these effects appears to be shaped by the context of an election, it is worthwhile to investigate to which degree the effects of different variables are shaped by the specific context in a given election, be it the closeness of the race, the campaign strategies, the strategic placement of parties and the like.

Electoral turnout in West-European Democracies

1. Introduction

General elections have become less important for the citizens of modern Western democracies, and therefore the turnout figures have fallen over the past decades. This is at least what many theorists want us to believe, and what has also been concluded from several empirical studies (e.g. IDEA 1997, 5; Teixeira 1987, 1992; Wattenberg 2000).

Turnout can be considered, among other things, as an indicator of the power of a political system to mobilize its citizens. A decline in turnout therefore points to a decreased mobilizing power, and possibly also to a decreased strength of the political system. From the system's viewpoint, declining turnout is generally bad news. From the citizen's viewpoint, low turnout challenges the democratic ideal of political equality (Lijphart 1997). It is therefore not surprising that the alleged decline in electoral involvement and turnout over the past few decades has been accompanied by a great increase in scholarly attention for the description and explanation of turnout, in both the United States and Europe.

In the United States, Teixeira (1987, 1992) pointed to "the disappearing American voter", and turnout decline is also prominent in Rosenstone & Hansen's (1993) broader analysis. More recently, however, McDonald & Popkin (2001) called the presumed decline in turnout in the United States into question. They show that the apparent decline in official statistics can almost almost completely be accounted for by changes in the composition of the "voting age population"—i.e., the increased number of non-citizens in the United States who have reached the voting age, are included in the denominator but who actually have no right to vote.

There is no consensus even on the issue whether or not turnout is stable or declining. It can therefore hardly be expected that there is more agreement on the factors important for the explanation of turnout. However, the literature across both sides of the Atlantic broadly agrees about the main demographic covariates of turnout. Education is usually seen as one of the two most important demographic factors affecting the individual decision to vote or not, but its impact is modest at best. Since voting is regarded as a low-cost political activity, individual resources such as education are relatively less important for explaining turnout than for other forms of participation. The other demographic characteristic that is important for the decision to vote or not, is age. But because education and age tend to show a

negative correlation, aggregate trends in turnout might well hide substantive developments among subgroups of the electorate.

The increased scholarly attention to issues of electoral turnout notwithstanding, there have been very few studies of turnout that take a longitudinal *and* comparative perspective (one of the exceptions is Topf 1995). Even rarer are the studies which use individual level data in this combined longitudinal-comparative perspective.¹ This is partly a consequence of measurement problems. Survey data on turnout display some important weaknesses, which ironically are so visible because official, aggregate turnout data are also available.² Reported turnout tends to be higher than actual turnout for at least three reasons: selectivity of the net sample in surveys, misreporting (e.g. for reasons of social desirability), and the stimulus effect of the survey interview itself, which occurs when respondents are interviewed both before and after an election.³

Measurement error in survey research into turnout will generally lead to biased results, both in descriptive analyses and in explanatory models with turnout being the dependent variable. However, surveys do provide a unique set of demographic, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics that are indispensable for understanding the development of turnout.

In several West-European countries, programs of national election studies have by now resulted in time series for some important variables associated with electoral turnout. Because several such variables are, through their common roots in the United States National Elections Studies, also comparable across countries, it is possible to take stock of developments in turnout in a longitudinal-comparative perspective, using individual-level data. This is the central aim of the present paper.

In this paper we address the trends in turnout in parliamentary elections in three European democracies - Germany (West), The Netherlands, and Norway - over a period of more than 30 years. In the near future, we will extend the set of countries in our analysis as more data will be added to our resources. We address three questions: Has turnout declined?; What are the effects of age/generation and the level of education on turnout?; What are the effects of election-specific circumstances on turnout?

¹ Anduiza Perea (2002) and Franklin, van der Eijk & Oppenhuis (1996) provide extensive comparative analyses of survey data but miss the longitudinal dimension.

² For some countries, the official turnout data are in principle even available at the individual level so that the survey measures of turnout may be validated. For the countries analyzed in this paper, this is the case for Norway.

³ See for an analysis of the relative strengths of these three sources of bias in the Dutch national election study of 1998: van der Kolk & Aarts (2001).

2. Declining turnout?

The notion that electoral turnout has declined over the past decades is widespread, but not as substantiated as one might wish. It has been defended by, among others, Rosenstone & Hansen (1993), Miller & Shanks (1996), Teixeira (1987, 1992) and Wattenberg (2000), and it has recently been the topic of a major research project (Patterson 2002).

The prime evidence for the presumed decline in electoral turnout comes from the United States, where the official turnout figures in presidential and congressional elections show a steady decrease from 1960 to 2000. However, there are two good reasons why in this case it might be misleading to trust common knowledge.

First, we have already referred to McDonald & Popkin's (2001) analysis of the official turnout statistics in the United States, which provides strong evidence that the presumed decline in turnout since 1972 is largely an artefact of the definition of the "voting age population". The denominator in the turnout ratio is usually the "voting age population", but this includes aliens without voting rights, a group that has steadily increased over the past decades. When the denominator is redefined as the "voting-eligible population", the turnout rates show a progressively upwards correction over the years, up to almost 6% in 2000. As a result, the "downward trend" in turnout rates largely disappears. When the new figures are also split up into Southern and Non-Southern time series, and corrected for changes in the voting age, no trend is visible anymore (McDonald & Popkin 2001, 969).

Secondly, and related to the first point, the United States are an exception rather than the rule when it comes to turnout. This is because of the decentralized, voluntary registration procedures, which result in a comparatively very low registration rate in the United States and also in comparatively strong relationships between turnout and individual resources such as education (Powell 1986, 36). For almost all other democracies, it is turnout defined in relation to the number of persons on the electoral list that captures best the power of an electoral system to mobilize its voters (Blais & Dobrzynska 1998, 241). The competing definition, turnout in relation to the so-called "voting age population" (e.g. IDEA 1997) is able to accommodate large groups of non-registered citizens, but often leads to the inclusion in the electorate of large numbers of people who are not full citizens by legal requirements. Recently, the "voting age population" definition appears to have become the worldwide standard, but at the cost of a blurred measurement of turnout as the mobilizing power of a system.

In this paper, we prefer to define turnout as the percentage of the registered voters who cast a vote. Incidentally, this definition is the most sensible when using national election surveys, which are always based on samples of enfranchised voters (rather than the voting age population). The exclusion of certain social categories from the computation of turnout levels may of course cover up lamentable situations (cf.

Norris forthcoming, Chapter 3), but should in our view not affect the measurement of turnout.⁴

Whether a decline in turnout is observed, depends on at least two additional considerations: the selected time frame, and the selected type of elections. The *time frame* that is selected varies from the past decade to the past two centuries, and it is obvious that the particular selection affects any conclusions on trends. In the latest decade or two, there are signs of a global decrease in turnout (Idea 1997). But looking at the trends in Western Europe since 1945, Topf (1995) emphatically rejects his research hypothesis that electoral participation has declined. The time frame in most of this paper (with the exception of the aggregate figures that are presented first) is the 30 years between 1970-2000. This is the medium-run period for which comparable national election study data are available.

The *type of elections* to be studied is important because turnout within countries tends to show a much greater variation over types of elections than across time for a single type of election. Some elections, such as the elections for the European parliament in most EU member states, are regarded as less important than others, and show lower turnout levels. Because such elections are less central for the voters, they tend to be contaminated with elements of the more central, usually the parliamentary, national elections. This can lead to fluctuations in turnout as a result of, for example, the parliamentary electoral cycle. In this paper we focus on the parliamentary elections only.

To an outside observer, the differences between the political systems of Germany, Norway and the Netherlands are probably less impressive than the similarities. All three are wealthy developed democracies in Northwestern Europe. All three are proportional electoral systems (Germany: mixed member proportional system; the Netherlands: nation-wide proportional representation; Norway: proportional representation) with a strong national arena (even though Germany is a federal republic). All three systems are also characterised by average turnout figures. The Netherlands has had compulsory voting until 1970, and turnout figures show a sharp decline immediately after its abolishment but recover quickly to an internationally average level.

Figure 1 shows the development of turnout, defined as the number of valid votes cast as a percentage to the number of registered voters, for all parliamentary elections since 1945. Evidently, turnout in the 1990s tends to be somewhat lower than in 1970s and 1980s in all three countries, but that is about all that can be said. Recent elections in Germany and in the Netherlands even show a slight recovery from the declining trend.

⁴ Who belongs to the “demos” and who does not, is one of the age-old questions that any democracy has to deal with. Although at first sight there seems to be relatively much consensus over the answer (cf. Dahl 1989), it would be short-sighted to conclude that the question is obsolete (cf. Blais, Massicotte & Yoshinaka 2001).

--- Figure 1 about here ---

The aggregate turnout figures for parliamentary elections thus show lower levels of turnout in more recent elections, but do not point to a dramatic decrease. It does not seem warranted to conclude on the basis of these figures that there is an immediate serious problem with turnout. However, the aggregate turnout figures may hide pressures at the individual level. We therefore turn to an analysis at the individual level.

3. The puzzle of electoral participation

Expectations

The absence of a secular decrease in voter turnout in the past few decades may be the net result of a number of competing forces on the individual decision to vote or not. That such competing forces are at work, is one of the premises of the literature on modernization processes and voting (Powell 1986; Fuchs & Klingemann 1995; Topf 1995; Wattenberg 2000). We provide a brief overview of the arguments in this literature.

Fuchs & Klingemann (1995) argue that modernization processes in Western democracies result in “informed participant citizens”, who are characterized by a high sense of personal efficacy and an instrumental orientation towards politics, and who generate new demands on the political system. Problems for this system arise when the existing parties and interest groups are slow in responding to the new demands. A lack in responsiveness of political parties will become evident first in turnout figures, since many other ways for participation are open to modern citizens. Turnout is therefore expected to decrease.

Topf (1995) submits that the changing demographic composition of the electorate might account for the lack of evidence of declining turnout. As a result of the changing *age composition* of the electorate (fewer births, more elderly persons) it is expected that turnout has increased. Also, the rising level of *education* would result in higher turnout. Topf’s analyses show that in Western European countries there is indeed a persistent (positive) correlation between age and turnout, but no effect of education. Topf also points out that the idea that casting your vote is a civic duty appears to be less firm among younger voters (1995, 46). But this is not to say that younger voter do not acquire such a sense of voting as civic duty later in their lives. Topf concludes:

“Our data clearly confirm . . . that throughout Western Europe for at least the last thirty years, the youngest electors are less likely to vote than older electors. But we have found no evidence of any general trend towards an increasing difference between these groups over time” (1995, 45)

And on the basis of these findings, plus the stable trend lines in turnout, Topf predicts an increase in turnout.

While Topf’s results do not take into account the developments since 1990, and thus miss the alleged more recent decline, it is notable that his results for Western Europe are not completely in line with those for the United States. The divergence lies in the impact of the level of education on turnout. Rosenstone & Hansen (1993, 135) point to the large impact of education on turnout in the United States, and Teixeira (1992) estimates that the impact of rising education in the 1960-1988 period on turnout has been no less than 12%.⁵ The reason for this divergence may at least partly be the lower level of turnout in the United States (cf. Verba, Nie & Kim 1978, 6-8).

Verba, Schlozman & Brady (1995, 48) argue however that voting, as an act of political participation, is fundamentally different from other participatory acts in that it requires only some time, no skills or money. The effect of education on voting is not a direct effect, but runs via what they call “engagement”: political interest, political efficacy, and party identification (1995, 360). They show that once political engagement is taken into account, the independent effect of education on turnout disappears.

When these and other results from research are considered together, it appears that education, age, interest, efficacy and turnout constitute the major parts of a puzzle - the puzzle of electoral participation (cf. Brody, quoted by Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, 3).⁶ The puzzle can be phrased as follows. The bivariate relationships between these five key variables display a consistent pattern: education is negatively correlated with age, and positively with efficacy and turnout. Age correlates positively with interest and turnout, but negatively with efficacy. Finally, interest and efficacy are positively correlated with each other and with turnout. The puzzle emerges when it is realized that (1) most of the relationships are weak, or moderately strong at the best, thus leaving ample room for other influences, and (2) the bivariate relationships by themselves do not tell much about the dynamics of turnout.

We have seen that the dynamics of turnout in Germany, the Netherlands and Norway add up to a basically stable, albeit more recently slightly lower, level of

⁵ That is, turnout in United States presidential elections would have been 12% higher if education would have been the only explanatory factor that changed over time.

⁶ Adherence to political parties also belongs to the elements of the puzzle, but will be dealt with in the next section.

electoral participation over the past decades. Over the same period, there is a well-documented increase in the level of education in these countries, which would *ceteris paribus* have led to higher turnout, just as the changing age structure would have. But that did not happen. Since individual modernization theory also holds that the sense of personal efficacy has increased (Inkeles, quoted by Fuchs & Klingemann 1995, 12), the net stability of turnout must be a consequence of declining political interest - that is, if the “puzzle of electoral participation” provides a valid picture of the forces affecting turnout.⁷

Data

These expectations can be tested with survey data from the national elections study programs from each of the three countries. These programs date back to the 1950s in Germany and Norway, and to 1971 in the case of the Netherlands. Around each parliamentary election, probability samples from the enfranchised population have been interviewed, often with a core set of recurring questions, which makes it possible to compare over time, and in some instances also over countries.

We use the integrated data sets that are being constructed in the *European Voter* research project. Equivalent measurements of age, education, and turnout are available in all election studies for all three countries. For interest and efficacy, this is not the case, and the availability of data for these key concepts to a large extent determines the scope of our analyses.

For measuring political interest, we have considered two survey questions. The first is the question into subjective political interest (basic format: “Would you say that you are very, fairly, or not at all interested in politics?”, with variations in the root and in the possible answers). The second is about how often people discuss politics with others (with variations in root as well as answers). Because the “discussing politics” question is generally available in Norway and the Netherlands, but not so in Germany (more particularly: not in the 1998 study), we present trends for this question but do not use it in the multivariate analyses.

Two indicators of political efficacy are available: disagreement with the statement “Members of parliament do not care about the opinions of people like me”, and with “People like me have absolutely no influence on governmental policies”. The first puts more emphasis on external, the second more on internal efficacy.

In both Germany and Norway, these items have not been asked in all elections studies. Therefore, we cannot include all available election studies in all analyses.

⁷ Rosenstone & Hansen (1993) hold that in the United States the sense of political efficacy has gone down in the 196-1988 period; but Listhaug (1995, 267-277) does not find any general trend in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, where cross-country variation seems to outweigh longitudinal variation.

Instead, we will use for each country each time point for which the appropriate data are available, and indicate the domains of the analyses in each table and figure. In this section, we use data from the German election studies of 1972, 1976, 1994 and 1998; the Dutch election studies of 1971, 1972, 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994 and 1998; and the Norwegian election studies of 1969, 1973, 1989, 1993 and 1997. The variables of interest from these studies have been harmonized, and the studies have subsequently been pooled per country. We have not weighted the various election years, since the numbers of respondents are not very different per country over the years, and since we use the pooled data for testing relationships rather than trends.

Survey data provide information on individual attitudes and behavior of voters that cannot be obtained otherwise. However, the survey design has a number of shortcomings, some of which are evidently present in this paper. Although we do not offer a solution to these problems here, they should at least be mentioned.

Reported turnout and political interest are two key variables in turnout research. Both are associated with measurement problems in surveys. Reported turnout suffers especially from overreporting (people say they voted but in reality they did not vote), but also from stimulus effects due to pre-election interviews (people sometimes vote because of the pre-election interview about politics), and from sample selectivity (people who like politics and voting will be more willing to take part in a survey than those who don't). The latter problem, sample selectivity, can also be expected to affect the measurement of political interest: people who are not interested at all in politics, are probably less willing to spend an hour or more talking about politics. These problems are documented for United States as well as European election studies (Burden 2000, van der Kolk & Aarts 2001).

Only in the case of Norway there is an adequate solution for the measurement problem of turnout. Data on reported turnout in the Norwegian election studies are validated against the actual turnout data in election records. Therefore, in the case of Norway we use validated turnout rather than reported turnout.

We first present the simple trends in political interest and efficacy. Figures 2-4 show these trends for Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway respectively.

--- Figures 2-4 about here ---

It is obvious from Figures 2-4 that there is *no* uniform development in political interest. Subjective interest has gone down in Germany, but not in the Netherlands and Norway. Note that the “puzzle of electoral participation” led to the preliminary conclusion that political interest must have decreased. This is simply not the case in general. This means that a cornerstone of the theory on which the puzzle was built, the theory of individual modernization, is missing.

But Figures 2-4 also show that another element of the puzzle, increasing political efficacy, is indeed present as expected. In all three countries, both internal and external efficacy are nowadays at higher levels than 30 years ago (although the development of external efficacy in Norway is not very clear).

Bivariate correlations and logistic regressions

The trends in political interest thus prevent an easy solution of the puzzle of electoral participation: political interest has not decreased so that it could have offset the measured increase in education and in political efficacy. This leads us to inspect the bivariate relationships between the main elements of the puzzle. Above, we formulated clear expectations about these relationships. They are reported in Table 1, based on the pooled data sets for Germany, the Netherlands and Norway.

--- Table 1 about here ---

It appears that all expected bivariate relationships show up in each of the three countries, with one exception and with one big caveat. The exception is the relationship between age and political interest, in Germany and in the Netherlands. In Germany the relationship is slightly negative, in the Netherlands it is slightly positive, but in both countries it is very close to zero. This means that, taking all appropriate election studies together, there is no clear positive relationship between age and education in two of the three countries.

The caveat applies to all bivariate relationships with turnout. These are at the best not very impressive. The highest correlations are found with political interest, but the other correlation coefficients generally do not exceed .10. What does this mean?

The low correlations of demographic and attitudinal variables with reported turnout reflect more generally the state of affairs in turnout research. Unless a concept such as “sense of voting as civic duty” or other concepts that are very close to the vote itself are included, individual-level analyses of turnout do not yield large portions of explained variance. We have already said that the “puzzle of electoral participation” is characterized by weak relationships which leave much room for other explanations, and Table 1 shows that this is true. The problem is to find other explanations. Again, if one wants to avoid near-tautologies, it proves hard to find summary measures which add to our understanding of individual variation in turnout. In the next section we offer our suggestions.

Before doing so, we present a final, multivariate analysis of the puzzle of electoral participation so far. Table 2 reports three logistic regression analyses, one for each country, of reported turnout on the other elements of the puzzle. Note that for these

analyses, we redefined the measure of education: rather than a single crude ordinal variable, we now use two dummy variables indicating a relatively low and a relatively high education, compared with a medium level of schooling. Also, in order to bring a dynamic element into these pooled analyses, we added two measures of “generation” to the set of explanatory variables. We created a dummy variable for respondents who were born before 1935, and who therefore belong to the generation that has more or less consciously experienced World War II, and another dummy variable for respondents born after 1965, who generally got the right to vote in the early 1980s or thereafter, and thus represent the youngest generations. In the course of time, through generational replacement, the latter group has outnumbered the former group. Any linearly time-related impacts on turnout that are not captured by the other explanatory variables in the model might therefore show up in the coefficients for these two generation variables.

--- Table 2 about here ---

As one might have expected from an inspection of the correlation coefficients in Table 1, Table 2 shows that political interest is the most important variable in the analysis for explaining turnout. In Germany and Norway, the generation dummies come second, indicating that turnout is also relatively strongly dependent on changes in the electorate over time that are not captured by the elements of the puzzle discussed so far. Younger generations tend to vote less, older generations more often. In both countries, inclusion of the generation variables has consequences for the impact of age: age is now insignificant in Norway, and has the wrong sign in Germany, once the indicators of generations are included. In the Netherlands, we find a negative impact of the “Post 1965” dummy on voting, but no impact for the “Pre 1935” dummy, and here the respondent’s age continues to affect turnout in the expected direction.

The respondent’s level of education has effects on turnout in the expected directions. The same applies to the sense of political efficacy in the Netherlands and in Norway, but not in Germany - where the regression coefficients are not statistically significant. This may partly be attributed to the relatively lower number of cases in the German analysis, which has led to higher standard errors; another factor may be relatively high bivariate correlations between political interest and the two measures of efficacy in Germany (cf. Table 1). Finally, we note that the amount of explained variance, indicated by the pseudo- R^2 , is far from impressive, which underlines what we argued above about the individual-level explanation of turnout.

Reflecting on the main results of this section, we presented a “puzzle of electoral participation” based on individual modernization theory and empirical results. If this puzzle was to present a valid picture of developments in turnout, we argued, then

political interest must have gone down considerably (so that it could offset the increase in education and in political efficacy). Political interest did not go down, and we have moreover shown that with the elements of the puzzle we are able only to explain a very modest part of the individual variation in turnout, and that there are time-related factors which we still have to pinpoint more precisely.

4. The Context of Voting Participation: the Nature of Alternatives

In the previous section we have dealt with two of the three principal kinds of factors emphasized by turnout studies: sociodemographic and social psychological factors. Conventionally differentiated, the third kind of factors concerns rational choice variables (Zipp 1985, 50). In this section we turn to these variables. However, we want to interpret the respective variables in a more broader perspective than just mere considerations of individuals maximizing (expected) utility. It is often neglected that citizens do not make political decisions in a vacuum. Choices take place in a context. Previous studies of the context of political participation have shown that the (institutional) supply side of politics matters for how voters (can) engage in politics, ranging from the degree of political sophistication of a voting population (c.f. Gordon and Segura 1997) to turnout (cf. Powell 1986, Jackman and Miller 1995). It is known that the importance of choice options available to individuals matter and that turnout decreases by the absence of a realistic candidate or party choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). Converse (1971) has pointed to the fact that motivational factors are most important for political participation and that motivational factors have to be differentiated in internalized motivation and external stimulation. Thus, our topic in this section is as to which degree voting participation is influenced by the nature of alternatives presented to citizens in elections. This is a particular and specific aspect of political context (Gershtenson and Plane 2001, 1).

It makes a difference whether political parties offer alternatives or not or whether a race is close or not. Voters compare political offers and make their choice if there is a satisfactory one. This, however, is only a necessary but not sufficient condition to participate in elections. The basic assumption behind and extending the condition obviously is a spatial account which assumes in line with Anthony Downs (1957) that voting decisions are made in terms of expected utility from ones decision. With regard to participation in elections this can mean several things: (1) elections may be about so unimportant offices that voters abstain or roll-off; (2) voters may abstain because there is no favorable political offer; (3) voters may abstain because the election outcome does not really matter because there are no important differences between the alternatives, (4) voters may abstain because they assume that the result

of the race is already fixed - or (5) nothing of this is true and voters appear at the booth.

Since we are dealing with national elections of which one can assume that they are comparatively important to voters, we do not have to take care of the first point. Here, we also do not deal with the closeness of an election (4). Feld and Kirchgässner have shown that closeness increases turnout (Feld and Kirchgässner 2001). Thus, we are stuck with points 3, 4, and, consequently, point 5. Points 3 and 4 concerns the elements of the classical spatial model of abstention: indifference and alienation (Brody and Page 1973). Hinich and Munger (1997, 151) give comprehensive and parsimonious definitions of indifference and alienation and the expected consequences:

“Indifference: If voters perceive little (no) difference between alternatives, they are less likely to vote. This prediction has both cross-sectional and time series implications: Voters who perceive little distance between alternatives are less likely to voters who perceive large net candidate differentials. Similarly, any given voter is more likely to vote in an election where the perceived difference is large, compared with other elections where the same voter perceives the difference as small.

Alienation: If both (all) alternatives in the election are far from the voter's ideal point, that voter is less likely to vote. Again, the prediction is made both across voters and over time: The greater the difference between the voter's ideal point and the nearest alternative, the less likely is that voter to turn out, compared either with other voters or other elections where perceptions of the difference are smaller.”

In formal rational choice terms these definitions and hypotheses imply the following:

--- Figure 5 about here ---

This model, however, only takes into account how individuals consider utilities in a given choice situation. It is important to notice that voters are provided by a set of alternatives which they themselves do not - or at least not directly - determine. The choice situation is a context defined by parties and candidates. Jacobson and Kernell (1983) have proposed a strategic politician hypotheses which implies that the supply side of politics affect turnout quite considerably. This has to do with the strategic entry (Cox 1997) in a situation when a race is close, strategic investment in campaigning (Jacobson and Kernell 1983), and also with strategic placement. As Aldrich has emphasized, the role of strategic politicians for turnout is an important complement to those rational choice perspectives focusing narrowly on individual calculus only: “it permits the integration of the rational choice of voting or abstention

into broader theories of political behavior by tying individuals' decisions with actions of parties, groups, and candidates in campaigns” (Aldrich 1993, 274).

In the following, we will in a first step evaluate at the individual level (1) the degrees of alienation and indifference, (2) the effects on voting participation in general, (3) the effects on voting participation for subgroups with different educational level (this refers to the sources of prediction errors of the Verba-Nie SES-model [Wattier, Menifield and Tatalovich 2000], and turn in a second step briefly to the question of the relationship between political supply as provided by party manifestoes and alienation and indifference respectively.

As Thurner and Eymann (1997, 6) points out, previous empirical analyses using the spatial theory of abstention have not been applied to multiparty system settings. Here, this cannot be claimed any longer, since Thurner and Eymann provided an analysis for Germany. However, what we can claim is that it has not been tried so far to apply it in a country and time comparative perspective to multi-party systems.

Our model of alienation and indifference is straight forward. We differentiate three aspects: parties, candidates, and policies, using differentials for each of the aspects. With regard to parties and candidates, liking scales are used, standardized across countries. With regard to policies a generalized measure of policy positions is used: the left-right self- and party placement. From previous research it can be justified to regard this as a generalized measure of policy positions (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989)

Indifference is easy to define: if voters give the same values to two or more parties or candidates respectively on the like-dislike scales, or show the same distance in left-right terms to more than one party, this is defined as indifference. Alienation is not a straightforward component in the way that indifference is. “While indifference flows naturally from choice theory, alienation requires an additional, often ad hoc assumption about a threshold of minimal acceptability of the better choice...” (Aldrich 1993, 250 fn 7). Here it is defined as the situation in which *none* of the parties or candidates receive values in the upper fifth of the liking scales. With regard to left-right, it is defined in the following way: smallest distance to all parties is 2 scale points or higher for Germany and Norway, 3 scale points or higher for the Netherlands. The difference in measures between the two definitions takes care of the fact that roughly the same proportion of voters (about 90 percent) can be regarded as not policy alienated. The rationale of this consideration about alienation and indifference with regard to party and candidate variables and analogous applied to left-right can be depicted from figure 6.

--- Figure 6 about here ---

Development of Alienation and Indifference

From the results one general observation made already in the previous sections can be confirmed: general trends cannot be detected. Neither from the perceptions of voters nor from what parties offer can be made a judgment of the “end of ideology” or a party race to the center (for party programs left-right profiles see figure 11). This means that from this particular perspective there is no reason to assume a trend in turnout development. Rather, situations vary from election to election, thus election specific models (Aldrich 1993, 271f) or rather models taking into account the particular context by comparable variables over time has to be identified in order to enhance the capacity to explain turnout. This demonstrates that context and in particular parties' and candidates' strategies have to be taken into account.

Looking more closely to figure 7, development of indifference with regard to parties, candidates, and generalized policy positions show quite some fluctuation with little in common between the three aspects of indifference. It also shows that indifference seems to be somewhat higher in the 90s compared to the 80s. However, going further back to the 60s and 70s shows that the levels are not unusually high. With regard to alienation, some signs of trend can be observed with regard to parties and candidates. From the 80s on it seems to have increased. However, fluctuations in the 90s are high.

--- Figure 7 about here ---

Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout

Over time, there are relative consistent patterns with regard to party and candidate alienation and voting participation in all three countries: not alienated turn out considerably higher than alienated. Differences are highest in Germany, lowest in the Netherlands. However, effects are not constant. Depending on the elections, the difference in turnout between non-alienated and alienated ranges from about 5 to 20 percentage points with regard to party alienation in Germany, for example. Policy alienation does not show clear results over time. However, in most of the years, alienated turn out less than others (figure 8).

With regard to indifference, results are mixed. Indifference seem not to matter in the Netherlands and in Norway only with regard to party indifference. Only in Germany, party and candidate indifference show the expected results, but less convincing than alienation.

--- Figure 8 about here ---

Our results demonstrate, that effects are not always the same over time. This again emphasizes the necessity to develop general models which can deal with election specific, i.e context specific variables. However, in cumulated analysis effects show up as expected: the higher the high score of party or candidate liking, the higher the turnout; the less the low score of policy distance, the higher the turnout; and indifference leads to abstention. However, country differences of effects are striking, in particular with regard to indifference (figure 9).

--- Figure 9 about here ---

If effects of the different aspects of alienation and indifference are cumulated the results are even more clear. Those showing no alienation turn out much higher than those cumulating up to three aspects, i.e. parties, candidates and policies. The same is true for indifference. Country differences, however, remain: effects are smallest in the Netherlands and strongest in Germany with Norway in between (figure 10).

--- Figure 10 about here ---

Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout at Different Levels of Education

In order to demonstrate that alienation and indifference are not phenomena which only affect less sophisticated voters but show its impact even if controlled for demographic characteristics, effects have been evaluated for different educational groups. This also shows that the standard model of political participation, the SES model by Verba and Nie (1972) is affected by context. If the context is not conducive for participation the SES model at least fails partly (Wattier, Menifield, and Tatalovich 2000). Results show that effects of the different aspects of alienation and indifference on turnout are at work across those with primary, secondary, and higher education (table 3). There is some indication, that effects get smaller, the higher the education level. This could mean that some more of the sophisticated people than others somehow find a way out of the decision dilemma in case of alienation or indifference. However, in almost all cases where effects are significant at lower levels of education they are also at higher levels.

--- Table 3 about here ---

Alienation, Indifference, Education, and Turnout: What Matters Most?

If we test the effects of the different aspects of alienation, indifference and education on abstention in a multivariate model and look for controlled effects, the following can be said: alienation (except policy alienation in the Netherlands) shows significant effects in the expected direction even if controlled for the respective other factors. The same is not true for indifference. Only party indifference show significant effects in Germany and Norway, policy indifference in the Netherlands. It does not come as a surprise that education shows significant effects even if controlled for alienation and indifference (table 4). This confirms the observation in the last section that the more sophisticated voters are the more likely it is that they find a way out of a decision dilemma in case of alienation or indifference.

If we sum up the adjusted effects of the three aspects of alienation and indifference respectively, it turns out that the cumulated effect of aspects of alienation attributes to 14 percentage points higher abstention in Germany, 6 in the Netherlands, and 15 in Norway at the individual level. The cumulated effect of indifference is considerably lower: 9 percentage points in Germany, 3 in the Netherlands, and 4 in Norway.

--- Table 4 about here ---

Interestingly enough, this result is (again) not in line with previous research in the United States context. Zipp found that indifference has a greater impact in the presidential elections of 1968, 1972, and 1976. He found on average a 4.5 percentage point effect of alienation compared to 8 percentage points for indifference (Zipp 1985, 58). First of all, effects of alienation seem to be much stronger in the three European countries. Second, alienation effects are much stronger than indifference effects. This again demonstrates that context matters. It is not unlikely that these differences can be attributed to the differences in the party and electoral system. In a multi-party system indifference is much more likely than in a two-party setting, given the multiplicity of supplies. And it should be much easier to find a suitable choice in a situation of more differentiated supply. Thus, if voters do not find a suitable offer in such a situation, it seems to be worse than in a two-party system.

Alienation, Indifference and Political Supply

Results so far in many aspects seem to point to the fact that context, in particular what is on offer, matters quite a lot for voting participation. This section will be concluded with a very brief observation comparing rates of alienation and indifference and the character of political supply in a given election. With regard to party supply we rely on party manifesto data from the party manifestoes project. We utilized the left-right summary score provided by Klingemann, Budge, Volkens and others (2001) for each party manifesto. From this data we constructed two measures: (1) the left-right range of a party system, taking the difference of left-right party platform score of the most left and most right party in a given election, as a measure of polarization, (2) as a measure of differentiation of political supply the standard deviation of left-right party platform scores in a given election. Figure 11 demonstrates that differences between parties vary over time and the degree of programmatic competition is election specific.

--- figure 11 about here ---

Correlating these figures with the rates of policy alienation and indifference reveal the following: the percentage of policy alienated voters in a given election correlates $-.38$ with left-right range of party platforms, and $-.11$ with left-right differentiation respectively. However, these correlation are blurred by the Netherlands. Taking the Dutch elections out correlation increases to $-.81$ and $-.61$ respectively and are significant (figure 12).

--- figure 12 about here ---

This result indicates that it matters how parties place themselves in a given electoral battle. The more a party system provides alternatives as indicated by the differentiation of political profiles in party platforms, the easier it seems to be for voters to find an attractive offer and to avoid alienation.

With regard to indifference, the result show the opposite: the higher the left-right range of party platforms and the more differentiated the more voters find offers between they are indifferent. Correlation with left-right range is $.70$, with left-right differentiation $.55$. This indicates that in multi-party systems parties face the risk or the challenge to demonstrate that they are different from their competitors. But this also explains why indifference does not matter as much for turnout as do alienation: it is just more likely that offers are tied.

Conclusion

The results presented here demonstrate that many variables are related to turnout. However, even if they show to have effects consistently over time and across countries it is obvious that their explanatory power altogether is rather weak. This probably has to do with the fact that electoral participation has a low-cost, low benefit nature. Under such circumstances neither an approach concentrating on resources like the SES model nor rational choice considerations can contribute considerably to the explanation of turnout in terms of R^2 . On the other hand, these variables obviously matter considerably for turnout, given the differences between different socioeconomic groups, or between those being alienated or not. Since the strength of these effects seems to be shaped by the context of an election, it seems to be worthwhile to investigate as to which degree the effects of different variables are shaped by the specific context in a given election, be it the closeness of the race, the campaign strategies, the strategic placement of parties and the like.

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Table 1: Bivariate Correlations (Pooled Data)

A Germany (West) (1972, 1976, 1994, 1998)						
	Education	Age	Political Interest	Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	Efficacy: "People like me ..."	Reported Turnout
Education	1,000					
Age	-0,247	1,000				
Political Interest	0,092	-0,033	1,000			
Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	-0,01	-0,055	0,236	1,000		
Efficacy: "People like me ..."	0,068	-0,099	0,257	0,385	1,000	
Reported Turnout	0,062	-0,008	0,216	0,073	0,069	1,000
(n = 4,173)						
B The Netherlands (1971, 1972, 1977, 1981, 1982, 1986, 1989, 1994, 1998)						
	Education	Age	Political Interest	Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	Efficacy: "People like me ..."	Reported Turnout
Education	1,000					
Age	-0,298	1,000				
Political Interest	0,288	0,033	1,000			
Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	0,246	-0,141	0,156	1,000		
Efficacy: "People like me ..."	0,265	-0,176	0,179	0,423	1,000	
Reported Turnout	0,085	0,090	0,167	0,088	0,103	1,000
(n = 12,443)						

C Norway (1969, 1973, 1989, 1993, 1997)						
	Education	Age	Political Interest	Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	Efficacy: "People like me.."	Reported Turnout
Education	1,000					
Age	-0,250	1,000				
Political Interest	0,173	0,122	1,000			
Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	0,181	-0,105	0,099	1,000		
Efficacy: "People like me ..."	0,285	-0,201	0,167	0,249	1,000	
Reported Turnout	0,046	0,132	0,172	0,042	0,039	1,000

(n = 8,766)

Table 2 Explaining Electoral Turnout (Pooled Data)

	Germany (West)		Netherlands		Norway	
	Odds Ratio (Std Err)	z	Odds Ratio (Std Err)	z	Odds Ratio (Std Err)	z
Age	0,983* (0,007)	-2,50	1,116** (0,019)	6,46	1,007 (0,004)	1,81
Low Education	0,653* (0,118)	-2,36	0,792** (0,067)	-2,74	0,792** (0,066)	-2,79
High Education	1,821* (0,489)	2,23	1,796** (0,220)	4,78	1,224* (0,121)	2,04
Pre 1935	2,123** (0,480)	3,33	1,197 (0,135)	1,60	1,683** (0,192)	4,55
Post 1965	0,307** (0,068)	-5,34	0,783* (0,088)	-2,17	0,523** (0,053)	-6,37
Political Interest	17,032** (4,426)	10,91	1,485** (0,044)	13,40	1,973** (0,110)	12,25
Efficacy: "Politicians ..."	1,364 (0,251)	1,68	1,361** (0,100)	4,20	1,267** (0,088)	3,38
Efficacy: "People like me ..."	1,019 (0,182)	0,11	1,697** (0,130)	6,93	1,207* (0,088)	2,58
-2 Log Likelihood	-780,231		-3390,727		-3034,530	
n =	4,229		12,482		8,811	
Pseudo R ²	0,140		0,084		0,073	

Entries are odds ratios from logistic regression analyses, and their standard errors, and z-scores.

Table 3: Difference in Abstention due to Alienation and Indifference in Education Groups (Percentage Point Difference)

	Education level		
	primary	second	higher
GERMANY			
- Party, alienated - not	15 0,000	16 0,000	10 0,000
- Candidate, alienated - not	14 0,000	15 0,000	10 0,000
- Policy, alienated - not	-2 0,262	4 0,237	3 0,4516
- Party, indifferent - not	17 0,000	19 0,000	14 0,000
- Candidate, indifferent - not	11 0,000	12 0,000	5 0,006
- Policy, indifferent - not	1 0,323	-1 0,551	2 0,448
The NETHERLANDS			
- Party, alienated - not	10 0,000	7 0,000	2 0,261
- Candidate, alienated - not	9 0,000	5 0,004	6 0,005
- Policy, alienated - not	3 0,217	0 0,938	1 0,620
- Party, indifferent - not	3 0,010	0 0,923	-1 0,494
- Candidate, indifferent - not	-1 0,392	-1 0,582	-1 0,645
- Policy, indifferent - not	3 0,000	0 0,890	2 0,123
NORWAY			
- Party, alienated - not	6 0,000	8 0,000	5 0,000
- Candidate, alienated - not	4 0,011	7 0,000	5 0,000
- Policy, alienated - not	9 0,018	10 0,000	8 0,025
- Party, indifferent - not	8 0,000	8 0,000	7 0,000
- Candidate, indifferent - not	4 0,009	2 0,061	0 0,969
- Policy, indifferent - not	1 0,602	4 0,022	1 0,341

Table 4: Effects of Alienation, Indifference, and Education on Abstention Compared: Adjusted Effects from ANOVA

	GE			NE			NO		
	effect	beta	sig	effect	beta	sig	effect	beta	sig
Alienation (y=1)									
- Parties	5	,08	,000	3	,06	,000	4	,05	,000
- Candidates	7	,10	,000	2	,04	,022	4	,05	,000
- Policies (LR)	2	,02	,022	1	,01	,291	7	,05	,000
Indifference (y=1)									
- Parties	8	,09	,000	1	,02	,372	5	,05	,000
- Candidates	0	,00	,841	-1	,02	,309	-1	,01	,176
- Policies (LR)	1	,01	,347	3	,05	,000	0	,00	,568
Education (1-3 hi)									
	-5	,06	,000	-5	,08	,000	-6	,07	,000

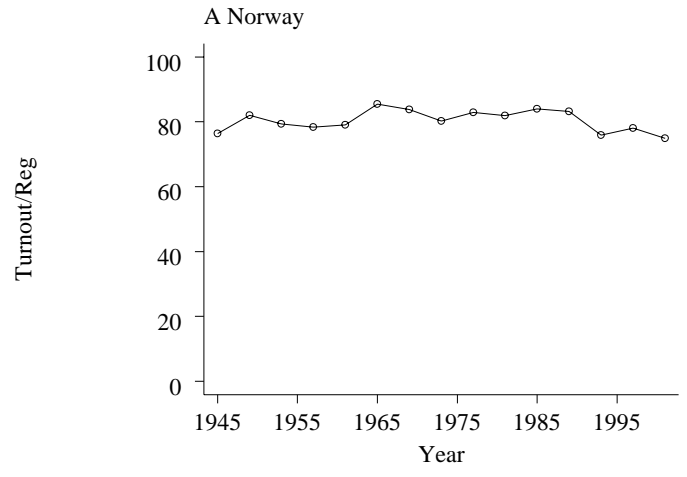
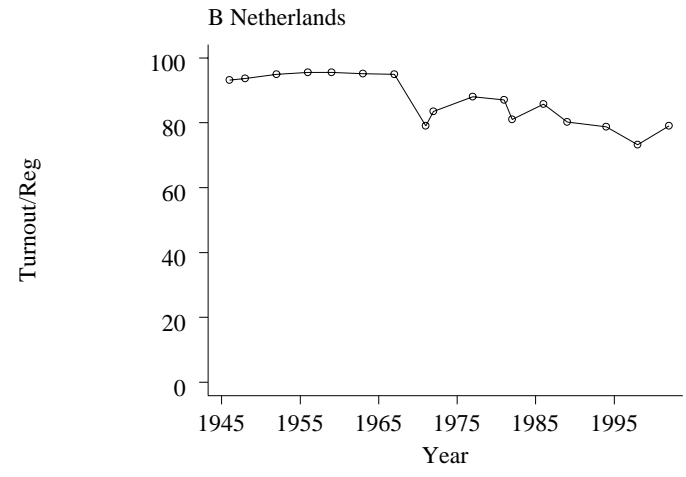
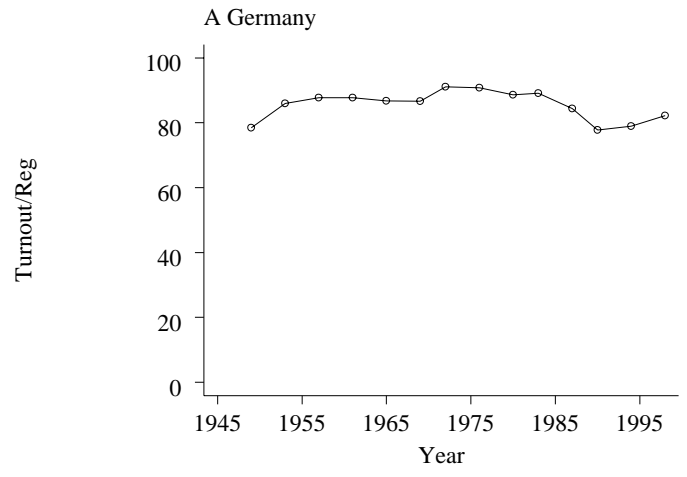


Figure 1 Turnout: Electoral Statistics

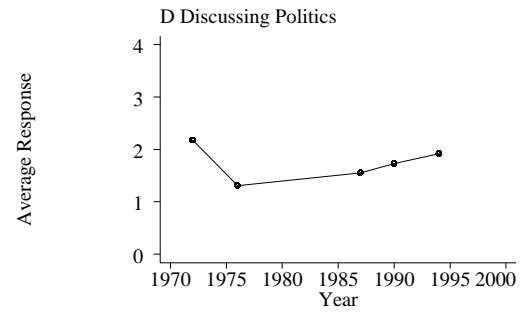
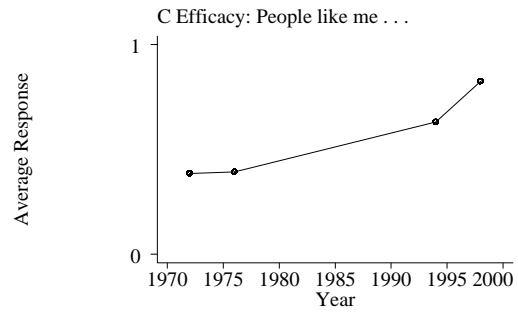
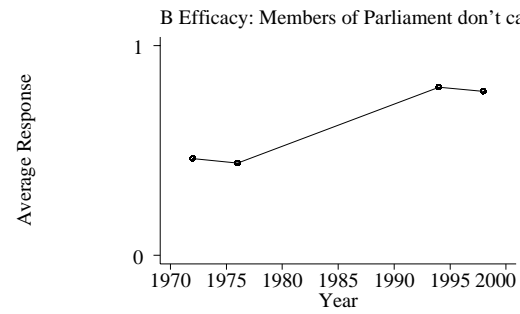
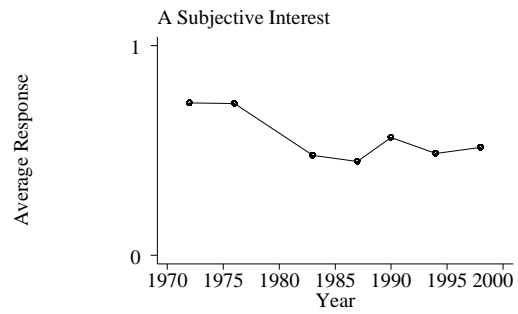


Figure 2 Trends in Interest and Efficacy: Germany (West)

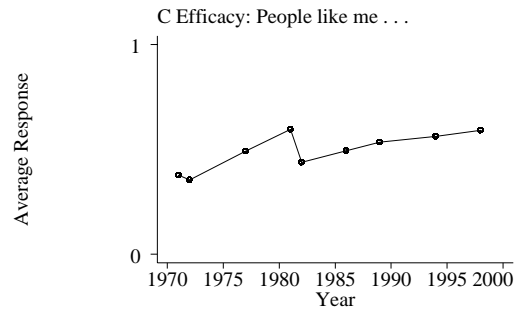
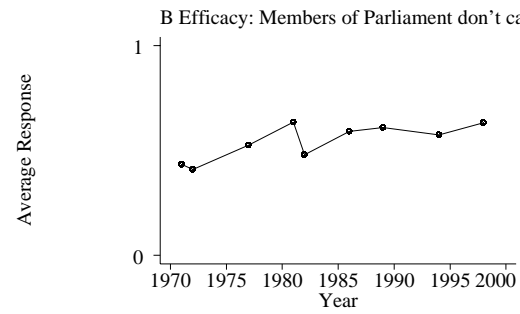
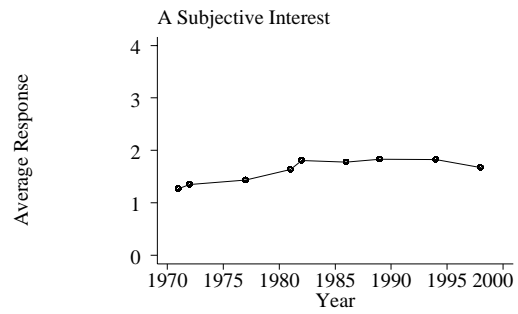


Figure 3 Trends in Interest and Efficacy: Netherlands

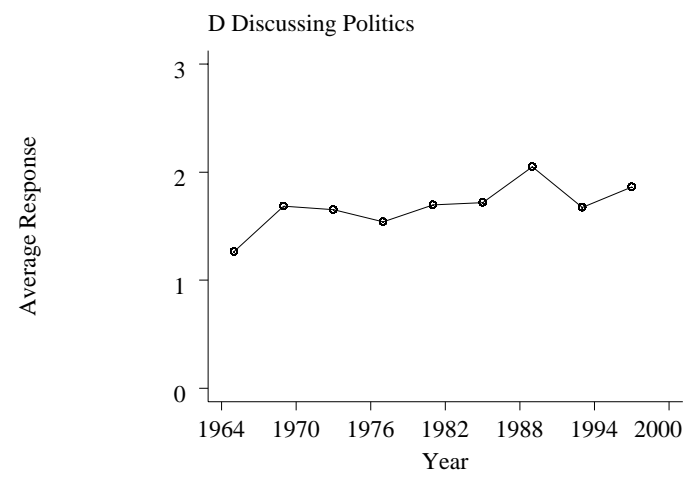
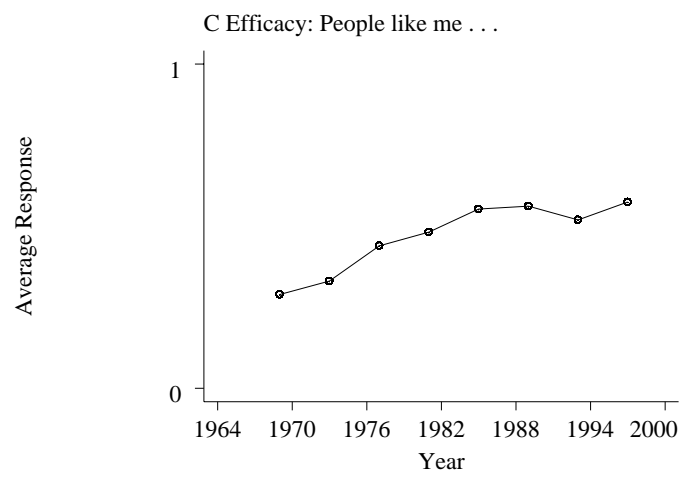
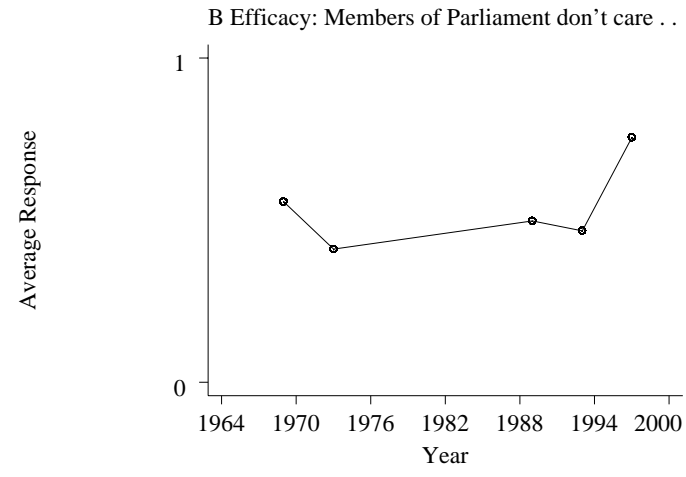
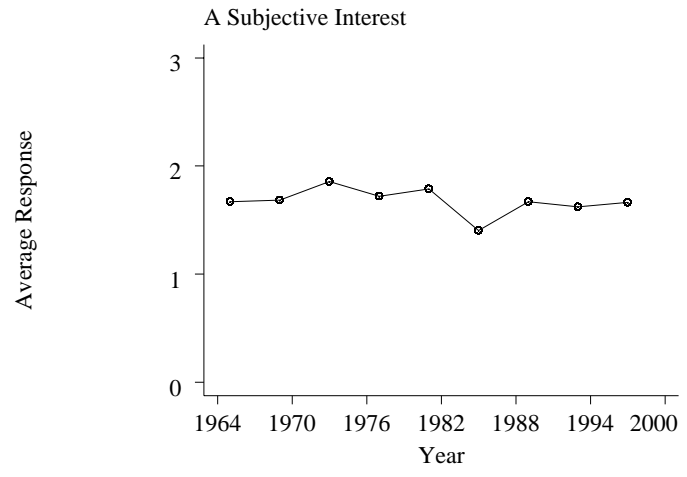


Figure 4 Trends in Interest and Efficacy: Norway

Figure 5: A Probabilistic model of vote participation

$ X_A - X_i < X_B - X_i $	Voter i is likely to vote; specifically more likely to vote for A if $ X_A - X_i < \delta$
$ X_A - X_i > \delta$ $ X_B - X_i > \delta$ where δ is the region of acceptance	Voter i is alienated and thus more likely to abstain. Probability of abstention increases with the distance to the closest position.
$ X_A - X_i \sim X_B - X_i $	Voter i is more likely to abstain, since choice is limited, outcome B as good as outcome A. Probability of abstention increases as a function of the difference to the candidate positions and reaches its maximum if it meets alienation.

Figure 6: Definition and Measurement of Alienation and Indifference

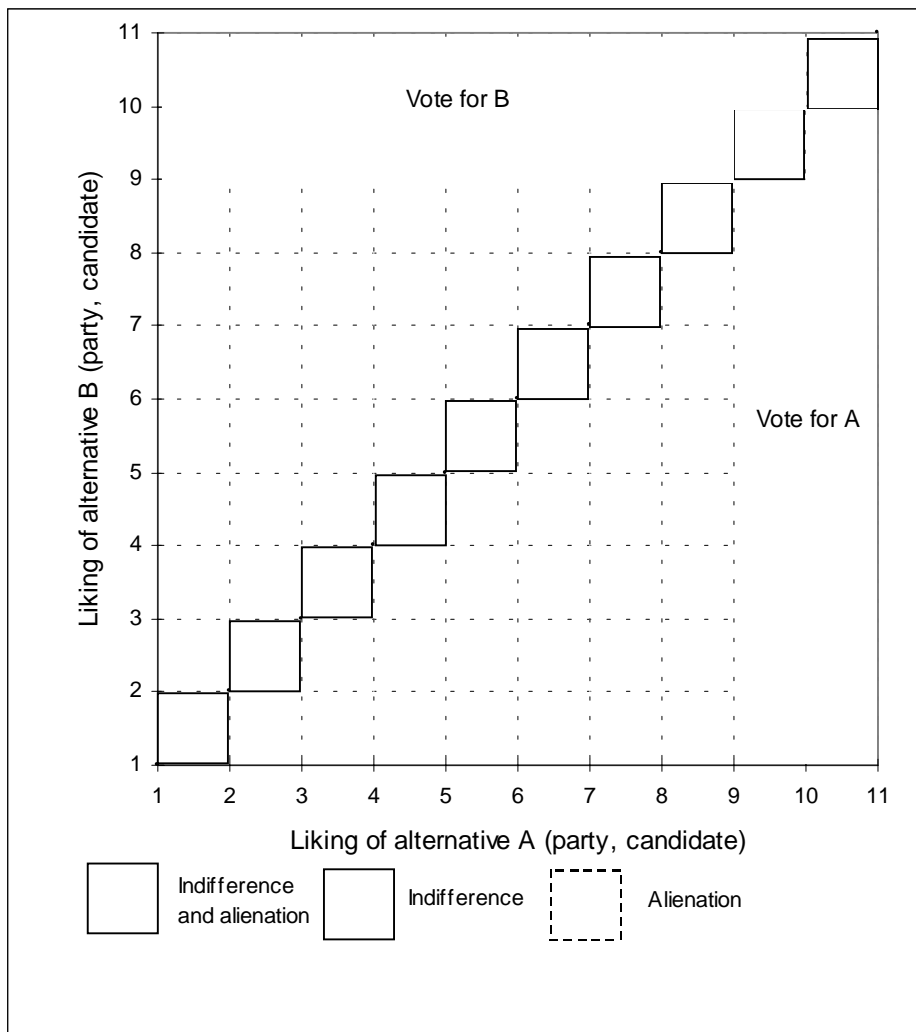


Figure 7: Development of Alienation and Indifference in Germany, The Netherlands, and Norway

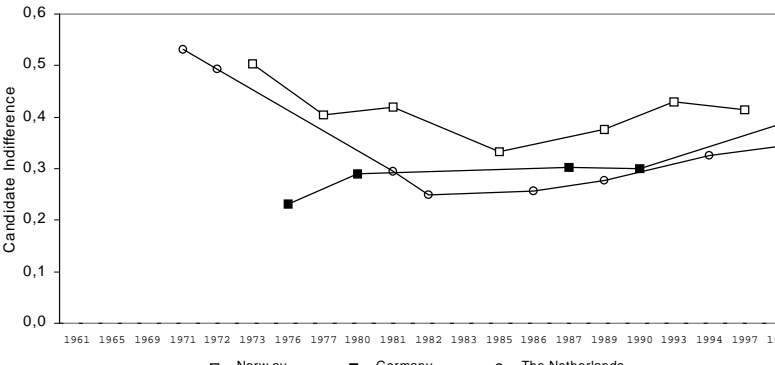
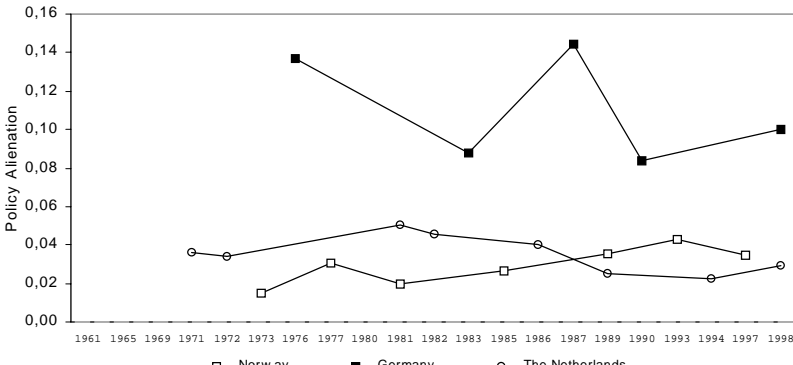
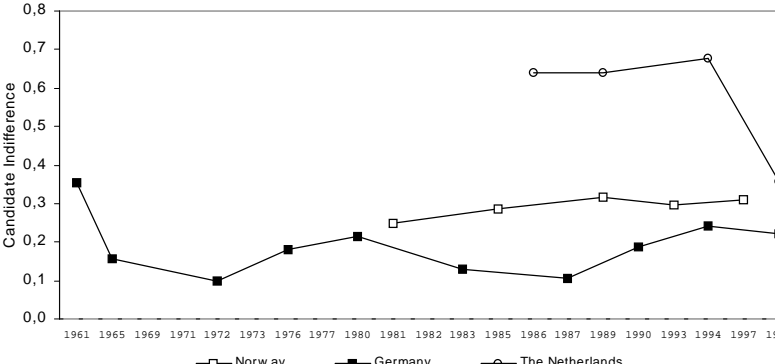
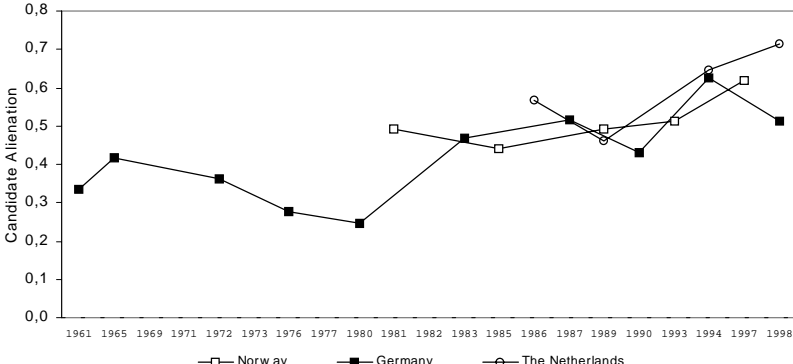
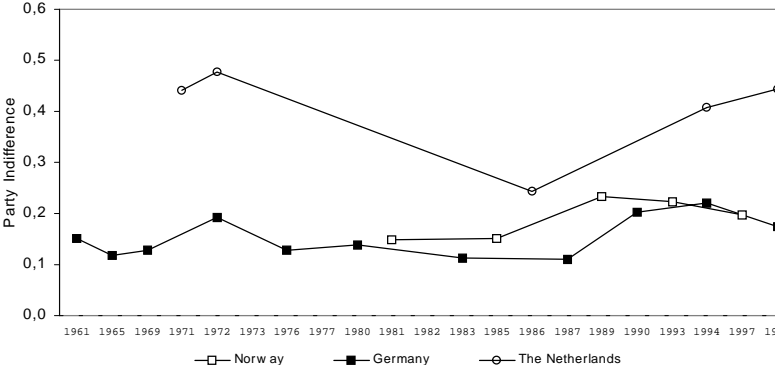
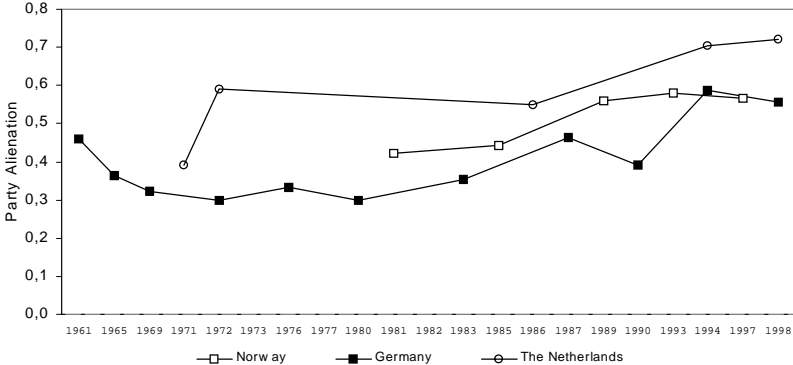
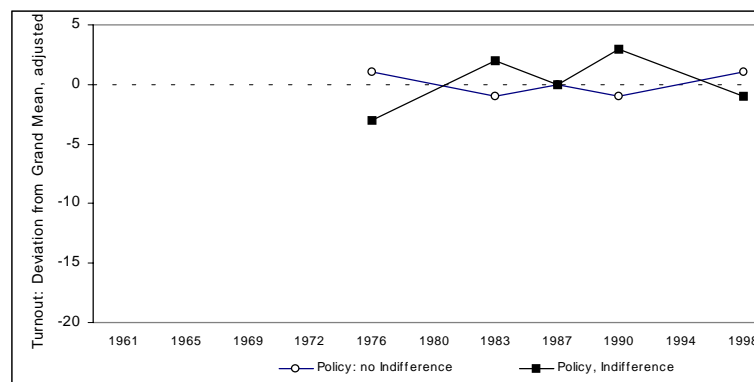
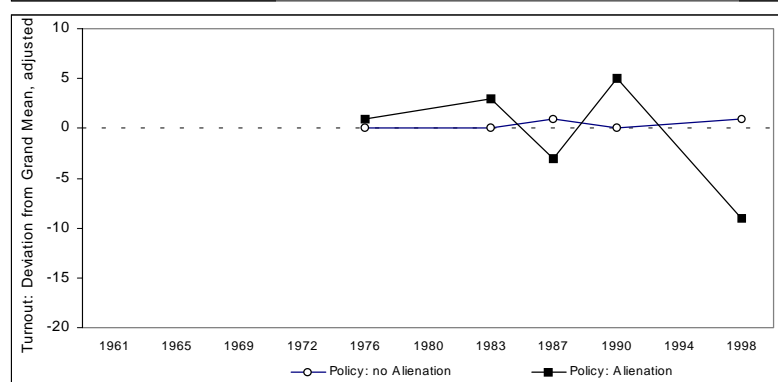
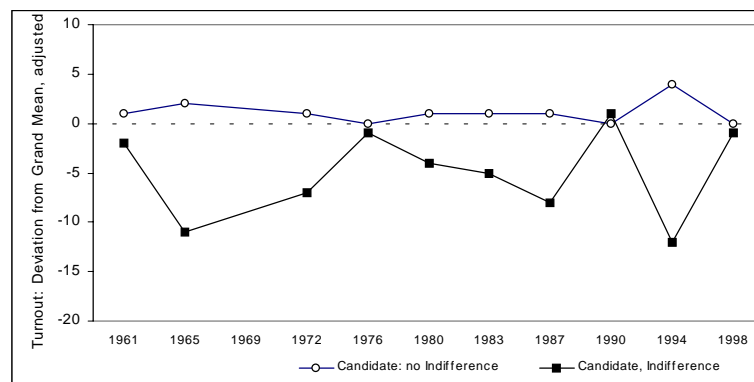
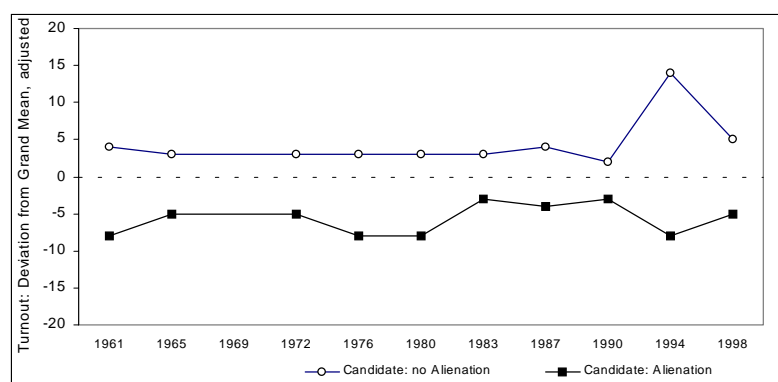
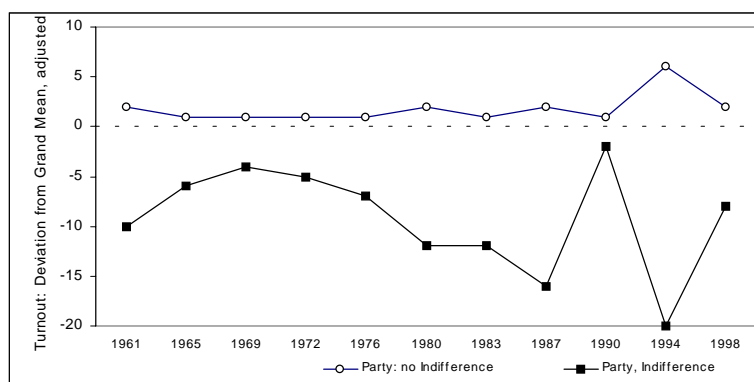
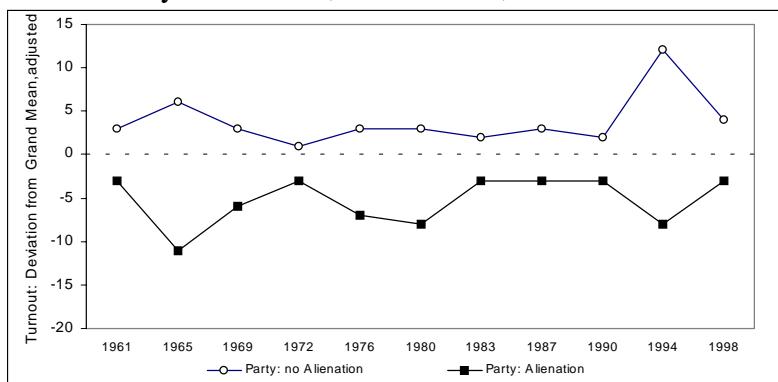
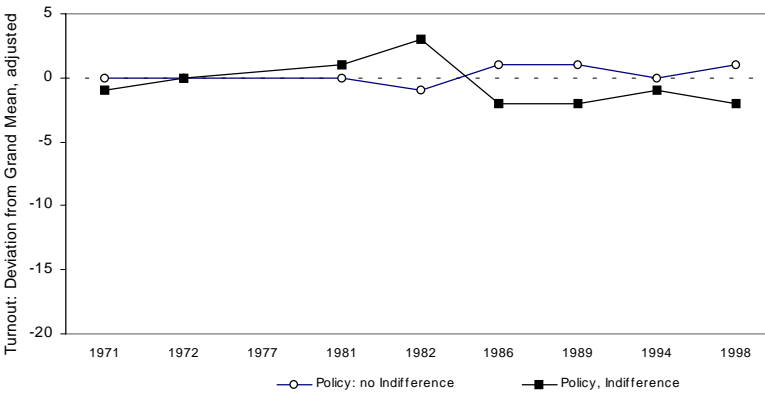
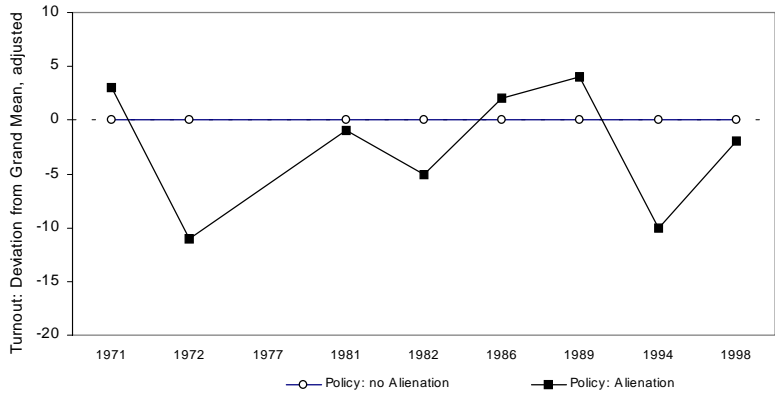
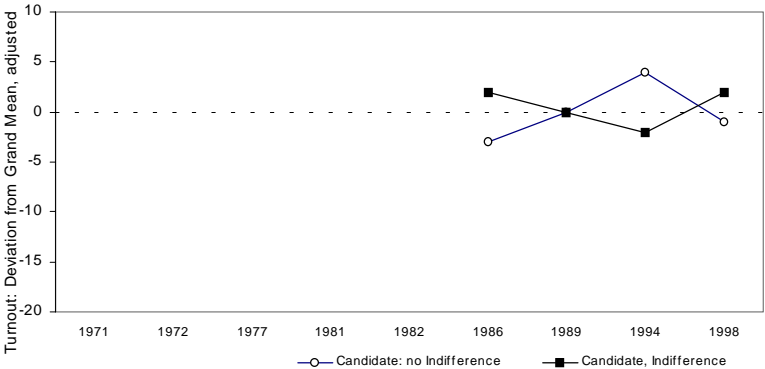
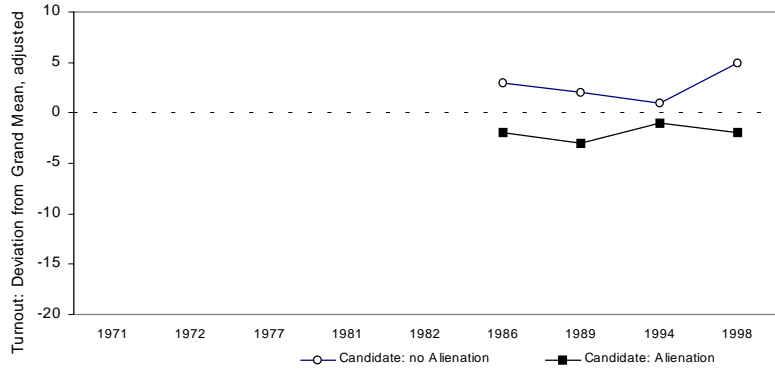
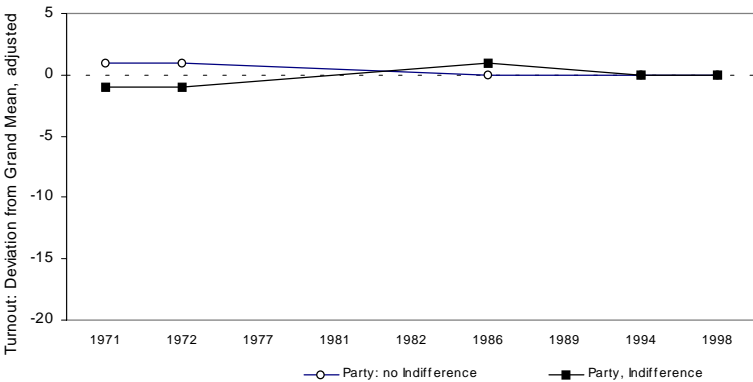
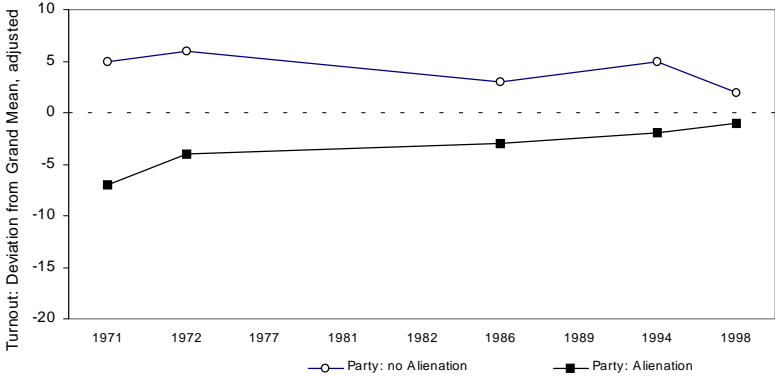


Figure 8: Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout
 8A: Germany: Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout over Time



8B: The Netherlands: Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout over Time



8C: Norway: Alienation, Indifference, and Turnout over Time

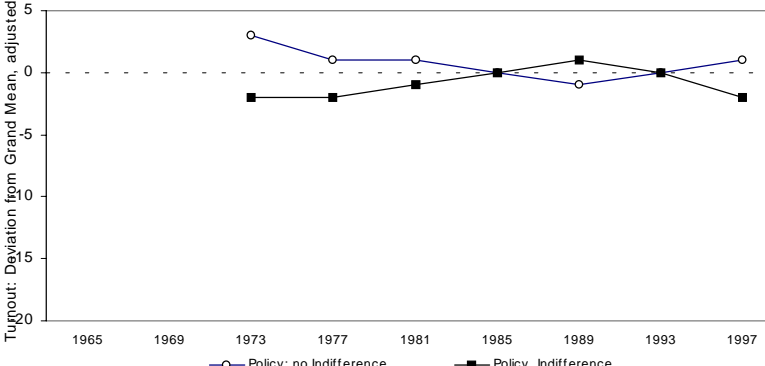
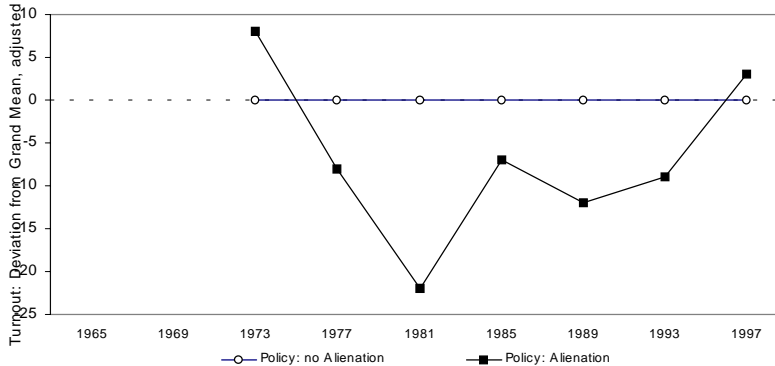
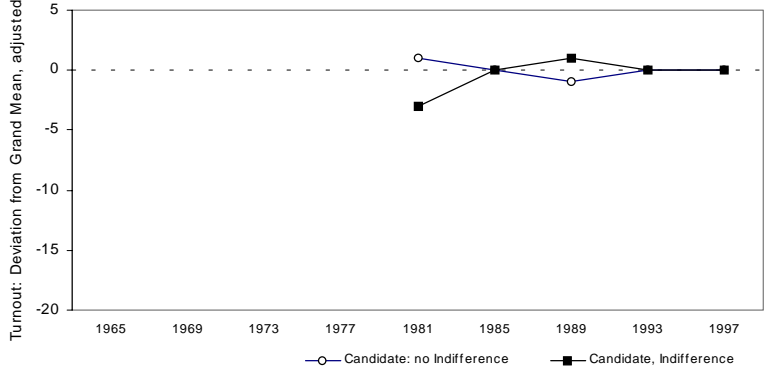
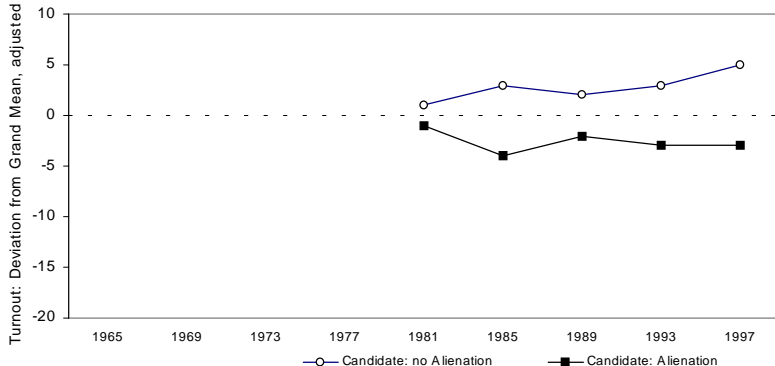
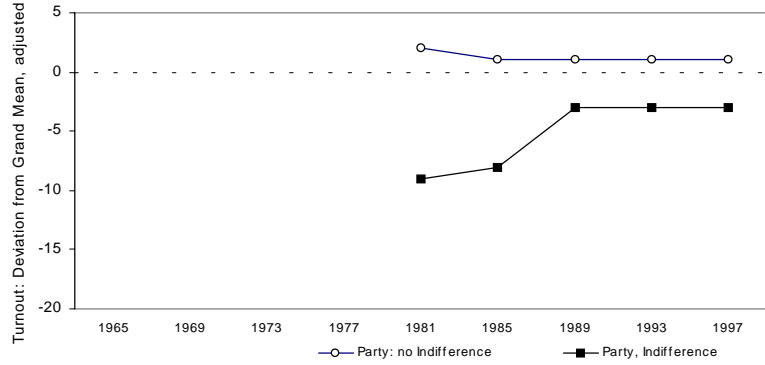
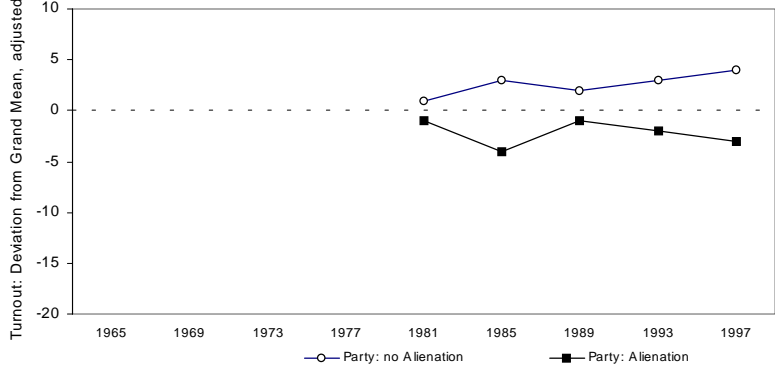


Figure 9: Cumulated: Alienation, Indifference and Turnout

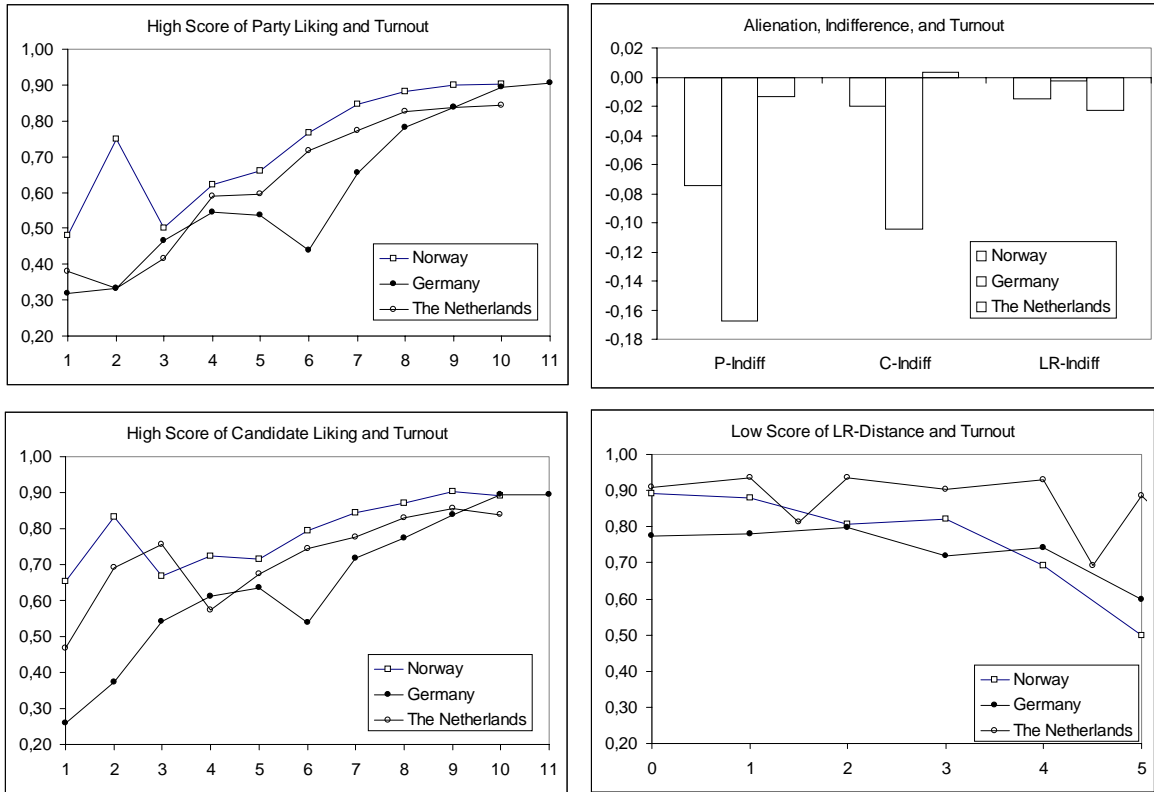


Figure 10: Cumulating Aspects of Alienation and Indifference, and Turnout

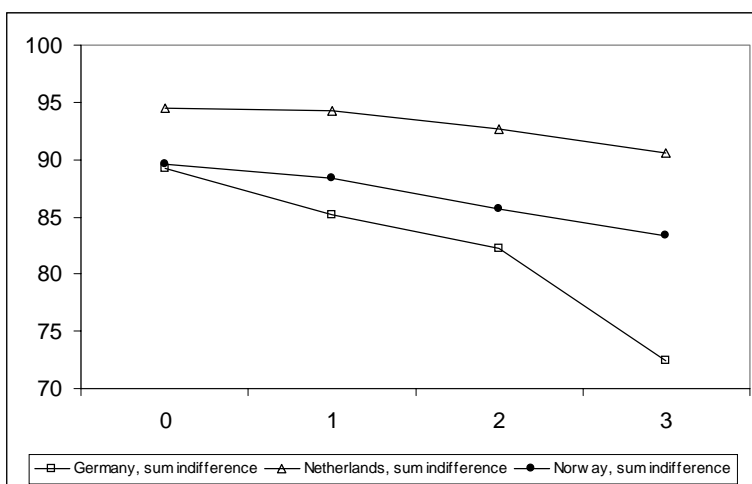
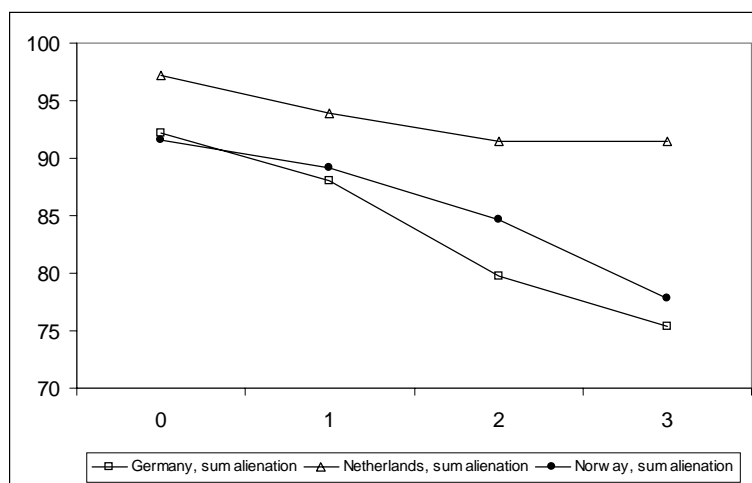


Figure 11: Development of Left-Right Range and Programmatic Differentiation of Party Systems

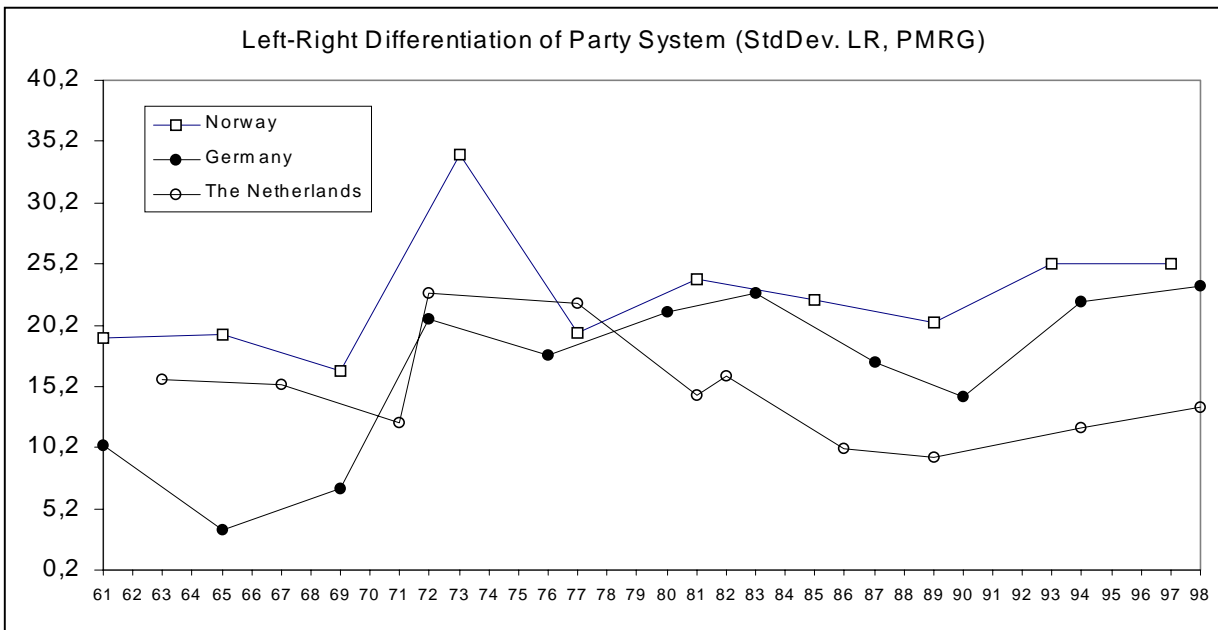
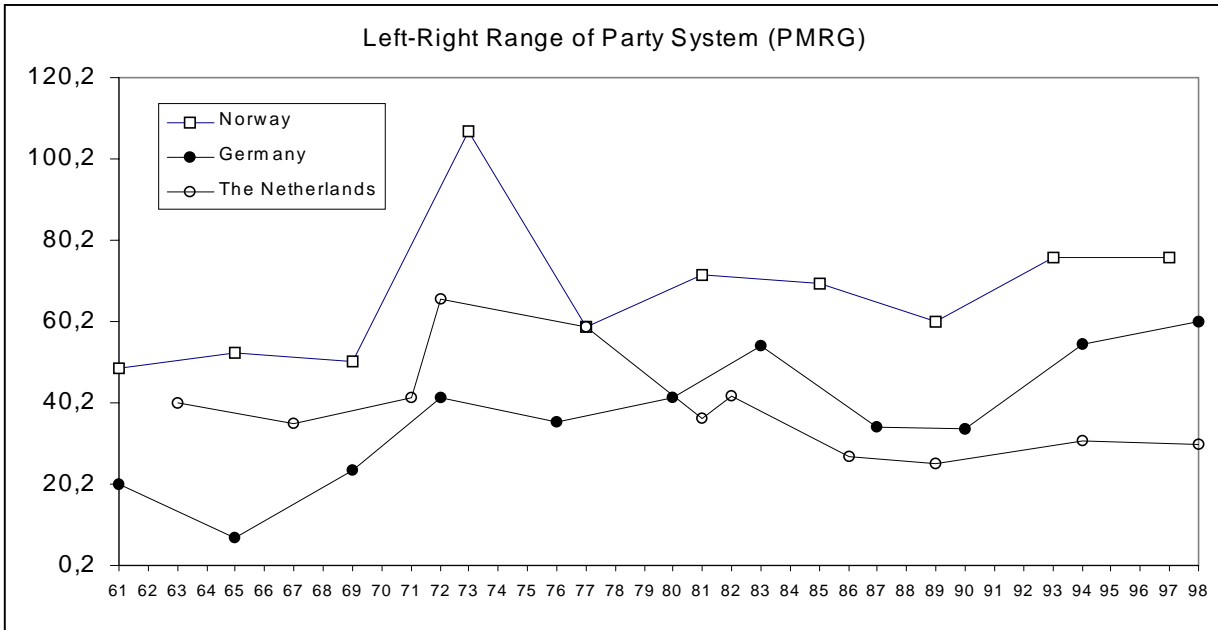


Figure 12: Party Supply and Alienation

