Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9196
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9196

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Open Access Journal

Unequal Turnout Among the Newly Enfranchised: The Role of Political Efficacy

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Submitted: 16 August 2024 **Accepted:** 13 January 2025 **Published:** 29 January 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Unequal Participation Among Youth and Immigrants: Analyzing Political Attitudes and Behavior in Societal Subgroups" edited by Arndt Leininger (Chemnitz University of Technology) and Sabrina Mayer (University of Bamberg), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i426

Abstract

Unequal political participation increasingly challenges democracies. The turnout gap is particularly large among younger voters, with severe implications for future developments of democratic representation, legitimacy, and quality. This article focuses on the role of political efficacy beliefs in explaining unequal turnout among newly enfranchised citizens. We argue that internal political efficacy beliefs are particularly important for turnout among the newly enfranchised from lower-class backgrounds, as they lack alternative mobilizing factors such as politically aware and active parents, political knowledge, and mobilizing networks. Furthermore, we argue that once these voters successfully turn out in their first election, they are as likely as those from higher-class backgrounds to turn out in their second election. We empirically test these arguments using original longitudinal data on newly enfranchised citizens from three German federal states (*Bundesländer*). Overall, our results support the argument: Political efficacy beliefs are a stronger predictor of first turnout among young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to those from more advantaged backgrounds, and those who do turn out are as likely as those with higher-class backgrounds to turn out in their second election. This highlights the relevance of political efficacy beliefs in the (re)production of persisting political inequality.

Keywords

first-time voters; Germany; habitual voting; multilevel system; panel studies; political efficacy; political inequality

1. Introduction

Most European democracies are troubled by declining and increasingly unequal voter turnout (Hooghe & Kern, 2017; Kostelka & Blais, 2021). Individuals with lower levels of education, income, or professional status turn out the least (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015; Dalton, 2017; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2017; Gallego, 2015; Markovich & White, 2022; Schafer et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2020). There is also ample evidence that young citizens turn out less frequently than older citizens (Blais et al., 2004; Kitanova, 2020; Konzelmann et al., 2012; Sloam, 2007; Smets, 2012, 2016; Wattenberg, 2008). Moreover, among younger voters, the turnout gap is particularly large: those from disadvantaged backgrounds show the lowest participation rates and vote at significantly lower rates than in decades past (Schäfer et al., 2020). By contrast, young citizens from advantaged backgrounds still participate in elections to a very high degree; their participation patterns have rarely changed. As the turnout gap between advantaged and disadvantaged voters is much smaller among older citizens, the decline in turnout we have witnessed in recent decades in almost all European democracies is predominantly due to unequal turnout among young voters (Franklin, 2004; Kostelka & Blais, 2021; Schäfer et al., 2020).

Although the decade-long decline in turnout and increase in turnout inequality seem to have halted in recent years, the sources of these new developments remain ambiguous. Some research convincingly points to increased political polarization as an explanation (Harteveld & Wagner, 2023), while the advent of populist parties seems to have had less of an influence on political participation (Leininger & Meijers, 2021), let alone participatory inequalities (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Marx & Nguyen, 2018). The apparent stabilization of turnout rates in recent years—at much lower levels than decades ago—notwithstanding, unequal political participation among young citizens remains a pressing concern.

Several mechanisms linking (low) socioeconomic status (SES) or (low) social class to (low) turnout have been discussed in the literature. First, economic hardship, material constraints, and unemployment cause feelings of social isolation and political alienation (Schaub, 2021), and undermine the motivation to acquire political knowledge (Jungkunz & Marx, 2021; Macdonald, 2020; Marinova & Anduiza, 2020). Experiences of material deprivation are especially relevant if they are experienced early in life (Akee et al., 2020; Jungkunz & Marx, 2024). Second, the decline of collective organizations such as labor unions, which historically tied lower classes to party politics, has increased the number of disadvantaged households that are no longer politically engaged. This lack of collective mobilization is transmitted from parents to their children (Gray & Caul, 2000; Schäfer et al., 2020). Third, individuals with lower SES or lower class backgrounds might feel powerless as they perceive that politics only caters to the needs and interests of the better-off (Gilens, 2012; Schäfer & Zürn, 2023), and such beliefs are also passed from parents to children.

In this article, we focus on internal efficacy beliefs because, as many of the above accounts imply, a disadvantaged family background impedes "the development of subjective political competence" (Marx & Nguyen, 2018, p. 920). We investigate the role of internal political efficacy beliefs in explaining, firstly, first-time turnout among newly enfranchised citizens in general and, secondly, unequal turnout among first-time voters in particular.

It is a well-established finding that efficacy beliefs impact political participation (see Lane, 1965). Similarly, we know that young people from disadvantaged family backgrounds possess lower efficacy beliefs than

their more advantaged peers (e.g., Cheadle, 2008; Nie et al., 1996; Niemi et al., 1991; Verba et al., 2005). In consequence, newly enfranchised citizens from disadvantaged homes turn out less frequently than those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Building on these insights, we argue that efficacy beliefs are particularly important for overcoming the hurdle of first-time voting (cf. Plutzer, 2002) for young citizens from disadvantaged backgrounds. Not having turned out before, they lack experience and familiarity with the electoral system and often do not know the parties and candidates competing for their votes very well (Franklin, 2004; Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Schäfer et al., 2020). Young citizens from advantaged homes, by contrast, are mobilized to turn out by a multitude of factors, such as support and role models from more politicized parents, placement in higher educational tracks with more time allocated to civic education, or higher frequency of political talk with peers (Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Verba et al., 2005). In other words, young citizens from advantaged backgrounds have a high probability of turning out, while those who are less advantaged lack alternative resources and would clearly benefit from believing more in their own political capacities.

Moreover, we know that participating in one's first election strongly increases the likelihood of also participating in future elections (e.g., Cutts et al., 2009; Dinas, 2012; Franklin, 2004; Gerber et al., 2003; Schäfer et al., 2020). Having managed the initial hurdle of the first election strengthens voters' self-image of being politically competent (Gerber et al., 2003; Plutzer, 2002), i.e., increases their internal political efficacy and thus renders turnout in the second election less costly. As the costs of first-time voting are particularly high for young citizens from disadvantaged homes, we argue that especially these citizens will profit from turning out in their first-ever election.

Using original panel data on young citizens from three federal states in Germany, we show that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower political efficacy and lower turnout rates than individuals from advantaged backgrounds. As expected, internal political efficacy is more strongly related to the first-ever turnout among individuals from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, we show that first-ever turnout is a strong predictor of second-time turnout among both groups and that internal efficacy drives this effect.

This article thus contributes, firstly, to the rich literature on first-time voting by exploring one possible mechanism—internal efficacy—of why some individuals have a higher propensity to turn out in their first election than others. Secondly, we contribute to the literature on political (in)equality by inquiring whether the strengthened internal efficacy of young voters from disadvantaged backgrounds might help to overcome the turnout gap. Finally, we at least tentatively contribute to the literature on habitual voting by exploring how successful turnout in the first election predicts turnout in further elections and how this differs by individual background.

2. The Political Importance of Internal Efficacy

At the core of the concept of self-perceived efficacy is the idea that people believe they can order their lives rationally and control external events (Lane, 1965). Individuals with high efficacy feel that they possess mastery over their environment, while those with low levels of efficacy perceive the world "as an unpredictable place in which their influence is minimal" (Lane, 1965, p. 148). This idea is very similarly conceptualized in many

disciplines (Gecas, 1989). In social psychology, for instance, perceived "self-efficacy" is defined as "personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals" (Bandura, 1982, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000, p. 83).

Efficacy develops early in life (Bandura, 2000; Gecas, 1989; Lane, 1965). While there is no consensus on how early in a child's life these processes unfold, evidence suggests that there are already stark differences in political competence and knowledge stratified by family background among primary school children (Abendschön & Roßteutscher, 2015). Using German household panel data, Bacovsky and Fitzgerald (2023) show that parental impact on children's preconditions for later political participation is greatest between the ages of nine and 11, further confirming that family background is highly significant for developing efficacy beliefs.

Early experiences of being efficacious are also crucial since they are generalized to different domains of life (Bandura, 1977, p. 194; Lane, 1965, p. 149). This is because efficacy includes the conviction that one can successfully cope with difficult and new situations (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Sherer et al., 1982); personal efficacy is thus activated as a reference whenever persons enter a new domain. Experiences in a new domain will lead individuals, on the one hand, to update their efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992), and on the other, to develop domain-specific efficacy (Gecas, 1989, p. 297).

Politics is an essential new domain that individuals enter when growing up. As young adults become eligible to participate in their first-ever elections, they develop political efficacy (Condon & Holleque, 2013, p. 168). Political efficacy is typically considered to consist of two components: internal political efficacy, which refers to the belief that one is able to understand politics and become politically involved (A. Campbell et al., 1960; Lane, 1965), and external political efficacy, which relates to individuals' beliefs in whether or not political actors are open to their demands (Beaumont, 2011; Karp & Banducci, 2008). Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated a robust positive link between such efficacy beliefs and political participation (e.g., Beaumont, 2011; Marx & Nguyen, 2016, 2018; Nie et al., 1996; Verba et al., 1995, 2005).

Among these efficacy beliefs, internal efficacy appears more strongly linked to first-time turnout (Condon & Holleque, 2013; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Sherer et al., 1982) than external efficacy, which takes shape when young adults learn how political parties and governments act on behalf of their vote (Bacovsky & Fitzgerald, 2023). Keeping in mind that fundamental efficacy beliefs are developed early in life (Bandura, 2000; Gecas, 1989) and that internal political efficacy is known to be relatively stable throughout individuals' lives as well as a strong predictor of political participation (Beaumont, 2011; Nie et al., 1996; Verba et al., 1995, 2005), we therefore focus on internal political efficacy and how it affects turnout of young adults from families with advantaged versus disadvantaged family backgrounds.

2.1. The Social Stratification of Internal Political Efficacy and Unequal Turnout Among First-Time Voters

Already in the late 1950s, Lane (1965, pp. 149–150) postulated that those belonging to the "dominant group," those who possess high social status and power (men, individuals from highly educated or wealthier backgrounds, and those from high-status professions), perceive far more internal capacity to master their environment than individuals of the "subordinate" group (women, children from families with lower

education, little income, or little professional prestige). SES-related differences in children's personal efficacy originate from differences in their homes, where they are provided better or worse opportunities for mastery experiences, and because parents are essential role models for children (see Becker, 2019; Gecas, 1989; Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Verba et al., 2005). For example, Lareau (2011) shows how middle-class parents aim at fostering their children's skills via various organized leisure activities, which also promote their efficacy, while working-class and poor parents do not provide their children with such experiences (see also Cheadle, 2008; Nie et al., 1996; Niemi et al., 1991).

Moreover, recent research highlights further channels through which material deprivation and economic hardship associated with lower class status affect political attitudes and behavior. For one, being exposed to severe material grievances, such as unemployment, negatively impacts the sense of mastery and control over one's life, generally and in the political realm (Marx & Nguyen, 2016, 2018). Moreover, poor economic conditions often imply a lack of time for searching out and processing political information, as time is spent on addressing the difficult economic situation (Hassell & Settle, 2017; Marx & Nguyen, 2018). Hence, if children experience these constraints both indirectly, through their parents, and directly themselves in their formative years, this has a long-term impact on their political engagement (Akee et al., 2020; Jungkunz & Marx, 2024).

Empirical studies regularly confirm that internal efficacy is socially stratified (Ho, 2010; Wiederkehr et al., 2015; see also Cheadle, 2008; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Gecas, 1989; Marx & Nguyen, 2016, 2018; Nie et al., 1996; Niemi et al., 1991; Verba et al., 2005). Knowing that political efficacy positively influences political participation (e.g., Beaumont, 2011; Nie et al., 1996; Verba et al., 1995, 2005), we suggest that the social stratification of internal efficacy can help to explain turnout inequality among first-time voters. Thus, our first hypothesis is the following:

> H1: The correlation between individuals' social class background and their turnout is weaker once we control for their internal efficacy.

In other words, we expect differences in first-time turnout rates between young citizens from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds to decrease once we control for individuals' levels of internal political efficacy.

Building on this, we further argue that the positive effect of internal political efficacy on first turnout is stronger for young voters from disadvantaged social backgrounds. This argument draws on a large body of evidence showing that children from advantaged backgrounds receive manifold participation stimuli from voting parents as role models, politicized peer networks, and political media consumption, among others (see, e.g., D. E. Campbell, 2009; Condon & Holleque, 2013; Nie et al., 1996; Plutzer, 2002; Roßteutscher et al., 2022; Verba et al., 2005). Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, in contrast, lack such mobilizing factors. They discuss politics less at home, have less politicized peer networks, and see their parents turn out for elections less often. Accordingly, Condon and Holleque (2013) find that the effect of general self-efficacy on turnout is strongest for young voters from low SES backgrounds. We suggest that this also holds for their internal political efficacy, and thus formulate our second hypothesis:

> H2: The (positive) correlation between internal efficacy and turnout is stronger for individuals with lower-class backgrounds than for individuals with higher-class backgrounds.

2.2. The Lasting Impact of First Turnout

First turnout is crucial for subsequent turnout (e.g., Brody & Sniderman, 1977; A. Campbell et al., 1960; Franklin, 2004; Milbrath, 1965, p. 31; Miller & Shanks, 1996, p. 62; Plutzer, 2002; Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 148). Several studies suggest that voting is habit-forming (e.g., Cutts et al., 2009; Dinas, 2012; Franklin, 2004; Gerber et al., 2003) and that the custom of voting (and of non-voting) is characterized by "inertia" during the individual life course (Plutzer, 2002). Green and Shachar (2000) define voting as habitual if voting in one election increases the probability of voting in the next election, all else being equal. Hence, the act of voting matters, independent of a person's predisposition, social background, or attitudinal makeup. In line with this, Schäfer et al. (2020) show that citizens who voted in their first election also reported very high levels of intention to vote in the subsequent election. By contrast, those who abstained are less committed to future voting. Consequently, the classic determinants of turnout—including efficacy—are less relevant for habitual voters (Aldrich et al., 2011; Fowler, 2006; Franklin, 2004; Melton, 2014; Plutzer, 2002; Schäfer et al., 2020).

In line with this literature, we expect that internal efficacy barely affects the second turnout when the first turnout is taken into account. Thus, our third and final hypothesis is:

> H3: The first turnout is a similarly strong predictor of the second turnout for young voters from both higher and lower-class backgrounds, irrespective of their individual internal efficacy.

3. Data and Methods

To empirically investigate our arguments, we draw on two original panel surveys of young citizens conducted in three German federal states (*Bundesländer*). These surveys are particularly well-suited to addressing our claims. In contrast to national election (panel) studies, which are typically based on representative samples of the entire electorate (with very low case numbers of newly enfranchised citizens), our surveys focus on young adults who face their first elections and cover two subsequent elections—state elections (*Landtagswahlen*) in the first waves and national elections (*Bundestagswahlen*) in the second waves—within a relatively small timeframe, allowing us to assess the start of individuals' careers as habitual voters or non-voters.

This particular sequence of elections—that is, state elections considered "second-order" elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980; but see Giebler, 2017) followed by a national election considered to be a "first-order" election—implies that we study a least likely scenario for the development of habituation effects. On the one hand, a second-order election is less mobilizing than a first-order election, and on the other, a first-order election strongly mobilizes citizens independent of their previous electoral participation. Our analysis therefore provides a conservative test of the habituation hypothesis.

At the same time, this scenario is increasingly representative of how young adults experience their first-ever elections. As more and more jurisdictions reduce the voting age, usually from 18 to 16, and do so for second-order elections first, an increasing number of young people will become eligible for the first time in their lives to participate in a "second-order" election (see also Leininger et al., 2023).

3.1. The Surveys

The first wave of the first survey was administered in Schleswig-Holstein shortly after the state election on May 7th, 2017. The second wave was fielded after the national election on September 24th, 2017. The first wave of the second survey was fielded shortly after state elections in Brandenburg and Saxony on September 1st, 2019. The second wave was fielded shortly after the national election on September 26th, 2021.

Both surveys applied official register sampling and contacted respondents via mail to invite them to take part in our online survey. In the first survey waves, we were able to interview over 10,000 respondents in total: 3,897 citizens aged 15 to 18 in Schleswig-Holstein, and 6,699 respondents aged 15 to 24 in Brandenburg and Saxony. Response rates in the first waves of the survey were 18.4% in Schleswig-Holstein, 14.8% in Brandenburg, and 15% in Saxony. All respondents who took part in the first survey waves were re-invited to take part in the second-panel waves. In Schleswig-Holstein, we were able to re-interview 1,900 respondents in the second wave (a response rate of 55.7%). In Brandenburg and Saxony, we were able to re-interview 1,230 and 771 respondents, respectively, with corresponding response rates of 37.9% and 36%. The surveys were carried out anonymously and contact details provided by respondents for re-contact were stored separately from the survey data.

Although both surveys are very similar in terms of their administration, questionnaire, and focus on young adults, they cover different elections and span a different period of time from one wave to the next: In Schleswig-Holstein, both waves were conducted in 2017, with only roughly four months in between the state and national elections (and thus the survey waves). In Brandenburg and Saxony, the first survey wave (covering state elections) was conducted in September 2019, and the second survey wave two years later, in September/October 2021 (shortly after the national election). Furthermore, the elections are characterized by different eligibility thresholds: While eligibility in national elections (in September 2017 and 2021) is restricted to citizens aged 18 or older, eligibility in state-level elections is age 16 in Schleswig-Holstein and Brandenburg, but age 18 in Saxony. Due to differences in timing and some divergent item formulations, we treat the two sets of surveys (Schleswig-Holstein vs. Brandenburg and Saxony) as separate studies and present the results accordingly.

As we are interested in the association between first-time voting and internal efficacy and how the experience of first-time voting impacts further electoral behavior, we excluded two groups of respondents from our analyses: firstly, respondents who were not first-time voters in wave one of the surveys, which applies to individuals who had already been eligible in the national election of 2017 in the Brandenburg/ Saxony survey and also to respondents who were not yet eligible in the first survey wave of either survey. Roughly a third of the respondents in the Brandenburg and Saxony survey had been eligible to vote in the European election in May 2019, which had a minimum voting age of 18. Unfortunately, we do not know whether respondents actually voted in the European election. Instead of excluding this large number of respondents from the analyses, we added a control indicating whether respondents had been eligible. In Appendix 9 in the Supplementary File, we replicate the main models, excluding all those who had been eligible in the European election; the results are highly similar to those presented in the main section of the article.

Secondly, when focusing on individuals' second turnout, we excluded respondents who were not eligible to vote in the national elections in 2017 or 2021, respectively, because we obviously cannot observe their second

turnout. This applies to all 16-year-olds in the Schleswig-Holstein survey (as they were by no means eligible for the national election the same year) as well as all 17-year-olds who had not turned 18 between May and September 2017 for the second survey. As a result, our main analyses are based on between 2,689 (wave 1) and 524 (waves 1 and 2) respondents from Schleswig-Holstein and on between 2,304 (wave 1) and 655 (waves 1 and 2) respondents from Brandenburg and Saxony (numbers refer to individuals with no missing values on the relevant variables detailed in Section 3.2).

3.2. Variables

Our dependent variable is self-reported turnout. As our surveys were post-election surveys, we simply assessed respondents' self-reported turnout by asking whether they had participated in the (state or federal) election (with "yes" coded as 1 and "no" as 0).

Our main independent variables are individuals' internal political efficacy and their class background. Our measures of internal political efficacy differ slightly between the two surveys. The Schleswig-Holstein survey contains a single item for internal political efficacy: "I am confident that I can take an active role in a group that engages in political issues" (In German: "*Ich traue mir zu, in einer Gruppe, die sich mit politischen Fragen befasst, eine aktive Rolle zu übernehmen*"). While internal political efficacy is usually measured by two items, several other studies, including the German Longitudinal Election Study's long-time online tracking panel, also only incorporate one item for internal efficacy. In the Brandenburg and Saxony survey, internal efficacy is measured by two items: "I understand important political issues" and "I am confident that I can actively participate in political discussions" (In German: "*Wichtige politische Fragen kann ich gut verstehen und einschätzen*" and "*Ich traue mir zu, mich an einem Gespräch über politische Fragen aktiv zu beteiligen*"). In all instances, responses are recorded on a five-point *agree-disagree* scale. As the items correlate strongly in the case of the Brandenburg and Saxony survey (as measured by a Pearson's correlation coefficient of 0.59, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.74), and do so for both high (r of 0.6 and alpha of 0.75) and low social classes (r of 0.56 and alpha of 0.72), we translated them into a five-point index by taking the mean of the responses to both items.

To measure class background, we asked respondents in both surveys to which social class they would (subjectively) allocate their parental home, offering six ordinal response categories: lower class, working class, lower middle class, mid-middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. We coded the first three categories as indicative of having a lower-class background and the last three as having higher-class background. According to our coding, about 25% of respondents in Schleswig-Holstein and 33% of respondents in Brandenburg and Saxony have lower-class backgrounds (the modal category was, as in other surveys, "mid-middle class"). These shares are similar to those in other established surveys, as we show in Appendix 8 in the Supplementary File. In Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File, we alternatively replicate our analyses with parental education instead of social class, which is available in the Schleswig-Holstein survey only. In the case that at least one parent attained "Abitur," the educational level that qualifies one for tertiary education, we coded this as "parents with higher education"; all other instances were coded as "low." The results regarding parental education are similar to those presented in the main body of the article.

All analyses include several control variables. With regard to demographics, we control for migration background, age, and gender. For the Schleswig-Holstein survey, migration background is based on an item asking respondents whether they or their family have a migration background (with *yes* coded as 1 and *no*

coded as 0). In the Brandenburg and Saxony survey, we treat all respondents who report that at least one of their parents was not born in Germany as having a migration background. Age is based on registered data on respondents' dates of birth. With regard to gender, the Schleswig-Holstein survey distinguishes between female and male, while the Brandenburg and Saxony survey also offers "diverse" as an answer.

Beyond these demographic controls, we also control for the type of school individuals attended. In Germany, education policy falls under the authority of the federal states; school types, tracking age, and other aspects of the educational system thus differ across states. In all three states in our study, the education systems have one school type that exclusively offers an academic/general school track (*Gymnasium*) and several school types that offer primarily or only non-academic/vocational tracks (at the level of secondary education, these are *Oberschule* in Brandenburg and in Saxony, *Gesamtschule* in Brandenburg, and *Gemeinschaftsschule* in Schleswig-Holstein). Since individuals' class backgrounds correlate with their school track, we expect that including school type as a control variable reduces the coefficient on social class.

We also control for respondents' levels of political interest, which is strongly predictive of turnout (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Prior, 2010; Verba et al., 1995), and correlates with internal political efficacy as well. In the Schleswig-Holstein study, we further control for sense of civic duty to vote, which is another important predictor of turnout (Feitosa et al., 2020). In the Saxony and Brandenburg survey, we control for eligibility in the EU election that took place earlier in the year and for federal states.

Finally, we estimate additional models that account for alternative mobilizing factors. Specifically, we control for parental turnout as reported by respondents, respondents' assessments of how many of their friends voted, and the frequency of political discussion with friends and family (measured as the number of days on which politics was discussed with friends or family in the last week before the election; for distributions of these by social class, see Figures A1 to A7 in Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File).

3.3. Analytical Strategy

To test H1, we focus on the first wave of each survey and regress respondents' self-reported turnout in the first election based on their family's social class, then add internal political efficacy. We expect diminishing differences between advantaged and disadvantaged groups upon the inclusion of internal efficacy; this would show that the association between class background and turnout is (partly) explained by individuals' internal efficacy. For testing H2, we expand upon the analyses from H1 by adding an interaction term between internal efficacy and social class.

Finally, to test H3, we regress individuals' second turnout based on their first turnout, social class, and the interaction between the two variables. In additional analyses, we further include individuals' internal efficacy measured in wave one (after the first election) to test whether internal efficacy accounts for the link between first and second turnouts. In each of these analytical steps, we use linear probability models. In the models based on the Brandenburg and Saxony surveys, we additionally include the state to control for differences—e.g., in voting age—between states.

4. Findings

We begin with a descriptive graph before discussing our regression analyses in more detail. Figure 1 shows the distribution of internal political efficacy among individuals with lower—and higher-class backgrounds in the two sets of surveys. In both surveys, we see that differences between individuals with lower and higher-class backgrounds are particularly large in the category of *very low* internal political efficacy. In both surveys, around twice as many individuals with lower-class backgrounds than those with higher-class backgrounds indicate that they have very low internal efficacy. With regard to *very high* internal efficacy, similarly, the share of individuals with lower-class backgrounds is lower than the share of highly efficacious individuals with higher-class backgrounds, in particular in the Brandenburg and Saxony survey. These findings indicate significant class-based differences in efficacy beliefs, while also showing that there are sufficient case numbers for all combinations of efficacy and class to allow for robust multiple regression analysis.

Continuing our descriptive assessment, Table 1 displays mean turnout rates for the different social groups in waves one and two of the surveys. The first column provides turnout rates for all respondents in the first waves, the middle column shows the turnout rates in the first waves among all those who participated in both waves (i.e., the sample we use to test H3), and the third column reports turnout rates for respondents in the second waves. Respondents' self-reported levels of turnout are higher than official turnout rates, but not more so than in other reputable election surveys—as detailed in Appendix 7 in the Supplementary File. It is not surprising that we see a well-known pattern of self-selection (cf. Granberg & Holmberg, 1991; Sciarini & Goldberg, 2017; Selb & Munzert, 2013) in our survey as well.

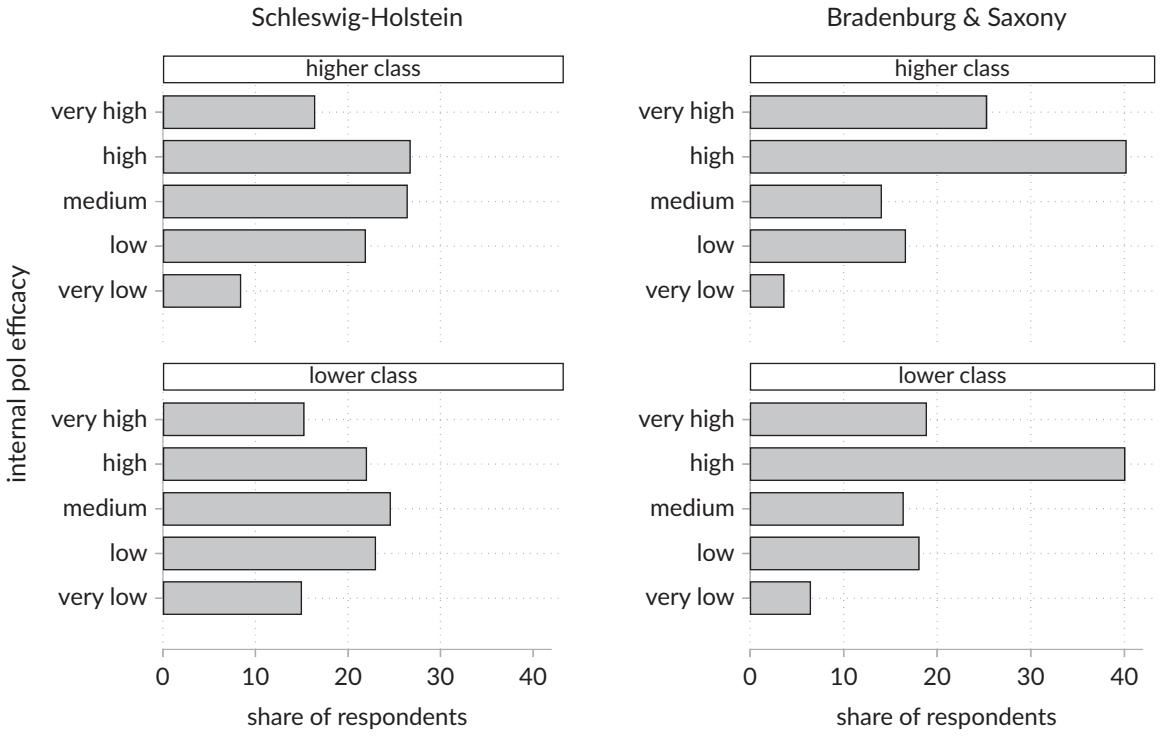

Figure 1. Distribution of internal political efficacy in the two sets of studies.

Table 1. Turnout rates among individuals with lower and higher-class backgrounds in the two sets of surveys.

	Turnout W1 — Full sample mean (sd)	Turnout W1 — Panel sample mean (sd)	Turnout W2 — Panel sample mean (sd)
Schleswig-Holstein			
Lower class	0.73 (0.447) *N* = 655	0.85 (0.357) *N* = 135	0.95 (0.223) *N* = 135
Higher class	0.86 (0.349) *N* = 2,015	0.87 (0.336) *N* = 417	0.94 (0.238) *N* = 417
Brandenburg & Saxony			
Lower class	0.80 (0.401) *N* = 608	0.89 (0.310) *N* = 187	0.93 (0.255) *N* = 187
Higher class	0.92 (0.274) *N* = 1,563	0.95 (0.224) *N* = 512	0.97 (0.157) *N* = 512

Reporting bias aside, self-reported turnout is higher among individuals from higher classes than among those from lower classes, as expected. Although this difference is most pronounced in the first waves of the surveys, it also applies to the reduced panel sample in the first waves and to the second waves. The smaller class-related difference in turnout in the reduced sample respective to second waves compared to the full sample in the first waves is due to self-selection: individuals who stayed in the panel were also those who were more likely to turn out. More concretely, non-random attrition implies that individuals who were less interested in the topics of the surveys—i.e., politics—also were less likely to turn out and less likely to respond to the second-wave questionnaire. Their dropping out thus leads to higher mean turnout rates in the second survey waves. Such non-random attrition might bias our results. In order to address this concern, we re-estimate the main models using only individuals with full information on the relevant indicators in both waves (see Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File); the results are very similar to those reported in the main sections.

The fact that we observe higher turnout rates in the second waves than in the first waves of the surveys is driven by the reporting bias just discussed and by the first election being "second-order" (state) and the second election being "first-order" (national). Again, we note that this latter aspect of the sequence of elections is common in multilevel systems, where an individual's first eligibility may occur in a municipal, state-level, or national election depending on their birth date.

Turning to the analytical results, we start with our first hypothesis, expecting that the association between individuals' class background and their turnout is weaker once we control for their internal efficacy (i.e., that internal efficacy helps to explain the lower turnout among individuals with lower-class backgrounds). Figure 2 illustrates our regression results for the key coefficients: Individuals with lower-class backgrounds are significantly less likely to indicate turnout in their first-ever election than those with higher-class backgrounds. The size of the turnout gap between those from higher and those from lower-class backgrounds amounts to over 10 percentage points in both sets of surveys. Internal efficacy, in turn, is positively related to turnout: individuals with high internal efficacy are around 5 percentage points more likely to have turned out in their first election than individuals with a medium level of internal efficacy.

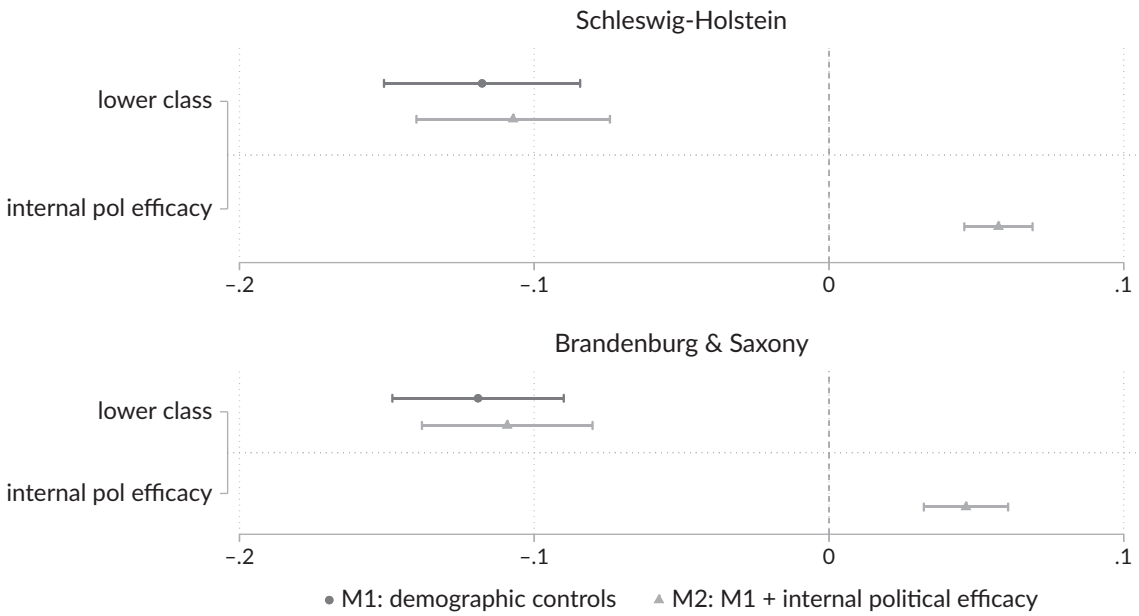

Figure 2. Evidence on H1: Association of social class and internal efficacy with turnout. Notes: Results of linear probability models: point estimates with 95% CIs of coefficients on internal efficacy and social class; dependent variable = first turnout (full results in in the Supplementary File, Appendix 4, Tables A3 and A4).

However, while the point estimate on those with a lower-class background decreases slightly after the inclusion of individuals' internal political efficacy (model 2, marked with a grey triangle in the figure), the confidence intervals overlap substantially, indicating that the decrease in coefficient size is not statistically significant. This implies that, although disadvantaged individuals have lower internal efficacy, this does not contribute much to explaining their lower turnout rates in their first elections.

We tested the robustness of this result by adding further variables that could lead individuals to turn out in their first elections: school type, political interest, sense of civic duty to vote (only in the Schleswig-Holstein study), eligibility in the previous EU election (only in the Brandenburg and Saxony study), turnout of parents and friends, and political discussion with parents and friends. Most of these variables barely change the coefficients on respondents' backgrounds (see Appendix 3 and Figures A8a and A8b in the Supplementary File). However, there are two exceptions. First, parental turnout reduces the effect of social class, which suggests that this mobilizing factor contributes significantly to the turnout gap between individuals with different class backgrounds. Second, political interest reduces the coefficient on internal efficacy due to the strong positive correlation between these two political predispositions.

A central limitation of our approach is that our surveys measure internal efficacy and self-reported turnout concurrently. As successful turnout might boost internal efficacy, in particular among disadvantaged individuals with lower such beliefs (Condon & Holleque, 2013; Gecas, 1989; Gerber et al., 2003; Melton, 2014; Shineman, 2018), the results here may understate the importance of internal efficacy, thus representing conservative estimates. That is, if individuals from lower-class backgrounds have profited more from their first turnout experiences in terms of their internal efficacy than individuals from higher-class backgrounds, their levels of internal efficacy are less different after their first election than before.

Our second hypothesis posits that internal political efficacy is more strongly correlated with turnout among disadvantaged individuals than those with an advantaged family background. To test this, we focus on the interaction between individuals' internal efficacy and family backgrounds in predicting turnout (all measured in the first waves of the surveys). Figure 3 illustrates the results of the respective analyses by showing the average marginal effect of internal efficacy on the first turnout by social class.

As expected, the coefficients on internal efficacy are larger among individuals with lower-class backgrounds in both surveys. Although the confidence intervals slightly overlap, the coefficients are statistically significantly different from each other at a significance level of 0.05 in both studies, as evidenced by statistically significant coefficient estimates on the interaction between internal efficacy and social class (see Appendix 4, Tables A5 and A6 in the Supplementary File). This is in line with our second hypothesis, suggesting that internal efficacy is indeed more important for turnout among individuals with lower-class backgrounds.

Substantively, the coefficient on internal efficacy for lower-class respondents is almost twice as large as it is for higher-class respondents. The expected differences in turnout between two lower-class respondents with low and high internal efficacy amount to over 30 percentage points. These results also hold when using a reduced sample composed of individuals with full information on the relevant variables in waves 1 and 2 of the surveys, i.e., those who did not drop out (see Appendix 6, Figure A15 in the Supplementary File).

In additional models, we add several further variables to our main models to test whether our results are robust. Adding school type, political interest, duty to vote (in Schleswig-Holstein), eligibility in the EU election (in Brandenburg/Saxony), political discussion with parents and friends, and turnout among parents and friends sometimes decreases the coefficient on internal efficacy, but the general pattern remains the same—for details, please consult Appendix 3 (Figure A9) in the Supplementary File. This confirms that internal efficacy is a particularly important resource for turnout among individuals from lower social classes.

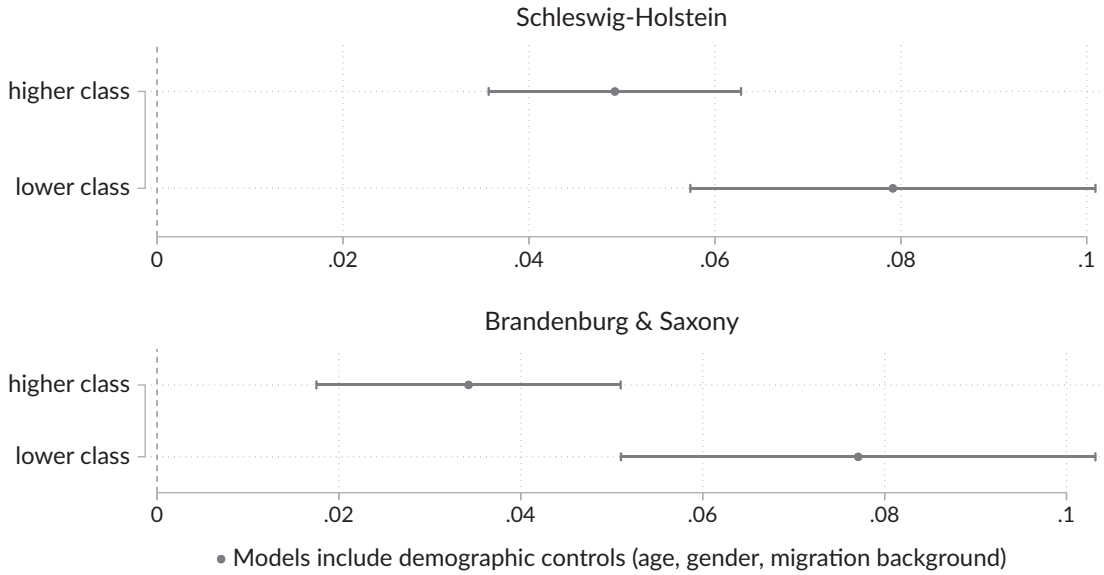

Figure 3. Evidence on H2: Average marginal effect of political efficacy on the first turnout by social class. Notes: Results of linear probability models; average marginal effect of internal efficacy on turnout by social class with 95% CIs; dependent variable = first turnout (all measured in waves 1 of the studies, full results in Appendix 4, Tables A5 and A6 in the Supplementary File).

Finally, we turn to our last hypothesis, which stated that first-time turnout would be a strong predictor of second turnout regardless of an individual's family background and irrespective of their internal efficacy. Figure 4 shows the results of our analyses by plotting the average marginal effect of the first turnout on the second turnout by social class.

The results confirm our final hypotheses: First turnout is a strong predictor of second turnout among individuals from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. The point estimates are clearly larger for individuals with lower-class backgrounds but are seldom statistically significant, as evidenced by strongly overlapping confidence intervals. Overlapping confidence intervals notwithstanding, the coefficient on first-time turnout is significantly different between respondents with higher and those with lower-class backgrounds in Brandenburg/Saxony when controlling for internal efficacy, as evidenced by statistically significant coefficients in the interaction between first turnout and class in Table A8, Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File.

As hypothesized, including individuals' internal political efficacy after their first election (see model 2, marked in grey in Figure 4) does not significantly change that pattern. In line with our expectations based on the respective literature, once individuals from lower social classes have successfully turned out in their first election, they are as likely as their peers from higher social classes to turn out in their second election. Hence, we agree with Dinas (2012, p. 432) that "it seems that once prior turnout record is taken into account, few things seem to matter"—including internal efficacy. However, we underline that these results constitute a conservative test of the habituation effect, as the second election is a strongly mobilizing, so-called first-order national election, reducing the importance of habituation.

Again, we tested whether our results were robust to the inclusion of additional variables that might influence second turnout (see Appendix 3, Figure A10 in the Supplementary File). Adding political interest and duty to

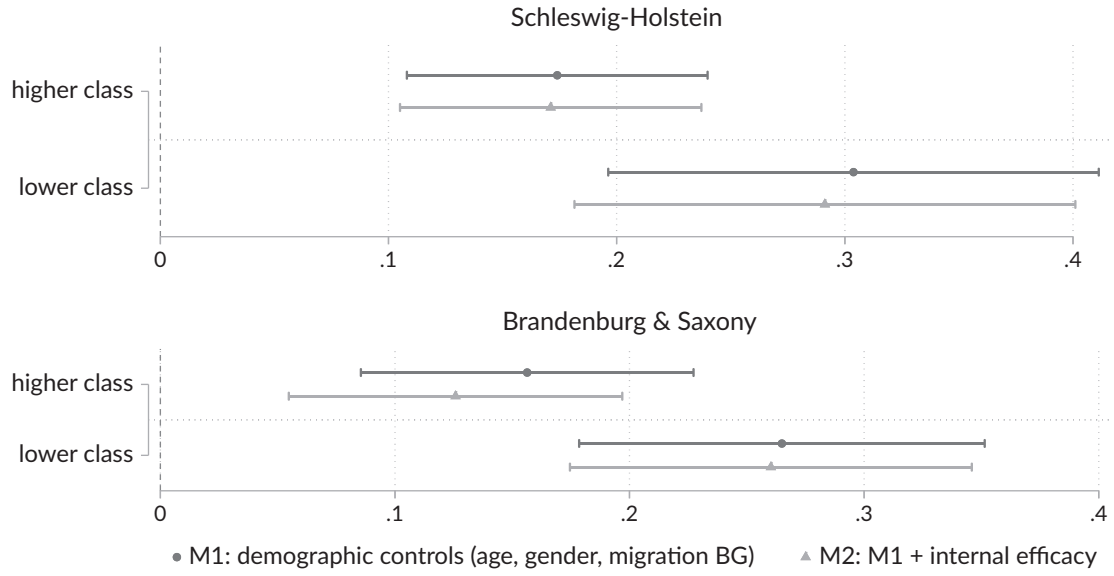

Figure 4. Evidence on H3: Average marginal effect of the first turnout on the second turnout by social class. Notes: Results of linear probability models; average marginal effect of first turnout on second turnout by social class; dependent variable = second turnout (full models in Appendix 4, Tables A7 and A8 in the Supplementary File).

vote does not change coefficients much; one reason might be that these aspects already shaped first turnouts and matter less for second elections, just like internal efficacy. In contrast, adding turnout among family and friends somewhat reduces the size of the coefficients of first turnout on second turnout among all groups, which suggests that mobilization by politically active social networks is important for the second election.

To summarize, based on two surveys among young voters from three German states, we find that individuals with lower-class backgrounds have lower internal efficacy and lower turnout rates than their peers from higher-class backgrounds. For both groups, internal efficacy is a strong predictor of their turnout. Yet, the lower levels of internal efficacy among more disadvantaged individuals do not seem to be the main reason for their lower turnout rates. Nevertheless, and in line with our second hypothesis, internal efficacy is more strongly associated with first turnouts among individuals from lower-class backgrounds and is less important for individuals from higher classes. Focusing on the association between first and second turnout, we find barely any differences between individuals from different social classes, which is in line with our third hypothesis. If anything, the first turnout is somewhat more important for the second turnout among individuals with lower-class backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

This article examined the interplay between young citizens' family backgrounds and their internal political efficacy. Based on original panel surveys in three federal states in Germany, we examined how class background and political efficacy relate to turnout for individuals' first election and how this experience predicts participation in the subsequent election. We focused on a sequence of elections that is becoming increasingly common in multilevel systems: a second-order (in our case: state-level) election being the first election for the newly enfranchised, and a first-order (national-level) election being the second.

In line with previous research, we showed that internal efficacy and having a higher-class background are positively associated with turnout in a newly enfranchised citizen's first election. Going beyond previous studies, we provided preliminary evidence that efficacy beliefs are more important for first turnout among younger citizens from lower-class backgrounds than for their more advantaged peers. Individuals from lower-class backgrounds have, on average, lower belief in their own capacity to navigate the political world, and at the same time, internal political efficacy is more important for their first-ever turnout than it is for newly enfranchised citizens from more advantaged family backgrounds. These results highlight the importance of strengthening the efficacy beliefs of children from lower-class families, for example through political education inside and outside schools to compensate for what their families cannot provide and to prevent long-term inequalities in political participation.

Once a young person has managed to overcome the hurdle of turnout for the first election, the likelihood of turnout in the second election is very high, independent of their social class and other predictors of turnout, including internal efficacy. At the same time, those who fail to vote in their first election will be harder to mobilize. Hence, our results highlight the importance of equal participation in young citizens' first-ever elections for the sake of greater political equality in later elections.

Despite using a large-scale, register-based panel survey of newly enfranchised young citizens, our study has some limitations. First, we have no baseline measure of individuals' internal political efficacy prior to their

first election. Thus, we cannot make any strong causal claims. For further research on young citizens' political behavior, researchers should consider surveying the newly enfranchised both before and after their first elections.

Second, in wave 2, conducted on the occasion of the national elections 2017 and 2021, there were very few non-voters left in the sample. We cannot disentangle to what extent this is due to generally higher participation rates in national elections (assessed in wave 2) and to what extent it is due to biased attrition by self-declared non-voters. Answering these questions is important, as the interplay between social class, internal efficacy beliefs, and turnout is crucial for shaping the long-term trajectory of turnout and political inequalities in established democracies. Therefore, we hope that future research will shed further light on these mechanisms, for instance by also studying the association between internal efficacy and turnout in other constellations of the elections, such as with an alternative sequence of the levels of the elections for the newly enfranchised.

Finally, in this contribution, we focused on internal efficacy beliefs as one of the most relevant prerequisites for young persons' turnout. Evidently, this is not to say that other preconditions, such as political interest, external efficacy beliefs, or sentiments of duty to vote, are irrelevant. Future research should use similar designs to test whether our arguments and findings also apply to other political predispositions.

Despite these limitations, our study provides important insights into how newly enfranchised citizens are socialized into voting by showing that internal political efficacy is a stronger predictor of turnout among the first-time enfranchised from lower-class backgrounds. This finding suggests that enhancing the internal political efficacy of these individuals has the potential to diminish the social gap in turnout. Young people from higher SES backgrounds, in contrast, are much less dependent on their internal efficacy because they are politically mobilized in diverse ways. For example, they attend higher educational tracks, show more consumption of (political) media, and have a higher likelihood of living in politicized and politically active families and peer groups.

Thus, to counter the increasing social inequality in political participation that emerges in individuals' first elections, it might be promising to offer adolescents from lower-class backgrounds more opportunities to strengthen their internal political efficacy. In this regard, schools, voluntary associations, or NGOs could support and encourage young people from less advantaged backgrounds on how to take control of their political lives, e.g., by informing them about politics more generally, by discussing elections and their importance, and by supporting the newly enfranchised in overcoming the costs of first-time voting.

Acknowledgments

We thank Sabrina Meyer, Nadja Wehl, and the participants of the In_Equality Conference 2024 as well as the anonymous reviewers for their incredibly valuable feedback and support.

Funding

This research was conducted as part of the research group *FOR 5173: Reconfiguration and Internalization of Social Structure*, which is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation)—Projektnummer 439346934. The surveys in Brandenburg and Saxony were funded through grants by *Otto Brenner Foundation* (project numbers 2019-100 and 2021-101).

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Sabrina Mayer (University of Bamberg).

Data Availability

Replication files are available in the Harvard Dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WMYQ5D).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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