

Future of Democracy | 03.2019

## A conflict line through Germany or a new East-West divide?

**Are Eastern Germans “wired” differently? The results of the recent state elections in Thuringia, Brandenburg and Saxony appear to support this hypothesis. But, more than anything, they reflect new lines of conflict in society that are very similar in Eastern and Western Germany. This also applies to the election results of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.**

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany is taking stock: Has reunification been a success? How much of the East-West divide has remained or is returning? The results of recent state elections in Thuringia, Brandenburg and Saxony appear to support two conclusions: Eastern Germans are wired differently! And they vote differently, too! But the question is: Why? The various election results have been interpreted as and attributed to an East-West divide. But is that right?

This analysis shows that the opposite is the case for the AfD’s election results. Instead of regional origins, it is social milieus and circumstances of life that shape the individual voting behavior. As elsewhere, the electoral success of right-wing populists in Germany runs along a new social line of conflict separating skeptics of modernization from supporters of modernization. In social, economic and cultural

terms, the milieus that are skeptical of modernization see themselves as the “losers” of modernization processes, feel that they are no longer sufficiently represented by the mainstream parties, are dissatisfied with democracy’s performance, are losing their trust in democratic institutions, and are turning away from the mainstream parties. For their part, the pro-modernization milieus view precisely these stances as a threat to democracy and social progress. The result is a new line of conflict that is strongly polarizing Germany – but one that runs diagonally through society as a whole rather than between Eastern and Western Germany. This line of conflict is one that affects all of society and therefore all of Germany, and it follows socio-cultural patterns that are very similar in Eastern and Western Germany. Thus, 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germans are more similar than they think – also at the ballot box!

## “Lega East” or Germany-wide milieu party?

The AfD’s state election results in Thuringia (23.4%), Brandenburg (23.5%) and Saxony (27.5%) make the right-wing populists look like an Eastern German regional party. Already with the 2017 elections for Germany’s federal parliament, the Bundestag, the AfD’s results in Eastern Germany (21.9%) were roughly twice as high as they were in Western Germany (10.7%). The AfD succeeded in sustaining this level of support in the three federal state elections in Eastern Germany held in 2019.

Does this mean the AfD is becoming a regional Eastern German party? A kind of “Lega East” akin to Italy’s “Lega Nord”?

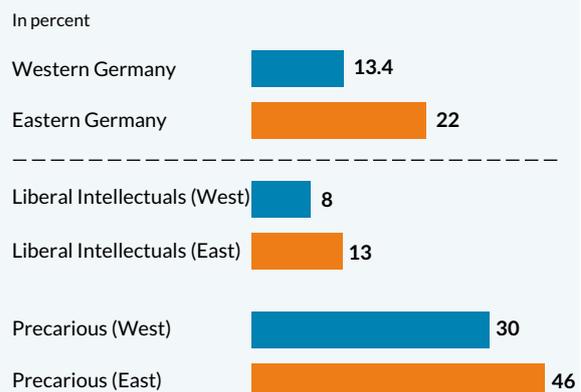
For one thing, the proportions of the potential voters in Eastern and Western Germany alone would argue against this. In big picture terms, those who voted for the AfD in the state election in Thuringia only make up 0.4% of all eligible voters in Germany, and the figure is only 1.9% if you combine the AfD voters for all three elections in Eastern Germany in 2019. In other words, the AfD’s high percentages actually only constitute a relatively meager share of all eligible voters in Germany. What’s more, in order to surpass the 5% hurdle required to secure seats in the Bundestag, as a purely regional party, the AfD would have to win more than 25% of the votes in Eastern Germany on a sustained basis. And despite having election results that were twice as high in Eastern Germany, the share of Eastern Germans among all AfD voters was and continues to be less than a third.

Thus, for the time being, the AfD is a Germany-wide phenomenon rather than a “Lega East.”

The milieu analysis (Fig. p.2) also shows this. Much larger than the regional differences between Eastern and Western Germany are the discrepancies among the social milieus. The percentage of people in Eastern Germany who intend to vote for the AfD is almost twice as high as that of their counterparts in Western Germany (22% and 13.4%, respectively). But voters from the socially Precarious milieu in both Eastern and Western Germany opt for the AfD about four times as often as voters from the Liberal Intellectual milieu. On average, voters in this pro-modernization milieu of the Liberal Intellectuals in both Eastern and Western Germany only opt for the AfD about half as often as the average of all voters.

In contrast, in the modernization-skeptical milieu of the socially Precarious, this rate is twice as high as the overall average. Granted, differences between Eastern and Western Germany are also evident in the milieu-based analysis of the election results. But the differences among the milieus themselves are much more pronounced than those between East and West.

## “Voting intention for the AfD”



Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

| BertelsmannStiftung

### BRIEFLY EXPLAINED: Is the AfD a kind of “Lega East”?

The results of the three recent state elections in Eastern Germany – in Thuringia (23.4%), Brandenburg (23.5%) and Saxony (27.5%) – suggest that this might be the case. In the citizens’ panel of the *Democracy Monitor*, the AfD had 22% of the vote in Eastern Germany and 13.4% in Western Germany. But the discrepancies among the societal milieus themselves are much bigger than the regional East-West differences. Among members of the modernization-optimistic Liberal Intellectuals, only 8% in Western Germany and 13% in Eastern Germany opt for the AfD. But, in the modernization-skeptical milieu of the socially Precarious, the respective figures are 30% and 46%. This shows that, rather than being a case of “the” Eastern Germans voting differently than “the” Western Germans, members of the same societal milieus in both Eastern and Western Germany vote at an above-average rate for the right-wing populist AfD party.

## The AfD is a modernization-skeptical milieu party

The milieu analysis shows that the AfD is primarily a party of the modernization-skeptical milieus in Eastern Germany, as well (Fig. p.3). Roughly two-thirds of its voters belong to a milieu that tends to be skeptical of modernization. Thus, as in Western Germany, the AfD also has a unique characteristic in terms of party politics in Eastern Germany: It is the only party for which a vast majority of its voters come from milieus that are skeptical of modernization and below the social line of conflict running diagonally through the social milieus. In addition to the socially Precarious, which accounts for about 13% of all

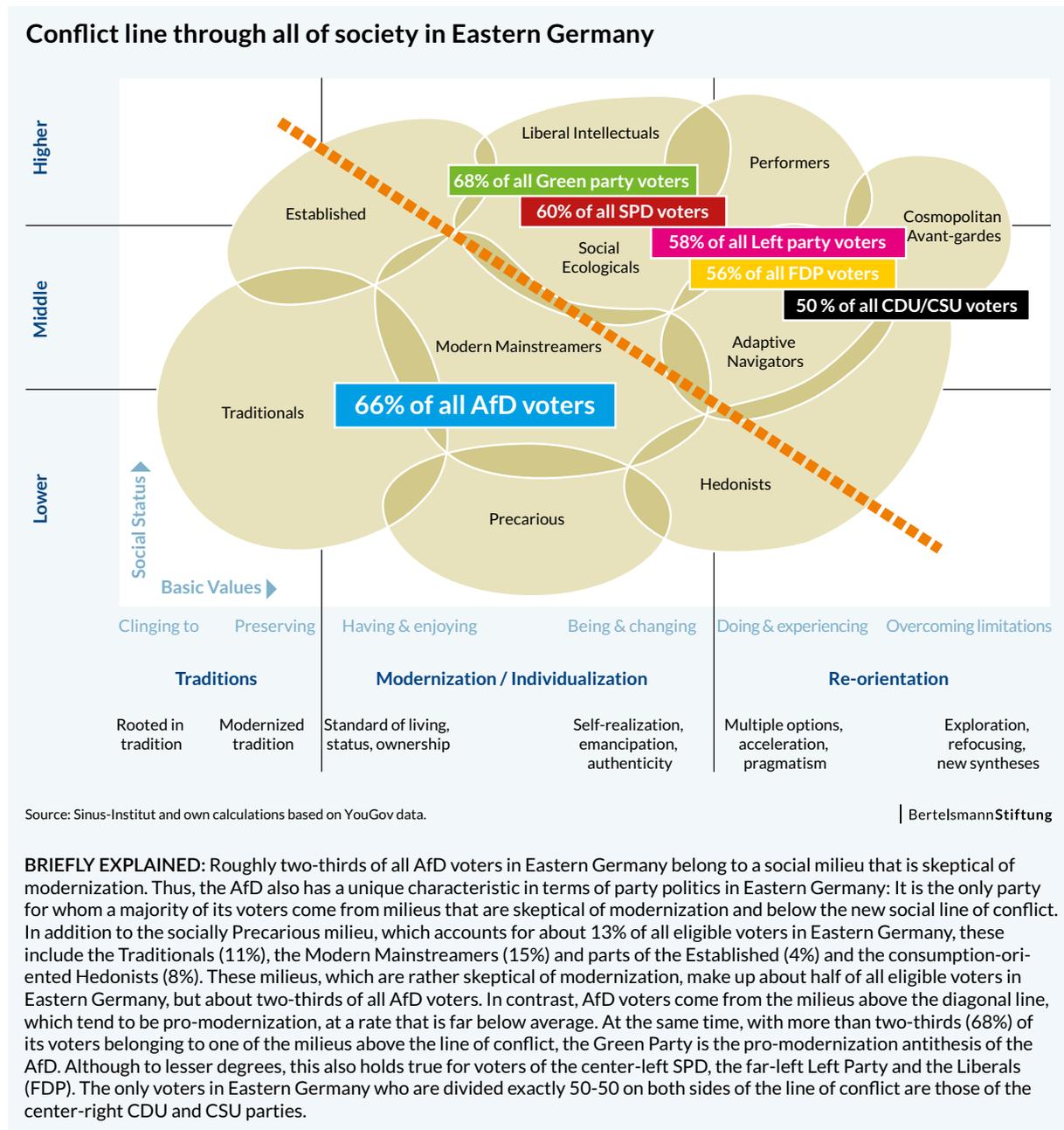
eligible voters in Eastern Germany, these include the Traditionals (11%), the Modern Mainstreamers (15%) and parts of the Established (4%) and the consumption-oriented Hedonists (8%). These milieus, which are rather skeptical of modernization, make up about half of all eligible voters in Eastern Germany, but about two-thirds of all AfD voters.

In contrast, the milieus above the diagonal line, which tend to be pro-modernization, vote for the AfD at a far-below-average rate. At the same time, with more than two-thirds (68%) of its voters belonging to one of the milieus above the line of

conflict, the Green Party is the pro-modernization opposite pole of the AfD. Although to lesser degrees, this also holds true for voters of the center-left SPD, the far-left Left Party and the Liberals (FDP). The only voters in Eastern Germany who are divided exactly 50-50 on both sides of the line of conflict are those of the center-right CDU and CSU parties.

## Same milieu, similar voting patterns in East and West

The East German line of conflict between skeptics and supporters of modernization identified here for 2019 corresponds very closely to the Germany-wide line



of conflict identified for the 2017 Bundestag election (Vehrkamp & Wegschaider 2017, p. 15). This also holds true for the milieus of AfD voters. As was the case in the 2017 Bundestag election, the two milieus with the highest proportions of AfD voters in Eastern and Western Germany are those of the Precarious and the Modern Mainstreamers.

## “Social conditions explain the election results better than regional origin.”

The predicted probability that an eligible voter in Eastern Germany from the Precarious milieu will vote for the AfD is a significantly above-average 44.2%, whereas the figure for Western Germany is 32.3%. The probability that an eligible voter in Eastern Germany from the Modern Mainstreamers will vote for the AfD is 35.3%, while the figure for Western Germany is likewise a significantly above-average 19.3%.

In contrast, the probability that someone from the Liberal Intellectuals will vote for the AfD is a significantly below-average 12.4% in the East and 8.1% in the West. And the probability that someone from the modernization-optimistic milieu of the Performers will vote for the AfD is similarly below-average, at 15.2% in the East and 9.9% in the West.

These milieu patterns demonstrate that the typical voter and non-voter milieus of the AfD are the same in Eastern and Western Germany. At the same time, the differences among the milieus themselves are much bigger and more pronounced than those between East and West. What's more, the rest of the East-West discrepancies in the election results for the AfD can almost entirely be explained by the varying strengths of the respective milieus in Eastern and

Western Germany and, above all, by a milieu-specific concentration and intensification effect in each:

- On the one hand, the typical AfD voter milieus are quantitatively much more strongly represented in Eastern than in Western Germany. For example, the Precarious milieu currently accounts for roughly 13% of all eligible voters in the East (Western Germany: 8%), and the Modern Mainstreamers 15% (Western Germany: 12%). At the same time, only about 6% of all eligible voters in Eastern Germany are classified as belonging to the rather modernization-optimistic and AfD-critical milieus of Liberal Intellectuals (Western Germany: 8%) and Cosmopolitan Avant-gardes (6% in Eastern Germany and 9% in Western Germany).
- On the other hand, a milieu-specific concentration and intensification effect has a much stronger qualitative effect: The stronger and more spatially concentrated the modernization-critical AfD milieus of the Precarious and the Modern Mainstreamers are in Eastern Germany, the higher the election results of the AfD are. The social concentration here very obviously also leads to a stronger normalization and increased social acceptance of voting for the right-wing populist AfD.

Taken together, these two effects of the quantitative and qualitative milieu concentration of the socially Precarious and the Modern Mainstreamers can almost completely explain why the AfD's election results are roughly twice as high in Eastern Germany. Thus, the AfD primarily has much higher election results in Eastern than in Western Germany because its core voter milieus are more strongly represented in the East, and because they vote for the AfD at higher rates owing to their concentration. But the modernization-skeptical milieus that vote for the AfD are the same in both Eastern and Western Germany; they are just found more frequently and in higher concentrations in the East.

The overall picture shows that social status and milieu-specific socio-cultural attitudes and imprints explain the divergent election results in Eastern and Western Germany much better than purely regional East-West differences.

### Sources:

This edition of the Policy Brief is published in connection with the *Democracy Monitor*, a project being jointly conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB).

Both the *Democracy Monitor* and this analysis are based on a representative online survey concerning political attitudes. The survey's sample is representative for residents of Germany. The survey was conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by YouGov Deutschland GmbH in three iterations between May and July 2019. The sample size is approximately 10,000 respondents per iteration.

## Line of conflict (I):

### Trust in Germany's Bundestag

Similar social conditions lead to similar socio-cultural attitudes and voting behavior – in both Eastern and Western Germany! This is shown, for example, by the following milieu-specific attitudes about how well Germany's democracy is functioning, trust in the Bundestag, and whether democracy is the best political system. Faith in democracy requires trust in its institutions. In fact, the degree of trust in institutions is even more important to a democracy's stability than the much more frequently cited degree of trust in its actors. When in doubt, its actors can be replaced via a democratic process. In contrast, a democracy's key institutions cannot be completely replaced and are much more difficult to change. Thus, the degree of trust in Germany's Bundestag is an important pillar of the faith in its democracy, functioning and legitimacy as the best political system.

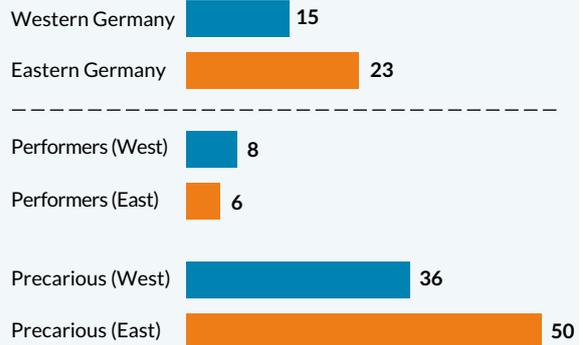
Even if the majority of Germans at least trust rather than mistrust the Bundestag, 15% of all eligible voters in Western Germany and even almost a quarter (23%) of those in Eastern Germany agree with the statement "I have no trust in the Bundestag". On the face of it, this initially suggests that – as with intentions to vote for the AfD – there is a significant East-West discrepancy, and that one can hastily infer from this that "all" residents of Eastern Germany have less confidence in the Bundestag than "all" residents of Western Germany.

However, the milieu analysis shows that there are some social milieus in Eastern and Western Germany in which almost everyone at least trusts rather than mistrusts the Bundestag, while at the same time the distrust of parliament is much more strongly pronounced in other social milieus than for the average of all milieus. This is illustrated, for example, by the degrees of trust of members of the modernization-skeptical milieu of the socially Precarious and of the modernization-optimistic Performers. Only a small minority of people do not trust the Bundestag "at all" in Eastern Germany (6%) and Western Germany (8%), and the figures for the Performers in the East are even slightly better than those of their counterparts in the West. But the socially Precarious are much more distrustful in both Eastern and Western Germany. In Western Germany, more than

a third (36%) of all eligible voters from the socially Precarious milieu do not trust the Bundestag "at all," and the analogous share in Eastern Germany is one out of every two (50%).

### "I have no trust in the Bundestag"

In percent



Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

| BertelsmannStiftung

**BRIEFLY EXPLAINED:** Of all eligible voters, 15% in Western Germany and almost a quarter (23%) in Eastern Germany agree with the statement "I have no trust in the Bundestag." So, do "the" Eastern Germans have less confidence in the Bundestag than "the" Western German? The milieu analysis shows that there are social milieus in Eastern and Western Germany in which almost everyone has confidence in the Bundestag (Performers), while at the same time the distrust of parliament is much more strongly pronounced in other social milieus (Precarious). Indeed, it is not that "the" Eastern Germans have less trust in the Bundestag than "the" Western Germans. Instead, it is the modernization-skeptical milieus below the new line of conflict in German society as a whole that have less trust in the Bundestag than members of the milieus above the conflict line that favor or actively advance modernization.

Thus, both the levels of distrust in the Bundestag and the related discrepancies between East and West can be explained by milieu affiliations. Indeed, it is not that "the" Eastern Germans have less trust in the Bundestag than "the" Western Germans. Instead, it is the modernization-skeptical milieus below the new line of conflict in German society as a whole that have less confidence in the Bundestag than members of the milieus above the conflict line that favor or actively advance modernization. And because these milieus are found more frequently and in higher concentrations in Eastern Germany than in Western Germany, the level of distrust is higher in the East than in the West.

## Line of conflict (II):

### Satisfaction with the democracy's performance

Representation gaps are fostering increased levels of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democracy and leading more citizens to vote for populist parties, which have criticism of the democracy's performance as one of the core defining elements of their brand. In Germany, dissatisfaction with democracy is by far most pronounced among AfD voters. Only non-voters are less satisfied with its functioning.

A comparison of East and West shows that, on average, Eastern Germans are much more dissatisfied with the functioning of the democracy than eligible voters in Western Germany. Whereas only 8% of all eligible voters in Western Germany believe that democracy "does not work at all," the analogous figure is 14% in Eastern Germany, or almost twice as high.

But why is that?

Are people in Eastern Germany more dissatisfied with the functioning of the democracy because they are Eastern Germans? Or does one's sociocultural milieu prove to be the more dominant explanatory factor in this case, as well?

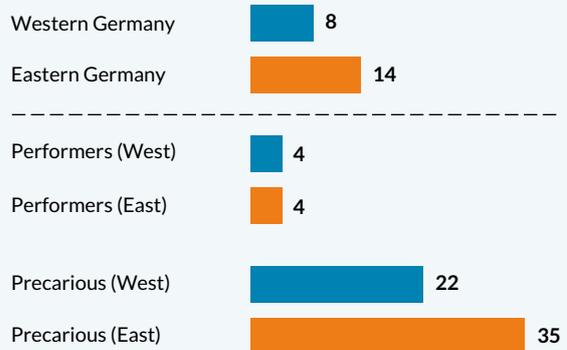
If one takes milieus into consideration, it becomes apparent that the discrepancies in satisfaction between Eastern and Western Germany are much less regionally determined and much more driven by the differences in satisfaction among the social milieus. In fact, in the modernization-optimistic Performer milieu, the levels of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the democracy's performance are at exactly the same levels in both Eastern and Western Germany. Only 4% of the eligible voters belonging to the Performers in both Eastern and Western Germany believe that the country's democracy "does not work at all". In contrast, this belief is held by almost a quarter (22%) of all eligible voters from the socially Precarious milieu in Western Germany and by more than a third (35%) of their counterparts in Eastern Germany. If one also considers that the socially Precarious are much more strongly represented in Eastern than in Western Germany, the following also becomes apparent:

It is not that "the" Eastern Germans are less satisfied with the democracy's performance than

"the" Western Germans. Instead, it is the modernization-skeptical milieus below the new line of conflict in German society as a whole that are much more dissatisfied than the modernization-optimistic milieus above the conflict line. What's more, the concentration of these milieus in Eastern Germany only boosts their level of dissatisfaction. But it is these same milieus, social conditions and resulting socio-cultural attitudes that lead to this dissatisfaction and its manifestation.

### "Democracy does not work at all"

In percent



Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

| BertelsmannStiftung

**BRIEFLY EXPLAINED:** Whereas only 8% of all eligible voters in Western Germany believe that the democracy "does not work at all," the analogous figure is 14% in Eastern Germany. However, while this view is held by only 4% of eligible voters from the Performers milieu in Germany as a whole, among those in the socially Precarious milieu, almost a quarter (22%) in the West and more than a third (35%) in the East share this opinion. This shows that it is not that "the" Eastern Germans are less satisfied with the democracy's performance than "the" Western Germans. Instead, it is the modernization-skeptical milieus below the new line of conflict of German society as a whole that are much more dissatisfied than the modernization-optimistic milieus above the conflict line. Thus, rather than running between East and West, the wall separating the satisfied from the dissatisfied runs as a diagonal conflict line straight through the social milieus of Germany society as a whole.

Thus, rather than running between Eastern and Western Germany, the wall separating those who are satisfied with the functioning of the democracy from those who are not runs as a diagonal conflict line straight through the social milieus of German society as a whole.

## Line of conflict (III): Democracy as the best political system

A similar picture emerges regarding the general attitude toward democracy as the best political system. For the legitimacy of democracy, its acceptance as the best political system is even more important than satisfaction with its functioning. Functional shortcomings can but do not necessarily lead to systemic legitimacy deficits. As long as it is only a democracy's performance that is criticized, rather than its legitimacy as a system, the democracy will remain stable as a system. But things get dangerous when functional shortcomings also delegitimize the system.

Almost no one in Germany absolutely disagrees with the statement that "democracy is the best political system." Thus, one can say that criticism of the system is much less intense than that of its performance. Nevertheless, 8% of eligible voters in Western Germany and 14% in Eastern Germany also do not explicitly agree with the statement. Instead, they place themselves in the lower half (1-3) of an opinion scale ranging from 1 ("I do not agree at all") to 7 ("I completely agree").

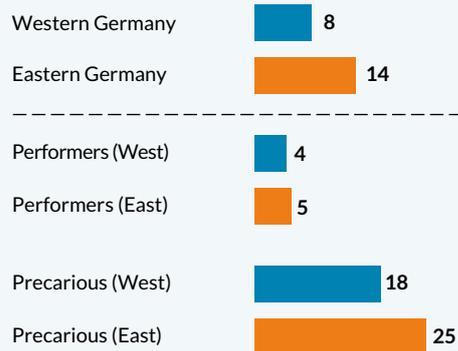
However, as with the criticism of democracy's performance, criticism of the system itself can actually be explained once again by milieu affiliation rather than by regional differences between East and West. While in the modernization-optimistic Performer milieu, only 4% of all eligible voters in Western Germany and 5% in Eastern Germany are critical of the system, the figures in the modernization-skeptical milieu of the socially Precarious are many times higher. Among the Precarious in Western Germany, almost one-fifth (18%) are also rather critical of democracy as a system. In Eastern Germany, this opinion is shared by a quarter (25%) of all eligible voters.

Thus, criticism of democracy as a system is less of a specifically East-West phenomenon in Germany and more the result of specific social circumstances and their associated attitude patterns. It is not that "the" Eastern Germans are more critical of the democratic system than "the" Western Germans. Instead, the modernization-skeptical milieus question democracy as a political system at a much higher rate than the modernization-optimistic milieus.

Once again, the new line of conflict regarding the democracy runs diagonally through German society as a whole rather than along the old wall separating East and West Germany.

### "Democracy is not the best political system"

In percent



Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

| BertelsmannStiftung

**BRIEFLY EXPLAINED:** Of all eligible voters, 8% in Western Germany and 14% in Eastern Germany do not agree with the statement that "democracy is the best political system." However, while in the modernization-optimistic Performers milieu only 4% in Western Germany and 5% in Eastern Germany are critical of the system, the figures in the modernization-skeptical milieu of the socially Precarious are many times higher, at 18% in the West and 25% in the East. This shows that it is not that "the" Eastern Germans are more critical of the democratic system than "the" Western Germans. Instead, the modernization-skeptical milieus question democracy as a political system at a much higher rate than the modernization-optimistic milieus. Thus, the new line of conflict regarding the democracy runs diagonally through German society as a whole rather than along the old wall separating East and West Germany.

Consequently, those who are concerned about the level of acceptance of the democratic system should endeavor to improve the social conditions of people in the modernization-skeptical milieus. They feel socio-economically and/or culturally suspended, and like the losers of society's modernization processes. However, these modernization processes are in turn especially shaped and driven by members of the pro-modernization milieus above the line of conflict. And it is primarily these milieus that benefit most in terms of their self-perception.

## A line of conflict through German society rather than a new East-West divide!

The election results in Thuringia seem to once again confirm the assumption that “this is just how those Eastern Germans are”. Although many interpretations and commentaries on the evening of the election did not explicitly formulate it in this way, that is what they amounted to. The Left Party received the most votes, the AfD received almost 24%, and the centrist mainstream parties of the old democracy of West Germany received less than 50% of the votes combined, meaning that they didn’t even have the votes to achieve a majority as an oversized four-party coalition.

Thus, 30 years after the fall of the Wall, it still seems to be true that Eastern Germans are simply “wired” differently, think differently and therefore also vote differently. But is this really “because” they are Eastern Germans? Do “the” Eastern Germans really vote differently than “the” Western Germans? This milieu analysis shows that “the” Eastern Germans do not intrinsically vote differently than “the” Western Germans. Instead, members of the same societal milieus in both Eastern and Western Germany vote for the right-wing populist AfD party, distrust the institutions of our democracy, criticize its performance and question its legitimacy as the best political system – all at an above-average rate. What’s more, the differences

between Eastern and Western Germany can be attributed to a new line of conflict running through German society as a whole rather than to a new wall between East and West. This line runs diagonally through the social milieus and divides the milieus of the skeptics of modernization from those who support it.

This means that similar social conditions in Eastern and Western Germany lead to similar socio-cultural attitudes and resentments, and that they also shape voting behavior in very similar patterns. Social and cultural experiences of disparagement and losing social status as well as the feeling of being left behind and not sufficiently represented by the parties lead to criticism of democracy, abstaining from voting and/or voting for populist parties and politicians. Thus, anyone who is concerned about the state of democracy in Germany must not and should not either try to achieve a new East-West divide or recklessly cause it to become – 30 years after the fall of the Wall – a self-fulfilling prophecy. The experiences that the modernization-critical milieus in Eastern Germany have had with the country’s transformation are very similar to the experiences with globalization of the people in the same milieus in the “rust belt” Ruhr region of Western Germany. Indeed, 30 years after the fall of the Wall, those of us in Western and Eastern Germany are much more similar than we sometimes suppose – also at the ballot box!

### Author:



**Dr. Robert Vehrkamp**  
robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81526

Robert Vehrkamp is Senior Advisor in the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program and currently visiting researcher in the research unit “Democracy and Democratization” at the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB).

### Further reading:

Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, Robert Vehrkamp, and Christopher Wratil (2019). Europe’s Choice – Populist attitudes and voting intentions in the 2019 European elections. Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh.

Koppetsch, Cornelia (2019). Gesellschaft des Zorns – Rechtspopulismus im globalen Zeitalter. Bielefeld.

Merkel, Wolfgang (2017). “Kosmopolitismus versus Kommunitarismus. Ein neuer Konflikt in der Demokratie.” In: Parties, Governments and Elites, (Eds.) Philipp Harfst et al. Springer VS: Wiesbaden. 9–24.

Vehrkamp, Robert, and Klaudia Wegschaider (2017). Populäre Wahlen – Mobilisierung und Gegenmobilisierung der sozialen Milieus bei der Bundestagswahl 2017. Bertelsmann Stiftung: Gütersloh.

#### Legally responsible for content

Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
D-33311 Gütersloh · www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Robert Vehrkamp, Christina Tillmann

Redaktionsassistentin und Anfragen:  
gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81105

December 2019 | ISSN: 2198-9796

#### A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program is dealing with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens’ participation. It is published 6–8 times per year on an unfixed basis.