

PRESS RELEASE

Trend reversal in the political climate: Sharp decline in populist attitudes in Germany

In the year before the 2021 federal elections, fewer and fewer people are populist, especially in the political center. The decline of populism is putting populists on the defensive. At the same time, the dangers of further radicalization on the right are increasing.

Gütersloh, September 3, 2020. The trend towards an increasingly populist political climate in Germany has been turned around. In November 2018, one in three voters still had a populist attitude, but by June 2020 it was only one in five – a drop of more than a third. At the same time, the proportion of non-populist voters has risen steeply. Compared with 31.4 percent at the end of 2018, almost one in two voters (47.1 percent) was non-populist in mid-2020. The proportion of non-populist voters has thus risen by exactly half. This reinforces the clarity of the trend: the increase in the proportion of non-populist voters has been even greater than the decrease in the proportion of populist voters.

This is the result of the new edition of the Populism Barometer compiled by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB). Commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, YouGov Germany conducted a representative survey of more than 10,000 eligible voters in June 2020. Since March 2017, this is already the fifth such survey carried out for the Populism Barometer. Respondents are considered populist if they simultaneously profess eight typically populist attitudes within the dimensions of anti-pluralism, anti-establishment, and homogeneity of the people.

Not only since corona: major shift already in 2019

The decline in populist attitudes began as early as 2019, long before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Germany, the populist wave reached its highest point so far at the end of 2018. By the end of 2019, the proportion of populists was already significantly lower and the proportion of non-populists significantly higher. The reversal in the trend continued with the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis in March 2020. “The increased trust in government work during the course of the corona crisis stabilized and slightly reinforced this trend reversal, but did not trigger it,” explains Robert Vehrkamp, democracy expert at the Bertelsmann Stiftung and co-author of the study. “Liberal democracy has responded to the populist mobilization with a democratic counter-mobilization – also and especially in the political center,” Vehrkamp continues.

Declining populism in the political center

It is striking that the anti-populist shift is underpinned and driven to an above-average degree from the political center. In the Populism Barometer 2018, this segment of the electorate was still showing the greatest increase in populist attitudes. Now, however, the proportion of non-populist voters in the political center has risen even more significantly than it has on average across the electorate. “The political center in particular is proving to be able to learn and to be robust in dealing with the populist temptation, and is thus proving to be the cornerstone of this change in public opinion,” Vehrkamp emphasizes.

Established party system increasingly resistant to populism

This is also shown when the voters of parties in the political center are analyzed. Their populism has declined sharply in prevalence and intensity. Thus, for the time being, the Union parties and the FDP have been prevented from sliding further into the populist voter segment. “The temptation of the CDU/CSU and the FDP to follow the populism of the AfD, to imitate it or at least rhetorically adapt to it, is losing its electoral appeal,” says Wolfgang Merkel, democracy researcher at the WZB and co-author of the study. The same applies to the SPD, and in the left-liberal center the Greens are once again defending their brand essence as the party least susceptible to populism. All in all, the party landscape in Germany is thus showing itself to be significantly more resistant to populism in the year before the 2021 federal elections than it was before and after the 2017 elections.

AfD: increasing dominance of right-wing extremist attitudes

The AfD remains an extreme outlier in the German party landscape in 2020. “The right-wing populist mobilization movement is becoming a party whose voters are increasingly dominated by right-wing extremist attitudes,” says Wolfgang Merkel. Almost three quarters (73 percent) of all AfD voters are either clearly populist (38 percent) or at least partially populist (35 percent). At the same time, a clear majority (56 percent) of all AfD voters are either latently right-wing extremists (27 percent) or even manifestly right-wing extremists (29 percent). The proportion of AfD voters who are both non-populist and also not right-wing extremists is only 13 %. Nearly nine out of ten AfD voters (87 %) thus either very clearly or at least latently have populist and/or right-wing extremist attitudes.

Additional information

As part of their joint project “Demokratiemonitor”, the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the WZB have jointly analyzed and evaluated these surveys. The criterion for populists is formulated relatively strictly in the Populism Barometer: only those who agree with all of the eight different populism items are considered populist. The selection of the survey items reflects the state of the art in international comparative empirical populism research.

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