



The full study is available only in German:

Schwindendes Vertrauen in Politik und Parteien.

Eine Gefahr für den gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt?

English Summary Declining Trust in Politics and Parties

A Threat to Social Cohesion?

Summary

“Trust in social and political institutions” is one of nine dimensions underlying the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s empirical measure of social cohesion. Although the studies we have conducted in recent years have shown that social cohesion in Germany as a whole remains strong, an examination of individual dimensions delivers more differentiated findings. “Trust in institutions” in particular has proven to be a dimension with rather low values. This finding is especially significant in view of the growing populism in Germany. The two sub-studies summarized in this brochure thus concentrate on this aspect of social cohesion. They examine the current situation in the country in terms of people’s willingness to support democracy and their trust in political institutions, particularly political parties.

Both teams of authors make use of a representative and regionally segmented dataset from the Social Cohesion Radar. From January to March 2017, the infas Institute for Applied Social Sciences surveyed more than 5,000 people in Germany by telephone (landline and mobile phones). The high number of respondents and the extensive questionnaire that addresses a wide range of topics have produced a dataset that is extremely insightful. It makes it possible to examine regional differences more closely while also comparing various demographic groups in detail, something that is not possible with many of the standard surveys carried out in Germany. Moreover, to compare findings over time, infas posed a number of key questions again in July and August 2018 as part of a multi-topic survey, for which a representative sample of 1,000 people were interviewed (also via landline and mobile phone).

The first study, *Muster regionaler Demokratieunterstützung in Deutschland 2017* (Regional Patterns of Support for Democracy in Germany 2017), by Tom Mannewitz (TU Chemnitz) and Erik Vollmann (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), explores the different forms of support for democracy in Germany’s states. The second study, *Gesundes Misstrauen oder Vertrauenskrise?* (Healthy Skepticism or Crisis of Confidence?), by Rainer Faus and Simon Storks (both of the pollytix consulting firm), sheds light on the reasons for lower levels of trust. The analyses offered in both studies draw entirely on the 2017 dataset. Both teams of authors considered only answers provided by the 4,969 respondents who could be assigned to a specific region (of 5,040 in total). For their analysis, Faus and Storks used only those responses provided by individuals who were at least 18 years old at the time they were interviewed (4,733 respondents), while Mannewitz and Vollmann included all interviewees 16 years old or older in their assessment.

Key findings:

- **A clear majority of Germans support democracy, although in declining numbers:** In 2018, 69 percent of the respondents said they feel democracy is the best form of government, and less than 10 percent disagreed with that statement. This finding, however, shows a drop in the support for democracy by 7 percentage points in the course of one year (2017: 76%). Similarly, a majority (52%) expressed satisfaction with democracy as it exists in Germany, while 19 percent stated that they are not satisfied, showing a 5 percentage points increase since 2017.
- **The number of those satisfied with democracy is decreasing:** In 2017, a majority of the interviewees, 53 percent, endorsed democracy both in principle and in practice. This group of “satisfied advocates of democracy” can be contrasted with “dissatisfied skeptics of democracy,” meaning people who reject democracy as a form of government and who are dissatisfied with it in practice. The share of those espousing the latter view is small, at just under 3 percent. In 2018, however, the share of those satisfied with democracy fell to 46 percent, while the number of respondents expressing ambivalence grew.
- **Trust in political institutions – excepting the federal government – has been largely stable:** Since 2017, the scores for trust in the federal parliament, state parliaments, state governments, political parties, law enforcement and the judiciary have remained more or less constant, fluctuating only negligibly. The federal government is the only institution for which trust has shifted noticeably, falling from 30 percent in 2017 to 24 percent in 2018.
- **Acceptance of democracy is lower in Germany’s eastern states:** Overall, there is strong support for democracy in Germany, although considerable regional disparities exist. Acceptance of democracy as the best form of government is consistently lower in the eastern states than in their western counterparts. The state with the lowest level of acceptance is Brandenburg, at 61 percent; the highest is Lower Saxony, at 84 percent.
- **When it comes to satisfaction with democracy in practice, clear differences exist between east and west:** In all of Germany’s western states, more than half of the interviewees in 2017 said they are satisfied with Germany’s democracy in practice; in six states (Hamburg, Saarland, Baden-Württemberg, Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony and Rhineland-Palatinate), the level of satisfaction even exceeds 60 percent. In the eastern states, only in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania did more than half of the respondents say they are satisfied; in Brandenburg and Saxony, the figure is less than 40 percent.
- **Regulative institutions enjoy more trust than representative ones:** On average, all institutions (law enforcement, judiciary, state parliaments, state governments, federal parliament, federal government, political parties, public broadcasters) are more trusted (35%) than distrusted (22%). If one considers the institutions individually, it becomes clear that the more regulative constitutional institutions, such as the judiciary and law enforcement,

enjoy considerably more trust than representative institutions. More than two-thirds of Germans trust the police, for example, and just under half trust the courts. Approximately one-third of the respondents trust their state government, and slightly more than one-quarter trust the state parliament itself. We see the same figures for the federal government parliament and federal government, respectively. There is markedly less trust in political parties, which in 2017 only 9 percent of the respondents expressed trust in (2018: 10%).

- **Trust in political parties increases with income:** People with a lower socioeconomic status in particular express less trust in political parties. For example, over 40 percent of the respondents with a net household income of under €3,000 do not trust political parties, while the same is true of significantly less than 30 percent of those with an income of over €3,000.
- **Feelings of injustice and insecurity translate into distrust of political parties:** Over 60 percent of the respondents who perceive society as very unfair do not trust political parties at all. Among those experiencing high levels of insecurity, the figure is 56 percent. The situation is different for those who feel that society is very just or who experience no insecurity, with only 12 and 27 percent, respectively, having no trust in political parties.
- **Party affiliation increases trust – except in the case of the AfD:** As a rule, those affiliated with a particular party also trust parties in general to a greater degree. This clearly does not apply, however, to supporters of the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) party, with 66 percent of AfD supporters saying they tend to distrust political parties.

The lower levels of trust in democracy and political institutions is a warning signal for social cohesion and a point of attack for populists. That makes responsible policymaking – that is, policymaking that focuses on solutions to the issues people are actually concerned about – all the more important. This includes a social policy capable of sustainably reducing poverty and inequality. In a time of growing complexity, it also requires a willingness to explain political activities and make the related processes transparent while defining the underlying values. Lively debates in civil society show that it is well worth engaging in dialogue, working to increase citizen participation, and cooperating with partners in civil society to actively shape communal life in a diverse society. Conflict cannot be avoided, but it is necessary and good, as long as it is supported by a democratic consensus.

The Living Values program

In the Living Values program, we examine social cohesion and especially the role played by religion and values for living together in diverse societies. We regularly research and publish new studies on these topics in the Religion Monitor and the Social Cohesion Radar. In addition, we actively seek to strengthen values through practical projects and methodologies, and work to build networks between civil society actors engaged in our field.



If you would like to learn more about our work, or receive regular information about new research results, studies and events, please use the QR code provided or visit the link below.

<http://b-sti.org/lebendigewerte>

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