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Of Performers And Precarious – Is Germany Becoming A Democracy Of The Better-Off?

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Low Voter Turnout Means Unequal Voter Turnout

In the run-up to the 2013 federal parliamentary elections in Germany, one could tune into a wide-ranging debate within the media about non-voters. On talk shows, prominent non-voters discussed the reasons why they had decided not to go to the polls. One saw journalists, actors, businesspeople and professors who primarily attributed their refusal to vote to a general disenchantment with politicians and political parties – and, furthermore, they did so using arguments that were highly political in terms of content. This gave rise to the impression that non-voters were particularly political people or, in any case, more politically informed and eloquent than many voters. In the wake of the election, however, the media debate fell abruptly silent. At least two aspects of this are noteworthy:

• First, the debate fell silent despite the fact that voter turnout had stagnated at a historic (and almost record) low of 71.5 percent and despite the fact that low voter turnout also always means unequal voter turnout. Indeed, all discussions about the possible consequences of low voter turnout fall short of the mark whenever they focus solely on the general level of voter participation. Concealed behind the voter-turnout average are differences and disparities that demonstrably increase whenever voter turnout declines on the whole. For the 2013 federal parliamentary election, the difference between electoral districts with the highest and lowest voter turnouts already stood at almost 30 percentage points. Even within individual cities, one could observe sometimes dramatic differences in voter participation. In Cologne, for example, voter turnout was worlds apart (46.2 percentage points) in the neighborhoods of Hahnwald (88.7%) and Chorweiler (42.5%) (with “neighborhood,” or Stadtteil, understood as a distinct, official subdivision of a district, or Stadtbezirk). The differences were similarly large in Hamburg (34 percentage points) and Düsseldorf (33 percentage points).

• Second, the image that the media portrayed of non-voters reflects only a small part of the reality. In any case, the people who represented non-voters on talk shows do not faithfully represent the bulk of the 17 million non-voters in Germany. Indeed, in the majority of cases, declining to vote is not a conscious decision following a systematic analysis and weighing of all arguments speaking for or against casting a ballot. Instead, not voting is very closely correlated with the social circumstances in which individuals live.

An analysis of 28 large cities and 640 representative voting districts across Germany finds that the social living conditions, social status and particular mix of social milieus of a residential area determine how high voter turnout will be.
These varying social realities are manifested, for example, in the societal milieus that shape a residential area, in the unemployment level, in the level of educational achievement, in the type of habitations and, last but not least, in the purchasing power of its households. The more precarious the living conditions in a neighborhood or voting district, the lower the voter turnout. In more concrete terms, this means that with a higher proportion of socially disadvantaged milieus, with higher unemployment, with inferior living conditions, with lower education levels and with lower average purchasing power, a neighborhood or voting district will have lower voter turnout.

The Different Worlds of Voters and Non-Voters

The differences in living circumstances become particularly vivid if one examines the societal milieus and how they correlate with voter participation. One used to speak of THE upper class or THE middle class. But, these days, the way one looks at societal groups is more differentiated. The microm Geo Milieus®, which are based on the Sinus Milieus®, are distributed within a two-dimensional space that has social status along one axis and values, attitudes and basic orientation along the other (see infographic: Geo Milieus microm®). If one takes these 10 milieus and their distribution in a defined area and analyzes them in relation to voter participation, a distinct picture emerges: The larger the share of people from socially disadvantaged milieus inhabiting a neighborhood the smaller the voter turnout is there. Likewise, wherever the share of the inhabitants from socially stronger milieus is above average, voter turnout also turns out to be higher than average.

- In areas inhabited by many people from the liberal-intellectual and high achiever milieus, voter turnout is at an above-average level. The well-educated and young, high-achieving elites of these milieus attach much value to living a self-determined life and thinking in global-economic terms, and they are characterized by a wide range of intellectual interests.

- The established-conservative and socio-ecological milieus also have a positive influence on voter turnout. The traditional establishment, distinguished by a strong responsibility- and success-oriented ethic, is to be found here. However, it also
includes groups that are critical of consumption and have very clear views about a normatively “correct” life as well as a strong social conscience. In areas with an above-average share of inhabitants from these milieus, one can observe a slightly positive effect on the level of voter turnout.

- A contrasting and thereby negative effect on voter turnout appears wherever the three socially disadvantaged milieus – those of the traditional, the precarious and the escapist – live. A need for security, a fondness for order and the mind-set of the petty bourgeoisie characterize these milieus, as do major anxieties about the future, poor prospects for social advancement and social disadvantages. However, at the same time, primarily the precarious and escapist milieus are also characterized by a lower stratum that is oriented toward fun and experiences while rejecting the conventions and behavioral expectations of the achievement-oriented segments of society. Wherever these basic attitudes appear, there is below-average voter turnout.

- In contrast, the milieus of the new middle class, the adaptive-pragmatists and the movers and shakers have no measurable effect on voter turnout. Here one finds the ambitious, creative avant-garde next to the conservative mainstream and the young modern middle class with a markedly pragmatic outlook on life.

It is precisely within the socially disadvantaged milieus that basic orientation and fundamental values make a crucial difference: While traditional values facilitate the path to the ballot box, basic attitudes that are individualistic, experimental and aiming for a new orientation or one promising fun or fresh experiences tend to lead toward declining to vote.

In sum, in the neighborhoods with the lowest voter-turnout rates, there are almost 10 times as many residents (67%) belonging to the three socially precarious milieus as there are in the neighborhoods with the highest voter-turnout rates (7%).

Low Voter Turnout in Areas with High Unemployment

As with the milieus, unemployment levels are also closely correlated with voter-turnout levels. The more unemployed residents there are living in a certain area, the lower voter turnout is there. The analysis of 28 large cities shows that there are almost five times as many jobless residents in neighborhoods with the lowest voter-turnout rates as in those with the highest voter-turnout rates. In neighborhoods with large-scale unemployment (e.g., Prohlis-Süd in Dresden...
or Tenever in Bremen), only slightly more than 50 percent of eligible voters exercised their right to vote. In contrast, neighborhoods enjoying full employment (e.g., Volmerswerth in Düsseldorf and Nienstedten in Hamburg) had voter-turnout rates of around 90 percent. What’s more, there is an additional effect because it is usually the case that neighborhoods with high unemployment also have high shares of foreigners who are not eligible to vote. Thus, if one takes as a starting point the entire population of a neighborhood rather than just the segment of the population that is entitled to vote, voter-turnout rates are even lower. In extreme cases, the voice of only one-third of an area’s population is represented in the election result. In fact, the correlation between voter participation and unemployment is so strong that one can use it as a basis for making predictions: If one knows the jobless rates, one can predict with a high degree of probability what the voter turnout in the individual areas of a city will be.

Low Levels of Education in Areas with Low Voter Turnout

An almost equally close correlation can be observed between the educational level in a residential area and voter turnout: As a general rule, the lower the average level of educational achievement, the lower the voter turnout. The analysis of 28 large German cities showed that, in the neighborhoods with the lowest voter-participation rates, more than twice as many people (15.2%) have no secondary-school degree (Schulabschluss) and far fewer than half (18.2%) have the pre-university degree (Abitur) than in the neighborhoods with the highest voter-turnout rates.

This becomes even more pronounced when one examines a particular city in detail: For example, in the Weststadt district of Braunschweig, only 15 percent of residents hold an Abitur degree, while almost 35 percent of residents in the Volksmarode district do. Whereas voter participation lay at 85 percent in Volksmarode, it was around 27 percentage points lower in Weststadt (58%).

This leads to a situation in which voters from residential areas in which education is understood as a self-evident part of everyday life enjoy above-average representation in an election result. In contrast, people from less educated areas are underrepresented in the election result in terms of their specific interests and concerns.

“Take, for example, the social and democratic cleavages in Cologne: In Chorweiler (19.3% unemployment), 42.5 percent voted; in contrast, 88.7 percent voted in Hahnwald (1% unemployment).”
High-Rises and Low Purchasing Power in Areas with Low Voter Turnout

After seeing such clear correlations between voter turnout and milieus, unemployment and education, it is hardly surprising that there is also a strong correlation between financial situation and the level of voter turnout. The pattern continues.

In the neighborhoods with the lowest voter turnout, the average annual purchasing power of households stands at Euro 35,000, or roughly one-third lower than the household purchasing power in the neighborhoods with the highest voter turnout (Euro 52,000). Succinctly put, this means that the better the financial situation of a neighborhood, the higher the voter turnout. The more precarious the living conditions, the lower the voter turnout.

This same correlation can also be observed in the type of habitations characterizing a neighborhood: The areas in which only a few residents exercised their right to vote in the federal parliamentary election were primarily dominated by large residential complexes or multi-story apartment buildings. Typical here are large social-housing and high-rise complexes, such as those found in the Gaarden-Ost neighborhood of Kiel (voter turnout: 47.5%). Conversely, voter participation is without exception high in better residential locations characterized by single- and two-family houses, such as the Rönne neighborhood of Kiel (voter turnout: 85.6%).

Precarious Milieus Are Underrepresented in German Democracy

If one takes together all this information and the demonstrated correlations between social situation and voter turnout, a drastic picture emerges: In areas with high unemployment, limited disposable incomes and low education levels, voter participation is lower than it is in areas with high employment rates, incomes and education levels. Thus, a large proportion of non-voters live in areas with precarious living conditions.

In addition to the low level of voter participation, it is above all these drastic social differences in voter turnout that present a challenge to our democracy. As our analysis shows, a disproportionately large number of the people who opted not to vote in the 2013 federal parliamentary election came from the socially precarious milieus. Their opinions, preferences and interests are thereby under-represented in the election result. For this reason, the 2013 election was a socially precarious vote.
Thus, the prevailing image of prominent non-voters in the run-up to the election actually had very little to do with reality. Concealed behind the rising number of non-voters is not a broad movement of politically motivated citizens who come from the socially strong and established classes and have resolved to boycott elections. Likewise, voter-participation levels also appear to be less dependent on day-to-day politics and ongoing political debates than is widely assumed. But, above all, non-voters do not come in equal measure from all segments and strata of the population. In fact, it is primarily the socially disadvantage milieus of society that are bowing out from democratic participation via voting – and more and more of their members are doing so for good: More than 70 percent of those who did not vote in the 2013 federal parliamentary election already didn’t cast ballots in the previous election, in 2009.

Given these facts, low voter turnout in Germany is also not a problem that can be resolved in the short term. On the contrary, it is a structural problem whose roots lie in social disparity and changing values, primarily those of the more socially disadvantaged milieus. Indeed, it would most likely only be possible to reverse the democratic disparity observable in the various voter-participation rates in a lasting and effective manner by diminishing social disparity. A more inclusive system of education – that is, one in which children’s educational achievement no longer depends on the social status of their parents – as well as a more inclusive labor market would accordingly also help Germany’s democracy.
“I Voted. Did You?”

Furthermore, we must also give some thought to stimuli that could already have an effect in the short term. Some promising examples already exist, including the successful “Kalk wählt” (“Kalk votes”) initiative of the Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, a daily newspaper published in Cologne. For a two-week period, initiative participants tried to get residents of the city’s Kalk district to pay particular attention to voting. Home visits, street fairs and making direct, personal contact were key tools of the initiative. Of course, one might think that’s nothing really new – but it worked: Voter turnout in Kalk rose for the 2013 election rose by 4.5 percentage points compared to the 2009 election, which represented the largest increase in voter participation in all parts of Cologne.

This logic is also based on an approach from the United States: As friendships and social relations become increasingly established in social networks, one may use the latter to give an additional incentive to participate in elections. Experiments have shown that one can successfully use Facebook to create peer pressure to cast one’s ballot. On election day, Facebook users were notified about how many of their friends had indicated that they had voted. An astonishing effect emerged: The more friends who indicated that they had voted, the greater the social pressure became to also vote – and the greater the likelihood that one would go vote oneself.

This shows that initiatives undertaken by completely different actors can also have a positive effect on voter turnout in the short term. Such initiatives require the active involvement not only of political parties, but also of other societal actors. Likewise, it doesn’t always have to be a broad-based and meticulously planned campaign on the national level, as grassroots initiatives that take shape within social networks can also make a valuable contribution. So all of our involvement is demanded as well!