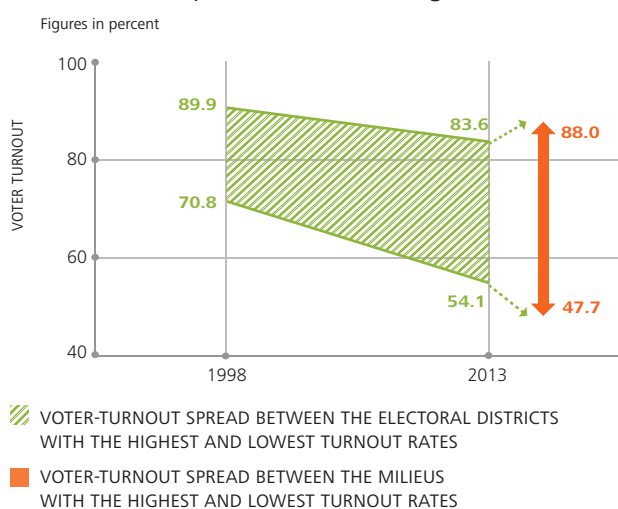




## Declining Voter Turnout Harms our Democracy

Declining voter turnout at all levels of government harms Germany’s democracy. It intensifies political inequality, as the decreases are not proportionate across all groups in society. More than anyone, it is members of the socially disadvantaged milieus who exercise their right to vote less often, thereby making election results less and less socially representative. Indeed, for some time now, Germany has been a socially divided democracy (see graphic).

### Voter-Turnout Spreads for Bundestag Elections

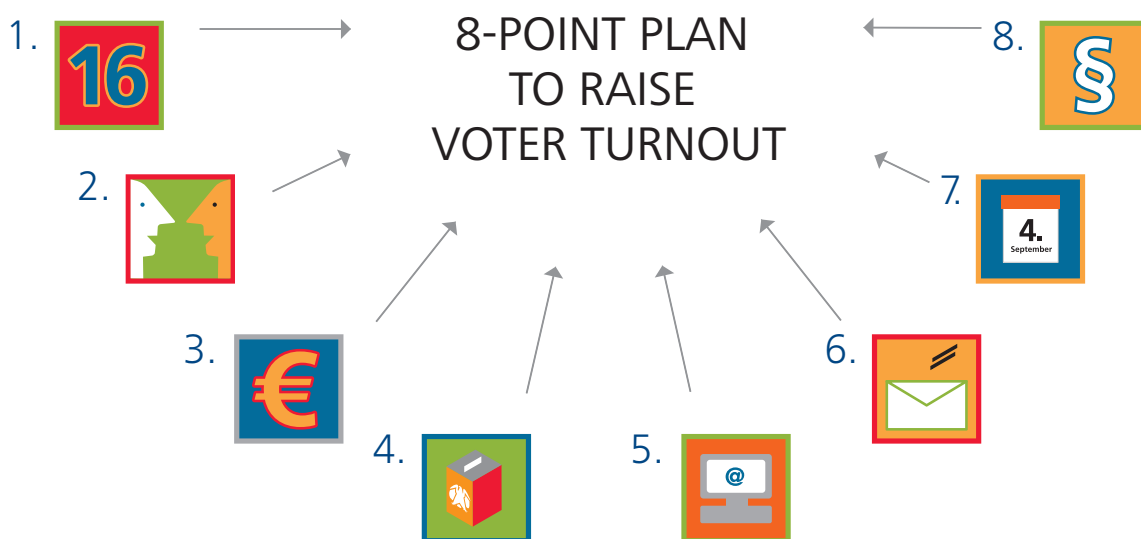
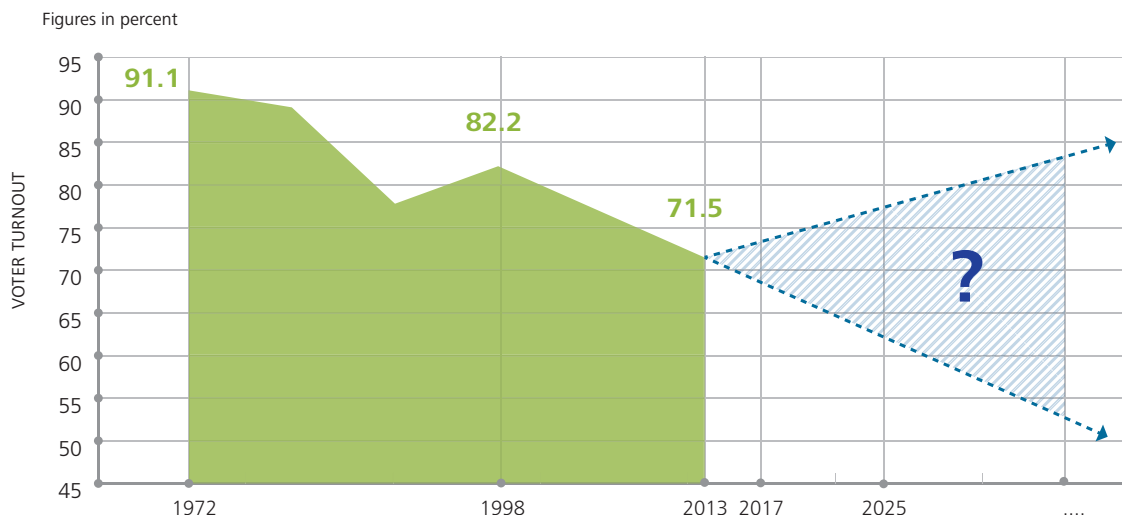






Sources: infratest dimap, microm, own calculations.

Thus, the goal of having a voter turnout that is higher and less socially divided is a key challenge for our democracy: If we can’t manage to get voter turnout back up, the representative democracy will lose internal legitimacy. The 2013 elections for the 18th Bundestag only represented the votes of 59.5 percent of all eligible voters and those of only 53.6 percent of all voting-age residents of Germany. Taking the average of all electoral districts, even the direct mandates were elected by less than a third of all voting-age residents. This leads to a self-reinforcing loss in acceptance of the representative system, which will stand on fragile foundations in the long run without the active and socially representative participation of its citizens.

However, a trend reversal won’t come out of nowhere. For that, there needs to be a concerted effort and strategy on the part of all democratic forces to (re-)mobilize this ever-growing group of non-voters. Already today, 41.0 percent of non-voters identify themselves as “never-voters”, but a large majority (59.0 percent) of non-voters still view themselves as “occasional voters” or even “always voters”. Thus, they do not rule out participation in elections per se. If the established parties and democratic forces don’t go after these non-voters, others will. Indeed, troubling examples of this can be found in the success that populist parties and movements in many European countries have had at mobilization. Every effort to prevent that is worthwhile.

Still, how can non-voters be motivated to go to the polls? The following 8-point plan admittedly doesn’t supply any simple, fail-safe solutions. However, addressing the core issues of who votes, how we vote and according to which rules we vote, it contains concrete proposals that could help – in both the near and long terms – get voter turnout back up and mitigate its social inequality.



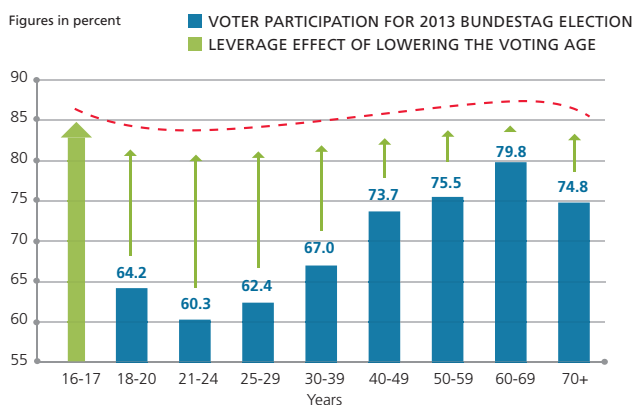
1.  **Lower the Voting Age to 16** – Lowering the active voting age to 16 will boost voter turnout for all elections – and keep it there!
2.  **Mobilize Non-Voters** – A non-partisan door-to-door campaign will increase voter turnout by up to 10 percentage points.
3.  **Reform Party Financing** – Introducing a voter-turnout bonus will create incentives aimed at mobilizing non-voters.
4.  **Modernize Poll Voting** – A national electronic electoral roll and voting computers will enable all citizens to cast their votes at any polling station.
5.  **Use the Opportunities of I-Voting** – Over time, the Internet will develop into a new channel for casting votes during elections.
6.  **Make Postal Voting Easier** – Postal voting documents will be sent to all eligible voters automatically and without request.
7.  **Combine Election Dates** – Having fewer voting dates by combining them vertically and horizontally will increase voter turnout.
8.  **Simplify the Election Law** – Having a simpler election law will also contribute to increasing voter turnout and making it less socially selective.

## 1. **16** Lower the Voting Age to 16

*Lowering the voting age to 16 can boost voter participation – and keep it there. Crucial for this are first-time voters: If their participation rises by being allowed to vote once they turn 16, it will also raise overall voter turnout on a long-term and sustainable basis.*

The number of young individuals entitled to vote as a share of the overall population has been declining for years. At the same time, their turnout at elections is below average and particularly socially selective. Already today, they are distinctly under-represented in election results. However, lowering the voting age can not only get, but also keep participation higher and reduce their social division.

### Leverage Effect on Voter Turnout of Lowering the Voting Age



Source: Germany's Federal Returning Officer, own calculations.

The fact is that turnout of first-time voters is decisive. Indeed, many studies show that the first vote plays a key role in determining an individual's (voting) life cycle. It influences the likelihood of whether eligible voters will participate in elections for the rest of their lives. Voting behavior is path dependent: Whether or not someone goes to the polls strongly influences whether he or she will also participate in future elections. If young individuals abstain from voting during their first election, it increases the odds that they also won't vote at the next election. However, the opposite is also true: People who participate in their first election will in all likelihood also go to the polls in the future, form a "voting habit" early on and come to regard voting as a matter of course.

Thus, the first vote has a major influence on our lifelong participation in elections. If turnout of the youngest groups of voters could be boosted by a third, that alone would lead to an increase in overall voter turnout for Bundestag elections from the 71.5 percent in 2013 to nearly 80 percent in 2049. The likelihood of first-time voting during the Bundestag election is thus a strategic lever for boosting overall voter turnout over the long run.

On the other hand, an alternative scenario shows what will happen if nothing changes: First-time voter participation of the youngest voters has been steadily declining since the 1980s. If this trend continues and voter participation of the youngest age groups declines by a third, overall voter participation for the 2049 Bundestag elections will dip below 60 percent (57.8 percent) for that reason alone. So it's important that we act on this now.

Empirical studies show why lowering the voting age to 16 is needed to raise first-time voter participation. Today's minimum voting age of 18 means that young people first get the right to vote during a very mobile phase of life in which their circumstances undergo major changes. They move out of their family home, leave their hometown and change their circle of friends or social milieu. Young people between 16 and 17, on the other hand, are frequently still embedded in the social surroundings of their family home, circle of friends, clubs and school. These differences are reflected in a much higher turnout rate: When 16- and 17-year-olds are allowed to vote (as in Austria, Hamburg, Bremen and Brandenburg), they cast votes more often than older first-time voters do.

However, it's also true that raising voter turnout by lowering the voting age isn't simply about flipping a switch. Indeed, raising first-time voter participation can only work if it is accompanied by sustained measures aimed at mobilizing young people. The odds of doing so are good because almost all 16- and 17-year-olds can be reached in schools. There, they can already participate in elections and the many creative voter-participation projects organized by government and civil society actors. Such activities generally take place shortly before elections. And, as can be seen from the 2015 elections in Hamburg, such measures have been successful. The city-state's election law permits voters to allot up to five votes among the parties. Voters between 16 and 17 exercised this option more than those in all other age groups. At the same time, they cast invalid ballots much less often than the overall average. Indeed, thanks to the supporting measures and projects, the youngest voters were very well informed about Hamburg's complex election law.

In the future, along with lowering the voting age, long-term, sustainable measures should also be established for Bundestag elections. Voting should be given more prominence in schools than it currently enjoys. Political education and hands-on democratic experiences should be firmly anchored in everyday school life and classroom instruction. More than 8 in 10 (81.0 percent) of all young people and more than 6 in 10 (61.5 percent) of all people in Germany favor such mobilization measures. Integrating them into everyday school life is important because the social divide among young voters is much more pronounced than in the population as a whole. For young children and adolescents from homes with parents less interested in politics, such projects are often the only means of political socialization. In this case, they learn about self-efficacy and see that things can be achieved through democratic means. So these are worthwhile measures!

## Sources

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Survey data cited in the text comes from polls conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by the Allensbach Institute between February and November 2015 (IfD Surveys 11045, 11048, 11036 and 11046) as well as surveys conducted by infratest dimap in July 2015 and regarding the 2013 Bundestag elections.

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2.



## Mobilize Non-Voters

*Directly addressing people in person at their doorstep has the potential to mobilize non-voters, too. Pilot projects indicate that a nationwide, non-partisan door-to-door campaign to mobilize non-voters could increase voter turnout by up to 10 percentage points.*

Voting is a social activity: If your friends and families vote, it increases the odds that you will, too. People want to live up to the expectations of those around them – and that also applies to voting. Targeted door-to-door campaigns use this effect to mobilize voters. Speaking to people in person and explicitly encouraging them to participate in an election increases voter turnout. Indeed, pilot projects in the United States and Germany were able to achieve a rise of up to 10 percentage points. In contrast, making contact via mail or by phone has a much smaller effect – even with a comparable message. Thus, the crucial factor is personal contact as well as the appeal “Your vote counts!”. In fact, the positive effect is even contagious, as the effect passes itself on to the family, circle of friends and entire social surroundings of those with whom the campaign has made direct contact. Through a kind of snowball effect, this creates an additional rise in voter turnout. Using such campaigns, one can reach not only individual societal groups, but all strata and milieus of society.

Given this, why don’t we conduct this kind of door-to-door campaign across Germany in the weeks before the next Bundestag election? Volunteer election workers could distribute information nationwide and urge as many people as possible to vote in face-to-face interactions. It goes without saying that they would be completely non-partisan and have nothing to do with any party’s campaign activities. Still, would this also be feasible in practice and affordable? This kind of campaign would incur additional expenses for compensating volunteer election workers, which initial estimates put somewhere in the range of Euro 25-35 million. Relative to the total spending of nearly Euro 130 million for the 2013 Bundestag election, this would mean additional expenses of roughly a quarter. For a chance to boost voter turnout by up to 10 percentage points, doesn’t that seem like a reasonable expense?

### Field experiments on door-to-door campaigns in Germany

A field experiment was conducted in 2014 for the municipal elections in Mainz, the capital city of the western state of Rhineland-Palatinate, in order to test the impact of door-to-door visits before national elections in Germany, too. During the two weeks before election day, university students went from door-to-door distributing information flyers. The results matched those of American studies: While talking in person resulted in mobilizing voters,

merely putting a flyer in the mailbox did not. The relative increase in voter turnout resulting from door-to-door visits lay between two and three percentage points. If one also takes into account the fact that only one in three house doors was actually opened, the rise in voter turnout is comparable with that found in the American studies. (cf. Faas, Thorsten / Hohmann, Daniela (2014): Mobilisierung bei Nebenwahlen: ein Feldexperiment zu Mobilisierungspotenzialen von Wahlkämpfen anlässlich der Kommunalwahl 2014 in Rheinland-Pfalz.)

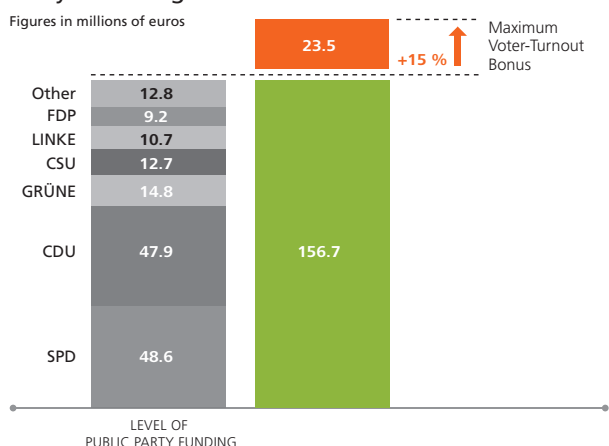
### 3. Reform Party Financing

*Mobilizing non-voters is expensive – and comes at a much higher cost than fishing for votes among those who already intend to vote. For this reason, the party-financing system should create incentives to raise voter participation. The introduction of a voter-turnout bonus would be a first step.*

Political parties in Germany are partially financed by the government – and that is both important and correct, too. So far, however, this financing has hardly done anything to stimulate higher voter turnout.

In 2014, the absolute upper limit for public funding of political parties was Euro 156.7 million – and this maximum amount was also disbursed in full. About 50 percent of the amount that each party obtained was tied to the number of votes it received in European, federal and state elections. The other half was calculated on the basis of a partial public funding for donations and member dues, among other things. Since 2002, the maximum public contribution has not been completely disbursed only once. Thus, declining voter turnout has so far not had any impact on the level of party financing. In fact, even if average turnout had fallen by nearly 11 percent more in the recent European, federal and state parliamentary elections, the parties wouldn't have suffered any financial losses at all in 2014. That could be changed by making the level of party financing in part dependent on the level of voter turnout. In this case, declining voter turnout would lead to smaller payments. And if the number of voters rose, more money would also be available to the parties.

#### Party Financing and Voter-Turnout Bonus



Source: Deutscher Bundestag, Assessment of public funds for the year 2014, own diagram.

A concrete step in this direction would be introducing a voter-turnout bonus, e.g., in the form of a bonus payment allocated on top of the current party financing, but one that would be explicitly tied to the level of voter participation. Still, how could a model like this be realized? A target voter-turnout rate could initially be set for each year, with the rate calculated from an average of the previous years plus a target rate of increase. If this target value for voter participation is reached, the bonus (e.g., 15.0 percent of the current maximum amount) would be disbursed in full. For example, in 2014, this could have resulted in bonus payments of up to Euro 23.5 million (15.0 percent of Euro 156.7 million). If this target amount is only partially reached, the bonus payment would also only be proportionally disbursed.

Thus, it appears that a voter-turnout bonus would make the level of voter participation a shared interest of all parties in financial terms, too. In other words, it would be a worthwhile thing to do!





## Modernize Poll Voting

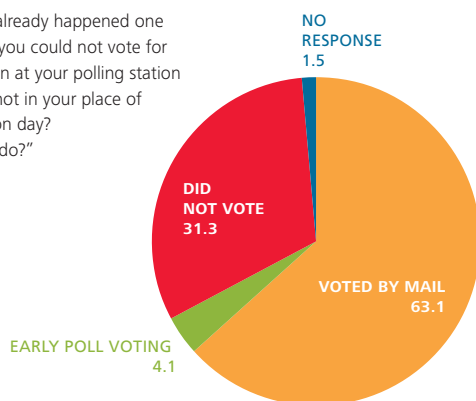
*The organization of poll voting is no longer up-to-date. It no longer corresponds with the mobility patterns of the modern day and age. A nationwide electronic electoral roll and voting computers would enable every eligible voter to vote at any of the ca. 80,000 polling stations nationwide.*

There were ca. 80,000 polling stations for the last Bundestag election. That seems like a lot at first glance. But if you take a closer look, it becomes evident that voters didn't benefit from this large number. This is because they can only cast their votes in the polling stations in their electoral district, and most of them only know about the polling station listed on their election notice. The following analogy illustrates just how outdated that is: Imagine you could only withdraw money from one of the ca. 60,000 ATMs in Germany. You'd probably start looking for more practical alternatives pretty fast! But the only alternative voters have is voting by mail – or, in the worst case, not voting at all.

### Use of Alternatives to Poll Voting

**Question:** "Has it already happened one or more times that you could not vote for a Bundestag election at your polling station because you were not in your place of residence on election day? If so, what did you do?"

Figures in percent



n = 618 respondents age 16 and older.

Source: Allensbach Institute survey on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Nov. 2015).

To meet the needs of an increasingly mobile society, the rigid poll-voting system must become less location-dependent. Voting should be possible at any polling station nationwide. Nearly half of the population has already been away from their place of residence on election day one or more times. Two thirds (67.2 percent) of them use postal voting or early poll voting as an alternative, meaning that a voter can already cast his or her vote in the community services office during the postal-voting period. In contrast, a third (31.3 percent) of them completely abstained from voting if they weren't present on election day. Indeed, having "Election Sunday" and a polling station near home used to make it as easy as possible for many people to vote. But that's no longer the case. Our society is more mobile now, and poll voting must adapt to this fact.

To enable voting at any polling station nationwide, two preconditions must be met: First, we need a national electronic electoral roll that centrally compiles for all of Germany who is entitled to vote and who has applied for postal voting. At present, each community compiles its own register of voters using its register of residents, thereby tying the voter to the electoral district of his or her place of residence. Thus, if the federal government wanted to compile a national electoral roll, instead of having to collect and store duplicate information, it would only need to gain access to the registers of residents of the municipalities or federal states in the run-up to an election and then assemble this information into a national roll.



Second, there needs to be a mechanism ensuring that voters receive the appropriate ballot for the election listing the direct candidates of the electoral district of their place of residence, and that their vote will be securely transmitted to where it can be counted. Traditional paper ballots are not suitable for this because it would require that the ballots from the other 298 electoral districts were available in each electoral district, and that, once filled out, they were forwarded to the voter's electoral district – which is hardly conceivable in terms of time, logistics and security technology. Thus, we need to have networked voting computers in the polling stations. Using such computers, the appropriate ballot would be on hand for each voter and their votes could be transmitted swiftly and securely.

In 2009, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court defined requirements for using voting computers, focusing particularly on safeguards against manipulation, maintaining the confidentiality of votes and public oversight. The Ministry of the Interior is supposed to transpose these requirements into an amended Federal Voting Machine Regulation and thereby establish a basis for the secure use of voting computers.

Many other countries (e.g., Brazil and the US) already have experience with voting computers. In Belgium, a system making it possible to verify whether votes were correctly counted has already been in use since 2012. A printer connected to the voting computer generates a printout of the ballot that the voter first checks to ensure it is correct. Only then is the vote "cast" and counted using a scanner that serves as an electronic ballot box. The printouts are kept as a precaution so they can be manually recounted should the results be challenged.

Citizens seem very interested in this form of voting from anywhere: Almost half (46.8 percent) think it is a good proposal, and roughly a quarter (24.2 percent) think it would make voting easier for them personally. Among 16- and 17-year-olds, the share of those who believe this would be particularly practical for them is even 44.6 percent higher (35.0 percent).

Germany has also had some initial positive experiences with voting at the polling station of one's choice: When Hamburg held a referendum on its Olympic bid in November 2015, a central electoral roll was compiled and all 200 polling stations were networked, enabling every eligible voter to vote at any polling station. The polling stations close to Christmas markets were especially popular – which is proof of how having voting options better aligned with voters' everyday lives is very attractive.

5.



## Use the Opportunities of I-Voting

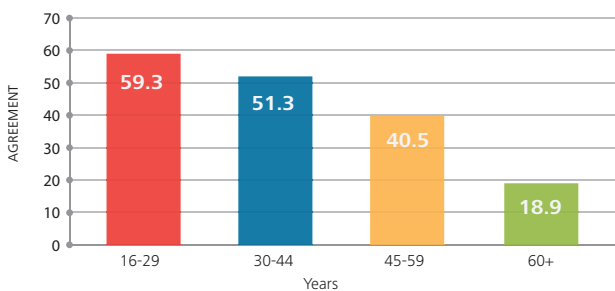
*Citizens are very open to digital voting possibilities, such as casting their ballots online (i-voting). This is also the case with many typical non-voters. Young people, in particular, would like to have the option to vote online at any time and place.*

Our world is becoming more and more digital, and this changes our everyday lives: how we work, how we live, how we learn – and, last but not least, how we engage in political debates and decisions. Used wisely, digitization can help expand and increase democratic participation. Having an electronic electoral roll and voting computers that make it possible to vote at any polling station are a first step. At the same time, looking further ahead, they are also the foundation for voting via the Internet (i-voting) from home – completely liberated from the polling station.

### Support for I-Voting by Age

**Question:** “If you could also vote for Bundestag elections online, would you use this option?”

Figures in percent



n = 1,400 respondents age 16 and older.

Source: Allensbach Institute survey on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Nov. 2015).

Many citizens – especially younger ones – view voting at polling stations as old-fashioned. They would like to have more flexible and modern methods of voting, such as via a smartphone app or the Internet. In general, citizens have a positive attitude about i-voting: More than half of the population between 16 and 44 would use i-voting. Even one in five (18.9 percent) of those over 60 would cast his or her vote online. These varying levels of acceptance toward i-voting can primarily be attributed to differing Internet-usage levels related to age. Going forward, as Internet usage grows among the older generations, their acceptance of online voting will increase to the same degree.

Moreover, it isn't just regular voters and people interested in politics who think highly of i-voting; non-voters do, too. While half of those between 16 and 44 would use i-voting, this figure is hardly any lower among the non-voters in this age group (41.8 percent). Likewise, there is no indication that i-voting would increase the social selectivity of voter turnout. Indeed, i-voting isn't an issue exclusive to the upper class. On the contrary, 41.5 percent of eligible voters from the broad middle class state that they would definitely or probably cast their vote online as soon as it were possible. That is the greatest share of supporters when comparing all classes. What's more, in addition to having positive impacts on voter participation, i-voting also reduces the number of unintentionally invalid ballots, precludes mistakes in counting votes and makes the election results available quickly.

Despite this public acceptance and great potential, there are still no voting apps or other ways to vote online. Before i-voting can become a reality, there are still some hurdles that need to be overcome: We must guarantee that each voter's choice is

correctly recorded, transmitted and counted while simultaneously ensuring that it is impossible to draw any inferences about which choices they made. However, an answer must still be found to the question of how the election can be publicly verifiable if the official vote counting at the polling stations is limited to only part of the ballots.

Possible solutions can be found in both academia and countries with experience in i-voting, including Australia, Canada, Estonia, France and Switzerland. In order to guarantee that voting is secret and uninfluenced, voters in Estonia and Australia, for example, can overwrite their vote several times up until election day. If voters feel they are being watched or influenced when they first cast their vote, they can recast it. In Australia, i-voters are mailed a confirmation number after voting. Using this number and an individual PIN, they can verify up until the vote that their ballot was correctly read and, after the vote, that their vote really made it into the election results. And, of course, any voting software would have to be certified in Germany and, for example, publicly tested. These examples show that there are technical possibilities for safeguarding the election principles with i-voting as well.

Looking for these ways is worthwhile. The Federal Constitutional Court has placed high hurdles for online voting, but it has also given a lot of leeway in terms of designing it to the Bundestag, which can now define concrete requirements for an i-voting system in line with the constitution. Indeed, we need to have this secure basis before we can take the first steps in this direction. I-voting is already being tested with non-political elections for student parliaments at universities. Elections for governing boards of social security institutions might make sense as a next step (although repeatedly stipulated in recent coalition agreements, this has never been realized). After that, we could think about pilot projects during political elections (e.g., for youth and senior councils at the municipal level) and about i-voting with direct-democratic ballots.

The development described above should take place in a gradual fashion so that voters, electoral offices and politicians can gain some initial experience, refine rules, rehearse implementation and build trust in the technology used for digital voting. Indeed, voters have a lot of faith in our current voting process, and this cannot be diminished by i-voting. However, if i-voting could over time become established as an additional, secure and more up-to-date form of voting and thereby boost voter turnout, we should take advantage of the opportunities digitization offers.

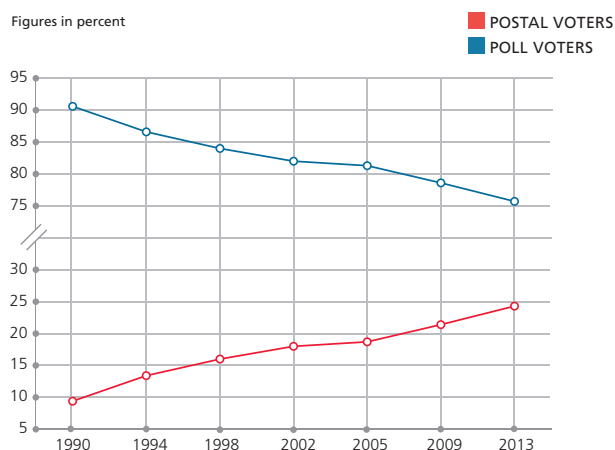
6.



## Make Postal Voting Easier

*Already a quarter of all voters made use of the opportunity to vote by mail during the 2013 Bundestag election, and this figure continues to rise. Having postal voting documents automatically sent to all eligible voters would make voting by mail much easier and boost voter participation.*

Share of Postal and Poll Voters since 1990



Source: Germany's Federal Returning Officer.

Postal voting hasn't been an exception for quite a while. During the last Bundestag election, almost a quarter of voters (24.3 percent) used what is currently the only way to vote at any time or place. Postal voting is thereby an important alternative to traditional poll voting and the only form of voting still attracting more voters. For all that, why is it still a special case in legal terms and not offered as an alternative of equal value?

For this, it might make sense to make it obligatory to send postal voting documents to all citizens before elections – automatically and without requiring any special request to receive them. At a minimum,

however, postal voters should be allowed to permanently register as such (as is already the practice, e.g., in some US states). This kind of registration could be done at any time, also independent of an election (e.g., after moving to a new city) or in the run-up to an election (e.g., when requesting an election notice card). This would dispense with the need to apply separately before each election and thus facilitate postal voting.

That is a good thing, as the traditional model of poll voting has been outdated for some time. According to a recent survey, the majority of Germans (57.2 percent) no longer see any difference between voting at polling stations or by mail. In addition, there is reason to suspect that openness toward postal voting will increase even further. For example, in the 16-29 age group, while only 19.4 percent still view postal voting as an exception, 72.0 percent no longer see any difference between postal and poll voting. In fact, already today, citizens would like to see postal voting made easier: Of respondents who had already not been where their polling station is on at least one election day, 57.6 percent think that having mail-in ballots automatically sent to voters would be a good thing.

In addition, a glance at those who use postal voting also shows that it has become a “normal” form of voting. These are not all highly educated people, for example, or the sick and infirm. Instead, hardly any difference remains between postal and poll voters.

Granted, as we get older, it generally becomes slightly more likely that we will vote by mail. But the differences are smaller than one might expect. While 29 percent of those over 60 voted by mail during the last Bundestag election, the figure for the overall population wasn't much smaller, at 24 percent. Only people living on their own mailed in their votes much more frequently (31 percent) than the overall population. Since it can be done at any place and time, postal voting offers flexibility. It is an important alternative to poll voting, and it enables voters to cast a ballot even when away from home on election day. Of those eligible voters who were not in their electoral district on election day, 63.1 percent voted by mail. More than half of all postal voters (57.0 percent) stated that they had used postal voting because they would be on vacation, had appointments or might have been away on election day. The time is right to bolster postal voting as the most flexible way of voting currently available. For this reason, the fact that voters stopped having to provide a justification for postal voting beginning in 2009 was already a first step in the right direction. In fact, this is what made permanent registration and the automatic sending of mail-in ballots possibilities in the first place.

Experiences in Switzerland demonstrate the positive effects of sending mail-in ballots to eligible voters: The increase in voter turnout after the introduction of direct mailing stood at 4.1 percentage points over the years 1970 to 2005. These days, mail-in ballots are sent to all eligible voters before all elections.

There have also been some initial attempts to have mail-in ballots sent directly to voters in Germany. The process has already been successfully used in three referendums in Hamburg: in 2007, 2010 and, most recently, 2015, during the referendum on the city's bid to host the 2024 Summer Olympics. The large majority of voters made use of this option: Some 9 out of 10 voters (88.1 percent) cast their ballot by mail for the Olympics referendum.

Of course, making postal voting easier also comes with some challenges: The goal of having high voter turnout must be weighed against the fundamental principles of free elections and secret ballots. Then, another issue is that of security with postal voting. Digitalization can help here, too, in the form of things like digital tools (e.g., QR codes) to track mail-in ballots, checking submitted election documents against the (electronic) electoral roll, or requesting individual security features (e.g., personal ID numbers).

7.



## Combine Election Dates

*Permanent campaigning and multiple election dates hurt voter turnout. An appropriate combination of election dates could significantly increase participation in many elections. The introduction of a maximum of two election days per year would be a first step.*

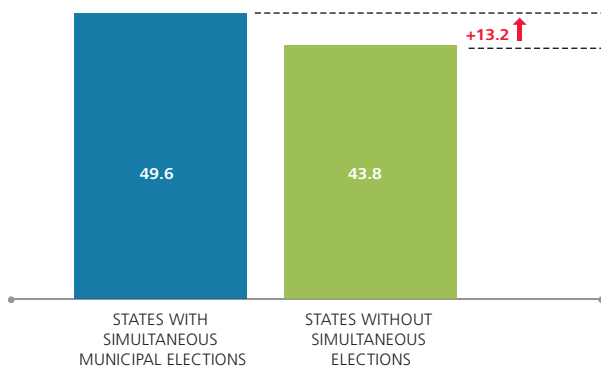
Germany finds itself in a state of “permanent campaigning.” In just the period between the 2009 and 2014 EU parliamentary elections, there were two federal parliament (Bundestag) elections, 19 state parliament (Landtag) elections and 26 municipal elections. This large number of election dates contributes to voting fatigue mainly in so-called subordinate elections. In addition, there is a clear disparity in voter participation between Bundestag and subordinate elections: While over 70 percent of voters go to the polls for Bundestag elections, the figure is only about 60 percent for Landtag elections, roughly 50 percent for municipal elections, and some 45 percent for EU elections. Voter turnout could be higher if election dates were combined. The vertical consolidation of elections has already shown positive effects in the past, such as by

combining Landtag and municipal elections or municipal ones with EU ones. Ten states also held their municipal elections at the same time as the last EU one, in 2014.

While voter participation for the EU elections in those states that did not have simultaneous municipal ones lay at 43.8 percent, it was 13.2 percent higher (49.6 percent) in those that did. Thus, the vertical consolidation of elections increases voter turnout for lower-level elections, and then their turnout rate matches the level of the election with higher participation. As a side benefit, combining elections also cuts costs, e.g., by reducing administrative outlays and requiring fewer election workers.

### Average Voter Turnout for 2014 EU Elections

Figures in percent



Source: Germany's Federal Returning Officer, own calculations.

In contrast, a horizontal consolidation of past elections (e.g., Landtag elections) did not have any major influence on voter turnout. The full effect of a horizontal consolidation would presumably only become apparent once all 16 Landtag elections (or all 16 municipal elections) were bundled together on something like a “super election day”. As a result, each individual election would attract more attention and increase in importance.

One first step toward combining election dates would be introducing a maximum of two election days per year. Due to the many limitations on finding feasible dates (e.g., school and other holidays in 16 federal states), there are already only a few election Sundays available during the year. Why not pool the election dates and reduce them to two uniform dates nationwide, one in the spring and one in the fall?

8.



## Simplify the Election Law

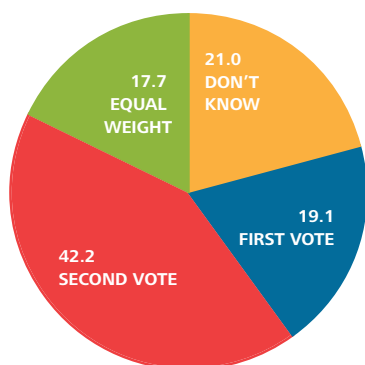
*A simple, transparent election law will also aid voter turnout. Participating in elections will get easier and thereby less socially selective. One step toward this would be a return to the one-vote system used in the first Bundestag election.*

An overly complicated and nontransparent election law also hurts voter turnout. It raises the threshold to voting and gives rise to additional information costs for voters. The share of valid but “incorrectly cast” votes increases as well as the share of invalid votes. What’s more, an overly complicated election law intensifies voter turnout’s social divide.

### Knowledge about First and Second Votes

**Question:** “Do you happen to know which vote is decisive in determining a party’s strength in the Bundestag: Is it the first vote? The second vote? Or do they have equal weight?”

Figures in percent



n = 693 respondents age 16 and older.

Source: Allensbach Institute survey on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (Oct. 2015).

With Bundestag elections, it is the current two-vote election law that is too complicated or opaque for a majority of eligible voters: Only slightly more than 4 out of 10 eligible voters (42.2 percent) know that the second vote (for party) only counts for determining majority relations in the Bundestag. Far more than half of all eligible voters either believe the first vote (for district candidate) is decisive (19.1 percent), or think both votes have equal value (17.7 percent), or are completely ignorant about the difference between the two votes (21.0 percent). Thus, reforming the current two-vote election law would also benefit voter turnout and decrease its social divide.

The following solutions might make sense: First, one could raise the level of understanding of the two-vote election law. To do so, what is now called the “first vote” could be renamed the “candidate vote,” and the “second vote” could be called the “party vote”. Although the current two-vote system would remain in place, it would be simplified and more easily understood, particularly for voters less interested in politics. An ever further-reaching reform would be reinstating the one-vote system used for the first Bundestag election, in 1949. At the time, the first and only vote counted for both party and candidate. This would allow the preservation of the fundamental principle of personalized proportional representation while simultaneously simplifying the voting system as much as possible.

Still, neither of the proposed reforms would resolve the problem of a significant “election law-related” enlargement of the Bundestag. To solve this problem, too, one would have to either accept distortions in terms of state proportionality in the vote-counting system or introduce a nationwide system of having two or more representatives for each electoral district instead of one per district.



## Is Compulsory Voting the Simple, Fail-safe Solution?

### Further reading:

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If stringently implemented, the eight measures presented here could make a noticeable contribution to stabilizing voter turnout as well as decreasing its social divide already for the 2017 Bundestag elections. The targeted mobilization of non-voters and the proposals for a more up-to-date organization of elections could be quickly implemented and effective. The introduction of a national electronic register of voters would promptly enable significant modernizations in poll voting. Automatically sending postal voting documents to all eligible voters would make a similarly effective contribution toward having a more modern system of voting in Germany. Other proposals, such as lowering the voting age, would only start to show their full effect in the long term.

Introducing compulsory voting is frequently proposed as a presumably simple, fail-safe solution. However, international experiences show that a legal obligation to vote only leads to higher and more socially representative voter turnout if combined with sanctions for non-voters. In other words, only obligatory voting under penalty of law works. However, more than two-thirds of all people in Germany are opposed to this. For this reason, the 8-point plan to raise voter turnout presented here aims at reform proposals that are both concrete and capable of gaining acceptance across parties – and therefore politically realizable.

One thing is certain: If the established parties don't do anything to (re-)mobilize the growing number of non-voters in Germany, others will. The success that populist movements and parties had at mobilizing people in the non-voter strongholds and in the typical non-voter milieus during the last Bundestag and Landtag elections demonstrate that very clearly in Germany, too.

Germany needs all its democratic forces to adopt a common strategy to increase voter turnout and make it more socially representative. The 8-point plan presented here would be an initial step toward these goals.

### Legally responsible for content

Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
D-33311 Gütersloh · [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Prof. Dr. Robert Vehrkamp  
[robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81526

Editors: Christina Tillmann, Dr. Dominik Hierlemann

Editorial assistance and inquiries:  
[gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
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### EINWURF – A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

EINWURF is a policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program 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. EINWURF is published 6–8 times per year on an unfixed basis.