



Future of Democracy | 01.2021

Right-wing extremist attitudes among voters ahead of the 2021 federal election

Just under eight percent of all eligible voters in Germany have manifest right-wing extremist attitudes. Among populist voters, however, the proportion is more than twice as high, and among AfD supporters it is almost four times as high. More than half of AfD voters hold latent or manifest right-wing extremist views.

Just under eight percent of the German electorate have a wholly right-wing extremist worldview. Comparing figures over the years, the proportion of manifest right-wing extremist attitudes thus still remains fairly low. What is new, however, is the strong party-political concentration of such attitudes in the AfD. The proportion of voters with a fully right-wing extremist worldview is almost four times higher in the AfD than the average across the electorate. Almost one in three AfD voters (29 percent) holds manifest right-wing extremist views. Another quarter (27 percent) have latent right-wing extremist attitudes. Overall, latent or manifest right-wing extremist views can be found among more than half of all AfD voters (56 percent). A similar pattern can be seen in all six dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes: advocating a right-wing dictatorship (15 percent of all AfD voters compared to 5 percent of the electorate), trivializing National Socialism (13 compared to 3 percent), endorsing anti-Semitism (13 vs. 5 percent), chauvinism

(54 vs. 20 percent), xenophobia (65 vs. 21 percent) and social Darwinism (8 vs. 4 percent). For all other parties represented in the Bundestag, the proportions of right-wing extremist attitudes among voters are either level with the average or even significantly lower. There is no single dimension of right-wing extremist views where any other party is clearly above the average. This shows that there is a distinct and unambiguous concentration of right-wing extremist views among AfD voters, meaning that the attitude profile of the AfD electorate is much closer to the profile of the extreme right-wing NPD than it is to the attitude profile of the other parties represented in the Bundestag. Since the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, the AfD is therefore the first electoral party in the German Bundestag with a majority of right-wing extremist attitudes. As the 2021 federal election approaches, the right-wing populist movement that was mobilized in the 2017 federal election has become a party of voters with latent or manifest right-wing extremist attitudes.

FIGURE 1 Measuring right-wing extremist attitudes

1. Advocating a right-wing dictatorship

- Under certain circumstances a dictatorship better serves the national interest.
- Germany needs a strong single party that represents the ethnic community as a whole.
- We should have a leader that rules Germany with a firm hand to the benefit of all.

2. Chauvinism

- We should dare to have strong nationalist feelings again.
- Today our country needs to firmly and energetically enforce its interests against other nations.
- The highest aim of German politicians should be to ensure that Germany has the power and recognition it deserves.

3. Trivialization of National Socialism

- Had it not been for the Holocaust, Hitler would be regarded as a great statesman today.
- The crimes of National Socialism have been greatly exaggerated.
- National Socialism also had positive aspects.

4. Xenophobia

- Foreigners only come here to abuse the welfare system.
- When jobs are scarce, foreigners should be sent home.
- Germany is losing its identity because of the large number of foreigners.

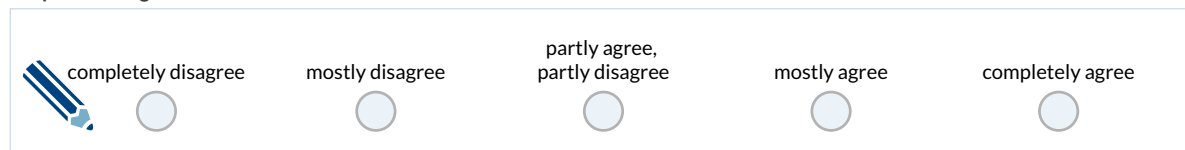
5. Anti-Semitism

- The influence of the Jews is still too strong.
- More than other people, the Jews use dirty tricks to achieve their goals.
- The Jews just have something peculiar about them and don't really fit in with us.

6. Social Darwinism

- Just as in nature, the strongest in a society should always get their way.
- The Germans are actually superior to other people by nature.
- There is worthy and unworthy life.

Response categories



Note: Items from Decker and Brähler (2020), translations from Decker, Oliver, Johannes Kiess and Elmar Brähler (2016). "Fertile soil of ideological confusion"? The extremism of the centre. In ibid. (Eds.). German Perspectives on Right-Wing Extremism. Challenges for comparative analysis. New York.

Source: Own illustration.

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METHODOLOGICAL NOTES: To measure and illustrate right-wing extremist attitudes, this POLICY BRIEF uses six attitudinal dimensions: 1. advocating a right-wing dictatorship, 2. chauvinism, 3. Trivialization of National Socialism, 4. xenophobia, 5. anti-Semitism, and 6. advocating racist social Darwinism (Decker and Brähler 2020). This study thus follows the definition of right-wing extremism which has been agreed upon by researchers, and which has also been used for years in the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (Decker and Brähler 2020) and the "Mitte-Studie" (Zick et al. 2019). **The operationalization of right-wing extremist attitudes among voters in Germany used here follows a concept based on scientific consensus in attitude research. It is not to be equated with the operationalization of right-wing extremism in proceedings of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Nor can the data here be used directly to draw conclusions or make judgments about the way in which the Office legally assesses and classifies individual parties.** The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the model of right-wing extremist attitudes with its six dimensions confirms that the dimensions each load on one factor (CFA: 0.973; TLI: 0.967; RMSEA: 0.050; SRMR: 0.035). For figures 4 to 9, respondents were divided into the categories "manifestly", "latently", or "not" right-wing extremist by aggregate indices on each of the six dimensions. A "manifestly" right-wing extremist attitude in a particular dimension is present if respondents "mostly agree" on average with the statements in this dimension, i.e. reach a value of at least 12 or more on the aggregate index. Respondents who on average scored at least "partly agree, partly disagree", i.e. at least a value of 9 on the aggregate index, were classified as "latently right-wing extremist". All other respondents with an aggregate index below this were classified as "not right-wing extremist". The minimum value per dimension of right-wing extremist attitudes is 3, the maximum 15 index points. At the aggregate level of all 18 items, respondents were divided into the categories of "manifestly", "latently" and "not" right-wing extremist, again using aggregate indices. Respondents were classified as "manifestly" right-wing extremist if they scored 63 or more on the aggregate index. On average, such respondents agree with all 18 items with a score of at least 3.5, when there are five answer categories per item. Respondents who reached a score of at least 54 were classified as "latent" right-wing extremists. Their average response behavior includes at least partial agreement across all 18 items. Thus, respondents are categorized in the same way as in the Leipzig authoritarianism study, which defines respondents who partially agree with all 18 individual items as "latent" (Decker and Brähler 2020).

Proportion of right-wing extremist attitudes remains low, but is concentrated in the AfD

Just under eight percent of the electorate have a fully right-wing extremist worldview, meaning that on average they agree either “mostly” or even “completely” with all 18 right-wing extremist statements. In the long term, the proportion of voters with manifest right-wing extremist views therefore remains stable at a comparatively low level.

At the beginning of the 2000s, comparable figures were still somewhat higher, at around ten percent. Thus, the electorate as a whole has not become further radicalized (toward the right), at least not across the board.

„Almost one in three AfD voters has a fully right-wing extremist worldview.“

Nevertheless, right-wing extremist attitudes do play a significant role across the whole of the electorate, because almost one in four people in Germany (24 percent) at least latently, or “partly”, agrees with right-wing extremist attitudes. Latent right-wing extremist attitudes are similar to right-wing populist attitudes in their extent and intensity. In this respect, the latency of right-wing extremist attitudes proves to be a kind of mobilization reserve for the extreme right, which they try to make use of through right-wing populist mobilization strategies.

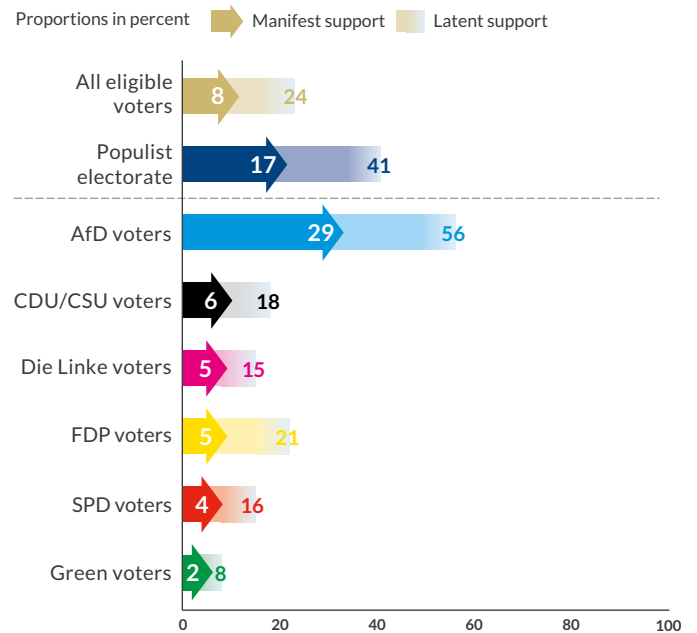
This can be seen very clearly in the attitude profile of AfD voters: on the one hand, the proportion of manifestly right-wing extremist voters in the AfD (29 percent) is almost four times as high as the average for all eligible voters (8 percent). Almost every third AfD voter thus holds a right-wing extremist worldview. Furthermore, another 27 percent of AfD supporters have views that are at least latently right-wing extremist.

In total, this means that almost six out of ten (56 percent) AfD voters have manifest or latent right-wing extremist attitudes.

The picture is fundamentally different for all other parties represented in the German Bundestag: their proportion of right-wing extremist voters is slightly

below the average across the electorate at between four and six percent (CDU/CSU, FDP, Die Linke and SPD), or even significantly below average at only two percent (Bündnis 90/The Greens).

FIGURE 2 Distribution of right-wing extremist attitudes



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters expressing manifest right-wing extremist attitudes, and the proportion expressing either manifest and latent right-wing extremist attitudes.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

A similar picture emerges for latent right-wing extremist attitudes. Here, too, the proportion of latent right-wing extremist AfD voters is about two to three times higher than in the CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD or Die Linke, and even four times higher than in the Green Party.

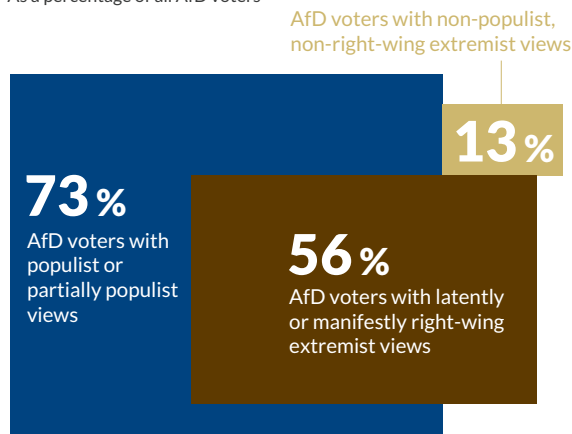
This shows that the greater danger does not come from an overall increase in the spread of right-wing extremist attitudes, but from their party-political concentration and radicalization within the AfD electorate. As the 2021 Bundestag election approaches, the AfD is a party whose voters are predominantly oriented toward right-wing extremist attitudes. It therefore bears more resemblance to the attitude profile of an extreme right-wing party than to that of a right-wing populist party. Not only on the supply side, but also on the demand side of the electorate, the AfD is chiefly oriented toward right-wing extremist attitudes.

Most AfD voters have latent or manifest right-wing extremist attitudes

An overall picture of the attitudinal patterns of AfD voters emerges when we analyze the overlaps between populist and right-wing extremist voters. A clear majority of AfD voters (56 percent) hold manifestly right-wing extremist (29 percent) or latently right-wing extremist views (27 percent). At the same time, almost three quarters (73 percent) of all AfD voters are either clearly populist (38 percent) or at least partly populist (35 percent).

FIGURE 3 Populism and right-wing extremist attitudes among AfD voters

As a percentage of all AfD voters



Target population: AfD voters according to the "Sunday question"

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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Because a large part (42 of 56 percent) of the AfD voters with latent or manifest right-wing extremist attitudes are also clearly or partly populist, the following overall picture emerges:

- Almost nine out of ten AfD voters (87 percent) hold views that are either clearly or at least partly populist and/or manifestly or latently right-wing extremist.

Sources:

The data and figures in this POLICY BRIEF are based on the results of an online survey of 10,055 respondents, conducted by YouGov Germany on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in June 2020. The results of the survey are representative for the German population aged 18 and over. Part of the analysis draws on the results of the "Populism Barometer 2020" (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2020).

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- The proportion of AfD voters whose views are neither populist nor right-wing extremist is only 13 percent. Thus, only about every eighth AfD voter is non-populist and not right-wing extremist.

The ways in which right-wing populist and right-wing extremist attitudes interact and influence one another have not yet been fully researched and understood. However, right-wing extremist attitudes often take the form of a radicalization of right-wing populist attitudes. Or vice versa: right-wing populist attitudes emerge as a less extreme form of right-wing extremist patterns of attitudes. Thus, right-wing populist and right-wing extremist patterns of attitudes adjoin one another and overlap to create a gray area:

„Only about every eighth AfD voter is non-populist and not right-wing extremist.“

- On the one hand, they can influence and "color" one another. The greater danger here is that right-wing populist attitudes will be radicalized to become right-wing extremist attitudes.
- On the other hand, right-wing extremists often use right-wing populist interventions as a Trojan horse and as a protective shield for their reputation. Disguising themselves as populists, they pursue more extreme goals.

For AfD voters, we can draw the following conclusions from this: the AfD may have achieved its electoral success in the 2017 federal election as a primarily right-wing populist mobilization movement in the shadow of the refugee crisis, but in the run-up to the 2021 federal election, it appears to be a voter party dominated by right-wing extremist attitudes. The AfD is increasingly right-wing oriented not only on the supply side, but also on the demand side of the electorate. This is reflected in the aggregated values of right-wing extremist worldviews as well as in the six individual dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes, which are presented and analyzed in the following (cf. also the overview and methodological explanations and clarifications on p. 2).

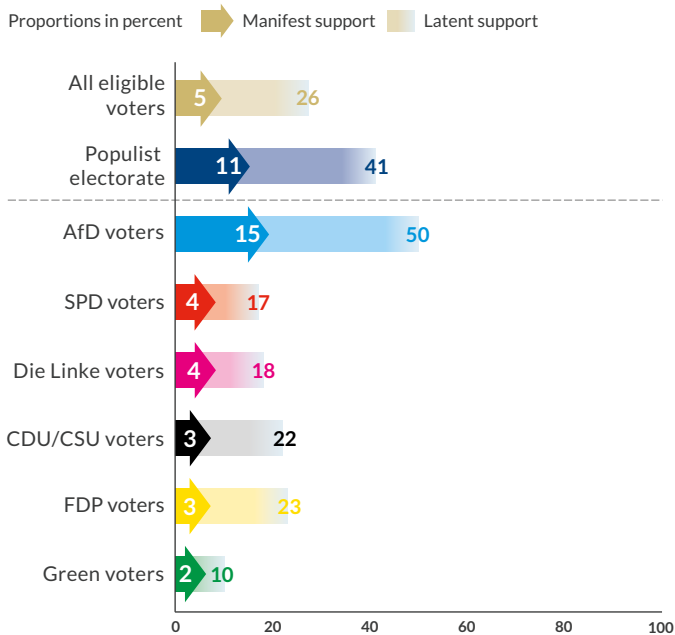
Advocating a dictatorship

Every second AfD voter (50 percent) is latently (i.e., at least “partly”) or manifestly in favor of a right-wing dictatorship, “under certain circumstances”, because it “better serves the national interest”, “a strong single party that represents the ethnic community”, and “a leader that rules Germany with a firm hand to the benefit of all.” Almost every seventh AfD voter (15 percent) manifestly agrees with this – i.e., either “mostly” or “completely”.

Trivialization of National Socialism

For the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Die Linke and the Greens, the proportion of voters who trivialize National Socialism is within the range of statistical inaccuracies (1 to 2 percent), and is once again even lower than the average for all eligible voters (3 percent). The vast majority of people in Germany thus show themselves to be almost completely resistant to trivialization of National Socialism.

FIGURE 4 Advocating a right-wing dictatorship



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters expressing manifest support for a right-wing dictatorship, and the proportion expressing either manifest and latent support.

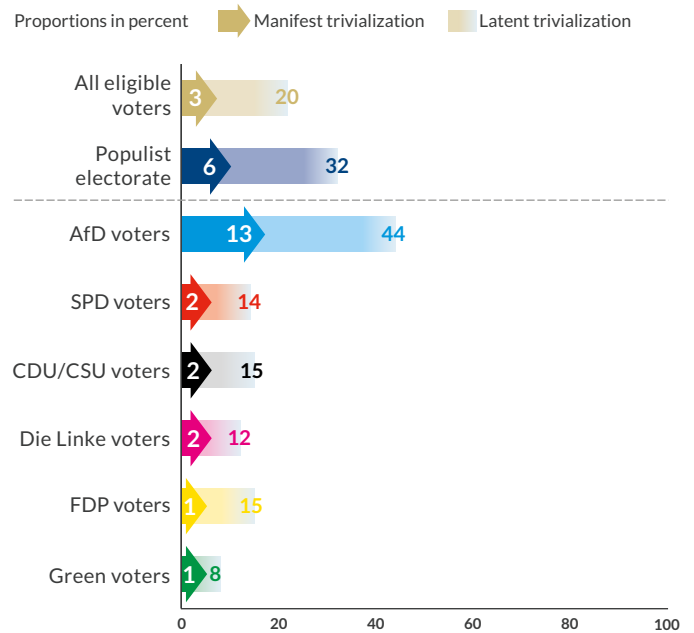
Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

Manifest support for a right-wing dictatorship is thus about three times as strong among AfD voters as it is across the whole electorate, and even latent support for a dictatorship is almost twice as strong.

Meanwhile, the voters of all the other parties represented in the Bundestag are significantly below the average of all eligible voters in both manifest and latent support for such a dictatorship. The lowest percentage is found among Green voters, where only two in one hundred (2 percent) support a dictatorship.

FIGURE 5 Trivialization of National Socialism



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters manifestly trivializing National Socialism, and the proportion either manifestly and latently trivializing it.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

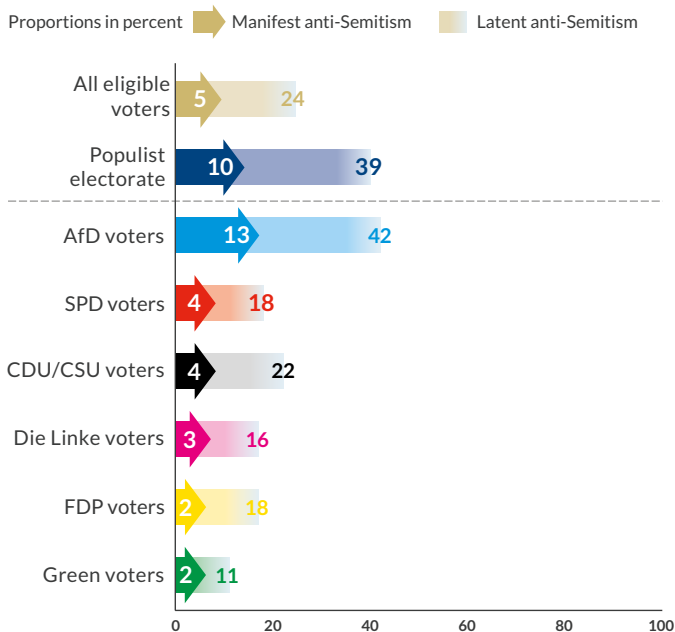
The AfD voters are different:

Here, 13 percent manifestly play down National Socialism, while a further 31 percent do so latently. Overall, more than four out of ten AfD voters (44 percent) have a manifest or at least latent tendency to trivialize the horrors of National Socialism. On average, they agree at least “partly” with the statements that if it had not “been for the Holocaust, Hitler would be regarded as a great statesman today”, “the crimes of National Socialism have been greatly exaggerated”, and “National Socialism also had positive aspects”.

Anti-Semitism

Manifest anti-Semitic attitudes are very rare among voters of the established parties and can only be found at low levels compared with the average across the electorate (2 to 4 percent compared to 5 percent). Among populist and AfD voters, meanwhile, 10 or even 13 percent of respondents have manifestly anti-Semitic attitudes. Latent approval for such views can even be found among roughly three out of ten of populists and AfD voters.

FIGURE 6 Anti-Semitic attitudes



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters with manifest anti-Semitic attitudes, and the proportion with either manifest and latent anti-Semitic attitudes.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

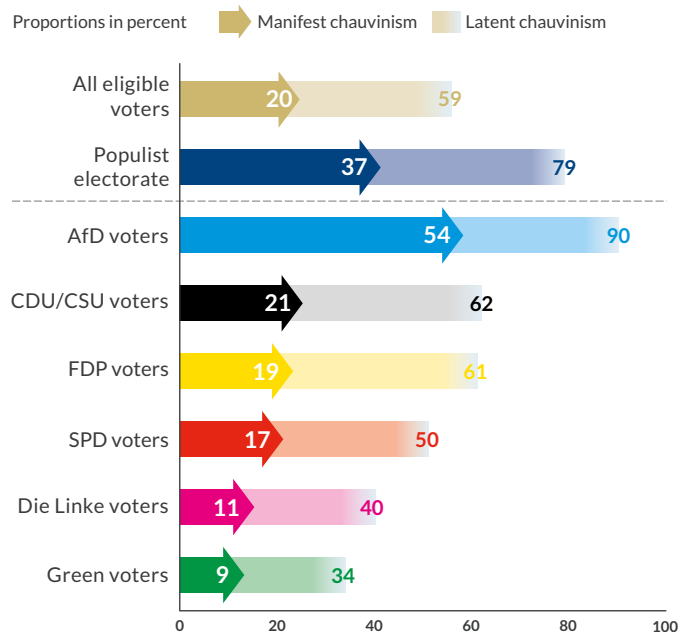
Thus, in these two groups of voters, four out of ten at least partly agree with the statements, “the influence of the Jews is still too strong”, “more than other people, the Jews use dirty tricks to achieve their goals”, and “the Jews just have something peculiar about them and don’t really fit in with us”.

Furthermore, it remains deplorable that almost a quarter of all people in Germany agree at least “partly” with such statements, and therefore do not reject them. Anti-Semitism is and will remain a serious problem across society. In the AfD, however, it is particularly concentrated, manifest and widespread.

Chauvinism

Chauvinist attitudes are significantly more widespread than the other dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes. After all, one in five eligible voters in Germany holds chauvinist views, and desires that “we should dare to have strong nationalist feelings again”, that our country needs to firmly and energetically enforce its interests against other nations”, and that “power and recognition” for Germany should be “the highest aim of German politicians”.

FIGURE 7 Chauvinistic attitudes



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters with manifest chauvinist attitudes, and the proportion with either manifest and latent chauvinist attitudes.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

Among AfD voters, significantly more than half (54 percent) manifestly express such views, and thus slightly less than three times as many as the average. Nine out of ten AfD voters (90 percent) are latently or manifestly chauvinistic, but so are almost six out of ten (59 percent) of all eligible voters.

This shows that chauvinistic attitudes are very widespread, even in the other parties. Only Die Linke (11 percent) and the Greens (9 percent) are highly resistant to manifest chauvinism. In its latent form of partial consent, it is much more widespread among those voters too.

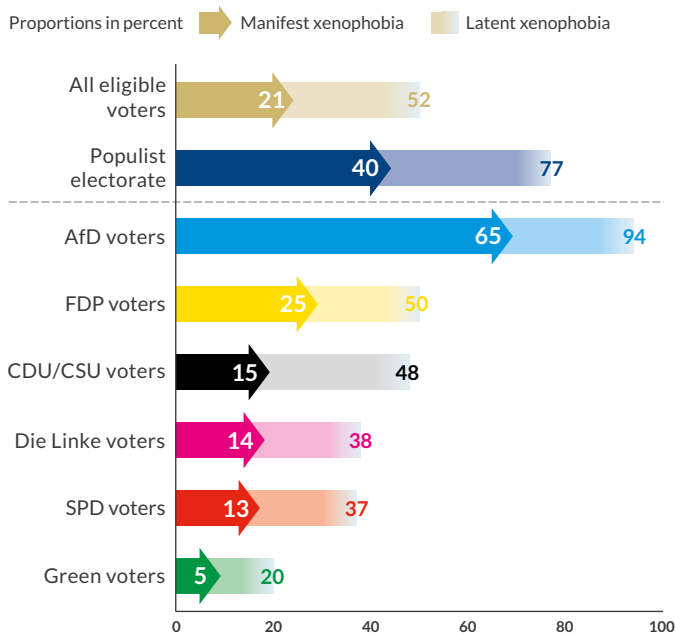
Xenophobia

Xenophobic attitudes are almost as pervasive. Manifest xenophobic attitudes are held by 21 percent of the electorate, by 40 percent of populist people in Germany, and by almost two thirds (65 percent) of AfD voters. They therefore at least predominantly agree with the statements that “foreigners only come here to abuse the welfare system”, “when jobs are scarce, foreigners should be sent home” and

Social Darwinism

The smallest deviation of AfD voters from the average of all people in Germany can be seen in the area of social Darwinism. Although their figures here are again slightly more than twice as high as the average of the established parties, they are at a low overall level, with a total of only eight percent. Even among AfD voters, statements such as, “just as in nature, the strongest in a society should always get their way”, “the Germans are actually superior to other people by nature”,

FIGURE 8 Xenophobic attitudes



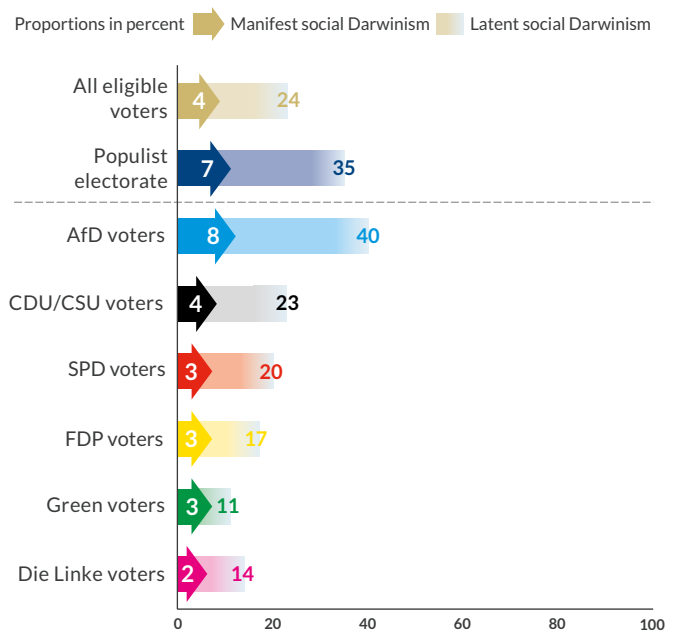
In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters with manifest xenophobic attitudes, and the proportion with either manifest and latent xenophobic attitudes.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

“Germany is losing its identity because of the large number of foreigners”. Latently, i.e., at least “partly” on average, 30 percent of all people agree with these statements, 37 percent of all populists and 29 percent of all AfD supporters. The lowest level of manifest xenophobia is found among Green voters (5 percent). Among AfD voters, manifest xenophobia is thus 13 times more pronounced than among the Greens. In fact, almost all AfD voters are manifestly or latently xenophobic (94 percent). At the ballot box, too, xenophobia proves to be the AfD’s highest common denominator.

FIGURE 9 Social Darwinist attitudes



In each case, the chart shows the proportion of voters who manifestly support social Darwinism, and the proportion who either manifestly and latently support it.

Target population: German population aged 18 and over in 2020.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

and “some lives are valuable, some are worthless” find the least approval of all dimensions of right-wing extremist attitudes.

Latently or manifestly, four out of ten AfD supporters (40 percent) advocate social Darwinism, which is again the lowest AfD value of all six dimensions of extreme right-wing attitudes. This is probably due to social-structural causes, because low earners and socially disadvantaged strata are also represented in the AfD electorate, and these respondents are often less inclined toward social Darwinist ideas.

Defending democracy against the challenge of right-wing extremism

There has not yet been sufficient research into the connections between right-wing populist and right-wing extremist attitudes, or the ways in which they influence each other. However, right-wing extremist attitudes can be interpreted as a radicalization of right-wing populist patterns. Or vice versa: right-wing populism as a less radicalized (pre-) form of right-wing extremist attitudes. Right-wing populism thus does not differ categorically from right-wing extremist patterns of attitudes but is distinguished from it above all in terms of intensity.

(Right-wing) populism is, as Cas Mudde has put it, a "pathological normality" within democracy. Radicalized into right-wing extremist patterns of attitudes, it becomes a "normal pathology" outside liberal democracy. Right-wing extremist patterns of attitudes are therefore no longer within, but outside the code of law and values of liberal democracies.

The confrontation with right-wing populism belongs above all to the arenas of the democratic public sphere, between the parties and in parliament. Confronting right-wing extremism, meanwhile, requires

additional procedures and tools of a democracy that knows how to defend itself. Manifest advocations of dictatorship, manifest anti-Semitism and radicalized xenophobia have no place in democratic debate in Germany. They require answers from a strong democracy that does not allow its foundation of values and laws to be destroyed.

„The AfD is the first voter party in the German Bundestag to be characterized mainly by right-wing extremist attitudes.“

These attitude patterns of voters in Germany show that as a party, AfD is deeply rooted in the right-wing extremist segment of voters. Overall, its ideological voter profile is closer to that of the far-right NDP than to that of the established parties. Its electoral gains in the 2017 federal election may have been primarily a success of right-wing populist voter mobilization in the shadow of the refugee crisis. But in the run-up to the 2021 federal elections, the AfD has shown itself to be a party mainly characterized by right-wing extremist attitudes among its voters, whose formerly right-wing populist orientation is now dominated by right-wing extremism.

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Further reading:

Decker, Oliver and Elmar Brähler (2020). Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020. Heinrich Böll Stiftung & Otto Brenner Stiftung. Gießen.

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Responsible for content (V.i.S.d. P.)

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February 2021 | ISSN: 2198-9796

A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

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