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Political Inequality – New Estimates Reveal the Social Divide in Voter Turnout in Germany

The first-ever estimates of voter turnout of the social milieus, for the 2013 federal elections in Germany, show that the upper social class has a voter-participation rate up to 40 percent higher than that of the socially weaker milieus. The socially disadvantaged milieus are under-represented in the election results by up to one-third, and they make up a share of non-voters almost twice as large as the share of non-voters of all eligible voters. At the same time, the socially stronger milieus are significantly overrepresented. (Election) surveys systematically underestimate the social divide in voter turnout.

Author



Prof. Dr. Robert Vehrkamp
robert.vehrkamp
@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Tel. +49 5241 81 81526

For the First Time Estimates of Voter Turnout in the Social Milieus

Recent election studies have revealed that the higher the unemployment rate, lower the household income and the worse the residential area in a neighborhood, the lower the voter turnout. The overall finding of these studies is unambiguous: The more precarious the social situation of a residential area, the larger the share

of non-voters. However, one cannot draw any unambiguous conclusions from this about the profile of individual non-voters. Indeed, when voter turnout is low in a neighborhood with high unemployment, one can't say for certain that it is the unemployed who no longer vote.

“A gap of slightly more than 40 percent separates the top and bottom social milieus in terms of voter turnout.”

Accordingly, unfounded stereotypes and myths about the typical non-voter in Germany stubbornly

persist. Typical among the swelling number of non-voters, some say, are mainly the “lethargic and content” and those “particularly critical of politics.” So, is that basically no problem for politics? In fact, could it even be good, in the sense that not voting might be seen as a sign of a well-functioning and mature democracy? No. In reality, people who make this kind of argument must be just as unconcerned about the social divide in the democracy as they are about the resulting distortions in political representation and loss of political equality. Indeed, recent estimates of the voter participation of the social milieus for the 2013 federal election in Germany prove that this is a misconception that is both too easy and politically negligent.

On behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the political polling institute infratest dimap analyzed voter turnout in the 640 representative voting districts used in the election polls of the national public broadcaster ARD for the federal election 2013 and the shares of the societal milieus living in them. From this data, it made the first-ever estimates of voter turnout of the individual milieus.

The results of these estimates, which are representative for the federal election, confirm the assumption that there is a deep social divide in terms of voter participation. Moreover, they also allow conclusions to be drawn on the individual level about the social profile of the typical non-voter in Germany. The estimates are based on the Sinus-Milieus[®], which group people into different societal milieus according to their social situations and attitudes. They consolidate information about household income, educational level and occupation into one “social situation” dimension and supplement this with a second “basic orientation” dimension, involving values and views about various areas of life.

Thus, instead of grouping people into different political target groups based solely on their views and party affiliations, the Sinus-Milieus[®] use an approach that

Sources

The estimates cited in this text on the voter turnout of the social milieus for the 2013 federal elections in Germany were made by infratest dimap on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. For basic information on the milieus, consult the Heidelberg-based Sinus institute.

For milieu-specific analyses of voter participation in Germany, see the Bertelsmann Stiftung's study “Prekäre Wahlen – Milieus und soziale Selektivität der Wahlbeteiligung” on the 2013 federal elections (released in November 2013), as well as its analyses of the recent city-state elections in Hamburg and Bremen (released in February and May 2015, respectively).

The election studies can be found on the Bertelsmann Stiftung website (www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de); estimate results are available upon request per email: gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

takes people's entire social environment and everyday life into account. This is especially meaningful for deciphering the non-voter because voter participation – even more so than the concrete decision in favor of one party – is determined by social environment. The microm Geo Milieus® locate the Sinus-Milieus® in a social space, thereby allowing one to make statements about the milieu affiliation of eligible voters in a small area. This, in turn, permits one to make a nationally representative estimate of voter participation in the 10 different social milieus.

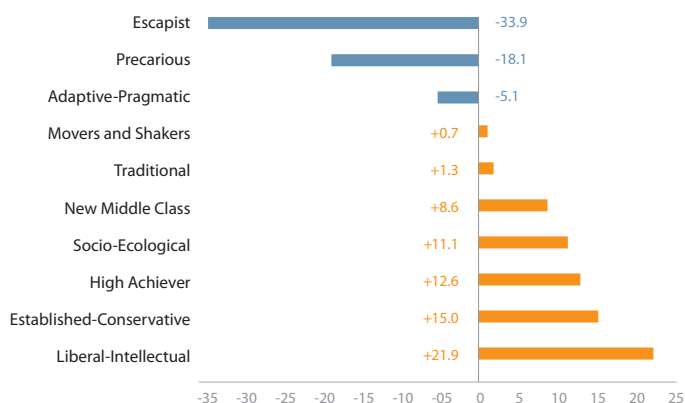
Socially Weaker Milieus Are Underrepresented By Up To One-Third

The results of these estimates show that while voter participation was significantly below average in the more socially disadvantaged milieus, in the milieus of the upper and upper-middle classes, it was decidedly higher than the national average of voter turnout in the 640 representative voting districts (72.2 percent). At 71.5 percent, the actual voter turnout for the 2013 federal election was less than one percentage point lower, which is proof of the high representative quality and explanatory power of the estimate results.

The estimates found the highest voter-turnout rate (88 percent) in the Liberal-Intellectual milieu, a socially strong milieu of the upper class, while the lowest rate (47.7 percent) was for the so-called Escapist milieu, a consumption-oriented milieu of the lower and lower-middle social classes. Thus, a difference of slightly more than 40 percentage points separates these two milieus in terms of voter participation. Based on how much its participation rate deviates from the national average, the Escapist milieu is underrepresented by more than one-third (34 percent) for the 2013 election. A similar picture also emerges for the socially disadvantaged Precarious milieu, with voter turnout of only 58.9 percent, which translates into underrepresentation of almost one-fifth (18.4 percent).

OVER- AND UNDERREPRESENTATION OF THE SOCIAL MILIEUS IN THE RESULTS OF THE 2013 FEDERAL ELECTION FIGURES IN PERCENT

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung and infratest dimap 2015



Using the estimated voter-turnout rates, one can also calculate the non-voters of the individual milieus in absolute figures. Doing so shows that the two socially disadvantaged milieus with the lowest voter-turnout rates (Escapist and Precarious), with a total of 6.6 million non-voters, account for almost 38 percent of all non-voters even though they accounted for only 22 percent of all eligible voters. Thus, slightly more than one-fifth of all eligible voters made up almost two-fifths of all non-voters.

The milieu with the lowest voter-turnout rate (Escapists) is simultaneously also the second-youngest of all societal milieus in Germany. Almost 40 percent of all people in this milieu are under 29 years old, and the average age of members of the Escapist milieu (38) is a decade younger than the national average. Moreover, the Escapist milieu is much more strongly represented in the area that was once West Germany than in the area formerly belonging to communist East Germany (the so-called New Federal States), which makes it a typically West German non-voter milieu.

Just as significant is the difference between the social profile of the Precarious milieu, with the second-lowest voter-turnout rate compared to the national average: Six of ten people in this milieu live in households with net monthly incomes below Euro 2,000, and their average net household income per month (EUR 1,895) is more than one-fifth below the average of all milieus. Furthermore, the share of all eligible voters who can be assigned to the Precarious milieu is almost twice as large in the New Federal States as the national average for Germany. Thus, the Precarious milieu is a typically East German non-voter milieu.

Socially Stronger Milieus Are Significantly Overrepresented

The exact opposite is true for the socially strong milieus of the upper class, which were decidedly overrepresented in the 2013 election results. Based on how much its voter participation deviates from the national average, the Liberal-Intellectual milieu was overrepresented by almost one-quarter (22 percent). The Established-Conservative (voter turnout: 83 percent), the High Achiever (81.3 percent) and the Socio-Ecological (80.2 percent) milieus were also overrepresented in the results, by up to a bit over one-seventh (11 to 15 percent).

Thus, the traditional societal establishment of the conservatives, the enlightened, well-educated elite of the intellectuals and the efficiency-oriented elite of the high-achievers continue to vote at a level significantly above average. More than eight in ten eligible voters from these milieus exercised their right to vote during the 2013 federal election. As a result, these milieus are overrepresented in the election results.

The same also holds true, though to a somewhat lesser degree, for the Socio-Ecological milieu of the upper middle class, which views itself as the standard-bearer of anti-consumerism, political correctness and societal diversity. Their notions of a normatively “correct” life, shaped by their socio-ecological mindset, are also overrepresented in the election’s results by over one-tenth.

From the voter-turnout rates, one can also derive absolute figures on voters and non-voters of the socially stronger milieus. The Liberal-Intellectual milieu,

with the highest turnout rate and a bit more than 5 million eligible voters, makes up over 8 percent of all eligible voters, but only 3.5 percent of all non-voters (0.6 mn). Thus, the Liberal-Intellectuals share of the voters is much more than twice as large as their share of the non-voters. For the three milieus of the upper classes, which had the highest voter-turnout rates overall, the aggregate share of all eligible voters is 26.3 percent (16.3 mn), and their share of all non-voters is just 15.1 percent (2.6 mn).

The Endangered Milieu of the New Middle Class

A much more differentiated picture emerges for the New Middle Class (NMC). This milieu also had above-average voter turnout (78.4 percent), which led it to be overrepresented in the election results by nearly one-tenth. But the NMC's situation is very different from that of the Socio-Ecological milieu.

On the one hand, since it is less-educated and influenced by its rise from the old working-class milieus, the NMC is much more troubled by fears of social decline than the socially stronger and more secure Socio-Ecological milieu, made up of

university graduates and civil servants. On the other hand, however, from their very context-dependent voting behavior, one can also detect latent feelings of endangerment and instability in the NMC. The greater the proportion of socially disadvantaged milieus in a neighborhood or voting district, the more likely it also is that voter turnout of eligible voters from the NMC

will be below average. And the same holds true in the opposite circumstances: The more the NMC mingles with members of the upper social class in its residential areas and voting districts, the more likely it is that they will participate in elections at an above-average rate.

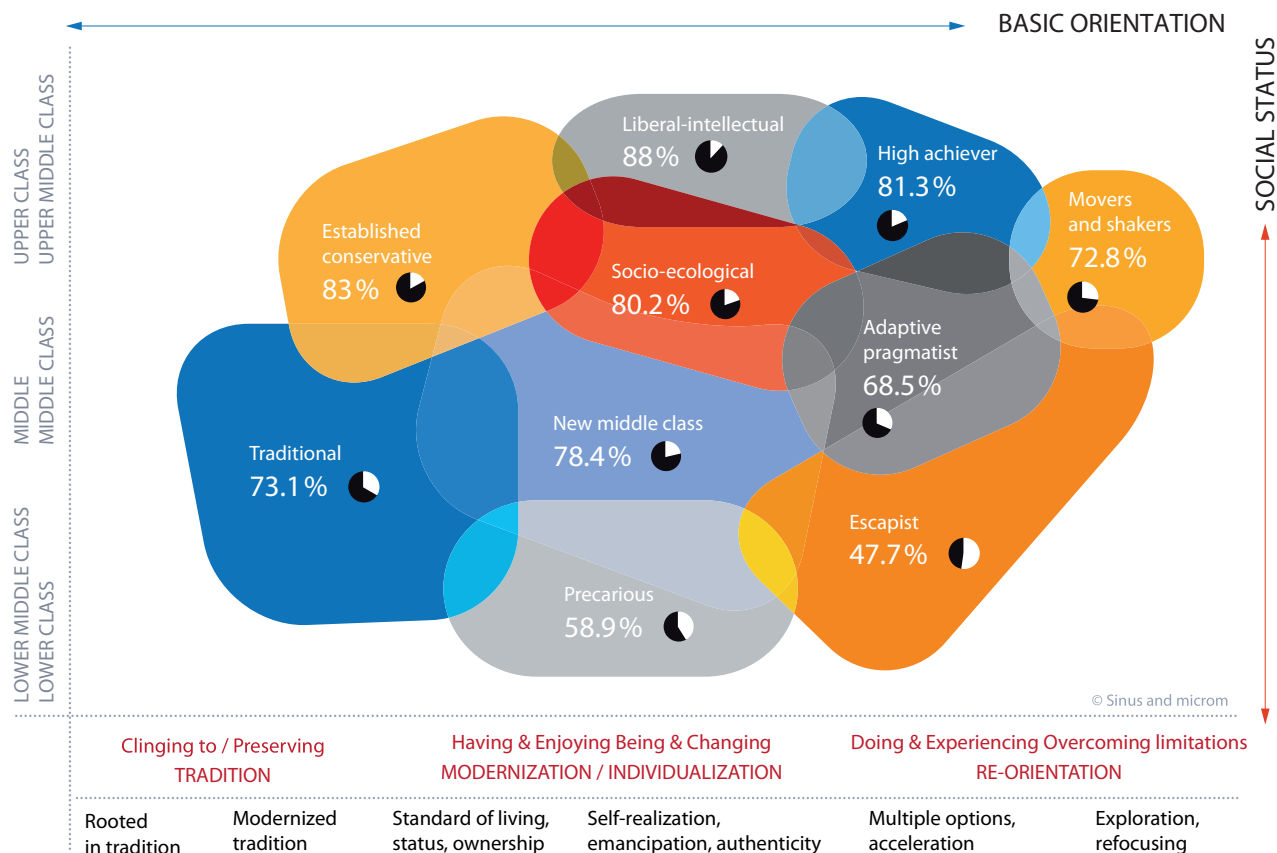
This shows that the NMC is a milieu that has latent feelings of endangerment and that is divided in terms of its voter participation, with such participation being strongly influenced by the social environment. This can especially be seen in the New Federal States, where the NMC mingles with the milieus of the lower social class much more frequently than in the 'old' federal states.

Social Situation and Values Determine Voter Turnout

However, the overall picture of milieu-specific differences in voter turnout also show that a milieu's social situation is not the only decisive determinant of its participation in elections. The second dimension of milieu affiliation – attitudes, values and behaviors – also prove to be significant.

“(Election) surveys systematically underestimate the social divide in voter turnout.”

VOTER TURNOUT OF THE SOCIAL MILIEUS FOR THE 2013 FEDERAL ELECTIONS



Voter turnout of the socially elevated Movers and Shakers milieu (72.8 percent) almost exactly matches that of the Traditional milieu (73.1 percent) from the lower-middle and lower class. Based on its social situation, one would expect the Movers and Shakers milieu to have a much higher turnout rate, of more than 80 percent. However, two variables that could explain this merely average turnout rate can be found in the attitudes and values of this milieu’s members. A pragmatic orientation, mobility and individuality, combined with a great skepticism toward order, commitment and obligations, also weakens the voting norm in this milieu while separating the Movers and Shakers to an increasingly greater degree from the other milieus of the upper and middle social classes, which have high turnout rates. Once again, age plays a big role here. Two-thirds of Movers and Shakers are under 30 and thereby somewhat younger than the eligible voters of the Escapist milieu, which has the lowest voter-turnout rate. The two youngest milieus are also simultaneously those with the lowest rates of voter participation in their respective social strata. The explanatory power of the two milieu dimensions “social situation” and “attitudes and values” also becomes very clear with the example of the Escapists. This milieu’s socially precarious situation and its reorientation of values and attitudes are mutually reinforcing. Social problems go hand in hand with a distinct propensity to consume, being fun-oriented and shunning the rules and obligations of society, leading to a pronounced non-voter climate.

The milieu approach and the estimates presented here therefore argue in favor of a two-dimensional model explaining why some people decline to vote. On the one hand, social situation and inequality determine voter participation. The more socially precarious one's situation and personal surroundings, the lower the voter turnout. Thus, social inequality harms participation in elections and the democracy. Furthermore, voting behavior is also determined by attitudes, values and behavioral norms: The more one's fundamental values are oriented toward tradition, notions of obligation and status, the higher the voter turnout. And the more a milieu is committed to individualization, self-realization and experimental reorientation, the lower the voter turnout. The explanatory thread of values and attitudes here has a class-spanning effect. In all social strata, individualization and changing values are leading to a weakening of the voting norm and to a significantly below-average voter-turnout rate.

How Polls and Voting Statistics Underestimate the Social Divide

The fact that the social divide in Germany in terms of voter participation continues to be so persistently underestimated may also have to do with the fact that there is no objective statistical data available on the social profile of voters and non-voters. The official and representative voting statistics available for scientific analysis only provide information on the age, gender and regional origin of voters and non-voters in Germany, but they don't offer any information on their socioeconomic profile, educational background or family status. Thus, from the official voting statistics on the 2013 federal election, one can only gather that voter turnout was lower in the New Federal States than it was in the 'old' ones, that the participation rates for women and men were roughly equal, and that younger people were much less likely to vote than older ones.

Someone wishing to get a differentiated impression must continue to rely mostly on the analysis of (voter) surveys, but these are of only limited informational value for research on non-voters. There are two reasons for this: First, non-voters participated in surveys less frequently than voters do. Second, those who do participate in surveys avoid admitting that they didn't vote for reasons of political correctness ("overreporting"). A comparison of voter-turnout rates stated in surveys with actual turnout rates shows the problem: Actual turnout for the 2013 federal election was 71.5 percent, meaning that 28.5 percent of eligible voters did not cast ballots. But post-election surveys of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), the largest of its kind in Germany, found that 84.7 of eligible voters claimed to have voted, meaning that the share of non-voters was only 15.3 percent.

Non-voters' massive underrepresentation in surveys does not make this a priori unusable for research on non-voters, but it does weaken their informative value.

Further Reading:

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Tillmann, Christina / Gagné, Jérémie (2013): *Of Performers and Precarious – Is Germany Becoming A Democracy of The Better-Off?* EINWURF 3/2013, Policy Brief of the “Future of Democracy” program, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Gütersloh.

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Weßels, Bernhard (2014): *Das Wahlverhalten sozialer Gruppen*. In: Hans Rattinger et al. (eds.): *Zwischen Fragmentierung und Konzentration. Die Bundestagswahl 2013*, pp. 187-202, Baden-Baden.

Granted, almost identical qualitative patterns of milieu-specific voter participation show up in the (election) polls. Sorted according to voter-turnout level, the order for the milieus with the lowest voter participation (Escapist and Precarious) and the highest participation (Liberal-Intellectual and Established-Conservative) are identical. However, in terms of the degree of respective over- and underrepresentation, one can see clear differences from the estimated values presented here. The higher the non-voter rates captured in the surveys, the larger the gap between the milieu-specific voter turnouts. Thus, the more non-voters captured in the surveys, the more clearly one can also see the differences in terms of voter participation between the typical non-voter milieus of the lower social class and the milieus of the upper social class, which have the high turnout rates.

For research on non-voters, surveys therefore suffer from a systematic distortion: Instead of being somewhat overestimated, the social selectivity of voter participation is systematically underestimated in proportion to its respective overreporting.

Bottom Line: In Social Terms, Election Results Are No Longer Representative

The estimates on voter participation of the social milieus presented here confirm the assumption that German society is deeply divided in terms of voter participation. As a consequence, election results are no longer representative in social terms. The socially stronger milieus are significantly overrepresented in election results, while the socially weaker milieus are significantly underrepresented.

Of course, socially selective voter participation doesn't necessarily lead to socially selective policies and the representation of selective interests. The elected members of Germany's federal parliament represent the interests of all people in Germany and are obliged to promote the common good. At the same time, though, politicians represent the interests of their own voters. For Germany's representative democracy, increasingly selective voter participation can therefore become a vicious circle of sinking voter turnout and selective representation, which can in turn result in eroding acceptance and willingness to participate.

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Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl Bertelsmann Straße 256
D-33311 Gütersloh · www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de
Prof. Dr. Robert Vehrkamp
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
Tel. +49 5241 81 81105
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