



Future of Democracy | 02.2021

The “Corona Effect”

Why voter turnout could decline and become more socially divided following the pandemic

The social divide in voter turnout narrowed slightly in the 2017 federal election. The “Corona Effect” could change that at the 2021 federal election, reducing voter turnout as a long-term effect of the pandemic and widening the social divide once more.

At the 2017 federal election, voter turnout in Germany remained deeply divided along social lines. This is shown by our new estimates of voter turnout according to social milieu: in parts of the social upper class, turnout was again almost 40 percentage points higher than in socially disadvantaged milieus. The social lower classes are thus underrepresented in the election results by up to a third. Nevertheless, the social divide in voter turnout did narrow slightly in the 2017 federal election. But this was not because socially precarious non-voting milieus returned to the established parties, from which they have increasingly distanced themselves since the 1980s. Instead, the above-average rise in electoral participation in these milieus was primarily due to the fact that they were successfully targeted by the AfD, while the established parties in the democratic center have largely lost their footing and their ability to gain support in socially precarious non-voting milieus. The divide which

narrowed slightly in 2017 could therefore widen again in the 2021 federal election, when the one-off populist effect fizzles out because disappointed protest voters from socially precarious milieus once again abstain from voting. That is what is suggested by recent survey data on the willingness of these milieus to vote. And due to the pandemic, the other milieus are currently also showing some electoral fatigue. This could condense into a “Corona Effect”, noticeably reducing turnout in the 2021 federal election and again deepening the social divide between voters and non-voters once again. But the resulting risks and damage to democracy continue to be underestimated – until the next wave of populist mobilization, which might then be larger, more sustained and more consequential for democracy than the last one. The battle for non-voters will therefore enter its next round in the 2021 federal election. And the democratic parties ought to win it this time, or at least take up the challenge.

Voter turnout remains deeply divided along social lines

76.2 percent of all eligible voters participated in the 2017 federal election. This was slightly higher than the turnout in previous federal elections in 2013 (71.5 percent) and 2009 (70.8 percent). However, it was still low by historic standards, being the third lowest turnout of all federal elections since 1949. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, turnout in federal elections was still just under 90 percent, and on average in the 1980s and 1990s it was more than 80 percent. Thus, despite the slight increase in 2017, voter turnout in the last federal elections was at a historically low level.

But what is wrong with low voter turnout? In principle, nothing at all. There is no compulsory voting in our democracy. Participation in elections is voluntary. No one who does not want to participate is obliged, let alone forced to do so. The right to vote corresponds to the right not to vote. Often, it is even argued that low voter turnout is an expression of a certain level of satisfaction and that high voter turnout actually indicates acute problems, a high degree of social mobilization and agitation, and intense political polarization. Following this pattern of interpretation means downplaying the risks to democracy posed by the sharply declining trend in voter turnout, which is then not recognized as a problem for democracy. So far, so good? Evidently not, because the lower the voter turnout, the more socially unequal it becomes. And that harms democracy, because non-voting follows a very clear social pattern: the more socially disadvantaged people are, the more socially precarious their living situation, the less formally educated they are, the more they experience unemployment, and the lower their average income, the less likely they are to vote.

Source reference:

Estimates of mobilization ahead of the 2021 federal election are based on a survey by YouGov (3,504 respondents), representative of the German population, commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in July 2021.

The estimate of voter turnout in the 2017 federal elections was conducted by infratest dimap on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. First, ten initial values for the non-voting shares in the Sinus milieus were determined on the basis of the Socio-Economic Panel. These values were then multiplied to adjust them to the official non-voting share of 2017.

The analysis also includes 621 representative electoral districts with their respective numbers of non-voters and eligible voters, and the proportions of the ten Sinus milieus in the electorate.

Conversely, the more socially privileged and formally educated people are, the more they earn and the less they are affected by unemployment, the more frequently and regularly they participate in elections. Low voter turnouts are therefore almost always socially divided. And behind a declining voter turnout there is almost always a worsening of social divisions. Such has been the case in Germany since around the mid-1980s. This then gives rise to representational distortions. The views and interests of particular social groups are represented more or less strongly in election results, to the point that these results are no longer socially representative. At the very least, there is a danger of socially selective politics in favor of the strongest groups and at the expense of the weakest. This creates gaps in social representation and damages democracy.

“Divided voter turnout leads to gaps in social representation and damages democracy.”

But how deep is the social divide in electoral participation and how large are the resulting distortions in representation? Our estimates for the 2017 federal election (see figure 1) show that between the social milieu of Liberal Intellectuals, the strongest voter group, and the milieu of consumerist Hedonists, the weakest voter group, there is a yawning gap of almost 40 percentage points. While more than nine out of ten eligible voters (90.9 percent) in the well-educated, high-income milieu of Liberal Intellectuals took part in the federal election, voter turnout in the socially disadvantaged milieu of consumerist Hedonists was only 53.5 percent. The other milieus follow the same primarily socio-economic pattern: the better the social position, the higher the voter turnout. This is shown when we compare pairs of milieus with similar basic values but a different social status:

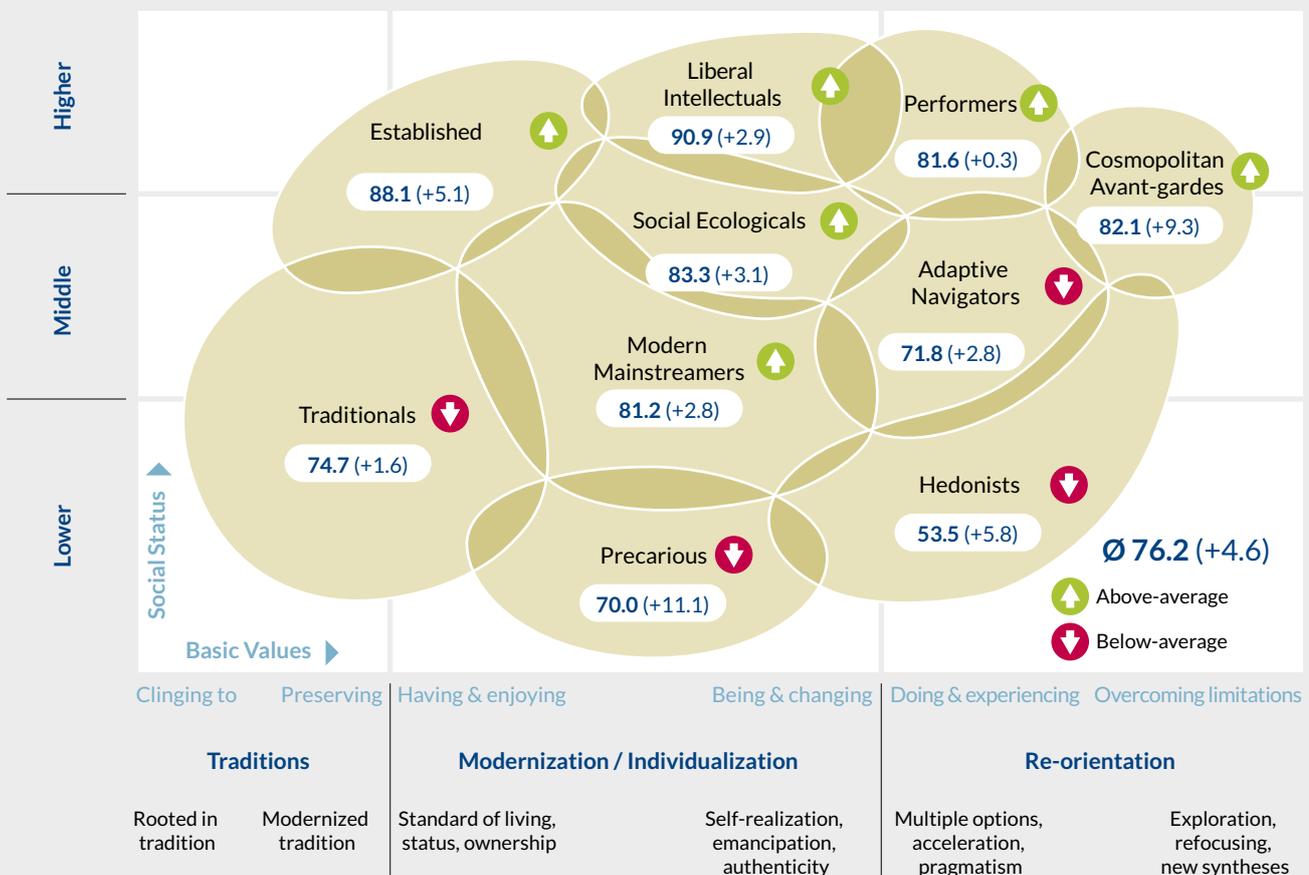
Where the axis of basic values shows a similar tendency towards tradition, a different social status corresponds to clear differences in voter turnout. For example, in the 2017 federal election, almost nine out of ten (88.1 percent) of all upper-class Established voters participated in the election, but only just

under three quarters (74.7 percent) of eligible voters from the Traditionals of the middle and lower class. Similar basic attitudes thus lead to very different turnouts depending on the social status. The same correlation is also evident for the milieus which are more strongly oriented toward modernization and individualization: while only seven out of ten eligible voters (70 percent) from the socially Precarious took part in the election, in the socially stronger milieu of the Modern Mainstreamers turnout was 81.2 percent, in the Socio-Ecological Milieu it was 83.3 percent and for the Liberal Intellectuals even 90.9 percent. Here, too, different social circumstances with similar basic values lead to noticeably divergent voter turnouts. Even among the milieus with a strongly pronounced tendency to shift attitudes and overcome limitations, the same pattern is found: only 53.5 percent of all

socially disadvantaged eligible voters from the consumerist and materialistic Hedonists voted, while the turnout was 71.8 percent in the socially stronger Adaptive Navigators, 82.1 among Cosmopolitan Avant-gardes, and 81.6 percent among Performers. Here, too, with similar basic values, social differences lead to very different levels of voter turnout. Thus, the social circumstances of a milieu are more decisive than basic mental attitude for the level of voter turnout. People's social status has an even greater influence on their voter turnout than their basic orientation, anchored in values, attitudes and preferences. In summary, for the 2017 federal election this means that despite a slight increase, voter turnout in the 2017 federal election remains at a historic low and continues to be deeply divided along social lines.

FIGURE 1 New estimates of voter turnout by social milieu in the 2017 federal election

In percent. Change in turnout in percentage points compared with 2013 in parentheses.



Source: Infratest dimap on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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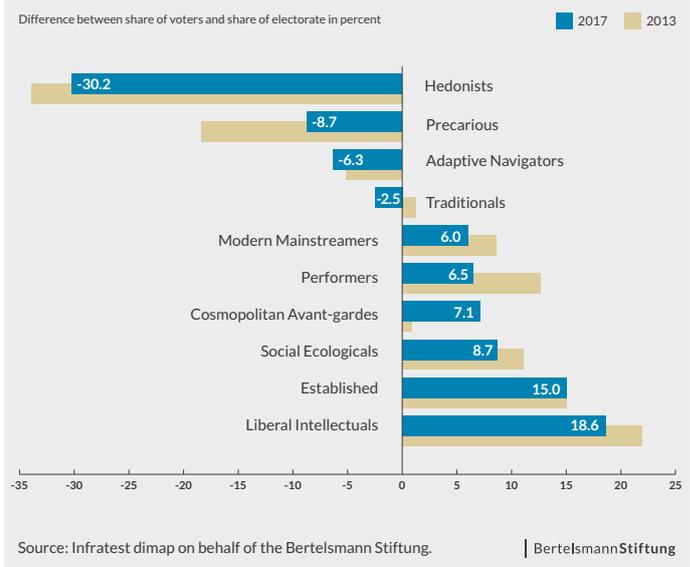
Underrepresented milieus are particularly vulnerable to populist mobilization

Nevertheless, individual milieus also show some interesting deviations from this overall picture. This applies particularly to the most socially disadvantaged Precarious Milieu. At 70 percent, voter participation in this milieu is still around about 20 percentage points below the milieus with the strongest voter base. Compared with the 2013 federal election, however, it has increased by 11.1 percentage points. This is the strongest rise in voter turnout within a milieu, and has also slightly reduced the social divide in voter turnout overall compared with the 2013 federal election (Vehrkamp and Wegschaider 2017). The main reason for this was the election result of the AfD, whose right-wing populist mobilization strategies were particularly successful in the non-voter milieus. In the 2017 election, the AfD succeeded where the democratic parties failed: by remobilizing voters in socially precarious non-voting milieus, they managed to narrow the social divide in voter participation. This may only explain a small part of the AfD's election result (12.6 percent), since the Precarious only form 9 percent of all eligible voters. But the fact that the AfD's result in this milieu was far above average (28 percent) almost completely explains the rise in participation in this part of the electorate.

What does this show? Typical non-voter milieus in the socioeconomic lower classes prove to be particularly vulnerable to (right-wing) populist mobilization strategies. People who no longer participate in elections out of disappointment, resignation and a sense that their interests are being ignored can become protest voters, and are easier to mobilize than those who have continued to participate regularly in elections, i.e., who still feel represented by one of the established parties. Populist mobilization strategies take advantage of this. Their focus is then primarily on mobilizing protest. And their preferred vehicle is to stir up resentment against foreigners, migrants and other minorities. Thus, in the 2017 Bundestag election campaign, the AfD had more success than average in some of the socially disadvantaged typical non-voter milieus. In essence, however, this is a protest vote against the established parties, who have failed to represent the electorate, according to the perception of many non-voters.

The extent of this under- and overrepresentation of social milieus in the 2017 federal election is illustrated by figure 2. While the three milieus with the largest shares of the socioeconomic lower class remain significantly underrepresented, the milieus with a high social status in particular turn out to be significantly overrepresented. The most pronounced representation deficits can be found in the socially disadvantaged milieu of consumerist Hedonists (-30.2 percent) and in the socially Precarious (-8.7 percent). The two socially privileged milieus of the Established (+15 percent) and the Liberal Intellectuals (+18.6 percent) are the most overrepresented. But the Social Ecologicals are also overrepresented by almost a tenth (8.7 percent),

FIGURE 2 Over- and underrepresentation of social milieus in the results of the 2017 general election



followed by the Cosmopolitan Avant-gardes (7.1 percent), the Performers (6.5 percent), and the Modern Mainstreamers (6 percent).

Thus, the key characteristic of voter turnout in the 2017 election was a slight increase combined with a slight narrowing in the social divide, due to successful mobilization by the right-wing populist AfD, above all in the socially precarious non-voter milieus. But what will be the defining traits of voter turnout at the 2021 federal election? How will the pandemic affect voter turnout and its social profile? On the one hand, we can find clues in the state and local elections that have taken place since the outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020.

In addition, a good two months before election day, current surveys allow initial conclusions to be drawn as to whether people intend to vote, enabling us to estimate the general level of pre-election mobilization.

Willingness to vote among different social milieus ahead of the 2021 federal election

Initial clues as to the likely turnout in the 2021 federal election can be found in the state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt, held during the pandemic. Voter turnout fell in all three federal states: in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate this decrease was very significant, at 6 percentage points, while in Saxony-Anhalt, where turnout was already at a very low level, it fell by 1 percentage point. This does not yet provide a forecast for voter turnout in the 2021 federal election. However, it may point to a further trend reversal. After the historic lows in 2009 and 2013, voter turnout was not only higher in the 2017 federal election, but also in the eight preceding and seven subsequent state elections. Primarily as a result of right-wing populist mobilization by the AfD and subsequent counter-mobilization from the democratic center. For the time being, the pandemic has put a stop to this upward trend in voter turnout. And in the 2021 federal election, the pandemic could mean that turnout dips in the direction of the lows of 2009 and 2013.

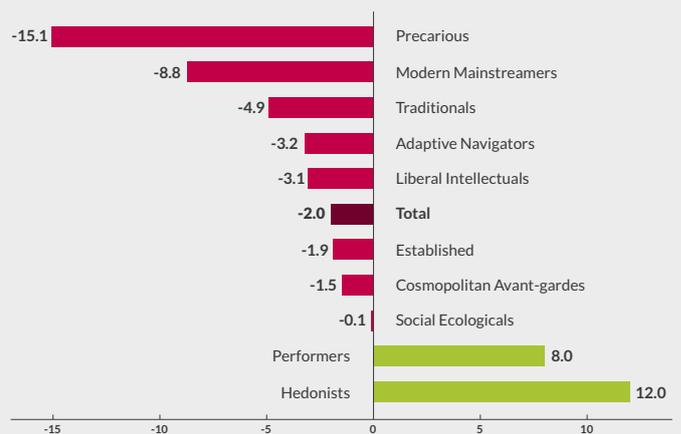
This is also indicated by the responses to recent surveys asking about people's voting intentions (see figure 3). Despite the election campaign, voters are still showing signs of fatigue, in comparison with the turnout in 2017. For example, the proportion of voters who respond to the question "Which party would you vote for if the federal election were held next Sunday?" by choosing a party and who also claim to "vote in (almost) all elections" is currently still 2 percentage points lower on average than the turnout in 2017. This indicates that mobilization in the run-up to the election is currently still rather limited. If, due to the pandemic, there are renewed contact and hygiene restrictions that hinder or prevent people from going to the polling station, this could result in a noticeable decline in participation. And if turnout sinks again, this would very likely also be associated with a fresh deepening of the social divide. This effect could be reinforced further by the expected increase in postal votes (Vehrkamp and Bischoff 2021, forthcoming).

The milieu profile of current voter turnout intentions is also interesting: the socially Precarious are the least mobilized. Here, the estimated intention to participate in elections is slightly more than 15 percentage points lower than participation in the 2017 federal election. This would make voter turnout among the socially Precarious even lower than in 2013, meaning that the populist mobilization effect of the protest votes for the AfD would have almost completely fizzled out.

This is also reflected by the overall decline in the AfD's recent poll ratings and state election results. Many of the protest voters from the socially Precarious are once again planning to abstain.

FIGURE 3 Mobilization of milieus ahead of the 2021 federal election

Change in voting intentions (as of July 2021) vs. 2017 turnout in percentage points



Sources: YouGov and infratest dimap on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

At any rate, the pandemic has not generated a second wave of populist mobilization. However, the social divide in voter turnout could widen again, because protest voters are not returning to the established parties, but are becoming non-voters again. The only two milieus currently showing a comparatively high degree of mobilization are the consumerist Hedonists (+12 percentage points) and the Performers (+8 percentage points). Still, it is unclear how reliable and sustainable this will turn out to be on election day. In their basic values, both milieus are shaped less by tradition and obligation than by new directions, experience and discovery. They do not decide whether to participate in elections on the basis of a binding

canon of values, and nor do they necessarily see voting as a civic duty. They tend to make decisions on a situational and short-term basis. Thus, if they express the intention of participating in elections when responding to surveys, this is less meaningful than the degree of mobilization expressed by the other milieus, which seem to be fatigued and, in some cases, considerably less motivated than average.

What overall picture does this give of the level of voter turnout and the extent of social division two months before the 2021 federal election?

Two tendencies seem to dominate, which could form a “Corona Effect” and shape turnout at the ballot box.

The “Corona Effect” – declining turnout, increasing social division?

The first pre-election tendency results from the pragmatic reaction of many voters to the challenges and restrictions posed by the pandemic. Going to the polling station is either avoided altogether or replaced by postal votes. Both reactions also have an impact on the social profile of voter turnout. An overall decline in voter turnout exacerbates the social divide, because those who do not participate are primarily people whose voting behavior already tends to be erratic and irregular. And these are primarily people with a lower level of education, who are socially disadvantaged and come from the socially precarious milieus of the socioeconomic lower and middle classes. At the same time, the milieus with a higher level of formal education and the higher-income upper class continue to vote at high and above-average rates. This shifts the social profile of voter turnout in their favor, exacerbates the social divide and makes the election results even less socially representative. A higher proportion of postal votes has the same effect, because these are used as a matter of course by groups which contain a large proportion of voters, more than by socially precarious non-voter groups.

The second pre-election tendency can be seen when we analyze voting intentions, and concerns the petering out of right-wing populist mobilization successes in socially precarious non-voter milieus. But people in these groups of society are not returning to the established parties, but are once again deciding not to vote. The two tendencies could condense into a “Corona Effect” in the weeks leading

up to the 2021 federal election and on election day, reducing voter turnout and making it more socially divided (see figure 4).

This would continue a trend which began in the early 1980s, of increasingly socially selective and unequal voter turnout. The brief opposing tendencies in the 1998 and 2017 federal elections would remain exceptional developments, overshadowed by the long-term trend of steadily increasing social division:

“The non-voting milieus constitute an ever-growing sounding board for populism.”

In the 1998 federal election, voter turnout recovered from previous lows and reached 82.2 percent, with a historically strong election result for the SPD (40.9 percent). This narrowed the social divide in voter turnout, which had been increasing since the 1980s; it shrank by 4.2 percentage points from 23.3 percent to 19.1 percent (measured by the gap in voter turnout in the top and bottom 10 percent of constituencies with the highest and lowest voter turnout respectively). With this “Schröder-Lafontaine effect” and the politics of the “new center”, one of the established parties of the democratic center finally managed again to help create an electorate that was decidedly more socially inclusive and less divided. Afterward, up to the 2013 federal election, the social divide increased by a little more than half to just under 30 percentage points.

It was not until the 2017 federal election that the AfD had comparable success, albeit to a lesser extent. This time, however, it achieved this with a right-wing populist program based largely on resentments, which it used to mobilize protest votes from socially disadvantaged non-voter milieus. This “AfD Effect” led to a narrowing of the social divide by as much as 2.8 percentage points in 2017.

The “Corona Effect” described here could reverse this once again at the 2021 election, or even overcompensate. Voter turnout would then return to the trend of deepening social division which was established in the 1980s, without the established parties having

learned from this and restored or at least strengthened their reach among the socially precarious non-voting milieus.

The danger to democracy is still being underestimated

This shows very clearly the extent to which the democratic parties in Germany continue to underestimate the challenge posed by deep social divisions in voter turnout. The socially disadvantaged, typically non-voting milieus are expanding and are continuing to become more entrenched. They constitute an ever-growing sounding board for populism and are particularly susceptible to populist mobilization. The “AfD Effect” in the 2017 federal election showed this, but the other parties have not learned from it.

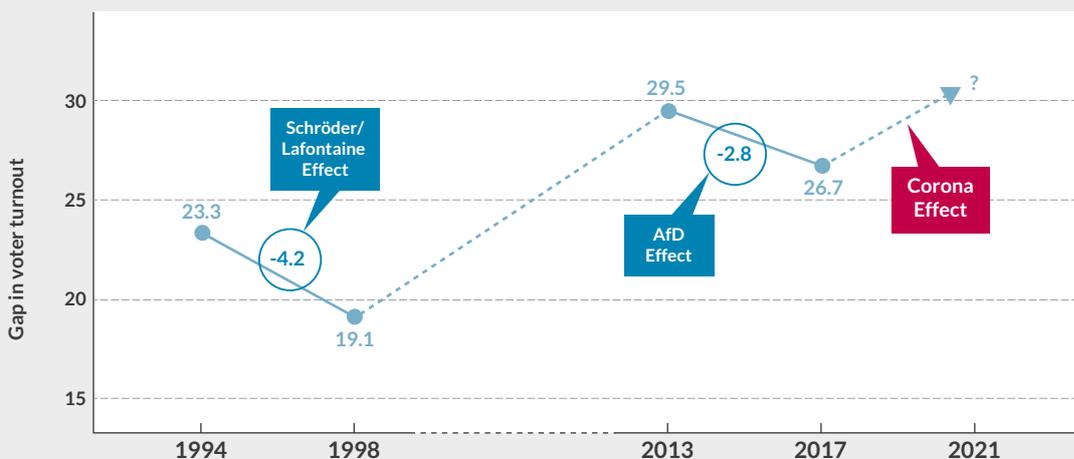
At any rate, if the “AfD Effect” peters out as expected in the 2021 election, this will not be due to the democratic parties reclaiming non-voters. Most will go back to abstaining from voting, until the next wave of populist (re)mobilization arrives. The established parties have almost entirely lost their base in these milieus, which remain largely blocked to them. Their members and functionaries, elected representatives

and leaders are much more representative of the upper-middle and upper-class milieus, which include more voters. At the same time, as their membership shrinks and turnout decreases, reducing their resources for mobilization, the parties are concentrating those declining resources on typical voter milieus where people are more willing to vote and to participate regularly.

This creates an asymmetrical mobilization that favors the socially privileged at the expense of the socially disadvantaged strata of the electorate, exacerbates social division and increases the risk of populist mobilization. In all of the populist mobilizations that have increasingly threatened and endangered liberal democracies around the world in the last decade, the mobilization of non-voters from disadvantaged, neglected and underrepresented sections of society has played a central role. Gaps in representation were perceived as democratic deficits and were instrumentalized by populists against liberal democracy. But liberal democracy has made itself vulnerable to attack: for far too long, it has underestimated the democratic challenge posed by deep social divides in voter turnout.

FIGURE 4 The “Corona Effect” – changes in socially divided electoral participation 1998 to 2021

In percent (changes shown in percentage points)



Note: Gap in turnout between the top and bottom 10 percent of constituencies (with the highest and lowest turnout)

Source: Own illustration based on data from infratest dimap.

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Conclusion: The fight for the non-voters goes into its next round

High and increasing rates of abstention to vote are a problem and a risk for democracies, because they are almost always the result and indicator of a widening social divide. This has been the case in Germany since the 1980s. Over four decades, a steadily growing and increasingly entrenched non-voting potential has emerged, insidiously and with only a few interruptions. The social profile of these potential non-voters is clear and easy to discern: it is primarily the socially disadvantaged milieu that no longer feel represented and therefore no longer participate. In their view, voting is no longer worth it. Disappointment prevails, to the point that people permanently stop voting. This creeping exclusion of socially disadvantaged groups has long been underestimated by the parties, which accept it and even welcome and encourage it as part of the asymmetrical mobilization of their own educated and high-income target groups. This has left a weak point for populists to use and instrumentalize for their own purposes.

Gaps in representation along social lines have made liberal democracies less inclusive and thus more vulnerable to attack. The business of populism is not to solve the underlying problems, but to mobilize the back of these problems, for other purposes that are often less democratic or even authoritarian.

“Gaps in representation along social lines have left liberal democracies vulnerable.”

The answer should be to win back the voter groups which are being lost to democracy, not to leave them to the populists or resign ourselves to non-voting milieu increasing again and becoming more deep-seated. In any case, the fight for these non-voter milieu is entering its next round. And the established parties should win this one, or at least take on the challenge. The 2021 federal election would be a good time to do so.

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