



Future of Democracy | 01.2019

## Europe's Choice

### Populist attitudes and voting intentions in the 2019 European election

**Representation gaps cause populism: those who feel that they are poorly represented are more populist in their thinking and at the polls. The same also applies to the 2019 European elections. However, populist citizens only agree on two things: they are sceptical towards Europe and dissatisfied with EU democracy. When it comes to substantive political issues, left-wing and right-wing populist voters are even more divided than the voters of the mainstream parties. This makes it more difficult to form new majorities in the next European Parliament.**

“For” or “against” Europe? Dissatisfied with democracy and “against” the EU, like the populists on the left and right, or “pro” EU, like the moderate, mainstream parties? These divisions will shape the 2019 European election campaign, but do they also reflect voters’ preferences? The results of a representative 12-country survey on the European elections in 2019 show that this is not the case. If it were up to the voters, the divisions in the new European Parliament would run not only between populist and mainstream parties, but also between economically and culturally left-wing and right-wing camps. Left-wing and right-wing populists only agree on their dissatisfaction with democracy and their EU scepticism. On substantive issues, they are even more deeply divided than the electorates of mainstream parties. In their economic and cultural preferences,

left-wing populist voters agree much more strongly with socialist, social democratic and green voters. Meanwhile, the preferences of right-wing populist voters are more similar to those supporting the Christian democrats and conservatives. Only liberal voters sympathise with the right on economic questions and with the left on cultural questions. For the new European Parliament, this means that without the populist parties at the margins, consensus and positive majorities are only possible through a grand coalition of most of the parties of the mainstream left-right spectrum. If this bridge cannot be built, negative majorities might lead to a self-imposed gridlock and stagnation in Europe. The stronger the populist-extreme forces become, the more likely it is that such a scenario becomes a reality. But Europe still has a choice.

## Representation and Populism

Does a lack of representation intensify populist views? Does the perception that their own positions and interests are not adequately represented by the parties make people more populist?

There has been plenty of speculation about these questions, much of it theoretically well-founded. Empirical evidence of a causal relationship between representation and populist attitudes has so far been scarce. Closing this research gap is one of the objectives of this study.

In order to investigate the causal relationship between representation and populism empirically, we have designed and conducted an innovative survey experiment for this study.

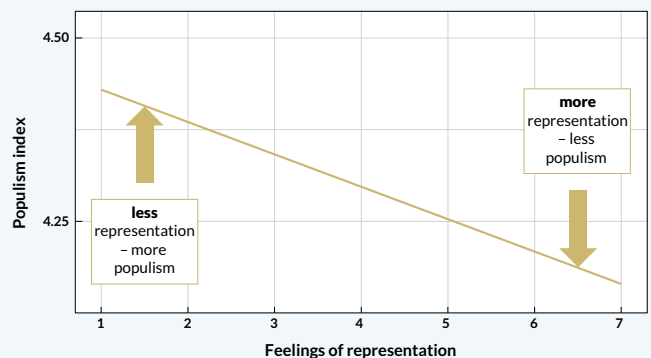
The primary goal of the experiment was to randomly change people's feelings of representation, in order to measure the extent to which populist attitudes are affected by a perceived lack of representation. For this purpose, respondents were first asked about their positions on various questions which play a role in public debate on the European elections. They were then shown randomly chosen party scenarios, which differed according to whether and how much their own position on a topic was represented by the parties of their country in the European election campaign. Respondents could then indicate the extent to which they felt represented by the parties of their country in this scenario. Finally, they were asked their opinion on various typical populist statements in order to ascertain the level of their individual populism. Using this experimental setup, we were then able to deter-

mine statistically whether perceived representation influences the level of populist attitudes:

Do people who feel poorly represented express more support for populist statements?

The short answer to this question is: yes – at least those respondents who were not populist already.

### The representation effect – worse representation means more populism



Method: Structural equation models (SEM).  
Target population: EU citizens eligible to vote in twelve European countries.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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The results of the analysis show that representation gaps can activate and reinforce populism. Poorer representation by political parties in a democracy can lead to an increase in populist attitudes. For the fight against populism, these results mean that good representation can help limit the spread of populist attitudes. If parties endeavour to reflect the various positions and interests in society and to represent them in the political process, they thereby contribute to countering the further spread of populist attitudes in representative democracies.

But what does this mean when it comes to dealing with populist attitudes in the run-up to the 2019 European elections?

Given these results on the connection between representation and populist attitudes, two things in particular seem important to us:

On the one hand, our analysis shows that the parties' efforts to ensure that voters feel

## Sources:

All analysis, data and figures in this POLICY BRIEF are based on the results of the study "Europe's Choice – Populist attitudes and voting intentions in the 2019 European election", by Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Robert Vehrkamp and Christopher Wratil, Gütersloh 2019.

This text is a slightly shortened version of the Executive Summary of that study. The national samples of respondents are representative of the electorate in each of the twelve European countries surveyed. The survey was conducted by YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in a survey wave in January 2019. A total of 23,725 respondents from twelve EU member states were interviewed (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom).

For further details and for information about the methodology, see the section "About the study" and the methodological appendix of the study.

represented are worthwhile. Representation counts! It is an important contribution against the further spread of populist attitudes among voters, and is therefore a goal which is worth every effort.

On the other hand, election campaigns are always a special opportunity to improve representation: by taking up and defining important issues, and by discussing them in controversial terms, political parties can improve voters' sense of representation in election campaigns, and hinder the spread of populist attitudes.

But do voters make their voting decisions for or against a party? Do they vote for the party that best represents their interests, attitudes and preferences? Or are they more likely to vote against other parties whom they do not support at all and whose electoral success they want to prevent? We have examined these questions by empirically measuring and interpreting positive and negative party identities.

## The (forgotten) relevance of negative partisanship

There is no doubt that voters are showing declining levels of identification with mainstream political parties across Europe. But how are voters' behaviour and decisions influenced by negative party identities, i.e. the explicit rejection of parties?

So far, there has been little empirical research on this subject in Europe. For this reason, in this study we have developed measures of negative and positive party identities for the twelve countries examined.

A positive party identity is attributed to those respondents who state that they "definitely" would vote for a particular party in European, national, and regional elections. Conversely, we classify people as having a negative party identity if they have indicated for each of the three elections that they will "definitely not" vote for that party.

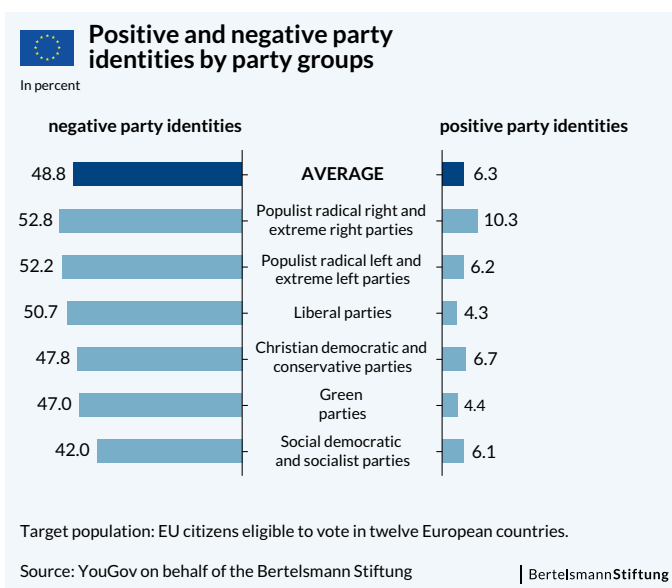
The figure at the bottom shows the average level of positive and negative party identities for each of the six main European party groups we have analysed.

It turns out:

- Positive party identities are much less widespread than negative party identities. This may indicate that many citizens do not opt first and foremost for the party to which they feel most attached, but rather react against parties that they most strongly oppose. They may then vote for the party that seems to promise them the best protection against the parties they most strongly oppose and whose electoral success they therefore want to prevent at all costs.

- The level of positive partisanship of the two traditional party groups of the mainstream spectrum (i.e. social democratic and socialist parties as well as Christian democratic and conservative parties) is almost identical but significantly lower than the positive partisanship of right-wing populists and right-wing extremists. Populist radical right and extreme right parties face the highest proportion of voters with a positive party identity: 10.3 percent of the eligible voters interviewed in the twelve European countries surveyed identify positively with a right-wing populist or far-right party.

- The two party groups on the left and right margins not only face relatively high levels of positive party identities, but at the same time also have a particularly high level of negative party identities (52.2 and 52.8 percent respectively). In other words, these party groups not only have a solid base of voters, but also have a large number of sharp critics. This also shows that the adaptation of the ideas and rhetoric



of these two party groups may be a risky strategy for mainstream parties, since a majority of voters firmly reject them.

Our results are also highly relevant to the 2019 European election campaign: against the background of decreasing positive partisanship throughout Europe, the mobilisation of negative identities could play an increasingly important role. Precisely in the confrontation between mainstream and populist parties, the mobilisation of negative identities in Europe seems to be becoming increasingly important: populist parties are mobilising against the mainstream parties, while mainstream parties increasingly rely on the (counter)mobilisation of voters against the populist parties.

Which divisions result from this among voters, and how are they likely to shape the 2019 European elections and the new European Parliament?

## **Divided EU Parliament: populists against the mainstream?**

Are the European elections above all a struggle between mainstream parties and populist parties, between “pro-Europeans” and “Eurosceptics”, or even between “supporters” and “opponents” of democracy?

The overall picture shows that when it comes to attitudes towards the political system – that is, populist attitudes, satisfaction with democracy in the EU and support for membership of the EU – the divisions between party supporters are very different from those related to economic and cultural questions.

Looking at populist attitudes and attitudes towards the EU system, we find a clear polarisation between the supporters of mainstream parties (Christian democrats, conservatives, social democrats, liberals and greens) on the one hand and the supporters of populist and extremist parties – left and right – on the other. While the supporters of mainstream parties are predominantly satisfied with democracy and EU membership and show a low level of populist attitudes, the supporters of populist and extremist parties are more strongly opposed to EU membership, more dissatisfied with EU democracy, and more populist.

On economic and cultural questions, meanwhile, a more classic ideological left-right divide can be seen, with the supporters of conservative, populist radical right and extreme right parties at one end and the supporters of green, social democratic and socialist parties as well as populist radical left and extreme left parties at the other.

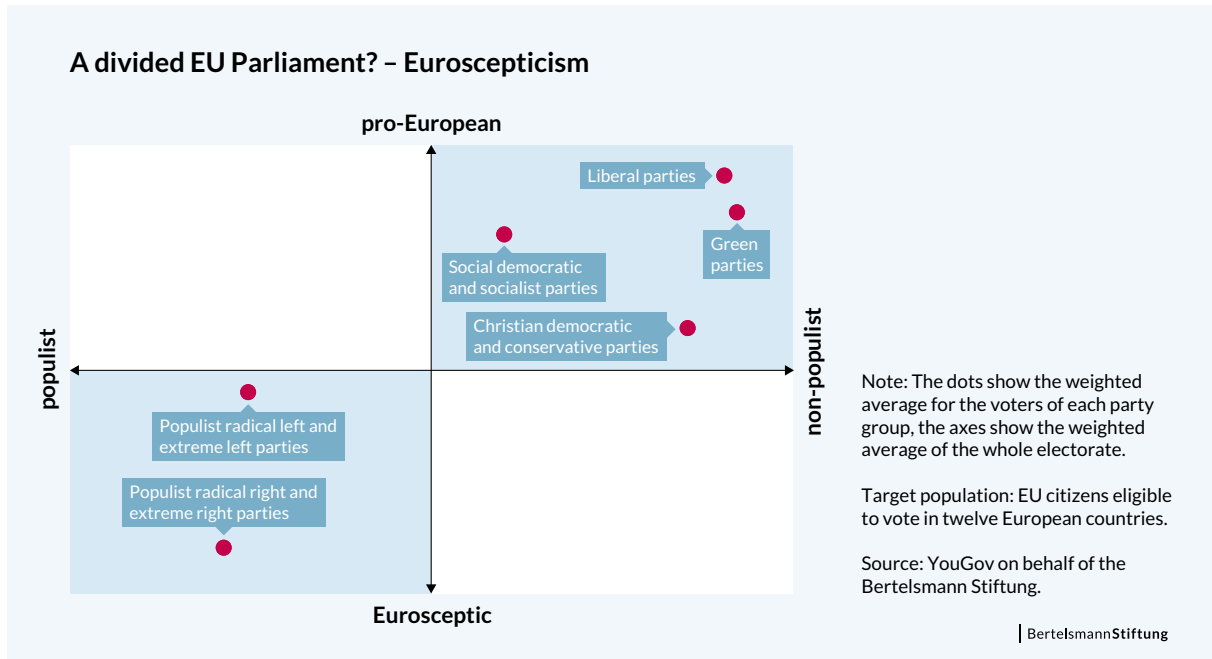
The divide between the supporters of mainstream parties and those of populist and radical parties is very clear when it comes to support for EU membership. In line with other parts of the study, agreement with eight typical populist statements was used to measure how populist respondents were. This allows us to locate the supporters of the European party groups in a space defined by populism/Euroscepticism:

The quadrants of the populism/Euroscepticism space, on page 5, reveal very clearly that the populist/pro-European quadrant and the nonpopulist/Eurosceptic quadrant are completely unoccupied. None of the party groups analysed is more populist than the average and at the same time more pro-European than the average, or less populist than the average and at the same time more Eurosceptic than the average.

The supporters of all party groups are thus located exclusively in the two remaining quadrants in the top right (= less populist and more pro-European than the average) or in the bottom left (= more populist and more Eurosceptic than the average).

The voters of all mainstream party groups can be found in the non-populist, Europe-friendly quadrant. Green and liberal voters are the least populist and most pro-European, while supporters of the group of Christian democratic and conservative parties are a little less populist than pro-European, compared to the average across the electorate. Socialist and social-democratic voters, meanwhile, are a little more remarkable in their pro-European position than their position on the populism dimension.

In the populist-Eurosceptic quadrant, on the other hand, we find the voters of left- and right-wing populist and radical parties. While their degree of populism is similarly high, they differ in the extent of their Euroscepticism:



the supporters of populist radical left and extreme left parties are much less Eurosceptic than those of the populist radical right and extreme right parties. Nevertheless, the supporters of both party groups are more Eurosceptic than the average of all voters and than the voters of all mainstream party groups.

When we consider how satisfied people are with the functioning of democracy in the EU, rather than support for EU membership, almost exactly the same picture emerges.

In summary, then, the divide between mainstream parties and “populists and extremists” is very striking both on the question of support for EU membership and on general satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the EU. These attitudes to the political system reveal two clearly separate party camps: the supporters of the mainstream parties stand in contrast to the populist and extremist camp on the left and right margins, who are Eurosceptic and dissatisfied with democracy in the EU.

This is precisely the distinction between the “pro-Europeans” and “Eurosceptics” as well as the “mainstream” and “populist” parties that has increasingly been invoked in the current

European election campaign, shaping political rhetoric.

But how similar are those who vote for populists on the left and right when it comes to economic and cultural issues?

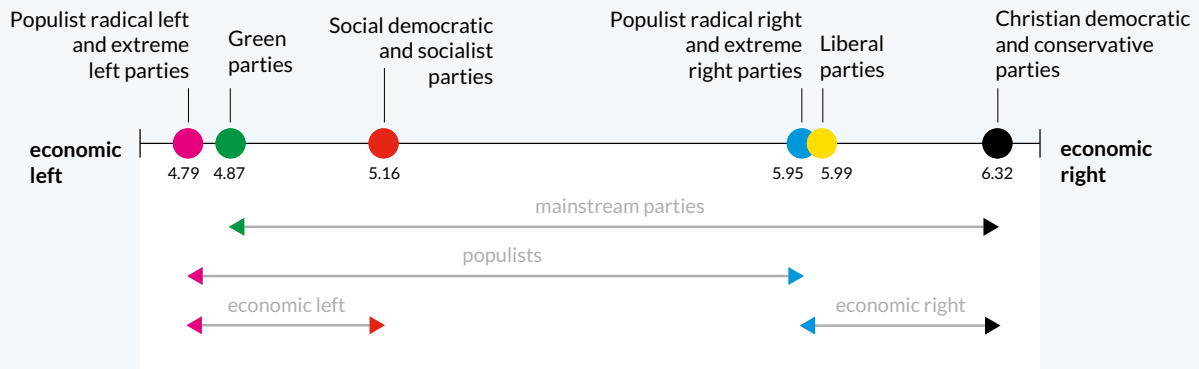
In other words: How uniform is their vision for the future direction of European policy?

## Left against right I – the economic dimension

To answer these questions, it is helpful to look at the voters of the party groups before the 2019 European elections according to their economic and cultural left-right preferences. For this purpose, two additive indices were generated in this study, which locate the preferences and attitudes of the party supporters on an economic and a cultural dimension.

As the illustration on page 6 shows, at the far left of the economic spectrum are the supporters of populist radical left and extreme left parties, with an average index value of 4.79. Right next to them are the supporters of the green parties (4.87), and soon after that come the supporters of the social democratic and socialist parties (5.16). These three party groups are clearly to the left of the average of all eligible

## Economically left or right?



Note: The dots show the weighted average for the voters of each party group. Target population: EU citizens eligible to vote in twelve European countries.

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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voters (5.61). By contrast, supporters of populist radical right and extreme right parties (5.95), liberal parties (5.99), and Christian democratic and conservative parties (6.32) are clearly to the right of the average.

The overall depiction of the economic left-right dimension thus shows clearly that camps have been formed by the supporters of the two party groups regarded as being “left-wing” and the green party group on the left, as well as the two “right-wing” party groups and the liberal parties on the right.

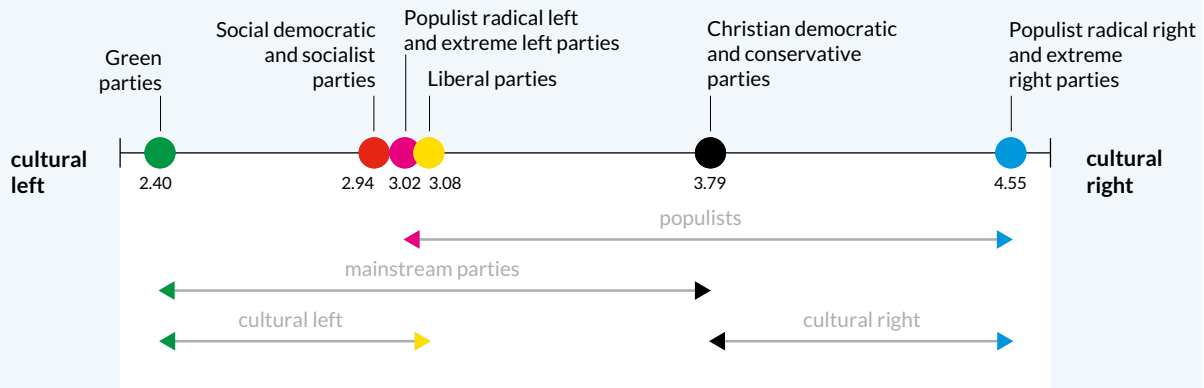
This is also illustrated by the distance arrows between the different party groups, the length of which indicates how strongly the preferences of the voters of different party groups differ from one another. The preferences of the voters of the mainstream party groups are furthest apart in the figure, as the index value of Christian democratic and conservative party supporters deviates by 1.45 points from that of the greens. The second largest distance on the economic left-right dimension is between the supporters of the two populist and radical party groups: here, the political distance between the supporters of populist radical left and extreme left parties and the supporters of populist radical right and extreme right parties is 1.16 index points, which is likewise very

considerable. A different picture emerges on the left and right side of the economic spectrum. There, the gap in political positions between voters in the economically left-wing and the economically right-wing party camps is only 0.37 index points on each side. In summary, this means that the economic preferences of the party supporters of the two populist and radical party groups differ more than three times as much from each other as those of the supporters within the economically left and within the economically right party camps.

### Left against right II – the cultural dimension

A similar but not completely identical picture can be seen for the cultural left-right dimension in the figure on page 7: The locations of the respective supporters of the European party groups are first depicted on a cultural dimension from left to right. And here, too, a clear picture emerges: to the far left of this dimension, there are the green parties, whose voters have an average index value of 2.40 when it comes to cultural preferences. Not far away are the supporters of the social democratic and socialist parties (2.94), the populist radical left and extreme left parties (3.02) and the liberal parties (3.08). The supporters of these four party groups are thus clearly to the left of the average of the whole electorate (3.60). To the right, on the other hand, are the supporters of Christian democratic and

## Culturally left or right?



Note: The dots show the weighted average for the voters of each party group. Target population: EU citizens eligible to vote in twelve European countries.

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conservative parties (3.79) and, to the far right, the voters of populist radical right and extreme right parties (4.55). In cultural terms, the supporters of the liberal parties therefore position themselves clearly to the left of the average. The supporters of the liberal parties are thus the only group to defy clear overarching left-right classification, since they appear economically right-wing and culturally left-wing.

Thus, in cultural left-right preferences, there is once again a contrast between the supporters of the two left-wing party groups and the green party group as well as the liberal parties on the left side of the cultural left-right dimension and the two right-wing party groups of the Christian democrats and conservatives as well as the right-wing populists and right-wing extremists on the right side.

However, a different picture emerges within the culturally left and right spectrum. There, the political distance between the voters within the cultural left (0.68) and within the cultural right (0.76) is only about half as great.

In summary, this means that the cultural preferences of the voters of the two populist-extreme party camps differ about twice as much from each other as those within the culturally left-wing and within the culturally right-wing party camp.

## Consequences for the new EU Parliament

What can be deduced from these results for the coming European Parliament?

In theory and purely in terms of voter preferences, new coalitions in the European Parliament are conceivable in economic and cultural matters – for example between Christian democrats/conservatives and right-wing populists, whose voters are sometimes closer to each other in cultural matters than the voters of some mainstream parties. But the past shows that most mainstream parties are reluctant to form coalitions with populists and Eurosceptics. It is not by chance that the data of this study show that left and right populist parties have particularly high levels of negative party identities. Especially in the European Parliament, the pro-European consensus of the mainstream parties has strong binding force and has repeatedly taken precedence over ideological differences between mainstream parties. Even during the financial crisis, when highly controversial economic questions had to be decided, the mainstream parties in the European Parliament preferred to compromise among themselves on the economic dimension rather than involve EU opponents and populists. Coalitions based on the “Austrian model”, as exemplified by the ÖVP and the FPÖ, are therefore unlikely in the European Parliament even after 2019.

## Conclusion: Conflict or consensus in the new EU Parliament?

Poor representation creates populism. Conversely, this means that good representation is an excellent strategy against populism. But good representation is not an easy business in democracies. It requires those who are represented to give their consent and believe in the legitimacy of the system. If people do not feel adequately represented in the diversity of their interests and attitudes, this creates dissatisfaction with and criticism of democracy. Representation deficits activate and trigger populism.

Populists on the left and right then use such representation deficits for their own purposes. This will also shape the European elections in 2019, where they will benefit from the vulnerabilities of the mainstream parties. They defend the supposedly “true” interests of an allegedly “homogeneous” people against a supposedly “corrupt and evil elite”. They turn voters’ perceived representation deficits into populist criticism of the EU and its democratic system. However, dissatisfaction with democracy

and EU scepticism remain the populists’ only and greatest common denominator. The populist–extreme “anti-EU camp” remains a fiction when it comes to concrete issues: left-wing and right-wing populist voters are even further apart in their preferences regarding such issues than the mainstream parties of the moderate left–right spectrum.

For the new European Parliament this means that consensus and positive majorities are only possible with broader coalitions of mainstream parties. Without the populist–extremist margins, positive majorities could in future require consensus between socialist, left–alternative, green and social–democratic parties, all the way to Christian democratic and conservative parties. The stronger the populist–extremist margins become, the more this forces mainstream parties to reach consensus in “grand” coalitions. If the mainstream parties do not succeed in building this bridge, negative majorities will lead to self–imposed gridlock and stagnation in Europe. The stronger the populist–extremist margins become, the more likely this scenario will be. But Europe still has a choice.

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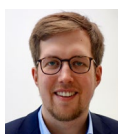
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The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program is dealing with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens’ participation. It is published 6–8 times per year on an unfixed basis.