

Future of Democracy | 01.2020

A Return of Trust?

More than two-thirds (68%) of all people in Germany currently regard the state as being strong and capable of acting. Seven in ten (70%) are satisfied with the way the government has been dealing with the corona crisis. This means that the interim assessment of its first phase of combating the pandemic is very positive.

But how stable are these figures?

The initial phase of the corona crisis has led to a significant improvement in the levels of confidence that Germans have in their state and government. More than two-thirds of all people in Germany currently regard the state as being “rather strong” or “very strong.” This means that the level of trust has risen by 23 percentage points since the end of 2019. At the same time, less than a quarter (23%) still think the state is “rather weak” or “very weak.” That is only about half as many people as at the end of 2019. In addition, more than twice as many people (49%) compared to last year, consider our government to be “strong enough,” and only half as many currently view the political system and political stability as weaknesses. Satisfaction with the government has also reached a high level as compared to other countries. Thus, the initial phase of combating the pandemic has led to a massive return of trust in the state’s and the government’s ability to act. The current trust levels are the highest seen in more than twenty years.

Although there was still talk at the end of 2019 of an “erosion of trust,” public sentiment has turned completely around during the first phase of the crisis.

But how stable are these figures? In any case, one thing is certain: The measured confidence levels are situation-related “performance evaluations.” In other words, they depict sentiments related to an ongoing event. If the assessed event changes, trust levels can also change again. In the process, short-term setbacks are just as imaginable as further consolidation or improvement. Therefore, the measured values represent situation-specific sentiments rather than basic convictions independent of current events. Nevertheless, they do show that the first phase of combating the pandemic has led to a significant increase in popular trust in the government. This freshly gained capital could still be needed in subsequent phases, so it must not be carelessly squandered in the phase of initial easing that is just now beginning.

“There is no glory in prevention?”

Right at the beginning of the crisis, we heard that “there is no glory in prevention.” In other words, don’t expect to receive any thanks for successfully preventing the pandemic. The reason for this warning, which many virologists gave to politicians and the government, was this: that the economic and social consequences of successfully combating the pandemic would persist, but the feeling of being under threat would disappear and the memory of the danger would fade. Sentiment will then reach a tipping point, and the hardships of combating the crisis will dominate people’s final assessment of the crisis-management efforts. This was the prediction heard from many sources. And things might still turn out that way. We might be facing just such a tipping point of sentiments regarding efforts to combat the pandemic. The societal, social and economic costs of combating the crisis are becoming much more palpable. The government’s measures are being questioned much more critically than in the acute emergency situation when the crisis was imminent. At the same time, there is mounting uncertainty about where the pandemic will go from here. Thus, one can only make an initial interim assessment at this point, and there will continue to be uncertainty about the final assessment of the crisis.

Nevertheless, assessments of the level of confidence in the government’s first phase of crisis management have been very unambiguous and very positive: The level of trust in government in Germany is higher than it has been in a long time. The available figures, from a survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, show that the populace and government have overcome the first phase of the pandemic together. A very large segment of the population has confidence in the government’s measures. The measured trust levels are exceptional, and the changes are more than clear. Since a leap like this is extremely rare, it is worthwhile to take an in-depth look at the individual findings.

Sources:

These findings are based on an online survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (field time: April 24-27, 2020). The survey’s sample is representative for residents of Germany aged 16 and older. A total of 1,082 people were interviewed. In order to be able to draw conclusions about Germany’s resident population, the results were weighted to align them with the structural data of official statistics.

The findings of Figure 4 are based on the COVID-19 tracker of YouGov. The tracker captures current representative sentiments on topics related to the coronavirus pandemic. The sample size for each country ranges between 1,000 and 2,000 respondents. The exceptions are Sweden and Denmark, with 250 respondents each.

Consolidated faith in the state’s ability to act

According to the Allensbach survey, more than two-thirds of Germans (68%) currently consider the state to be “rather strong” or “very strong.” In contrast, less than one in four (23%) views the state as “weak” (see Fig. 1). In other words, after Phase 1 of the pandemic, the vast majority of Germans regard the state as strong and capable of acting. This kind of consolidated confidence is particularly important in crisis situations, and it shows that the population supports the majority of measures being taken to contain the pandemic. Thus, compared to last year, public sentiment has fundamentally changed within six months. In the first two months of the pandemic, the German state was able to increase the level of trust in it by 23 percentage points compared to November 2019. Six months ago, only a minority (45%) had expressed their confidence in the state; but after the end of the first phase of the pandemic, the share has reached a new record level.

“Trust in the government is stronger now than it’s been in a long time.”

What’s more, the proportion of citizens who tend to mistrust the state has fallen by a full 21 percentage points compared to last winter, and has thereby almost been halved. Only the share of people who answered “undecided” to the question stayed roughly the same. Even if one makes a comparison using an Allensbach survey from the summer of 2018, the picture remains the same: Confidence in the state is noticeably increasing during the crisis.

This major increase in confidence in the state and its ability to act are evident in both Western and Eastern Germany. However, the share of people in the former West Germany who describe the state as strong and capable of acting is nine percentage points higher than in the former East Germany. And there are still more people in the East who tend to view the state as weak. While almost a third (31%) regard the state as weak in the East, the figure is a bit over one in five (22%) in the West. Nevertheless, a large majority in both the West and the East are currently expressing their confidence in the state, even if the overall verdict in the East is still somewhat less favorable.

Compared to 2019, there have been massive gains in trust in the state among citizens in both Eastern and Western Germany. However, the increases in confidence have been larger in the East than in the West: While trust in the state rose by 21 percentage points in the West, it climbed by 26 percentage points in the East. If one compares the significantly lower starting level in the East in 2019 (34%), the relative gain in confidence is an additional 76%. By comparison, the leap in confidence in Western Germany from a much higher starting level is “only” 44%. Regarding the share of citizens who view the state as “weak,” a time comparison shows respective declines of 19 and 26 percentage points in the West and East. Thus, in the corona crisis, the East appears to be catching up with the West in terms of trust in the state. However, only time will tell whether this trend will be long-term and sustainable, so no final judgment can be made at this time. In any case, this is still a very positive finding for Eastern Germany, in which opinion polls often find a lower level of confidence in the state.

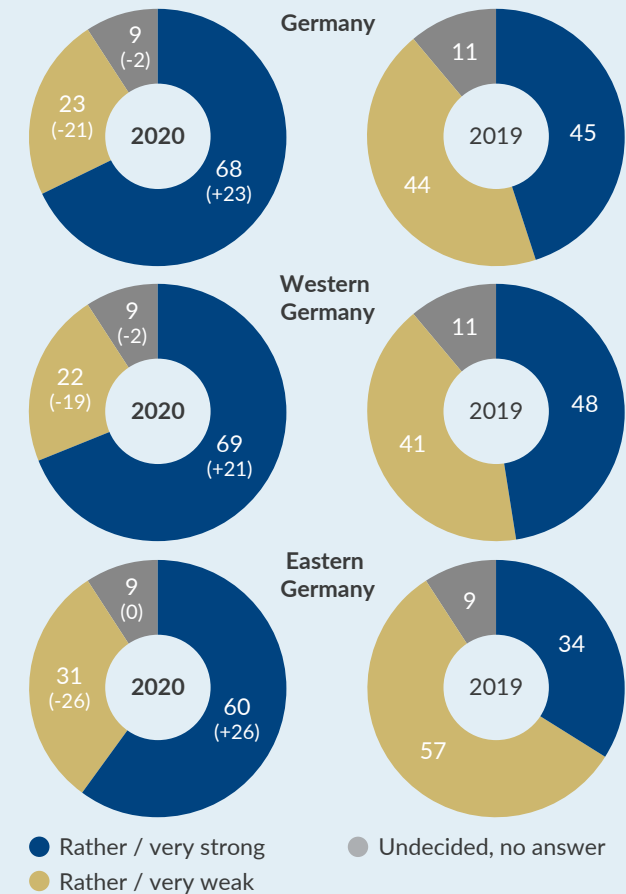
Thus, all in all, the state has managed to noticeably increase the level of trust it enjoys after Phase 1 of the pandemic. When broken down by region, trust in the state and its ability to act has increased somewhat more in the East than in the West. In the former, the share of people with trust in the state has almost doubled. However, the social divide when it comes to trust in the state persists in the crisis, as well. The share of people who view the state as strong and capable of acting is significantly higher in groups with high incomes and educational achievement levels than in socio-economically weak groups. And people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are being particularly hard-hit by the economic and social consequences of the crisis.

In this case, it is particularly important to approach people and to foster more trust and understanding for their fears and concerns through open communication. But is the increase in confidence in the state also rubbing off on the government? The Grand Coalition (GroKo) – made up of the center-right CDU; its Bavarian sister party, the CSU; and the center-left SPD – was repeatedly under heavy fire. It was regularly accused of disagreeing on substantive policy issues and of squabbling. So, what does faith in the government look like after Phase 1 of the pandemic?

FIGURE 1
Is our state strong and capable of acting?

Question: As you know, there are varying opinions as to whether we in Germany have a strong state that is capable of acting or a rather weak state. What do you think? Would you say our state is very strong, rather strong, rather weak or very weak?

In percent. Change vis-à-vis 2019 in parentheses



Basis: Population of Germany aged 16 and older (sample size: 1,082 for 2020; 1,298 for 2019)

Source: Allensbach Institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (field time: April 24-27, 2020) and Allensbach Archive, IfD Survey 11092 (field time: November 2019).

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BRIEFLY EXPLAINED: Within six months, the state has managed to recover the confidence it had lost in recent years. As recently as November 2019, less than half (45%) of German citizens considered the state strong and capable of acting. Within six months, confidence in the state has risen by a full 23 percentage points. After Phase 1 of the corona pandemic, more than two-thirds of Germans (68%) currently consider the state to be “rather strong” or “very strong.” The proportion of citizens who tend to mistrust the state has fallen by a full 21 percentage points compared to last winter, and has thus almost been halved. A comparison with the corresponding figures from the summer of 2018 shows the same picture: Confidence in the state is noticeably increasing during the crisis.

Is our government strong enough in this crisis?

Crises are generally considered the “hour of the executive.” But is this also the case for the GroKo? The short answer is: Yes, Germany’s GroKo government is also enjoying rising confidence levels. However, the level of trust in the government remains well below the level in the state.

The possibly record-breaking level of trust in the state is also reflected in the range of opinions on the government. After over ten weeks of lockdown, almost half of Germans (49%) currently view the government as “strong enough” (see Fig. 2). In contrast, only one in four citizens (26%) thinks governmental action has been “too weak”. Thus, compared to 2019, public sentiments regarding the federal government have also massively changed within six months. In November 2019, only about one in five citizens (19%) believed the government was “strong enough.” Today, after

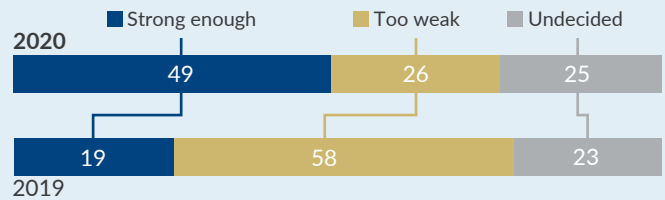
the government was “only” able to double the level of trust it enjoys in the West. Nevertheless, the same holds true for confidence in the government during the crisis: Trust in the executive continues to be socially divided. Even if confidence in the government has risen noticeably in recent months in the strata of society that have low incomes and educational achievement levels, there continues to be a confidence gap between the socially advantaged and disadvantaged milieus. Overall,

FIGURE 2

Is our government strong enough?

Question: Is our government strong enough, or are you worried it is too weak?

In percent



Basis: Population of Germany aged 16 and older (sample size: 1,082 for 2020; 1,298 for 2019)

Source: Allensbach Institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (field time: April 24-27, 2020) and Allensbach Archive, IfD Survey 11092 (field time: November 2019).

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BRIEFLY EXPLAINED: The trend of increased confidence is continuing from the general level of government, including the federal government. Almost half of Germans (49%) believe the government is currently “strong enough.” In other words, it enjoys a good starting position to confront the more far-reaching consequences of combating the crisis. In contrast, only one in four citizens (26%) thinks governmental action has been “too weak.” In November 2019, only one in five citizens (19%) believed the government was “strong enough.” Today, after Phase 1 of the crisis, this figure has more than doubled (+30 percentage points). At the same time, the share of people who thought the government was “too weak” in November 2019 (58%) has declined by more than half (-32 percentage points). Thus, within six months, the assessment of the government has completely reversed, with public sentiment switching from being emphatically negative to predominantly positive.

“The assessment of the government has completely flipped, from negative to positive.”

Phase 1 of the crisis, this figure has more than doubled (+30 percentage points). At the same time, the share of people who thought the government was “too weak” in November 2019 (58%) has declined by more than half (-32 percentage points). Thus, the assessment of the government has completely reversed, with public sentiment switching from being emphatically negative to predominantly positive. And even in comparison with older survey results from the summer of 2019, the picture of a record-breaking interim assessment of the government is confirmed. Since the question was first asked in 1999, public sentiment has never been this positive.

The rise in confidence in the government described above is reflected in Eastern and Western Germany, but it has been bigger in the East than in the West. For example, relative to the starting level, faith in the government has risen at an above-average rate in the East. Thus, on its current course, the GroKo especially appears to be recovering lost confidence in the East. It has managed to boost its approval rating in the former East Germany by ten percentage points, from just 29% in November 2019 to 39%. This means that it has quadrupled its result from last winter. In contrast,

the trend of increased confidence in the general level of the state is also continuing at the actor level of the federal government. For almost half of the Germans, our government is currently “strong enough” and thereby appears to be well-prepared to confront the far-reaching consequences of combating the crisis. The increased confidence is currently also reflected in significantly better “amounts in dispute” of the GroKo. In another question on the governing coalition of the

CDU/CSU and SPD, it was able to noticeably improve its scores compared to 2018: Whereas six in ten citizens (61%) viewed the GroKo as divided in September 2018, this figure has now dropped to just four in ten (37%).

In contrast, the share of respondents who consider the GroKo to be “united” has increased by 17 percentage points during the corona pandemic, to just under a third of all respondents. This is also a record level, although

Diminishing weaknesses are not yet strengths

As citizens see it, Germany is in a much better position after the first phase of the pandemic than it was last year, including when it comes to its strengths and weaknesses. However, as with the state and government, there also appear to be varying assessments regarding strengths and weaknesses. Even though the picture has noticeably changed for the better in this case, as well, it is evident that the shifts are only on the weaknesses side, while the strengths remain stable. In other words, diminishing weaknesses do not automatically mean growing strengths. At present, only just under a third (31%) of citizens still view the quality of our government as a weakness (see Fig. 3). What’s more, only about a quarter of respondents regard both the political system and political stability as weaknesses. A comparison with 2019, when respondents were asked exactly the same question, shows that these figures are good in historical terms.

FIGURE 3

Germany’s strengths and weaknesses

Question: Every country naturally has its strengths and weaknesses. If you look through the following aspects, which of these do you think are good in Germany, meaning more of a German strength? And which do you think are not so good, meaning more of a weakness?



Basis: Population of Germany aged 16 and older (sample size: 1,082 for 2020; 1,298 for 2019)

Source: Allensbach Institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (field time: April 24-27, 2020) and Allensbach Archive, IfD Survey 11092 (field time: November 2019).

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BRIEFLY EXPLAINED: As citizens see it, Germany is in a much better position after the first phase of the corona pandemic than it was in the previous year, including when it comes to its strengths and weaknesses. However, the assessments in this case vary rather widely. The shifts have only taken place on the weaknesses side, but the strengths side has remained largely stable. At present, only just under a third (31%) of citizens still view the quality of our government as a weakness. What’s more, only about a quarter of respondents also view the political system and political stability as weaknesses. Six months ago, seven in ten (71%) respondents still viewed the quality of the government as a weakness. And the picture was similarly bleak in terms of the political system and political stability. On the other hand, the strengths did not enjoy the same degree of boosts in confidence. On the contrary, unlike those for the quality of government, the figures for the political system and political stability have remained stable over time.

there is still much room for improvement. In any case, confidence in a strong government lags far behind confidence in a strong and capable state. However, having such varying levels of trust is nothing unusual: The more vague and abstract the actor (e.g., a state), the higher the level of trust; and the more concrete and tangible the actor (e.g., a government), the lower the level. But what exactly are the strengths and weaknesses that the respondents are ascribing to our democracy in the corona pandemic?

“Only about a quarter of Germans view the political system as a weakness.”

Six months ago, seven in ten (71%) – and therefore the overwhelming majority – of respondents still viewed the quality of the government as a weakness. And the picture was similarly bleak in terms of the political system and political stability. The former was identified as a weakness by almost one in two (47%) and the latter by 41% of respondents. Thus, over time, there are also major differences here: While public sentiment was still very negative in November 2019, the prevailing mood is predominantly optimistic now, especially when it comes to the quality of the government. In this case, the share of respondents has gone down by 40 percentage points, or by more than half, from a clear majority to a clear minority. And public sentiments regarding the political system and political stability have also improved. Compared to the prior year, after Phase 1 of the pandemic, just under half as many people still view these two issues as weaknesses. But does that automatically mean that yesterday’s weaknesses have become today’s strengths?

The answer is: No. Although the picture of the strengths has improved, it has not done so to the same extent as the weaknesses.

The largest gains in confidence in this case were with the quality of the government, which almost four in ten citizens identified as a strength. Six months ago, this only held true for a bit over a quarter of respondents (26%). However, this increase is not reflected at the systemic level. In this case, the share of individuals who rate the political system or political stability as a strength has remained more or less the same as last winter. Then as now, more than half of respondents have identified both aspects as strengths of Germany.

“Only half as many people now view the quality of government as a weakness.”

Positive sentiments regarding the weaknesses and strengths of politics are evident in both the former East and West Germany. For all three questions, the share of respondents who rated them as weaknesses decreased significantly compared to 2019. In fact, the share in the West decreased by almost half for all three questions. The situation was similar in Eastern Germany, but the change in this case is not quite as large and the share of citizens who continue to be critical of the three aspects asked about in the survey is still appreciably higher than in Western Germany. The opposite is the case when it comes to the strengths: In this case, the gains in confidence in Eastern Germany have been much larger than in Western Germany. While almost as many people in the West currently identify political stability and the political system (59 and 54%, respectively) as strengths as did in 2019, the share of people in Eastern Germany has markedly improved – by ten percentage points for the political system and by three percentage points for political stability. At present, the quality of government is identified more often as a strength in both the East and the West than in 2019. However, in this case, as well, the change relative to the starting level in November 2019 has been greater in the East than in the West. In other words, as was the case with confidence in the state and the government, there appears to be a catch-up effect of citizens in Eastern Germany vis-à-vis those in Western Germany.

Thus, the overall assessment of strengths and weaknesses remains positive. In this case, as well, the German government has achieved its highest score since June 2015, when this question was first asked. And it has been five years since so few citizens have identified the political system and political stability as weaknesses. Thus, in terms of weaknesses, the

government and the political system are in a better position in the corona pandemic than they have been in a long time. However, a comparison of the strengths over time shows that the levels have so far only remained stable during the crisis. Rather than resting on their laurels, politicians should continue working to ensure that weaknesses actually become strengths.

Good ratings compared to other countries

The survey results of YouGov’s COVID-19 tracker also show that confidence-building during the corona pandemic has so far been successful (see Fig. 4). While the level of satisfaction with the way the German government has been dealing with the corona pandemic still stood at a respectable 51% in mid-March, the German government managed to boost this level by about 20 percentage points, to 72%, within four weeks. Since then, the level of satisfaction with the German government has remained stable at a high level. However, since the end of April, there has been a very slight flattening in confidence. Thus, it continues to be uncertain how confidence levels will develop in the second phase of the pandemic. After Phase 1 of the crisis, only Australia and Denmark show higher satisfaction levels than Germany. In addition, the country comparison shows that hardly any other country has been able to boost its level of trust during the crisis as much as Germany has. Since the launch of the survey, satisfaction with the government has increased by about 20 percentage points. This high level has only been surpassed by Australia and Sweden, which were able to lift their levels of satisfaction with the government by 26 and 23 percentage points, respectively, during the assessment period.

Crises as the “hour of the executive”

Crises are usually considered the “hour of the executive,” but France, the UK and the US are showing that this isn’t always the case. Despite initially positive developments, all three countries appear to be squandering the trust they have gained during the crisis. At first, in mid-March, they were able to noticeably increase their confidence levels. In France and the US, satisfaction levels with the coronavirus measures rose by six and seven percentage points, respectively. Boris Johnson and his Tories even managed the biggest leap in confidence of all countries – 17 percentage points – within two weeks. But, since then, none of these countries have been able to convince their citizens that they are taking the right approach to combating the crisis. The gains in trust in the US and the UK are apparently being squandered

right now, and this is often attributed to the sometimes populist crisis management of their governments. At present, France is in the worst shape. Since the launch of the YouGov survey, trust in the government in France has fallen from 54 to 34%. That is the largest loss in confidence of all the examined countries.

times as high in Australia, which leads the pack with 89% approval. Thus, in times of crisis, high levels of satisfaction with the government are far from a given. As the country comparison shows, any gains in trust can also be quickly squandered. For successful governmental action in times of a pandemic, it is arguably essential to have clear communication, an open and honest discussion regarding the disease as well as its economic and social ramifications, and continuous reflection on any decisions that have already been made. However, any analysis must also take into account that each country is currently in a different phase of the pandemic. For example, varying levels of trust measured at the same time always also reflect different stages of the crisis. Even if Germany has been doing well so far, acceptance of the coronavirus measures taken may swing back the other way just as quickly.

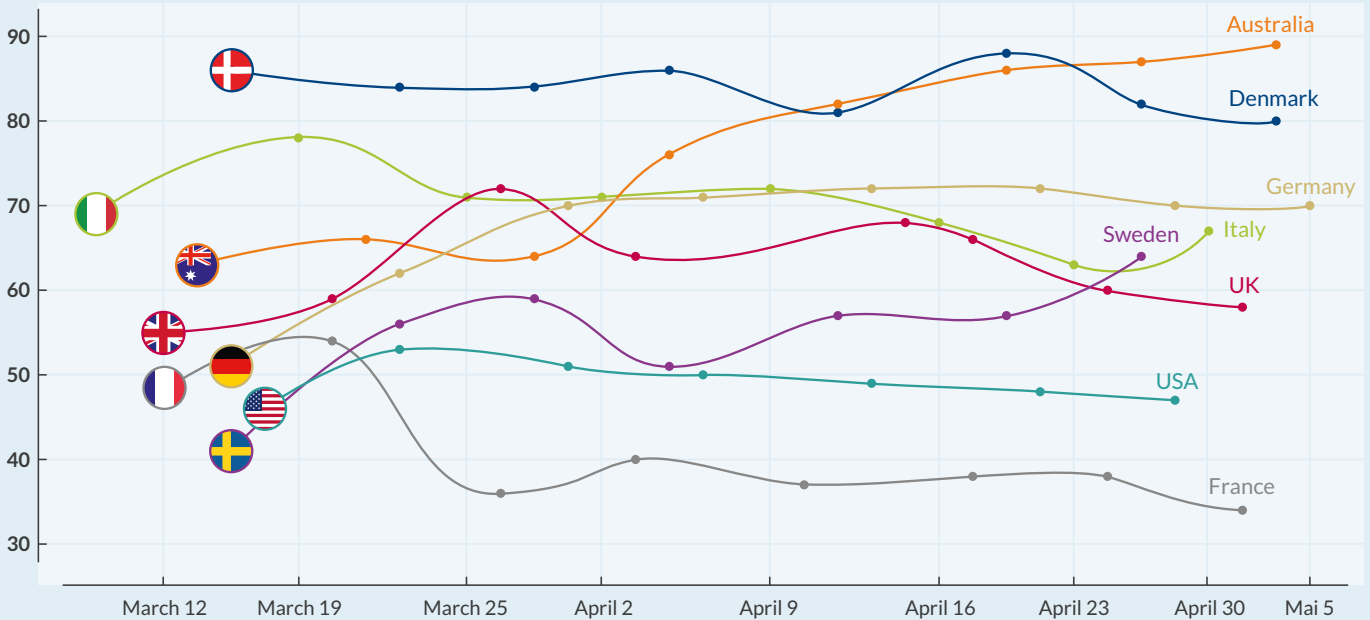
“The German government is also performing very well when compared with other countries.”

Over the last eight weeks, France has lost as much confidence as Germany has gained. By way of comparison, at the beginning of May, only one in three citizens in France was satisfied with their government and the way it has been dealing with the corona pandemic. In contrast, satisfaction is almost three

FIGURE 4

An international comparison of levels of satisfaction with the government

The percentage of people in each country who think the government is handling the issue of the coronavirus “very” or “somewhat” well.



Source: YouGov international COVID-19 tracker. Available online at: <https://yougov.co.uk/covid-19> (Accessed on: May 11, 2020) | BertelsmannStiftung

BRIEFLY EXPLAINED: The country comparison shows that high levels of satisfaction with the government are not always a given in times of crisis. Any gains in trust can also be quickly squandered. At present, Germany is faring very well. While the level of satisfaction with the way the German government has been dealing with the corona pandemic still stood at a respectable 51% in mid-March, the German government managed to boost this level by roughly 20 percentage points, to 72%, within four weeks. Since then, the level of satisfaction with the German government has remained stable at a high level. Only Australia and Denmark enjoy higher levels of satisfaction. Hardly any other country was able to boost its confidence levels in the first phase of the pandemic as much as Germany. At the same time, however, the examples of France, the UK and the US show how trust that was initially gained during the crisis has been quickly lost. Thus, although crises are usually considered the “hour of the executive,” this isn’t always the case.

Conclusion: A return of trust as a must for the future

The present findings show that Germany's government and populace have jointly overcome the first phase of combating the pandemic. The government's crisis strategy has been bolstered by a return of trust in the strength and abilities of the state and government. This justifies a very positive interim assessment. But how stable are these figures? Two things are especially important for answering this question: First, one must keep in mind that rather than reflecting stable basic cognitive dispositions and convictions, these measured confidence levels are situation-related, sentiment-determined situation assessments. They continue to be linked to an evolving and volatile event. They are "performance evaluations." They reflect public sentiments that can change again – on short notice, too. Second, one must also keep in mind that trust in the German government stood at a historical low in late 2019. The bad reputation of the supposedly "lousy" Grand Coalition was reflected in an "erosion of trust" – despite the government's objectively rather good results in terms of fulfilling its promises.

Thus, neither the "erosion of trust" in the years 2018/19 nor the "return of trust" in the first months of the crisis in 2020 should be overinterpreted. Low levels of trust in the state and government therefore do not represent a crisis of democracy. Likewise, improved trust levels are not a blank check for the future.

"The trust of the first phase is not a blank check for the future."

But the public sentiments they reflect are politically important, as they influence politicians' room for maneuver and the potential impacts of their policies. As a determinant of the public climate, they provide important information and pointers for shaping and communicating policy and government action – also and especially in times of crisis. Thus, the return of trust in the government permits a very positive interim assessment of the first phase of combating the pandemic. But now is no time for resting on our laurels.

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The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program deals 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.