



Wahllokal



Summary

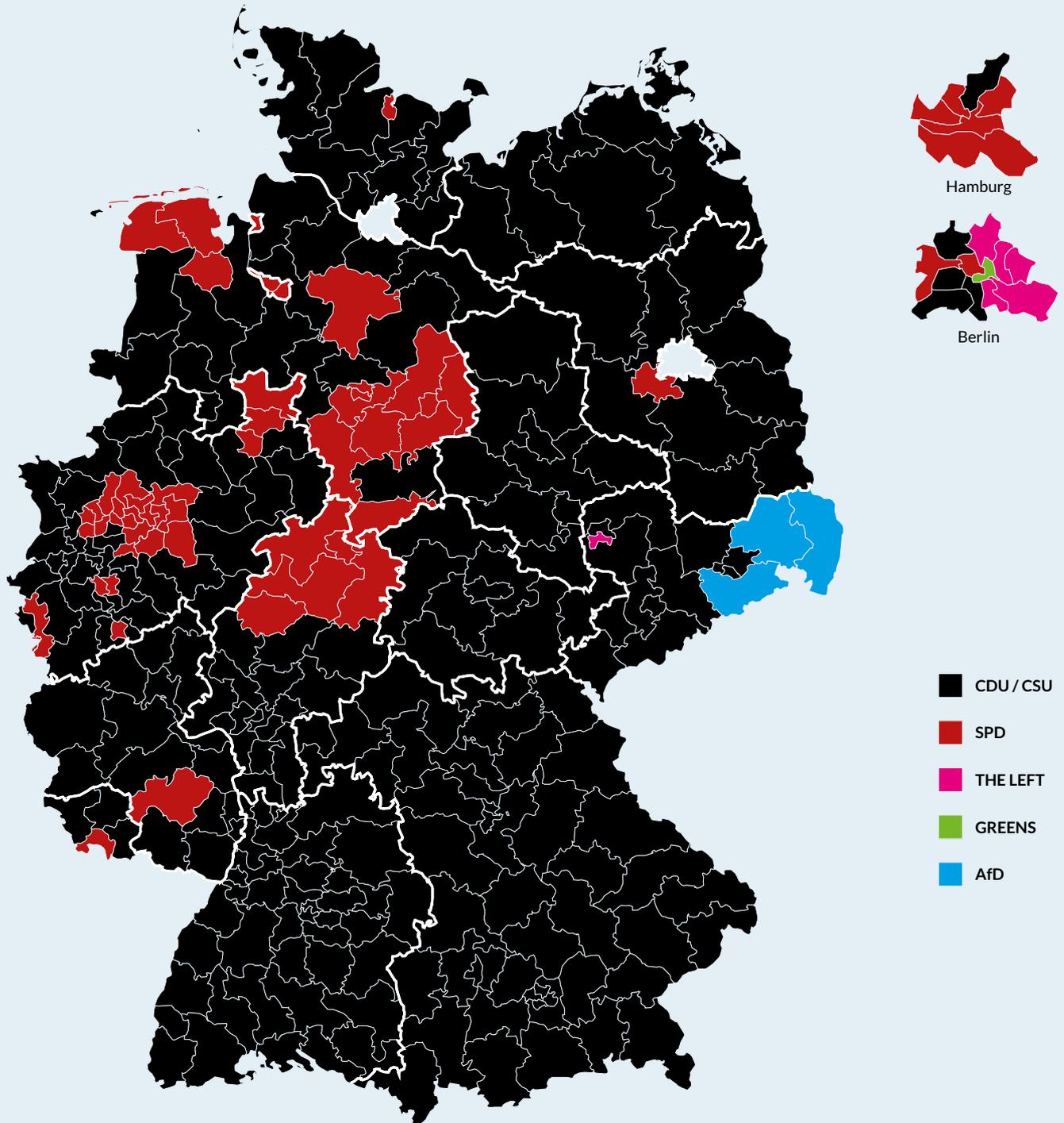
# „Popular“ Election

Mobilization and counter-mobilization dynamics in the social milieus during the Bundestag election of 2017

Robert Vehrkamp and Klaudia Wegschaider

# An overview of the results of the 2017 Bundestag election

Direct mandates in the 299 electoral districts



Source: Own depiction, based on preliminary official results. © Federal Election Commissioner, Federal Statistical Office, Wiesbaden 2016, Electoral district map for the election for the 19th German Bundestag foundation of the geoinformation © Geobasis-DE / BKG (2016).

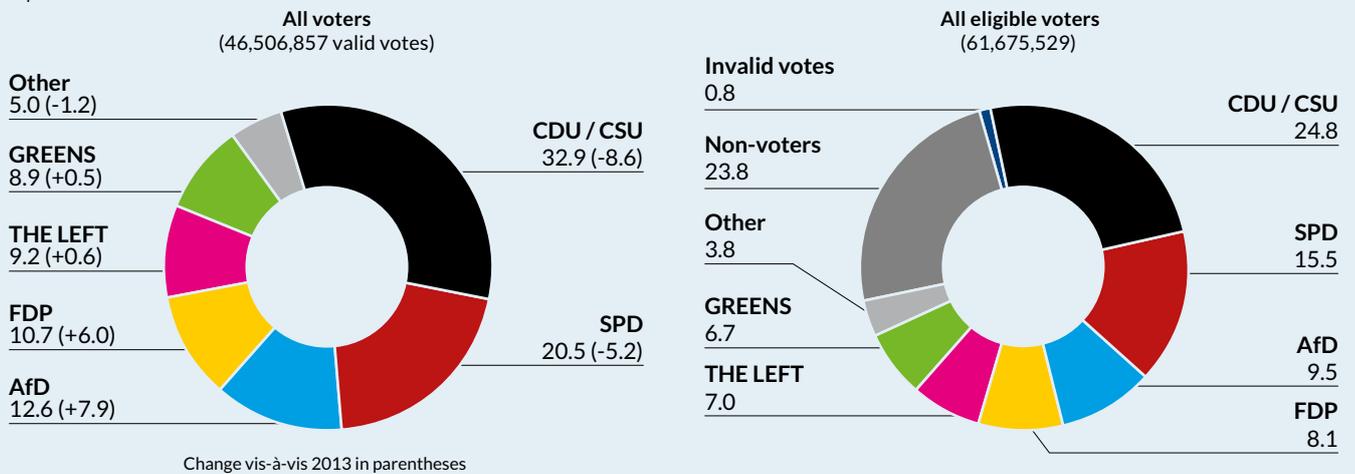
### Trends in voter participation

In percent

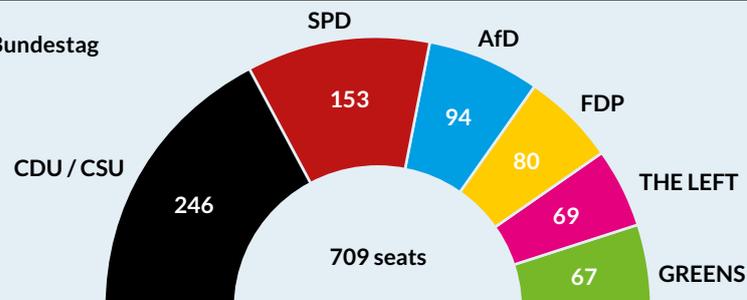


### Preliminary official results: Second (party) votes\*\*

In percent



### Seat allocation in the 19th Bundestag



Note: Data for 2017 based on preliminary official results.

\* Due to inaccuracies when figures are rounded off, the difference is 4.6 percentage points. This number is also identified by the Federal Election Commissioner.

\*\*In Germany, voters cast a "first vote" for the candidate in their voting district and a "second vote" for a political party.

Source: Own depiction based on information from the Federal Election Commissioner.

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# Executive Summary

## The “Popular” Bundestag Election of 2017

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The 2017 election of Germany’s federal parliament, the Bundestag, marked a turning point for the country’s democracy. But what exactly is behind this turning point? The ongoing decline of the mainstream political parties? The challenge presented by a new right-wing populist protest party in the Bundestag? The political fragility of the Modern Mainstream? Or the erosion of the democracy in the socially precarious milieu?

These are all pressing questions and characteristic facets of this election – and ones that point to a new line of conflict in the democracy. This new line of conflict is a diagonal tear running through the middle of German society – not geographically, but socially and culturally. It divides the societal milieus into the socio-cultural skeptics and supporters of modernization, and thus influenced the election result along this line of conflict.

A new right-wing populist protest party has established itself in the camp of the socio-cultural skeptics of modernization: the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Almost two-thirds of its voters belong to a milieu that is skeptical of modernization. The majority of votes cast for the other parties came from voters belonging to the pro-modernization milieus. Thus, the democracy’s new line of conflict between the social-cultural skeptics and supporters of modernization is becoming an influential factor in Germany’s political arena. Therefore, this line of conflict is the distinguishing feature of the “popular” Bundestag election of 2017.

### AfD effect reduces the social divide in voter participation

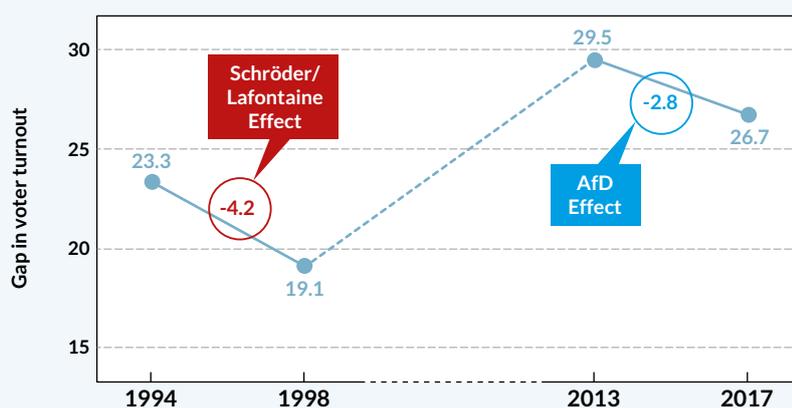
In the 2017 Bundestag election, the AfD managed to accomplish something last done by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) roughly two decades ago: By successfully mobilizing voters in the socially precarious non-voter strongholds, it noticeably reduced the social divide (or stratification) in voter turnout. The rise in voter participation to 76.2 percent (+4.6 percentage points) led to a reduction in its social divide of just under 3 percentage points (-2.8). The reason for this is that voter turnout in the socially precarious voting districts with the lowest voter participation increased by more than twice as much as it did in the economically strong voting districts with the highest voter participation.

During the 1998 Bundestag election, a rise in voter turnout by 3.2 percentage points was also accompanied by a significant reduction in its social divide (4.2 percentage points). The SPD had scored a major electoral success primarily by simultaneously mobilizing voters from the middle stratum of society and the

core SPD voter milieus of the middle and lower classes. This electoral success is closely associated with the names of the top two SPD leaders at the time: Gerhard Schröder and Oskar Lafontaine. The social profile and mobilization pattern of this “Schröder/Lafontaine effect” of the 1998 Bundestag election bear a strong resemblance to the social profile and mobilization pattern of the “AfD effect” of the 2017 Bundestag election. In both cases, the electoral and mobilization successes in the socially disadvantaged non-voter milieus led to a noticeable reduction in the social divide of voter participation. And even if the AfD effect of 2017 has turned out to be somewhat smaller than the Schröder/Lafontaine effect of 1998, the following still holds true: Something that was achieved by an established mainstream party during the 1998 Bundestag election was now accomplished by a right-wing populist protest party, the AfD.

### Reduction in the social divide of the Bundestag elections of 1998 and 2017

In percentage points



Note: Gap in voter turnout in the respective 10 % of all voting districts with the highest or lowest levels of voter turnout.

Source: Own depiction based on data from infratest dimap.

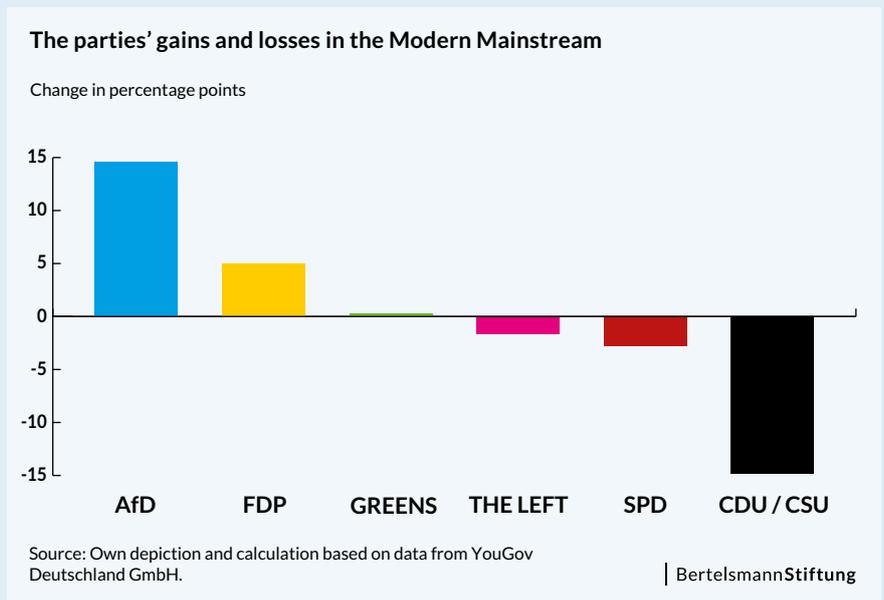
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## The battle for the Modern Mainstream

In the battle for the milieu of the Modern Mainstream, the AfD also competed with the established parties and, in particular, Chancellor Angela Merkel’s center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). In the Modern Mainstream, the AfD achieved a result equal to 20 percent of all votes, representing a growth of 15.0 percentage points over its 2013 result. At the same time, in its core milieu of the Modern Mainstream, the CDU/CSU suffered the largest loss of all parties in a single milieu (-14.6 percentage points). Furthermore, the CDU/CSU also clearly lost its absolute majority in the Modern Mainstream – after winning 52 percent in the 2013 Bundestag election, it only won 37 percent in 2017. However, in relative terms, the CDU/CSU continues to be the strongest political force in this milieu. Having

said that, with estimates putting the share of non-voters for the 2017 Bundestag election at about 26 percent, this still means that four out of every ten eligible voters from the Modern Mainstream either did not vote at all or voted for the AfD. Almost half of all eligible voters from the Modern Mainstream cast their ballot for the far-left Die Linke (The Left), the AfD or one of the other minor parties – or refrained from voting altogether.

This distribution of votes also impacts the arithmetic of how coalition majorities can be formed: After representing 73.5 percent of the votes in the 2013 election, the so-called Grand Coalition of the SPD and the CDU/CSU would only represent 55.8 percent of all voters and only some 42 percent – or roughly four out of ten – of all eligible voters from the Modern Mainstream. A so-called Jamaica Coalition made up of the CDU/CSU, the business-friendly Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Die Grüne (the Greens) – whose respective party colors (black, yellow and green) are the same as the Jamaican flag – would only represent a slight majority of 51.7 percent of all voters and less than four out of ten (39 percent) of all eligible voters. All of this goes to show that the established (mainstream) parties are losing a lot of ground in the Modern Mainstream. The battle over the middle has significantly intensified, and the first stage – represented by the 2017 Bundestag election – went to the AfD.



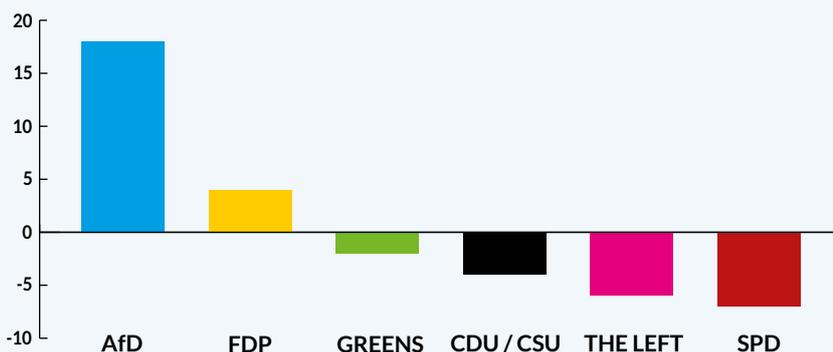
### Erosion of the established parties in the socially precarious milieu

In the milieu of the Precarious, a milieu of the lower stratum of society, the erosion of the established political parties is now progressing rapidly. The estimated voter turnout in this milieu only stood at about 58 percent of all eligible voters. At the same time, the AfD enjoyed its best results in this milieu – 28 percent of all

votes – as well as a growth of 18 percentage points compared to its results in the Bundestag election of 2013. In contrast, the losses in this milieu are more evenly spread among all established parties, though they were particularly felt by the SPD (-7 percentage points) and The Left (-6 percentage points). Thus, nearly 63 percent of all eligible voters in this milieu either did not vote at all or voted for the AfD or one of the other minor parties. Overall, almost six out of ten eligible voters (58 percent) either did not vote at all or voted for the AfD. A Grand Coalition would only represent nearly four out of ten (38 percent) of all voters in the Precarious milieu and less than a quarter (22 percent) of all eligible voters. Arithmetically, a Jamaica Coalition would represent less than a third (32 percent) of all voters and less than 18 percent of all eligible voters in this milieu. Indeed, the erosion of the established parties and the dominance of the non- and protest voters has made more progress in the Precarious milieu than in any other.

#### The parties' gains and losses in the Precarious milieu

Change in percentage points



Source: Own depiction and calculation based on data from YouGov Deutschland GmbH.

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### The democracy's new line of conflict: Skeptics versus supporters of modernization

The results of this study indicate that a new line of conflict in Germany's democracy is the distinguishing feature of the 2017 Bundestag election, a line that runs like a diagonal tear through the middle of German society. As a diagonal line, it divides society along the two defining dimensions of the social milieus: On the one hand, it runs along the socioeconomic ("social status") dimension of the upper, middle and lower classes. On the other, in the values dimension, it runs along the basic orientations of tradition, modernization/individualization and re-orientation. The milieus of the skeptics of modernization are located on the left side of the diagonal line, and the milieus of the supporters of modernization on the right side of it. On either side of the diagonal, there are roughly half of all eligible voters in Germany.

On one side of the line of conflict are those who are rather skeptical of or even opposed to the economic, social, technical and cultural trends of modernization for very different reasons. At least subjectively, they consider themselves to be the social, economic and/or cultural losers of modernization. This also influences their voting behavior.

On the other side of the line of conflict are primarily people who are benefiting from the economic, social, technical and cultural trends of modernization or who at least feel attracted to it and therefore associate mainly opportunities with it. This influences their voting behavior, as well.

The results of the 2017 Bundestag election can also be interpreted along this new line of conflict: Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of all AfD voters are located below the diagonal line of conflict in the area designating skeptics of modernization. Only slightly more than a third (35 percent) come from a milieu of supporters of modernization. Thus, the AfD is predominantly a party of voters who are skeptical of modernization, a unique trait that sets it apart from all other parties along the entire political spectrum. Indeed, a majority of the people who vote for all the other parties represented in the Bundestag belong to milieus that support modernization.

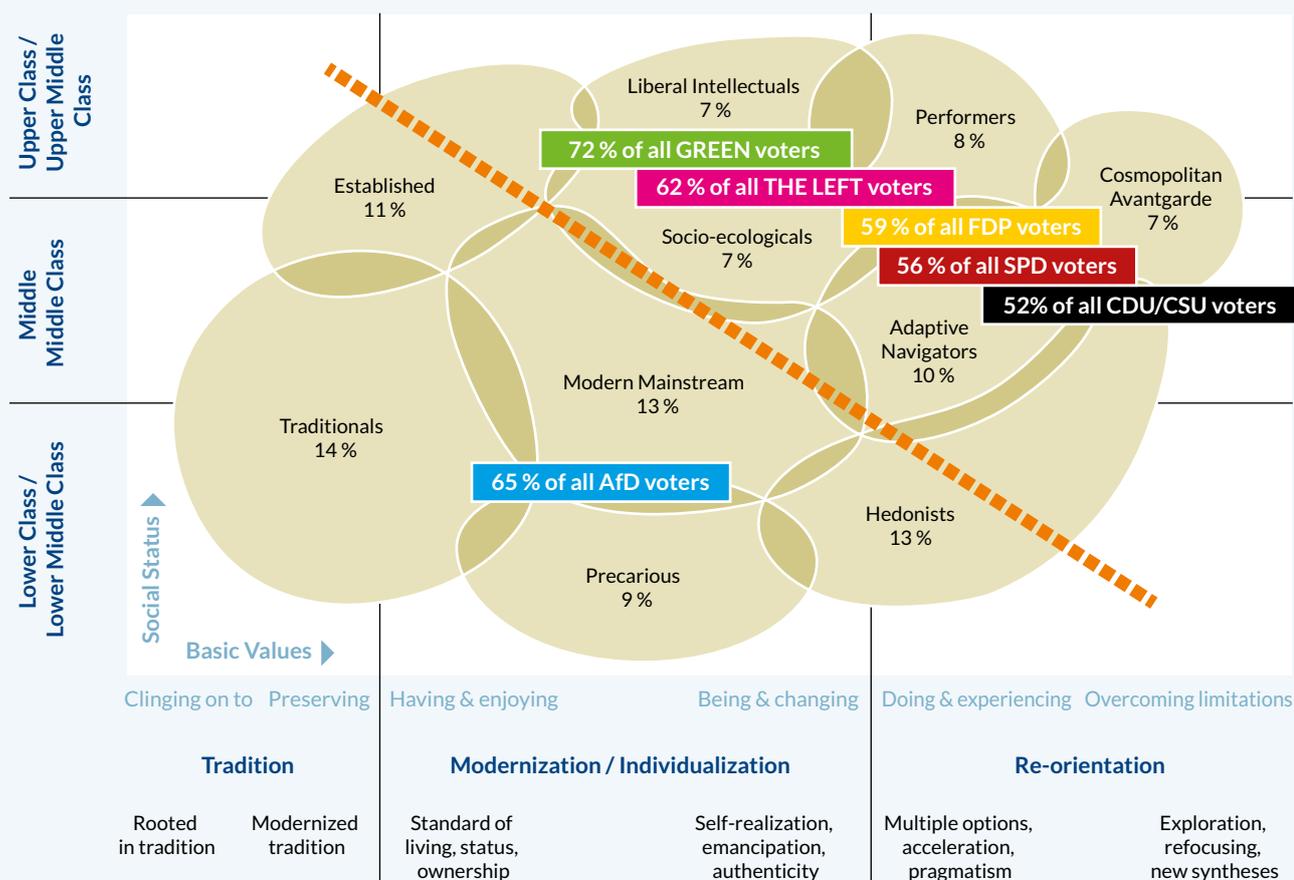
Of all the other parties, the CDU/CSU has the most balanced voter profile: Just under 52 percent of its voters come from a milieu of supporters of modernization, and slightly more than 48 percent come from a milieu of skeptics of modernization. With the SPD, slightly more than 56 percent of its voters come from the area designating supporters of modernization, and just under 44 percent come from the area designating skeptics of modernization. The voter profiles of the smaller parties are even more strongly characterized by voters from the modernization-friendly milieus. For the FDP, the ratio of its voters in the Bundestag election was 59 percent from the milieus of the supporters of modernization to 41 percent from the milieus of the skeptics of modernization. The respective figures were 62 to 38 percent for the FDP, and 72 to 28 percent for the Greens. Thus, The Left and the Greens are the parties most strongly characterized by voters from the pro-modernization milieus, even more so than the FDP.

Similar patterns arise for the voter profiles of the mathematically possible coalition majorities: The Grand Coalition of the SPD and the CDU/CSU shows what is still a relatively balanced profile of 53 to 47 in favor of the milieus of modernization supporters. Meanwhile, this profile would be much more pronounced under a Jamaica Coalition, which would represent just under 57 percent of the modernization-friendly milieus and only about 43 percent of the voters from the modernization-critical half of voters beneath the new line of conflict.

For both potential coalitions, the results of the Bundestag election for the next legislative period lead one to expect a worsening polarization along the democracy's new line of conflict between skeptics and supporters of modernization. Whether this will lead to a conflict between the AfD and the rest of the established party system, as well as how severe this conflict might be, remain completely open

questions. In any case, many of the existing political controversies could run and be played out along this line of conflict. This could further intensify them, or defuse them. For this reason, it is the actual and enduring distinguishing feature of the “popular” Bundestag election of 2017.

Sinus-Milieus® - Distribution of all eligible voters



Sources: SINUS-Institut and own calculations based on data from YouGov Deutschland GmbH.

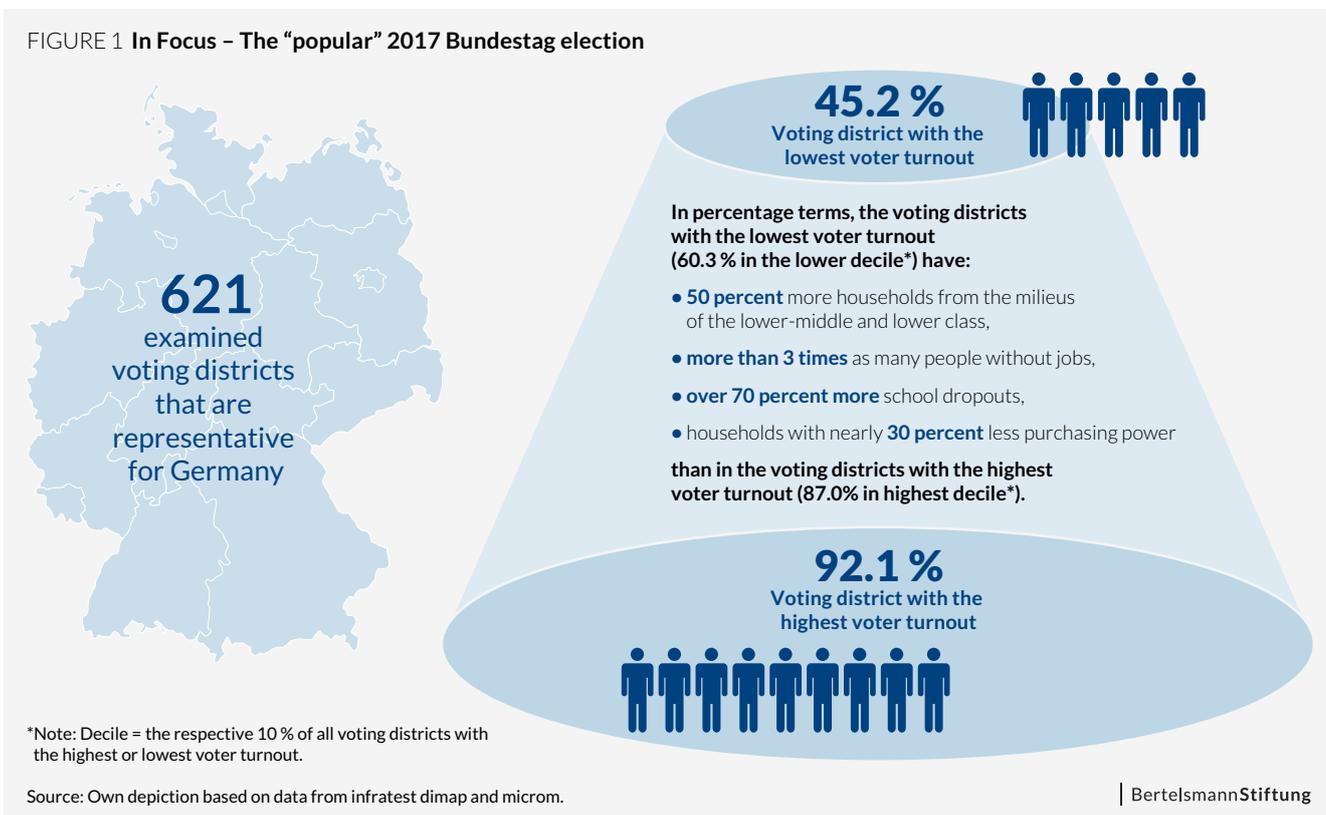
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**BRIEFLY EXPLAINED:** This illustration shows where voters from the different political parties in Germany stand relative to the diagonal line. This line roughly divides German society into two halves, with those skeptical of modernization lying below the line and those supportive of modernization lying above the line. From it, one can clearly see that a majority of voters from the following parties are pro-modernization: the Greens, The Left, the FDP, the SPD and the CDU/CSU. The vacuum created by this below the diagonal line is now filled by the AfD – 65 percent of its voters come from the milieus of the Traditionalists, the Precarious, the Modern Mainstream, the consumption-oriented part of the Hedonists and half of the Established. The respective shares of the vote were calculated using estimated voter turnout based on survey data and voting district analyses as well as the party results in the various milieus.

# 1. In Focus: The “Popular” Bundestag Election of 2017

After rising in eight consecutive parliamentary elections in Germany’s federal states (*Bundesländer*), voter turnout reached 76.2 percent of all eligible voters, in the 2017 election of Germany’s federal parliament, the Bundestag. This marks an increase in 4.6 percentage points. All told, 47 million of what are just under 61.7 million eligible voters exercised their right to vote. The number of non-voters thereby decreased by 2.5 million, to 14.7 million. Despite this increase, voter turnout is at its third-lowest level in the postwar era and, at 76.2 percent, is even below the level of the first Bundestag election, held in 1949. However, this increase by 4.6 percentage points in voter participation is the second-highest one of the past 70 years. At the same time, there has been a reduction in the social divide between typical voters and typical non-voters. Although this imbalance between the economically strong voter milieus and the economically weak non-

FIGURE 1 In Focus – The “popular” 2017 Bundestag election



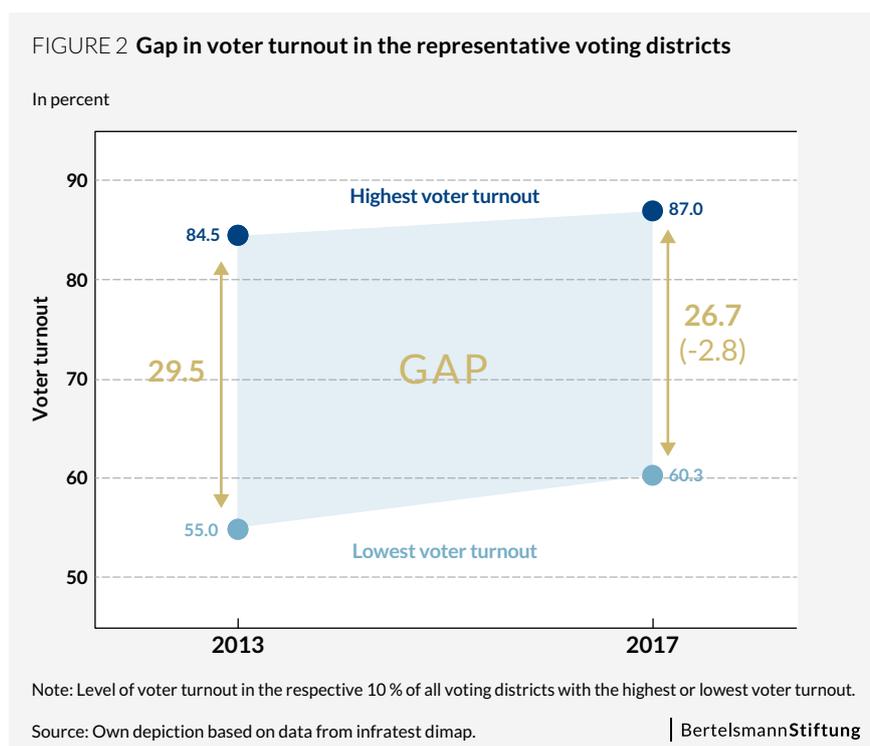
voter milieus continues to be socially precarious at a high level, it has noticeably decreased for the first time in almost two decades.

Why is that? The decisive factor is the social profile of the mobilized non-voter. If the voters who are mobilized primarily come from the economically strong "voter milieus," the social divide intensifies. But if the voters who are mobilized are from the socially precarious non-voter milieus, it leads to a reduction in the social divide of voter participation.

The results of this study show that, for the 2017 Bundestag election, it was mainly the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party that succeeded in mobilizing former non-voters in the socially precarious non-voter strongholds at an above-average rate. In other words, the mobilization in these non-voter strongholds was primarily an "AfD effect." In contrast, the mobilization of the established parties in the typical voter milieus turned out to be weaker and less clear-cut in terms of its social profile. As a result, voter turnout in the economically well-situated voter strongholds only grew at a below-average rate. At the same time, the AfD effect led to an above-average increase in voter turnout in the socially precarious non-voter strongholds. This, in turn, reduced the overall social imbalance in voter participation.

## AfD effect reduces the social divide

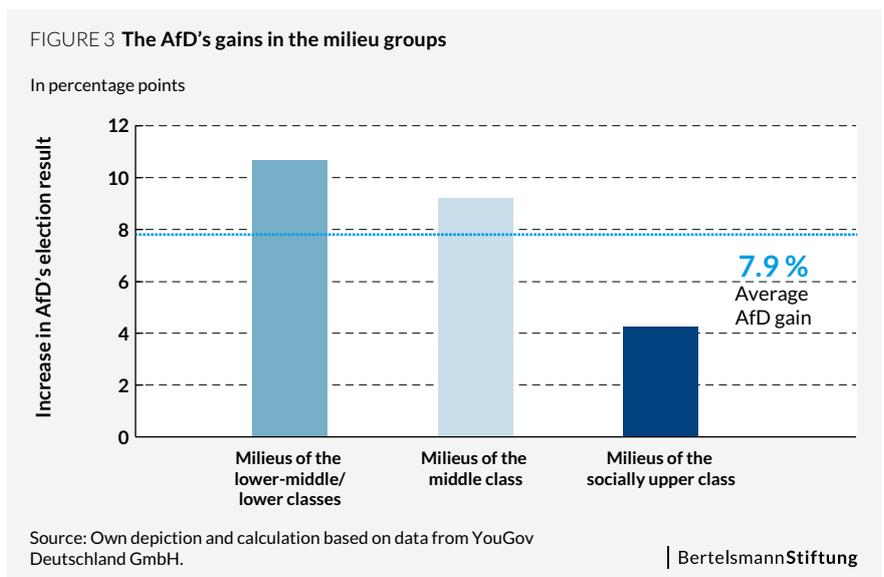
The reduced, but still strong social divide in voter participation of the 2017 Bundestag election becomes clear if one compares voter turnout in the representative voting districts with the highest and lowest voter turnout (Figure 2):



One can see that, while the overall level of voter turnout rose, the gap in voter turnout between the voting districts with the lowest and highest voter turnout noticeably decreased, sinking from 29.5 percentage points in the 2013 Bundestag election to 26.7 percentage points in the 2017 Bundestag election. Thus, the gap in voter turnout decreased by just under three percentage points (2.8). The reason for this is that voter turnout in the voting districts with the lowest voter turnout increased by more than twice as much as it did in the voting districts with the highest voter turnout. In the socially precarious voting districts with the lowest voter turnout, it rose at a slightly above-average rate of 5.3 percentage points, from just 55 to 60.3 percent (the average increase of overall voter turnout was 4.6 percentage points). At the same time, voter turnout in the economically strong voter strongholds rose at a clearly below-average rate of just 2.5 percentage points, from 84.5 to 87 percent. At an overall higher level overall, this led to a noticeable reduction in the gap in voter participation.

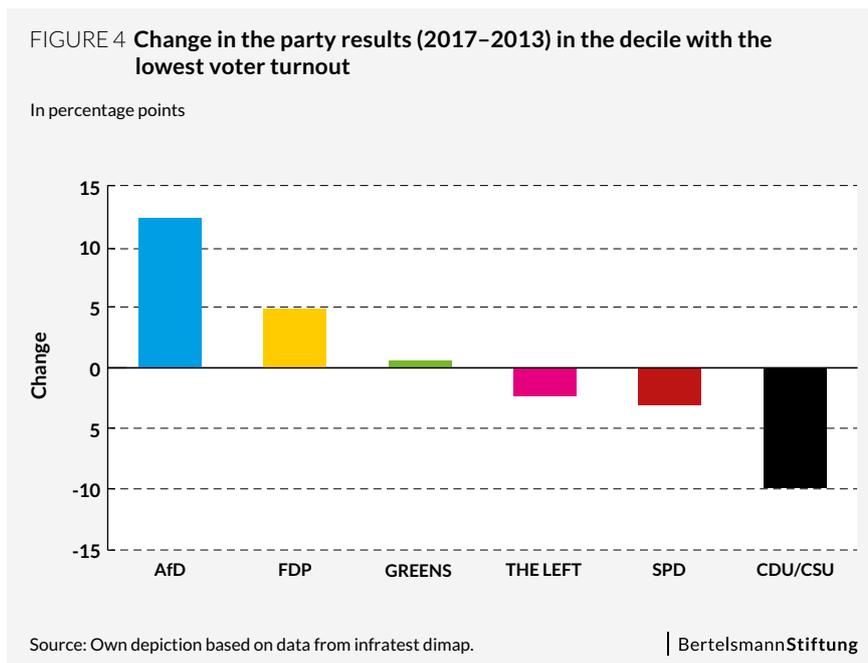
But what is the reason for this gap in voter participation? And why did it decrease so noticeably in the 2017 Bundestag election?

For starters, one can say that the social profile of a voting district determines its level of voter turnout. The more socially precarious the milieu structure in a voting district, the lower the voter turnout; and the higher the share of economically stronger milieus from the middle and upper social strata, the higher the voter turnout (cf. Figure 1). Thus, the gap in voter participation is the mirror image of its social divide. For this reason, a reduction in its gap also leads – perhaps not inevitably, but in all likelihood – to a reduction in its social divide. This is precisely what happened in the 2017 Bundestag election: The AfD’s above-average rate of mobilization in the socially precarious non-voter strongholds decreased the social divide in voter participation. The social profile of the AfD election results illustrates this correlation (Figure 3):



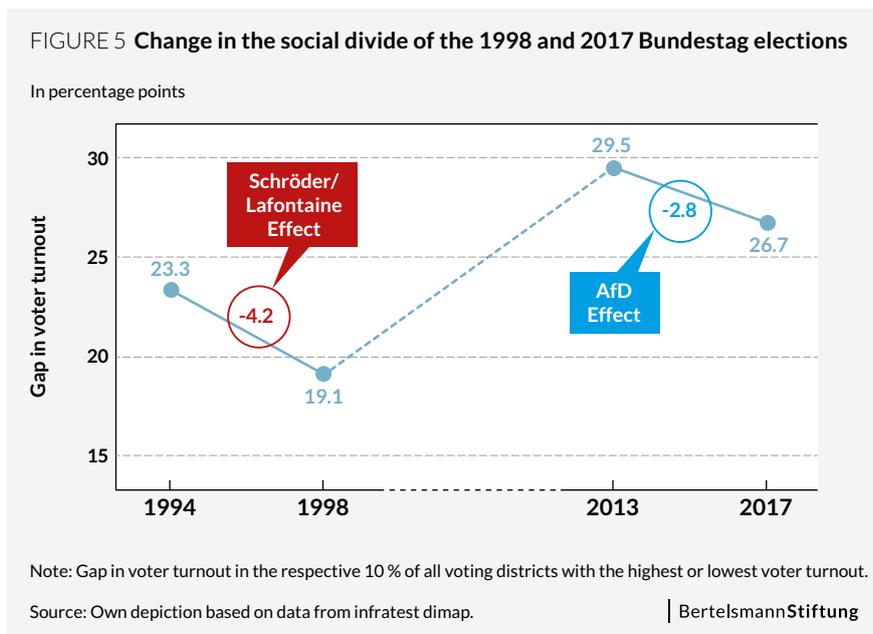
The AfD achieved its strongest results by far in the milieus of the lower-middle class and in the socially precarious milieus of the lower class. In these typical non-voter milieus, the AfD achieved its strongest result: 16.4 percent. Thus, its share of the vote in the non-voter milieus was twice as high as the party's results in the milieus of the socially upper class, which have high turnout rates. The changed social profile of the AfD election result can be seen even more clearly from the gains it made vis-à-vis the 2013 Bundestag election: With an increase of 10.8 percentage points, the AfD's gains in the non-voter milieus were more than twice as large as its gains in the high-vote-turnout milieus of the socially upper class (+4.3 percentage points).

Thus, in simplified terms, one can say the following about the AfD's election results: The more socially precarious the voting district, the better the AfD performed and the larger its increase. For this reason, it is very likely that the above-average rise in voter participation in the voting districts with the lowest voter turnout is an AfD effect. This is also shown by the change in party results in the voting districts with the lowest voter turnout, where voter turnout happened to rise at an above-average rate in the 2017 Bundestag election (Figure 4):



The above-average increase in voter turnout in these voting districts is accompanied by clearly above-average gains for the AfD: Its results in this decile of all representative voting districts rose at the above-average rate of 12.4 percentage points over those from the 2013 Bundestag election. At the same time, if you add up the gains and losses in percentage of the established parties, you arrive at a negative figure, which indicates that they had little or even nothing to do with the mobilization effect in these voting districts with the lowest voter turnout. In big picture terms, it is clear that the above-average increase in voter turnout in these voting districts was in all likelihood an AfD effect. In this case, the decrease in the social gap in the 2017 Bundestag election is also an AfD effect.

The AfD therefore managed to accomplish something last done by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) more than two decades ago: By successfully mobilizing voters in the socially precarious non-voter strongholds, it noticeably reduced the social divide in voter turnout (Figure 5).



In the 1998 Bundestag election, a rise in voter turnout (+3.2 percentage points) was also accompanied by a significant reduction in the social divide in voter turnout (-4.2 percentage points). The SPD scored a major electoral success primarily by simultaneously mobilizing voters from the middle stratum of society and the core SPD voter milieus of the lower-middle and socially lower classes. This electoral success is closely associated with the names of the top two SPD leaders at the time: Gerhard Schröder and Oskar Lafontaine. The social profile and mobilization pattern of this “Schröder/Lafontaine effect” of the 1998 Bundestag election bear a strong resemblance to the social profile and mobilization pattern of the “AfD effect” of the 2017 Bundestag election. In both cases, the electoral and mobilization successes in the socially disadvantaged non-voter milieus led to a noticeable reduction in the social divide of voter participation. And even if the AfD effect of 2017 has turned out to be somewhat smaller than the Schröder/Lafontaine effect of 1998, the following still holds true: Something that was achieved during the 1998 Bundestag election by an established mainstream party was now accomplished by a right-wing populist protest party, the AfD.

## Publication details

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bei der Bundestagswahl 2017.“

To access it, please visit:

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