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## Rather Apolitical Friends: Who Doesn't Vote in Germany Anymore – and Why

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Whether someone votes in Germany depends on where they live, who their friends are and whether politics are discussed in their family. The typical nonvoter doesn't view voting as a civic duty, lives in disadvantaged neighborhoods, is young and is just as apolitical as those in his or her environment. The protesting "Party of Nonvoters" is a myth: Political indifference, rather than disenchantment with democracy, explains why people from social strata with lower levels of income and education participate in politics less. Germany is becoming a socially divided democracy.

## The “Party of Nonvoters” – just a popular myth!

Participation in elections is dropping in almost all Western democracies – and sometimes dramatically. This is also the case in Germany, where voter turnout for the most recent federal parliamentary election, in 2009, reached a historical low of just 70.8 percent. In comparison, more than 90 percent of Germans were still going to the polls in the early 1970s. At the time of writing, no one can predict how high voter turnout will be on September 22, 2013, when Germany will hold its next federal elections, or whether it will decline even further. Participation in politics and elections is also subject to economic

fluctuations. However, there are many indications that voter turnout will continue to drop in Germany in the coming decades.

The widely held belief that unhappy potential voters are choosing not to cast their ballots as a sign of protest and out of disenchantment with democracy turns out to be a myth. Of course, the story one hears about this sounds plausible: As citizens grow more

and more frustrated with politicians and political parties, the thinking goes, many of them are turning their backs on democracy. This disenchantment with politics has spawned widespread disenchantment with democracy, it continues, prompting huge numbers of people to decline to vote as a sign of protest and frustration. Although it holds no seats in federal or state parliaments, the protest “Party of Nonvoters” is supposedly becoming the strongest party in Germany. Or at least that’s the storyline of this tale.

However, already the metaphor of a “Party of Nonvoters” is misleading. Nonvoters are not part of some homogenous bloc of people heroically protesting by declining to vote. Germans have never been genuinely dissatisfied with democracy. On the contrary, in the run-up to the 2013 parliamentary elections, 82 percent of those eligible to vote are either fairly or very satisfied with it, while only 11 percent are dissatisfied. There is admittedly somewhat more discontent among nonvoters, but the differences in terms of satisfaction with democracy cannot explain the growing number of people who abstain from voting. This is also the case in the areas of Germany that were once part of communist East Germany, where only 47 percent of the electorate claimed to be satisfied with their democracy in 2003. Since then, however, the share of those who are satisfied with democracy there has climbed to 74 percent, which places it only slightly below the level of satisfaction found in the areas of Germany that were once part of West Germany.

## Nonvoters – the unknown entity?

But who are the nonvoters in Germany? And what determines whether a person eligible to vote really exercises his or her right to do so? These days, no one contests the validity of what scholars call the “social selectivity” of the electorate.

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“The democratic promise of equality for all remains unfulfilled because one segment of society is throwing away its right to vote.”

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### Sources

All of the figures referenced in this text are discussed in detail in the following study of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the IfD Allensbach:  
Petersen, Hierlemann, Vehrkamp and Wratil (2013): *Gespaltene Demokratie – Politische Partizipation und Demokratiezufriedenheit vor der Bundestagswahl 2013.*

This voting behavior varies according to one's income level, educational background and social class. Voter participation continues to be relatively high among higher earners and the well-educated (with pre-university and/or university training) who identify themselves as belonging to the upper-middle or upper class. But voter turnout is dramatically lower among lower earners with less educational achievement who identify themselves as belonging to the lower class of society.

Already after the last federal parliamentary elections, in 2009, only 76 percent of those from the lowest income quintile said that they had cast their ballots, whereas the analogous figure for 1972 was still 92 percent. For the highest income level, the figure for 2009 was still at 95 percent, only slightly less than the 97 percent from 1972.

Thus, between 1972 and the parliamentary election of 2009, the social division in terms of income class and voter participation grew almost four times as large, from 5 to 19 percentage points. This same pattern witnessed with income groups can be also be seen when comparing educational achievement and social class. Those with low levels of income and educational achievement opted not to exercise their right to vote more than anyone else.

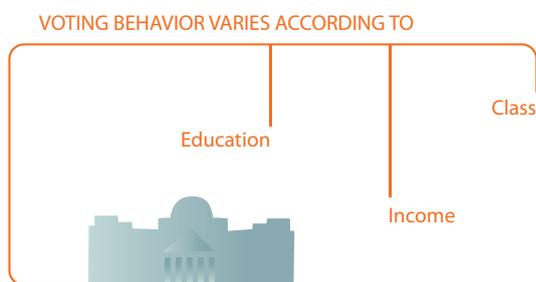
Indeed, this trend appears to be intensifying once again

just a few months before the parliamentary elections: Whereas 68 percent of eligible voters from the middle and upper classes already say they will definitely go to the polls, only 31 percent of those from the lower class make the same claim – a difference of almost 40 percent!

Thus, the typical nonvoter in Germany is not some unknown entity, not someone who vociferously refuses to vote as a sign of protest and not someone disenchanted with democracy. But, more than anything, he or she is not someone who purposefully boycotts elections as a rational choice. Instead, the typical nonvoter is a low earner with a low level of educational achievement who frequently lives in disadvantaged neighborhoods and is a member of the so-called lower class according to established socioeconomic criteria.

The diagnosis turns out to be surprisingly unambiguous: The decline in voter turnout in Germany primarily results from the fact that the lower class is bowing out from playing an active role in democracy. For a long time now, Germany has been on the path to a socially divided democracy. Political inequality is expanding while inclusion is shrinking. The democratic promise of equality for all remains unfulfilled because one segment of society is handing away its right to vote.

This social divide is reflected even more glaringly in alternative forms of democratic participation. In social terms, all established forms of direct democracy and citizen participation are significantly more selective than the act of voting. Individuals who



## Information

Voter turnout for Germany's 2013 federal parliamentary election will also strongly vary according to education, income and social class. Among those who have earned a university-entrance qualification and/or attended university, 68 percent already say they will definitely vote. But the analogous figure for those with a basic secondary-school qualification (Hauptschulabschluss) is only 50 percent. While 71 percent of those at the highest income level will definitely vote, only 49 percent of those in the lowest income level will do so. However, the greatest difference is found in terms of class: While 68 percent of the upper class plans to definitely vote, only 31 percent of the lower class plans to do so.



## About Paul Nolte

Paul Nolte, b. 1963, is Professor for Modern History at the Freie Universität Berlin. His academic work focuses on the fundamental issues and current problems of democracy. EINWURF spoke with him about the thesis of Germany's socially divided democracy.



do not vote typically refrain from participating in citizens' initiatives and referenda, as well. Nor do they join in street demonstrations. And the less likely they are to vote, the less likely they also are to be politically engaged. Thus, there is much to indicate that, instead of ameliorating this social division, alternative forms of political participation actually exacerbate it.

What are the reasons for this, and what drives this growing social division of our democracy? There

appear to be two possible approaches to explaining this: On the one hand, it could be the mounting social inequality in Germany. The lower social strata are bowing out from democratic participation because democracy does not keep its promise of offering equality (anymore). Under these circumstances, social inequality harms the democracy. The perceived and/or actually increasing social inequality demobilizes the lower strata.

A second line of explanation focuses on changes in values and attitudes, especially among members of the lower social strata. Democratic participation is no longer viewed as being a civic duty. Apathy and indifference toward democracy predominate, primarily within the lower strata.

Combining both of these explanatory approaches yields a plausible picture: The increase in perceived and actual social inequality has the effect of politically demobilizing citizens because the change in attitudes and values causes this social division to engender indifference and apathy rather than protest and political mobilization. Today, the forces that have historically given impetus to democracy are being called into question. At the beginning of the 20th century, democracy was still the answer to the social question. But, at the beginning of the 21st century, the new social question is becoming one of the greatest challenges.

## Social environment determines whether someone votes

The fact that changing values and social division are mutually reinforcing can already be seen in the major influence that an individual's personal and social environment has on the likelihood that he or she will participate in elections. If one tries to determine the likelihood that the average person eligible to vote will actually exercise his or her right to vote, factors related to personal and social environmental appear to be the dominant explanatory variables. Whether someone votes primarily depends on his or her political socialization within the parental home, among friends and in the wider social environment:

- The average person eligible to vote in Germany has a 77 percent likelihood of definitely voting if he or she assumes that the majority of his or her friends will

also vote. The likelihood drops dramatically – by almost 60 percentage points – to only 19 percent if he or she assumes that most of these friends will also not exercise their right to vote.

- If politics are discussed very frequently in the parental home, there is a 91 percent likelihood that the individual will vote. If politics are never or only rarely discussed in the parental home, the likelihood of voting drops to 55 percent.
- If someone views the right to vote as a democratic civic duty, there is a 74 percent likelihood that he or she will cast a ballot. If one does not view it as such, there is only a 39 percent likelihood.

If one draws distinctions between these determinants of voting likelihood according to socioeconomic strata, it becomes clear why there has been such a drastic decline in voter turnout primarily among people from the lower social strata. This is because individuals from the lower strata tend to have a majority of friends who do not vote, are less politically socialized in the parental home and, like those in their environment, view the right to vote as being less and less of a civic duty:

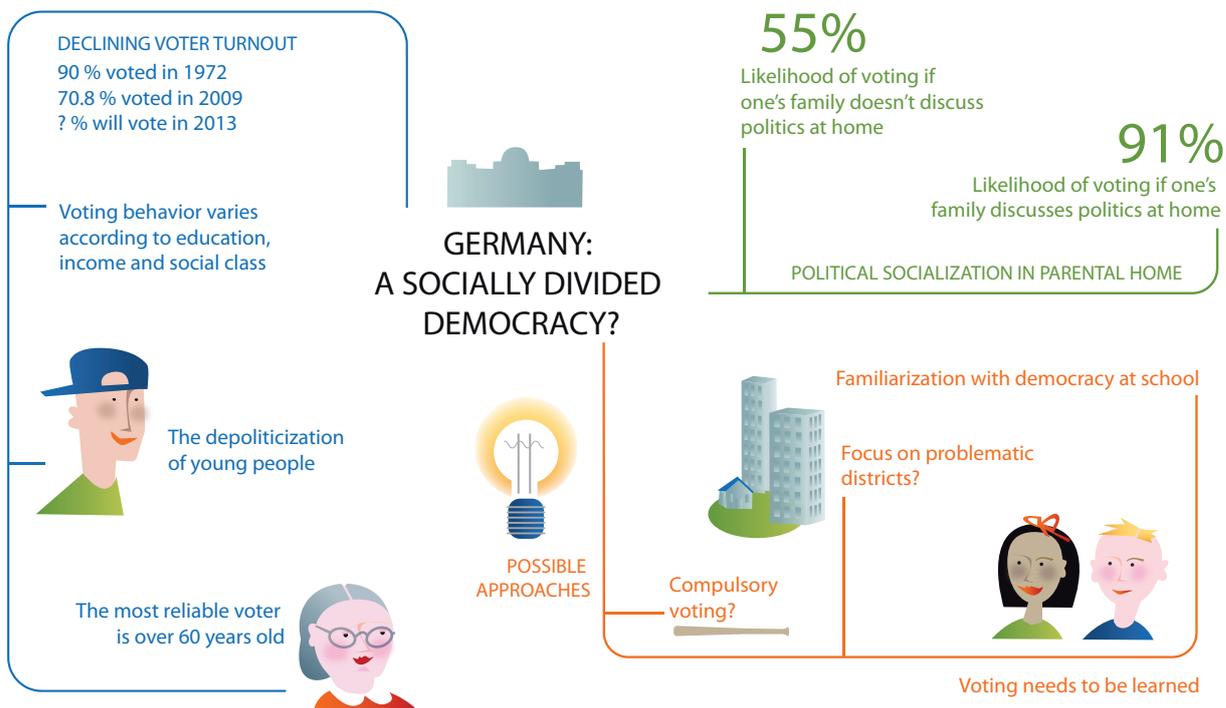
- Only 37 percent of individuals in the lowest social stratum believe that the majority of their friends vote. For the upper-middle and upper strata, the analogous figure is 68 percent.
- Politics were discussed either often or very often in the parental homes of only 14 percent of the individuals in the lowest social stratum. In the upper strata, this was the case for 29 percent of individuals, making it more than twice as frequent.
- Only slightly over half (55 percent) of individuals in the lowest stratum view voting as a democratic civic duty, whereas the analogous figure for the upper strata is 82 percent.

Thus, it can be seen that cluster effects driven by one's mentality and determined by one's social environment provide the best explanations for why there is increasing social selectivity within Germany's democracy. A depoliticized precariat is bowing out of political participation and, in doing so, is helping transform their inclusive, social democracy into an increasingly defective "two-thirds democracy" because it is socially divided.

## **Fighting youth indifference to politics**

This picture of a socially divided democracy is complemented by another finding that is no less challenging for democracy.

If one analyzes how the population's interest in politics has changed since the end of the 1960s, one can see considerable differences among age groups. Today's younger generation is significantly less interested in politics than earlier ones. Over the last five decades, one can discern a growing depoliticization of the younger generation, made up of individuals between 16 and 29 years old. While the index value



of the political interest of the younger generation still stood at 95 in 1969, it had already declined to 81 by 1983. Since then, it has sunk to its current value of 55. Granted, today's young people are also likely to become more interested in politics as they get older. Nevertheless, this is happening at a significantly lower level than it did with previous generations.

Interest in politics, in turn, has a very strong impact in determining the likelihood that an individual will vote. Only 36 percent of politically uninterested individuals will definitely go to the polls, whereas the analogous figure for those who are politically interested is more than twice as high. Thus, the younger generation's declining interest in politics results in declining participation in elections.

While today's most reliable voters are those over 60 years old, there is a significant decrease in the likelihood of voting in the generation of first-time and newly eligible voters younger than 30. In the run-up to Germany's 2013 federal parliamentary elections, 64 percent of those 60 and older already say they will definitely vote. In comparison, only 38 percent of those between 18 and 29 years old say the same thing.

This change in values also plays an important role in explaining decreasing participation in elections within the younger generation. In fact, one sees not only declining interest in politics, but also growing societal acceptance of not voting, especially among the young: Of those under 30 years old, 76 percent say that their friends would be understanding or even not care if they didn't go to the polls. Thus, not voting is becoming more and more socially acceptable, particularly among the young. There is

no social sanction for this within their own environment. Likewise, first-time voters appear to care less and less about whether someone throws away his or her right to vote. Indeed, to them, it is simply no longer important.

Thus, with young voters, as well, one shouldn't equate declining participation in elections as a sign of dissatisfaction, protest or deliberate rejection of democracy. Sheer indifference appears to be the dominant explanatory factor in this case, as well.

Depending on one's normative viewpoint, this depoliticization of young people can be evaluated in completely different ways. However, by itself, this generational effect will trigger a long-term and continuous decrease in voter turnout. The highly politicized postwar generations – and, first and foremost, the so-called “68ers,” the German term for those who participated in the political movements and student protests of the 1960s – are being replaced by less politicized generations. This development, which can hardly be influenced at this point, could result in a gradual and steady decline in the level of voter turnout in the coming decades – and a decline from which one will not be able to deduce that there is growing dissatisfaction with democracy, shrinking acceptance of it or even increasing potential for protest.

Whoever wishes to change something about this must (re-)mobilize those with low levels of income and education just as much as the respective younger generation of first-time voters. The real challenge in doing so isn't finding a remedy for principlebased disenchantment or an aggressive attitude of protest toward democracy. Instead, perhaps the more difficult challenge is mobilizing individuals who are indifferent to politics and no longer believe it is important to vote or to be actively engaged with the democracy.

## **Voting needs to be learned ...**

So, what do we do now? How can we draw people who abstain from voting out of indifference or even disinterest back to the ballot box? Instead of immediately wielding the cudgel of compulsory voting, there are also two (admittedly more labor-intensive) ways to bring about increased inclusion and political participation. What is crucial in this for both lines of thinking is the mobilization and politicization of members of the lower social strata and young people, in particular.

First of all, one must turn the very simple, but also very clear correlation between political interest and likelihood of voting to constructive use: Whoever is interested in politics is more likely to vote. Therefore, whoever would like to increase voter turnout and get lagging groups to participate in politics more again would be wise to focus on precisely this issue.

Citizens become interested in politics when politics are interested in them. They want their individual political engagement to have genuine influence. For some

## Further reading:

Wolfgang Merkel (2013): Zukunft der Demokratie – Krise? Krise!, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 6, p. 7.

Paul Nolte (2012): Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart. C.H. Beck

Thomas Petersen, Dominik Hierlemann, Robert B. Vehrkamp, Christopher Wratil (2013): Gespaltene Demokratie. Politische Partizipation und Demokratiezufriedenheit vor der Bundestagswahl 2013. Bertelsmann Stiftung

Armin Schäfer (2011): Der Nichtwähler als Durchschnittsbürger: Ist die sinkende Wahlbeteiligung eine Gefahr für die Demokratie?, in: Evelyn Bytzek, Sigrid Rossteutscher (Hrsg.), Der unbekannte Wähler? Mythen und Fakten über das Wahlverhalten der Deutschen. Campus, pp. 133-154

time now, Germany has been launching a variety of new forms of civic participation. At the community level, in particular, serious efforts are being made to get citizens to participate in novel ways. But here too, there have only been extremely rare cases of success in terms of involving the formerly disengaged. Indeed, there continues to be a huge lack of know-how when it comes to being able to mobilize apolitical nonvoters who are concentrated in the disadvantaged and problematic neighborhoods of many large cities. “Citizen’s participation outreach” is the big catchphrase – and the even bigger challenge. One possible approach could be to focus efforts aimed at political mobilization on individual disadvantaged city districts. A decisive role in this would be played by political parties, which have in many cases withdrawn from these urban areas and preferred to perform party-related work and campaign activities only in places where they have enjoyed popularity. To remedy this, there needs to be an overall strategy aimed at politically mobilizing and integrating politically precarious urban districts. In other words, we must venture bravely into uncharted territory!

There is also a second aspect: Whoever comes from a family that discusses politics is more likely to be interested in politics and to vote. But what if politics are discussed less and less frequently around the kitchen table at home? If this is the case, it has to take place somewhere else. And, as happens so often, schools are being asked to step in on this matter as well. Particularly given the widespread introduction of all-day schooling in Germany, for the coming generations of voters, school will be the place where they spend the largest amount of their time. Instead of at the kitchen table, politics must now be discussed in the school cafeteria. Likewise, there don’t need to be any new school reforms to bring this about. Instead, what’s required are innovative and concrete proposals for how to implement this transition in practice. Some models for this already exist: For example, the online platform “Schülerhaushalt” (“participatory budgeting in schools,” [www.schuelerhaushalt.de](http://www.schuelerhaushalt.de)) allows school students to decide for themselves what a portion of the city budget earmarked for schools will be spent on. “Jugend debattiert” (“youth debates,” [www.jugend-debattiert.de](http://www.jugend-debattiert.de)) offers a political competition that attracts school students to politics in a number of ways. And “U18-Wahl” (“under-18 vote,” [www.u18.org](http://www.u18.org)) tries to get both younger and older school students to pay more attention to federal parliamentary elections. We’d like to see more of these kinds of programs!

### Legally responsible for content

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### EINWURF – A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

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