

# EINWURF

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## 2013 Bundestag Election – Why The Low Voter Turnout Harms Germany’s Democracy

Voter turnout for the 2013 election of Germany’s federal parliament reached its second-lowest level since the founding of the Federal Republic. Almost 30 percent of eligible voters opted not to exercise their right to vote. Growing regional and social disparities in voter turnout are intensifying political inequality. Democratic representation is eroding, and many believe that the democracy is losing internal legitimacy. For this reason, low voter turnout is weakening the democratic system. But German voters are still opposed to statutory compulsory voting.

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## Voter Turnout Persists at an Almost Record Low

In historical terms, voter turnout for the national election held for the Bundestag, Germany's parliament, in September 2013 stood at a very low level. At 71.5 percent, it was only slightly (0.7 percentage points) above the record low set during the 2009 Bundestag election. Once again, more than 17.6 million of Germany's 61.8 eligible

voters opted not to exercise their right to vote in a Bundestag election. Thus, the election saw not only the second-worst voter turnout since the 1949 founding of the Federal Republic of Germany, but also the second-worst voter turnout for a national election in Germany in almost 120 years. Since the early 1970s, when it reached its peak values, voter turnout has declined by almost a quarter. Likewise, it decreased for three consecutive Bundestag elections beginning in 1998 (2002, 2005, 2009).

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### Sources

All of the survey data referenced in this text were collected by the Allensbach Institute for Public Opinion Research in the week before the 2013 Bundestag elections on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung (IfD Survey 11013, Sept. 11-19, 2013).

On the social divide and selectivity of voter turnout, cf. the following joint study of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Allensbach Institute: Petersen, Hierlemann, Vehrkamp, Wratil (2013): *Gespaltene Demokratie – Politische Partizipation und Demokratiezufriedenheit vor der Bundestagswahl 2013*.

For a detailed analysis of the 2013 election results at the level of electoral wards and urban areas, cf. the following study of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and Infratest dimap (2013): *Prekäre Wahlen – Milieus und soziale Selektivität der Wahlbeteiligung bei der Bundestagswahl 2013*.

The fact that more and more eligible voters in Germany have made up their minds not to vote and for longer periods of time is reflected in the declining importance of the right to vote for many voters in Germany: More than 20 percent of all eligible voters have come to view their right to vote as no longer “very important.” And this figure even climbs to almost one-quarter for eligible voters who are not particularly interested in politics. Even more pronounced is the declining importance of the right to vote in the generation of first- and second-time voters in eastern Germany: Only slightly more than half of eastern Germans between 16 and 29 years old feel that their right to vote is a very important democratic basic right.

This shows that the vast majority of German non-voters are not “voters on holiday” or “voters in waiting,” and that sinking voter turnout can also not merely be written off as a seasonal phenomenon resulting from temporary disenchantment with politics and political parties. Since the early 1980s, a growing potential for permanent non-voters has taken root in Germany, which presents its democracy with serious challenges.

## Sinking Voter Turnout Intensifies Political Inequality

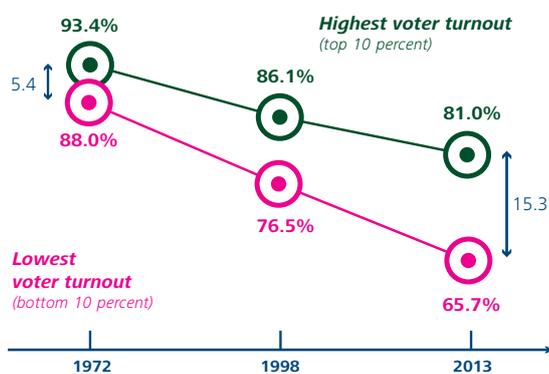
One of these challenges arises from the pronounced regional and social variations in terms of voter participation, which are leading to intensified political inequality in Germany. While the high voter-turnout rates of the 1970s were very equally distributed throughout all of the country's regions and social strata, in recent decades, the social and regional gap in terms of who does and doesn't vote has been constantly expanding. An initial indicator of this can be found in the variations in

voter turnout at the electoral-district level, which have drastically increased since the end of the 1970s:

- During the 1972 Bundestag election, 91.1 percent of all eligible voters cast a ballot. Likewise, only 5.4 percentage points separated the top and bottom 10 percents of electoral districts in terms of voter turnout.
- During the 2013 Bundestag election, 71.5 percent of all eligible voters cast a ballot. The difference between the top and bottom 10 percents of electoral districts in terms of voter turnout was 15.3 percentage points, or drastically higher than for the 1972 election.

Infographic:

### Growing disparity in voter turnout



Voter turnout by electoral district. Source: Federal Returning Office, own calculations

Thus, between the 1972 and 2013 Bundestag elections, the difference between the electoral districts with the highest and the lowest voter-turnout rates almost tripled (see infographic).

The variation in voter participation is even more distinct at the level of individual electoral wards. Already in 2009, the difference between the electoral wards with the highest and lowest voter-turnout rates was 30 percentage points, or twice as large when compared to that at the electoral-district level. Although final voting figures for the 2013 Bundestag election at the electoral-ward level are not yet available, there is reason to believe that this chasm has solidified even further (cf. Sources).

## Loss of Internal Democratic Legitimacy

Another challenge for Germany’s democracy arises from the loss of internal legitimacy of election results and elected officials associated with low voter turnouts: The fewer voters who cast a ballot, the lower the degree of popular representation; and the lower the degree of popular representation, the lower the internal legitimacy of the democratically elected institutions.

The following observations on current “second-vote” results from the 2013 Bundestag election shows just how strongly representation has eroded as a result of changes in voter turnout (see “How Germans Vote” sidebar on page 4):

Of the 68.7 million inhabitants of Germany of voting age (i.e., 18 and older for federal elections), 61.8 million were eligible to vote. Of these, 71.5 percent – or 44.2 million eligible voters – participated in the 2013 Bundestag election.

## How Germans Vote

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When Germans vote in federal parliamentary elections, they actually vote twice. So-called first votes are for the candidates from the 299 electoral districts, who win in a first-past-the-post manner and are guaranteed direct-mandate seats in the Bundestag. The second votes are for the political party and draw an (at least) equal number of parliamentarians from state party lists. Importantly, however, the second vote also determines the relative strengths of the parties in the Bundestag – in other words, how the pie is divided. To partake in the pie division, though, a party has to either win 5 percent of the second vote at the national level or win at least three direct mandates. Since parties often win more first-vote seats than they are entitled to based on the second vote, and since they are guaranteed to keep all their direct mandates, extra “compensation mandates” (Ausgleichsmandate) are awarded to parties entitled to a larger section of the pie based on the second vote. This boosts the number of seats, but it ensures that parties’ shares of seats are consistent with the share they won of the second vote (after adjustments are made because parties that don’t meet the 5 percent threshold forfeit their shares of the pie!).

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However, when viewed in terms of the entire population of voting-age residents rather than simply those who are eligible to vote, the percentage of German residents who participated in the election drops from 71.5 to just 64.3 percent.

However, the right to vote and voter turnout are not the only factors that influence the degree of representation of an election’s results. In Germany, the fact that the election law requires a political party to surpass the 5 percent hurdle in order to win seats in the Bundestag also leads to a decrease in the effective representation of voters by elected officials. The 2013 Bundestag election saw a record share of 15.7 percent of ballots cast not count as a result of the 5 percent threshold rule. Consequently, the newly elected Bundestag has a representation quota of only 59.5 percent of all eligible voters. In terms of all voting-age residents of Germany, this representation quota sinks even further, to only 53.6 percent.

In a nutshell, this means that the newly elected 18th German Bundestag represents only 59.5 percent of all eligible voters and only 53.6 percent of all voting-age residents of Germany.

The fact that a significant loss in the internal legitimacy of Germany’s democracy results from such a low representation quota (slightly over 50%) can be seen in German voters’ attitudes about election results with low voter turnout: Almost one-third (30.8%) of all voters in Germany share the opinion that one can no longer speak of democratic election results when voter turnout is low. Only somewhat over half of eligible voters (57.3%) believe that democratic legitimacy does not depend on the level of voter turnout.

In other words, voters themselves already view a “democracy without voters” as being less democratic and less legitimate. Even regardless of the level of voter turnout, only slightly more than half of all voters in Germany perceive the election results as being unquestionably democratic. Already today, almost one in three sees growing deficits in the internal legitimacy of the democracy as a result of election results with low voter turnout as well as the drastically sinking representation quotas resulting from them. These developments could easily give rise to a vicious circle of sinking voter turnout, decreasing representation and declining perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions that, in turn, lead to even lower voter-turnout rates. In fact, Germany already fell into such a vicious circle some time ago.

## Eroding Representativeness of Direct Mandates

The problem of declining representation can also be seen with the first-vote results, with which “direct mandate” candidates are elected in electoral districts. Here, as well, the share of the votes with which parliamentarians are being

directly elected to the Bundestag is eroding and leading to strongly decreasing representation quotas:

- During the 1972 Bundestag election, all direct mandates were on average still elected by a slight absolute majority (50.2 percent) of first votes. As a result, the average election winner also represented at least a majority of all the ballots cast in his or her electoral district. Even in the 10 percent of electoral districts with the narrowest direct-election results, the direct mandates were still elected by at least an average of 42.2 percent of first votes.

- During the 2013 Bundestag election, direct candidates were on average only elected by a considerably lower share of the votes. In the bottom 10 percent

of electoral districts with the narrowest direct-election results, the relative electoral-district majority even sank to just slightly more than one-third (35.9 percent).

The losses in representation of the directly elected parliamentarians can be seen even more clearly if one uses the share of all voting-age residents of an electoral district as a basis:

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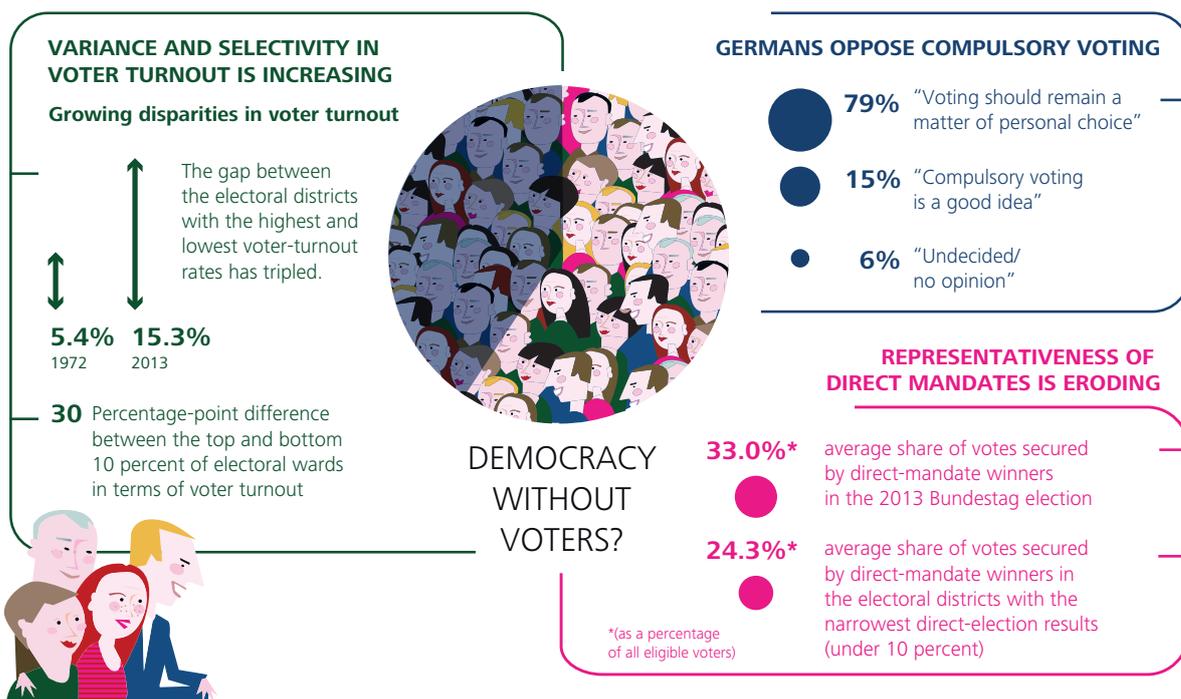
“The newly elected 18th German Bundestag represents only 59.5 percent of all eligible voters and only 53.6 percent of all voting-age residents of Germany.”

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- During the 1972 Bundestag election, the direct mandates on average still won 45.2 percent of the votes of all voting-age residents. Even in the electoral districts with the narrowest direct-election results, the directly elected parliamentarians still secured just under 40 percent (37.6%) of the votes.

- During the 2013 Bundestag election, the direct mandates of all electoral districts were elected on average by less than one-third of all voting-age residents. In the 10 percent of electoral districts with the narrowest direct-election results, this election result even stood slightly below the 25 percent mark (24.3%). In other words, not even one in four voting-age residents actually voted for the candidate in his or her electoral district who was directly elected to the Bundestag.

As a result, the 299 parliamentarians who were directly elected to the new Bundestag on average only represent a little more than one-third of the voting-age population of their respective electoral district. In the 10 percent of all electoral districts with particularly low voter-turnout rates and narrow direct-election results, the representation quota of these direct candidates even stands below 25 percent. This means that each of the directly elected parliamentarians was elected by not even one in four citizens of voting age.



## Berlin-Mitte – Heart of the Democracy, or an Ominous Warning?

These drastic losses in the representation of direct mandates can be illustrated using the example of an electoral district in which the results of low voter turnout, a large share of foreigners ineligible to vote and narrow direct-election results are particularly pronounced:

The Berlin-Mitte electoral district can be described as the political “heart” of Germany. The country and the city-state of Berlin are governed from here; the German Bundestag has its headquarters here; the federal chancellor casts her ballot here; and many federal parliamentarians live here when performing political duties in Berlin. At the same time, in social terms, Berlin-Mitte is a very heterogeneous electoral district with a high percentage of foreigners and narrow direct-election results. During the 2013 Bundestag election, the direct mandate was elected by scarcely 28.2 percent of valid first votes. Given the slightly below-average voter turnout (69.4%), this direct-election result corresponds to only a 19.6 percent share of all eligible voters. And if one also takes into account foreigners ineligible to vote, who make up just over 30 percent of the district’s voting-age population, the representation quota of the elected direct mandate stands at only 13.4 percent. Thus, less than one in every eight of the electoral district’s voting-age residents actually voted for the parliamentarian directly elected to the Bundestag.

Many electoral districts in the other federal states (Bundesländer) also present a similar picture. What’s more, this phenomenon is affecting urban electoral districts

with socially disadvantaged neighborhoods and rural electoral districts alike. Indeed, the representation of our direct mandates is vanishing across the entire country.

## **Opposition to Compulsory Voting Despite Negative Record**

The introduction of statutory compulsory voting is frequently discussed as a seemingly simple method to boost voter turnout. Although international experiences in countries with compulsory voting have varied widely, on first glance, having a legal obligation to vote that is underpinned by sanctions appears thoroughly suitable to ensure voter turnout of more than 90 percent of all eligible voters. This can be seen from the experience in Australia, for example, where compulsory voting has been enforced with fines and – as a last resort – the threat of imprisonment. However, at the same time, the example of Italy also shows that compulsory voting by itself still offers no reliable guarantee of higher voter turnout if it lacks accompanying sanctions.

Almost one-fifth (79%) of all voters in Germany already oppose the introduction of statutory compulsory voting, and only about one in seven eligible voters (15.1%) thinks that compulsory voting would be a good idea in Germany. In any case, having a legal obligation to vote does not accord well with Germans' basic understanding of democracy and conception of what constitutes democratic behavior. Indeed, its introduction against the will of a large majority of all eligible voters could even intensify the already growing legitimacy deficits of the democracy.

Furthermore, Germans seem to view it as more of the political parties' responsibility to see to it that voter turnout goes back up. Nevertheless, almost half (46.7%) of all eligible voters support the proposal to make the amount of election campaign expenses that the state refunds to parties directly dependent on the level of voter turnout achieved. Thus, in their view, the lower voter turnout is, the lower the proportion of campaign costs that the state should shoulder. Only slightly over one-quarter (26.7%) of all eligible voters view that as not being a very good idea.

However, it would be neither appropriate nor promising to place on political parties all the blame for declines in voter turnout – buzzword “disenchantment with parties” – as well as for the resulting deficits in representation and legitimacy.

Instead, it is the task of society as a whole to achieve higher voter-turnout rates again, improved democratic representation, a socially representative electorate and, consequently, improved legitimacy of our democratic institutions. Political parties play an important role in this; but it is too much to expect them to do so by themselves.

**Further reading:**

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Frank Decker, Marcel Lewandowsky, Marcel Solar (2013): Demokratie ohne Wähler? Neue Herausforderungen der politischen Partizipation, Dietz.

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Manfred Güllner (2013): Nichtwähler in Deutschland, forsa institute on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Forum Berlin.

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Evelyn Bytzek, Sigrid Roßteutscher (ed.) (2011): Der unbekannt Nichtwähler? Mythen und Fakten über das Wahlverhalten der Deutschen, Campus.

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Armin Schäfer, Harald Schoen (2013): Mehr Demokratie, aber nur für wenige? Der Zielkonflikt zwischen mehr Beteiligung und politischer Gleichheit. In: Leviathan, 41 (1), pp. 94-120.

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## Higher Voter Turnout as a Challenge to Society as a Whole

Unfortunately, there are no simple, fail-safe recipes. But we do know something from the experiences of Sweden and Denmark, for example: Democracies with strong societal cohesion, a high degree of social homogeneity and inclusive educational and social systems appear to tackle these challenges considerably better than less inclusive and more socially heterogeneous societies. Societal cohesion, inclusion and social justice are long-term challenges faced by society as a whole. And to tackle them, educational institutions, associations, religious communities, municipalities and neighborhoods are just as called upon as political entities and parties.

Nevertheless, this also gives rise to very concrete questions related to the political system, our electoral law and political parties: Is it good for the democracy in Germany if almost 7 million foreigners without German passports remain excluded from participating in elections? Shouldn't we review our citizenship and/or election laws to see whether more inclusion and participation in the common democracy is feasible? How are losses in democratic representation and legitimacy related to the 5 percent hurdle of the election law if the latter invalidates more than 15 percent of ballots cast when it comes to determining the distribution of seats and power in the Bundestag? How large could the contribution of the parties be if they opened themselves up to more participation from non-members? Could an election law that also allows voters to have a voice in selecting party candidates raise the representation and legitimacy of an election as well as the degree to which voters identify with it? When it comes to voter-turnout levels, what role is played by the perception of many citizens that parties are hermetically sealed member organization intent on holding on to their own power? What role could new forms of citizens' participation and direct democracy play in mobilizing non-voters?

These are questions that need to be answered before our democracy is seriously harmed by further-sinking voter-turnout rates, eroding representation and the consequent losses in legitimacy!

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**EINWURF –  
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