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Democracy needs a future

The importance of future expectations for the long-term viability of Germany's democracy

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For many Germans, the future is no longer promising. The majority takes a pessimistic view of the well-being of future generations, there is a lack of positive visions of the future, and politics is often perceived as merely short-term crisis management. This is more than just a snapshot of public sentiment, as the survival of democracy depends on more than just elections, institutions, and political decisions: it also depends on people believing that they can have a hand in shaping society's future. Those who assume that the future mainly holds risks, losses, and decline view political decisions differently than those who see them as steps toward a better future. Our findings show that when people view the future as a downward spiral and think that the prospects of a better tomorrow are slim, they are increasingly questioning the functioning of democracy and less likely to vote for parties close to the political center.

The findings of this policy brief show that expectations about the future shape not only how we view the future, but also how we evaluate democracy and politics in the present. Expectations about the future are therefore an important source of democratic

legitimacy, as people who are pessimistic about the well-being of future generations are much more likely to be dissatisfied with how democracy functions and are less likely to support parties close to the political center. At the same time, many survey respondents

lack a positive vision of the direction in which society could evolve. Thus, in addition to negotiating solutions to current problems, democracy also needs public deliberation over different visions of a desirable future. This policy brief is organized in the following way: Chapter 1 examines how people in Germany view the future. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between expectations about the future and satisfaction with democracy. Chapter 3 does the same for expectations about the future and political orientation. Chapter 4 asks what role visions of the future and the long-term orientation of political decision-making play for the future viability of Germany's democracy. Lastly, we formulate three key recommendations for policymakers, political parties, and civil society.

Methodology

The cited survey results were collected by the polling firm YouGov Deutschland GmbH on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in an online survey conducted from December 9 to 23, 2025. A total of 2,117 people were surveyed; they were recruited from the YouGov panel based on representative criteria (age, gender, educational attainment level, region of residence, degree of urbanization, interest in politics, and voting behavior in the 2025 Bundestag election). Registering with the YouGov panel is voluntary and done on one's own initiative. Internet access is required to participate in the survey. The results were weighted accordingly and are representative of the resident population aged 18 and older in Germany.

1. People in Germany are pessimistic about the future

More than half of people in Germany (52%) believe that future generations will be worse off than people are today (see Figure 1), and only 7% think that future generations will be better off. The notion that the future mainly holds opportunities and possibilities for coming generations – children, (great-)grandchildren, and society as a whole – seems to have been replaced by concerns about insecurity, downward mobility, and a loss of control. Such negative expectations about society's future constitute a “structural problem” because they undermine trust in society and politics (El-Mafaalani 2026: 56).

Compared to other countries, Germany displays particularly pessimistic expectations about the future – and this pessimism has been steadily growing in recent years (Edelman Trust Barometer 2025; 2026).¹ Although earlier decades were also marked by major concerns about the future (e.g., fears of nuclear war, HIV, or high unemployment in the 1980s), today's expectations about the future are even more negative (see Gaub 2026). However, people assess the future from today's perspective, and the level of prosperity against which the future must be measured is historically unprecedented. From this vantage point, only a few people seem to be convinced that the future holds societal progress, upward mobility, and improved living conditions.

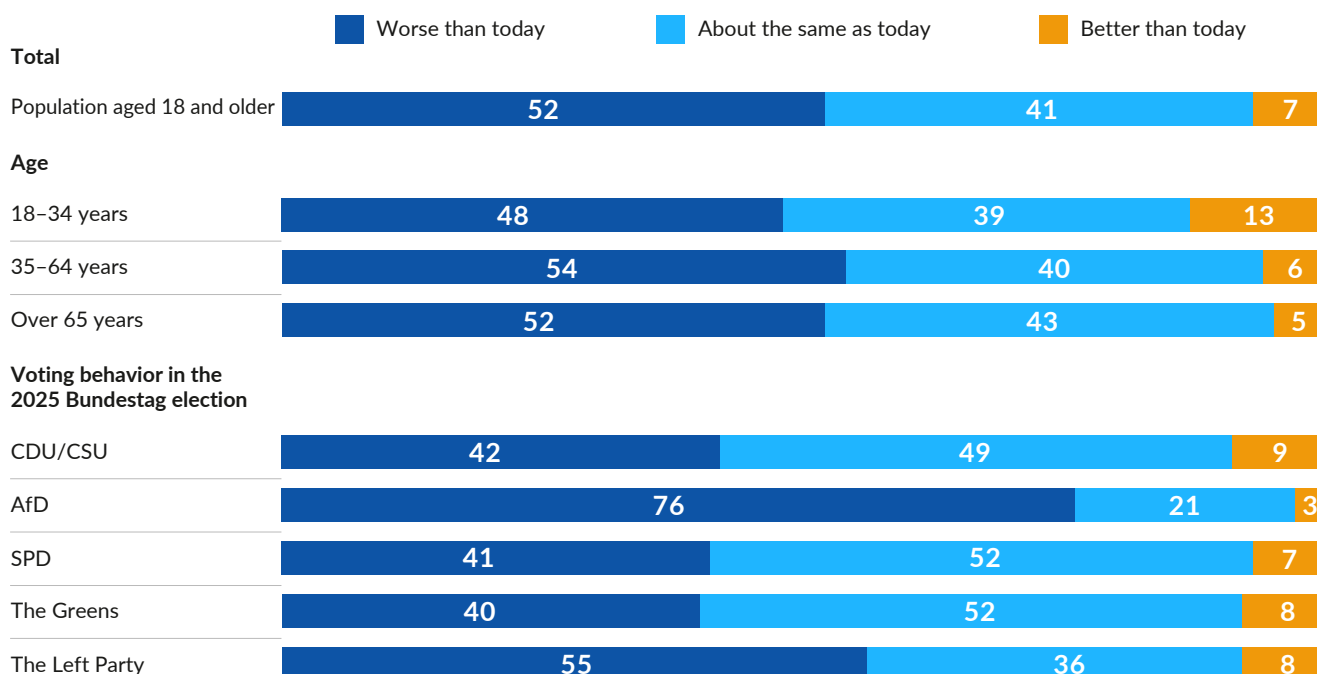
Rather than being a generational phenomenon, pessimism about the future is found across all age groups. In every age group, about one in two people expect that future generations will be worse off than we are today. Young people, however, are somewhat more optimistic about the future: Among 18- to 34-year-olds, the proportion of those who expect things to improve is 13%, which is roughly twice as high as among 35- to 64-year-olds (6%) and those 65 and over (5%).

1 Pessimism about the future is widespread overall in Western democracies (e.g., Australia, Japan, Italy and the UK) – in contrast to countries where the majority of people believe that future generations will be better off (e.g., China, India and Saudi Arabia). However, international comparisons should be interpreted with caution, as the assessment of future developments is based on the perceived social and economic conditions at the time and takes place within the context of different political and social structures. In addition, the reliability of the Edelman Trust Barometer is limited because the data is collected (at least in part) through online panels, which excludes significant segments of the population in some societies.

FIGURE 1 Expectations about the future in Germany

On the whole, how will future generations in Germany fare?

Figures in %



The question included the following note: In this questionnaire, “future generations” refers to people who will be born in the future. The well-being of future generations (expectations about the future) was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = much worse than today” to “11 = much better than today.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: worse than today, 5–7: about the same as today, 8–11: better than today. The populist BSW, the neoliberal FDP and other parties are not depicted due to low response numbers. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

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Expectations about the future are also linked to the respondents’ political preferences (i.e., the parties they support). Voters for the far-right AfD and the far-left Left Party are more pessimistic than voters for centrist parties (i.e., the center-right CDU/CSU, the center-left SPD and the Greens). More than three out of four AfD voters (76%) believe that future generations will be worse off, while the share is more than half of voters for the Left Party (55%). In contrast, the proportion of centrist voters who are pessimistic about the future is significantly lower. However, this does not mean that voters for centrist parties are more likely to believe in a better tomorrow than voters for other parties. Regardless of political preference, not even one in 10 voters believe that future generations will be better off, although voters for centrist parties show slightly more optimism about the future and appear to perceive society as being in decline less often.

Thus, voters for the AfD and the Left Party are notably more pessimistic about the well-being of future generations. AfD voters, in particular, are especially pessimistic and worried. At this point, however, the direction of causality must remain open. In other words, do people vote for the AfD because they have a more pessimistic view of the future, or are AfD voters more pessimistic because of their political preferences? In any case, it is clear that expectations about the future are not evenly distributed across the political spectrum and are linked to voting decisions. In Chapters 2 and 3, we examine in greater detail the role that expectations about the future play in satisfaction with democracy and political orientation.

2. Pessimism about the future goes hand in hand with dissatisfaction with democracy

As discussed above, pessimism about the well-being of future generations is widespread. But when the future is perceived more as a risk than as an opportunity, society's focus shifts slightly toward maintaining the status quo. As a result, long-term investments, efforts to shape how society develops, and transformative projects lose public support.

Part of the foundation of democracy is keeping the future open as a negotiable space of possibilities, as there needs to be a wide range of political options so that people can choose between them as part of a democratic process. But when societal change seems unlikely and difficult, and maintaining the status quo becomes the best available option, the scope of political agency shrinks. Despite all the crises, democracies therefore face the challenge of preserving the capacity to shape the future and thereby strengthening the foundation for societal self-efficacy (White 2024; Metelmann and Welzer 2020). As Felix Heidenreich (2025: 12) has put it, "What threatens the stability of many democracies is a lack of vision for the future, confidence and prospects." At the same time, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's latest Democracy Monitor shows that support for democratic values, rules, and

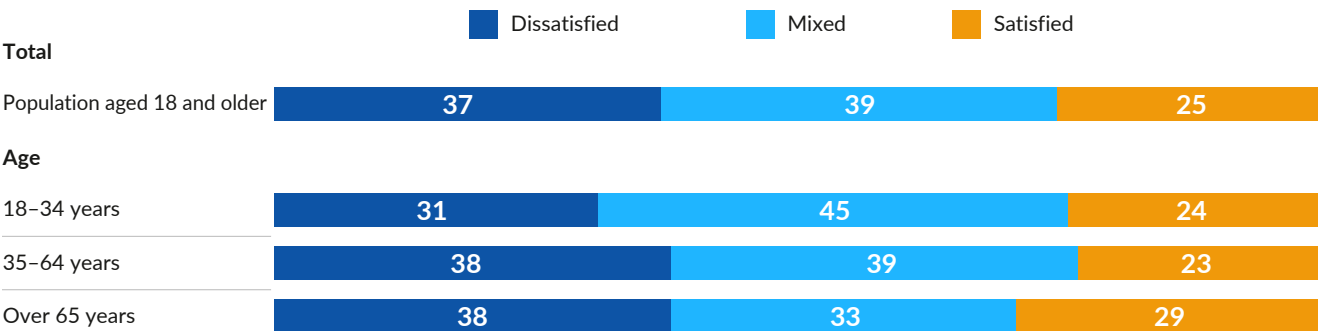
institutions remains high and has even increased since 2019 (Vehrkamp and Koß 2026). However, the Democracy Monitor also shows that there is a significant gap between acceptance of the democratic system and assessments of how well it functions. Many of our survey respondents are currently dissatisfied with how democracy functions, its effectiveness, and the quality of its processes (see Figure 2). The relatively low level of satisfaction shows that many people perceive a significant gap between their expectations of democracy and their current experience of political reality.

Regarding these findings, the differences between the age groups are relatively small. Younger people tend to express ambivalence slightly more often, while older people tend to be slightly more satisfied with how Germany's democracy is functioning. On the whole, however, a remarkably similar picture emerges across generations.

To begin with, the gap between democratic ideals and political reality is nothing unusual for democracies. But this becomes problematic when people no longer believe that political change for a better future – as a result of the next election, through engagement or hard work – is possible. When the future is mainly associated with uncertainty and loss, dissatisfaction with individual governments or political processes can turn against the very functioning of the democratic system itself.

FIGURE 2 Satisfaction with democracy

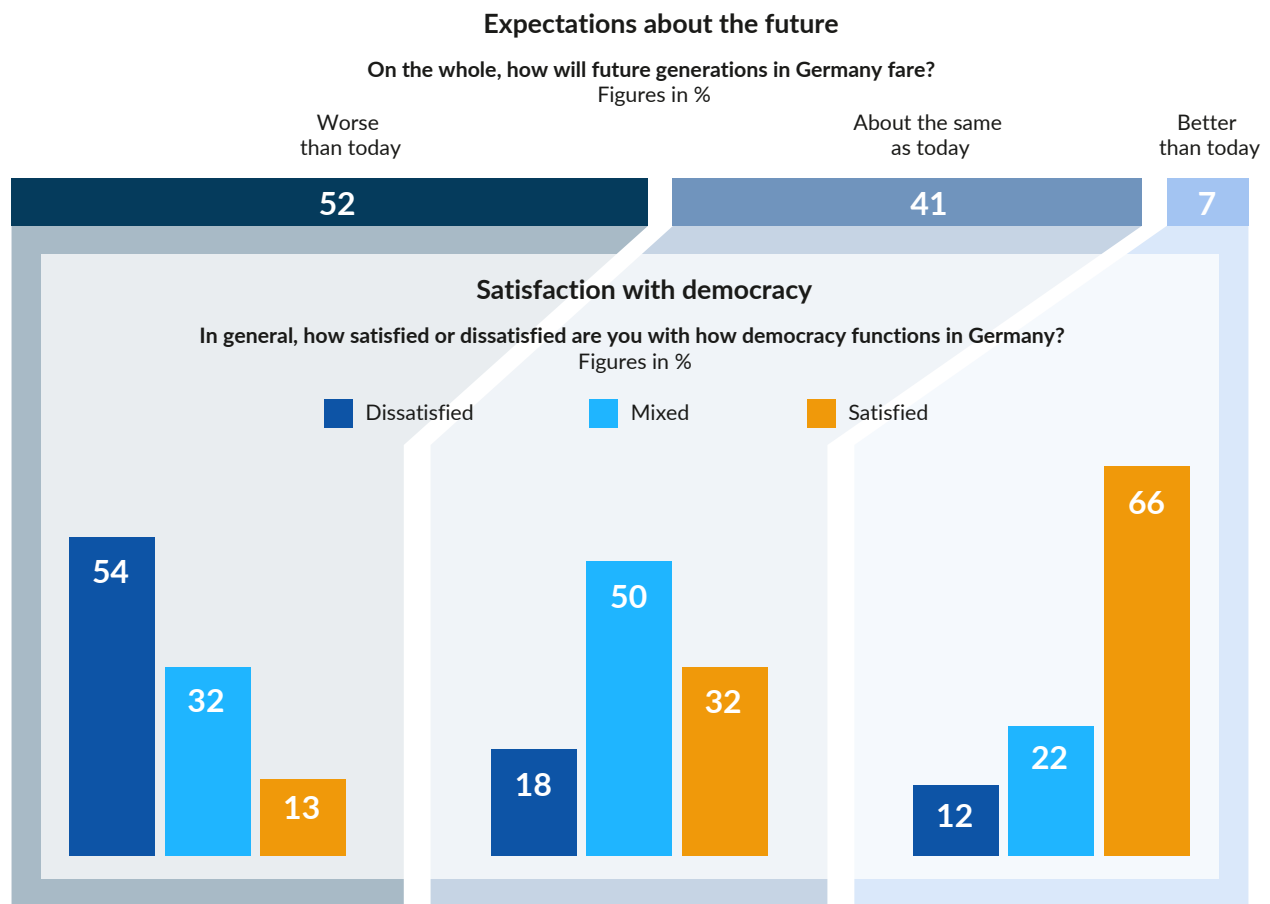
In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with how democracy functions in Germany?
Figures in %



Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = not at all satisfied" to "11 = very satisfied." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: dissatisfied, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: satisfied. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

FIGURE 3 Satisfaction with democracy based on expectations about the future



The well-being of future generations (expectations about the future) was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = much worse than today" to "11 = much better than today." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1-4: worse than today, 5-7: about the same as today, 8-11: better than today. Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = not at all satisfied" to "11 = very satisfied." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1-4: dissatisfied, 5-7: mixed, 8-11: satisfied. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9-23, 2025

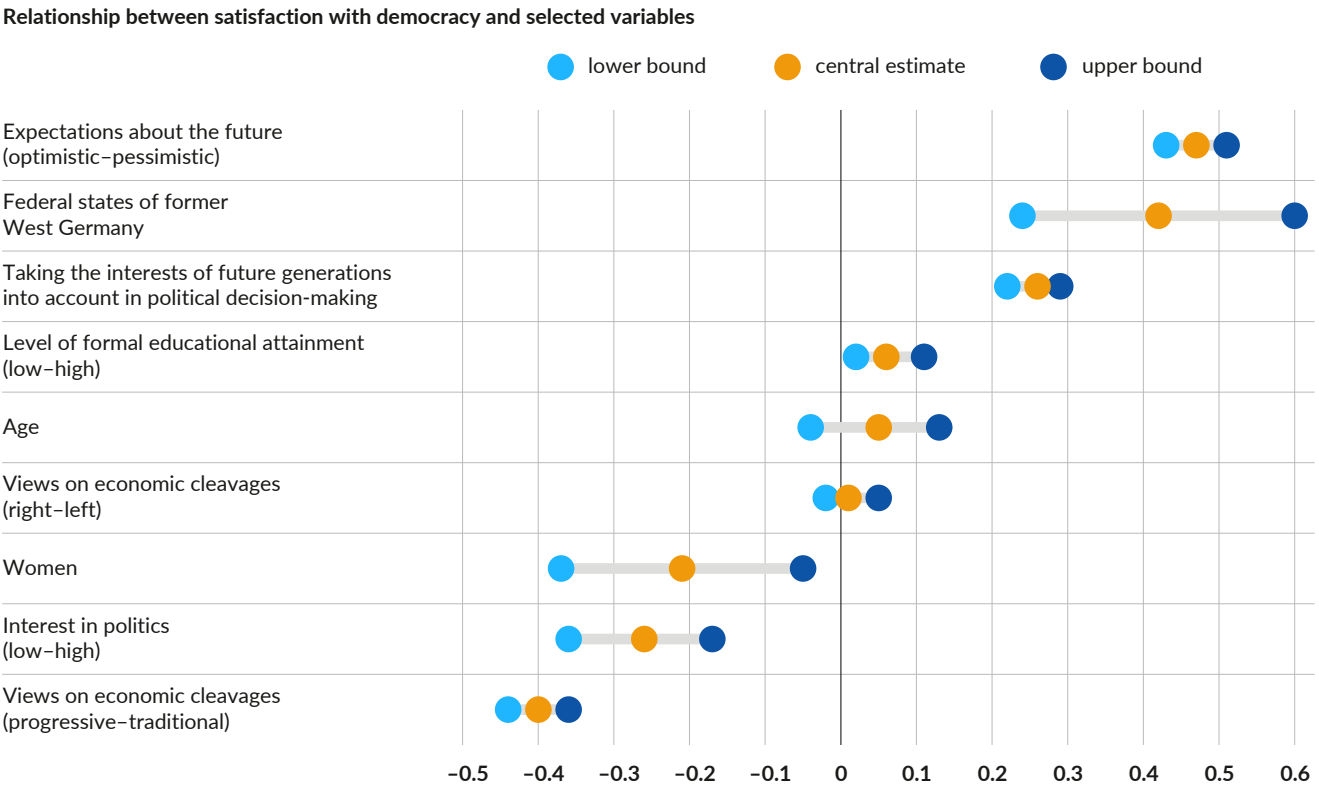
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The data suggests a strong correlation between expectations about the future and satisfaction with democracy (see Figure 3). Among people who are pessimistic about the well-being of future generations, the proportion of those who are dissatisfied with democracy (54%) is more than four times as high as among those who are optimistic (12%). To determine whether this relationship holds even when other influencing factors are taken into account, we examined it using regression analysis.

The regression model shows that people who are optimistic about the well-being of future generations are more satisfied with the functioning of democracy (see Figure 4).² Optimism about the future is the variable that has the strongest effect on satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. At the same time, there are differences between the respondents living in federal states that used to be part of West Germany and those that used to be part of East Germany. The data suggests that people living in the former parts of West

2 In a second model, we also included trust in politics as an independent variable. On average, people who have trust in politics view the functioning of democracy more positively. This finding is consistent with those of other political science studies: Although the two concepts are not identical in theory, they overlap in empirical terms. In this alternative model, as well, expectations about the future are statistically significant for satisfaction with democracy despite the strong correlation between satisfaction with democracy and trust in politics.

FIGURE 4 Regression model: Satisfaction with democracy



Intercept (baseline): 4.80 (lower limit: 4.18, upper limit: 5.40).
Bayesian regression. Dependent variable: Satisfaction with democracy. The figure shows key estimates and the upper and lower bounds of the interval within which the effect lies in the population with a 90% likelihood.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

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Germany are more satisfied with democracy. This also applies to people who believe that the interests of future generations are taken into account in political decision-making.³ Other relevant correlations are evident with regard to gender (women are less satisfied with democracy), interest in politics (the greater the interest in politics, the greater the dissatisfaction with

democracy), and societal cleavages (more traditional positions⁴ are associated with higher levels of dissatisfaction). The model does not show any statistically significant influence of age, level of educational attainment, or economic cleavages on satisfaction with democracy.

3 The consideration of future generations in political decision-making was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = does not apply at all” to “11 = applies completely.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: disagree, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: agree. Wording of the question: “If you just think about the politicians in Germany’s Bundestag in general: To what extent do the following statements apply or not apply? – Politicians give sufficient consideration to the impact of their political decisions on future generations.”

4 We measured views on societal cleavages (traditional vs. progressive) using a matrix question with various statements on a scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “11 = strongly agree.” The statements covered the topics of climate change, gender equality in society, and migration. Wording of the question: “There are differing opinions on various political issues. What about you? What do you think of the following statements? Government measures to promote gender equality in society are already going much too far / Taxes on fossil fuels (e.g., oil, gas and coal) should be raised to combat climate change / Immigrants should be required to adapt to German culture.”

Regression analysis

To analyze the relationships between expectations about the future and satisfaction with democracy and political preferences, respectively, we estimated Bayesian linear and logit probability models. We preferred Bayesian regression approaches over frequentist ones because they provide a more realistic and robust depiction of uncertainty and variance in the relationships between the parameters. Bayesian regressions provide a point estimate of the statistical relationship between one or more independent variables and a dependent variable as well as an interval (upper/lower bound) within which the statistical relationship in the population lies with a 90% probability.

An initial model examined the relationship between expectations about the future and satisfaction with democracy. Satisfaction with democracy served as the dependent variable, while the independent variables included in the model were expectations about the future, consideration of future generations in political decision-making, trust in politics, attitudes toward societal issues (i.e., immigration, climate change, gender equality), attitudes toward economic issues (i.e., wealth redistribution, regulation of the rental housing market), interest in politics, age, gender, level of formal educational attainment, and region of residence (i.e. former East or West Germany).

A second model examined the relationship between expectations about the future and political preferences. The dependent variable was the preference for parties close to the political center (intention to vote for the CDU/CSU, the SPD, the Greens or the FDP) over other parties (intention to vote for the AfD, the Left Party or the BSW). While we did not report results for the BSW and FDP voter groups

in the descriptive analyses (given that both analysis groups comprised fewer than 100 respondents), we did include both voter groups in the regression analyses, as this allows us to represent the entire political spectrum and make optimal use of the sample. The model included the following independent variables: expectations about the future, consideration of future generations in political decision-making, voting behavior in the 2025 Bundestag election, trust in politics, attitudes toward societal issues (i.e., immigration, climate change, gender equality), attitudes toward economic issues (i.e., wealth redistribution, regulation of the rental housing market), interest in politics, age, gender, level of formal educational attainment, and region of residence (i.e. former East or West Germany).

We chose not to include the economic situation in the regression models because 326 participants (16%) did not provide information about their income. The univariate descriptive analysis shows that pessimism about the future tends to be associated with less favorable economic circumstances. Nevertheless, since we did include level of formal educational attainment (i.e. a variable correlated with income) in the models, we can still assume that the model is robust.

In both regression models, weakly informative priors with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 2.5 were used for all model parameters. The priors for the intercept were set to 5 with a standard deviation of 2. These priors were selected to avoid bias in the model coefficients, to enable an appropriate yet efficient exploration of the prior space, and to reduce the likelihood that the models will estimate unrealistic relationships.

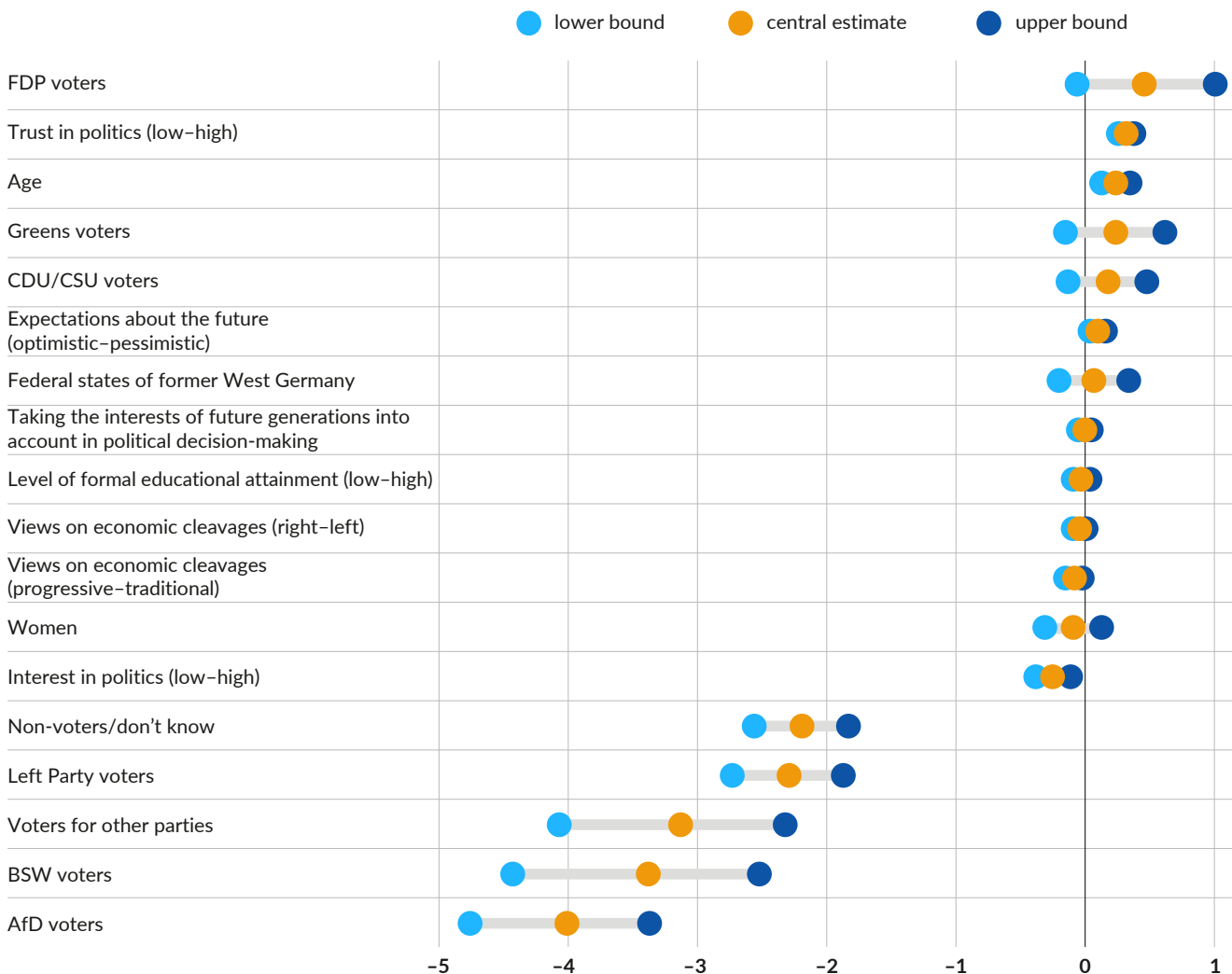
3. Pessimism about the future goes hand in hand with lower support for parties close to the political center

In addition to being relevant for assessing how well Germany's democracy is functioning, expectations about the future also shape political attitudes and voting decisions. They are therefore an important

component of the demand side of politics, as people's ideas about the future influence which political concepts and visions for the future they find convincing. Chapter 1 already showed that pessimism about the future is more prevalent among voters for the AfD, the BSW and the Left Party than among voters for centrist parties. This relationship is also confirmed by the regression analysis (see Figure 5). People who take a more optimistic view of the well-being of future generations tend to favor parties close to the political center

FIGURE 5 Regression model: Political preference

Relationship between political preference and selected variables



Intercept (baseline): 0.29 (lower limit: -0.6, upper limit: 1.1).

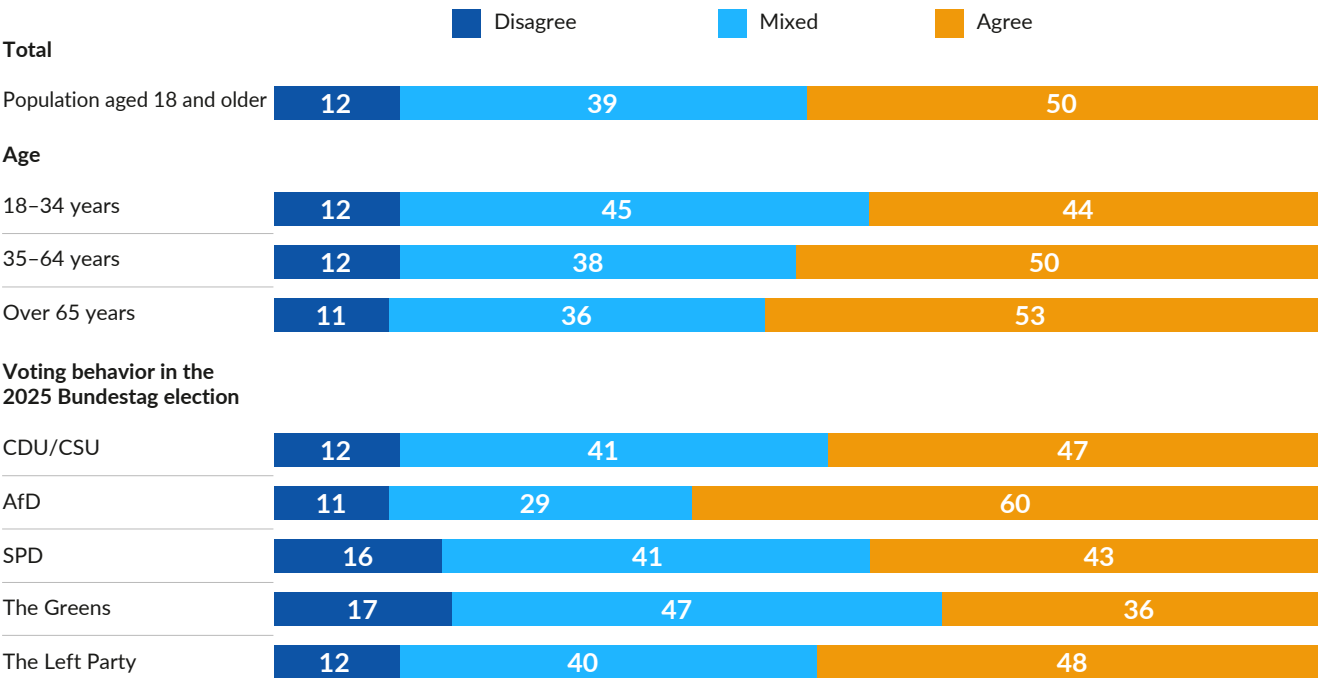
Bayesian regression. Dependent variable: Voting intentions for centrist parties (CDU/CSU, SPD, the Greens and the FDP). The figure shows key estimates and the upper and lower bounds of the interval within which the effect lies in the population with a 90% likelihood. Voter groups based on voting behavior in the 2025 Bundestag election. Voter groups are coded as binary variables. SPD voters are not depicted given that they represent the comparison group.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9-23, 2025

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FIGURE 6 Political parties' lack of a vision for the future

"I don't know what vision for the future most of the parties represented in the Bundestag stand for."
Figures in %



Agreement with the statement was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "11 = strongly agree." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: disagree, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: agree. The BSW, the FDP and other parties are not depicted due to low response numbers. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

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(the SPD, the CDU/CSU, the FDP and the Greens), while more pessimistic expectations about the future are more often associated with a preference for other parties (the AfD, the Left Party and the BSW).

As expected, past voting behavior and trust in political institutions are particularly strongly correlated with current party preference in the regression analysis. However, expectations about the future remain a relevant factor in shaping the political views of the respondents even beyond that. What appears to be decisive for political preferences is not so much the perception of specific political measures designed to take future generations into account (which we surveyed separately) as the fundamental expectation that the way society develops will or will not benefit future generations.

The results show that the political demand side varies significantly depending on expectations about the future. However, in addition to responding to existing expectations about the future, political parties can also seek to shape them through political narratives and future-oriented political offerings. Thus, expectations about the future are also relevant to the supply side of politics. The differences in expectations about the future among various voter groups therefore raise the question of whether political parties are able to clearly communicate their vision of society's future – and whether that vision is actually getting through to voters. Our data shows that half (50%) of respondents do not know what visions of the future most political parties stand for (see Figure 6). This suggests that political parties do not communicate their visions for the future in a way that is sufficiently clear and differentiated.

This perception that political parties lack such visions for the future is somewhat more pronounced among older people than among younger people. People who vote for the Greens, in particular, seem to perceive the parties' future-oriented political offerings more clearly or to recognize differences between them, while voters for the AfD, the Left Party and the CDU/CSU are significantly less likely to do so. Overall, it is clear that many people currently do not see any political offerings that sufficiently provide a sense of direction for the future.

At the same time, an analysis of the party platforms for the 2025 Bundestag election suggests that references to the future are indeed present in the parties platforms, and that the platforms of centrist parties tend to be more forward-looking than those of other parties. Nevertheless, these visions of the future are generally often vague and "offer few points of reference for an informed debate about the future" (Küstters and

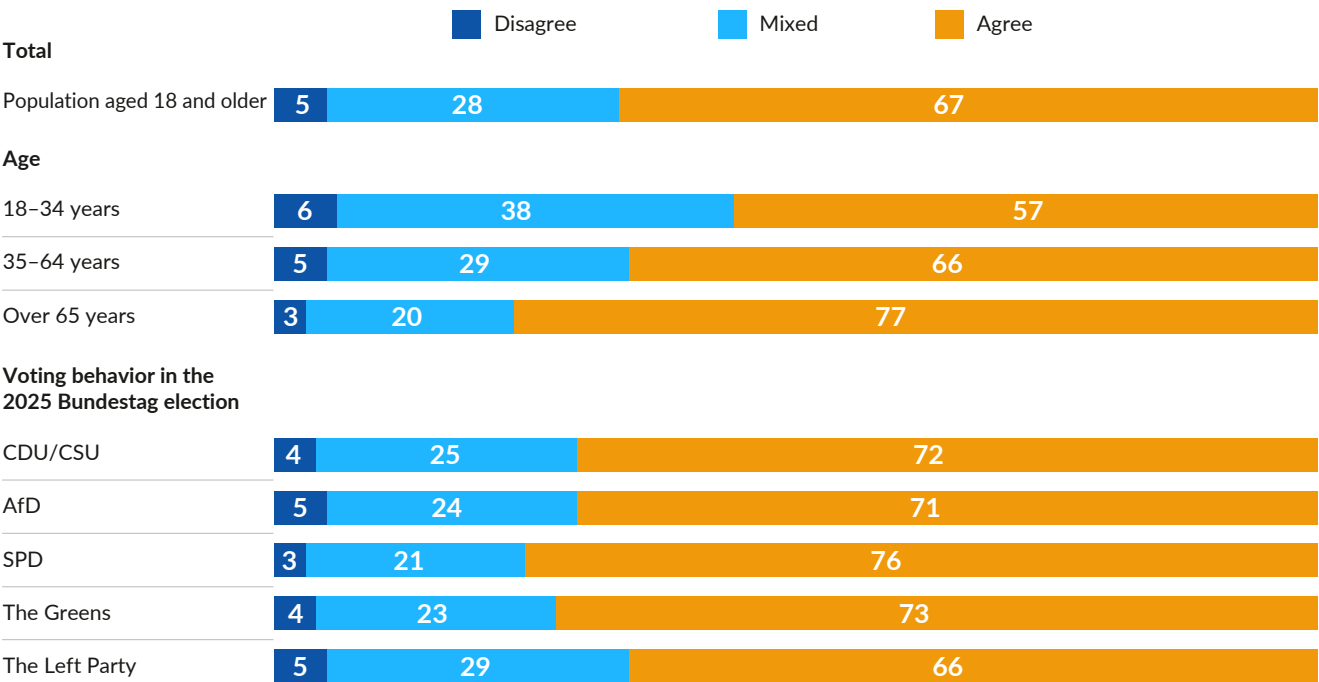
Andritzky 2025: 17). These findings suggest that the problem does not solely lie in a lack of visions for the future.

What's more, these future-oriented political offerings do not seem to be sufficiently visible, differentiated, or embedded in day-to-day politics to be perceived as providing a sense of direction for how society should develop. Likewise, this lack of a vision for the future is not limited to voters of the AfD or the Left Party, as it is also found among large segments of the CDU/CSU and SPD voting bases. Isabella Hermann (2025: 168) aptly describes this shortcoming, writing: "Especially in times of crisis, when old certainties begin to fracture, narratives about the future reveal their greatest power. [...] At the moment, the political center has little convincing to offer in this regard."

The future is not an issue that only certain parties stand to gain from addressing. After all, two-thirds

FIGURE 7 Party attractiveness according to vision for the future

"I find it harder to support parties that don't have a clear vision of the future."
Figures in %



Agreement with the statement was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "11 = strongly agree." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: disagree, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: agree. The BSW, the FDP and other parties are not depicted due to low response numbers. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

(67%) of those surveyed believe that political parties without a clear vision for the future are less deserving of support (see Figure 7). On the demand side, therefore, there is a widespread desire for a future-oriented political agenda. Supporters of all parties welcome clear visions and goals from political parties. The desire for a future-oriented political direction is also found across all age groups and even increases significantly with age. A focus on the future is therefore not merely a concern of individual political or social groups, but a widely shared societal need.

Further, visions of the future are not merely communicative elements of political platforms but can also serve as an important resource for political orientation. However, the results suggest a tense relationship between the strong demand for a vision of the future and the perceived lack of such visions on the part of political decision-makers. In this case, the problem apparently doesn't only lie in the political parties' lack

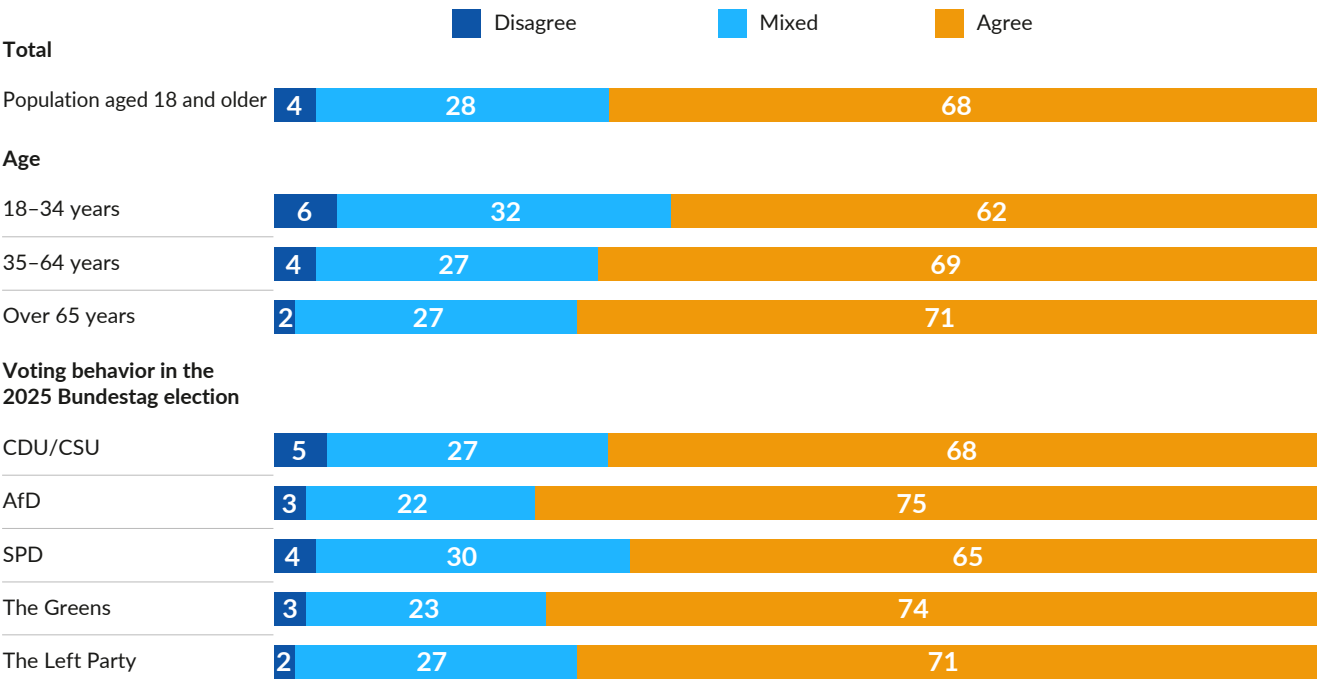
of a vision for the future. Rather, many future-oriented political offerings do not seem to be sufficiently visible, differentiated, or effective in terms of providing a sense of direction. This presents political parties with the challenge not only of articulating visions of the future in their platforms, but also of making them visible in day-to-day politics, in public debates and in government action, so that they are perceived as providing guidance on the direction society should take.

4. A large majority lacks a positive outlook on the future

The fact that so many Germans believe that political parties lack a vision for the future reflects a deeper societal problem: Many people lack a positive vision of how German society might develop going forward (see Figure 8). More than two-thirds of them (68%) believe that society lacks positive visions of the future. This

FIGURE 8 Lack of positive visions of the future

“Our society lacks positive visions of our future.”
Figures in %



Agreement with the statement was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “11 = strongly agree.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: disagree, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: agree. The BSW, the FDP and other parties are not depicted due to low response numbers. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

perception is widespread across nearly all social and political groups – and particularly pronounced among voters for the AfD (75%) and the Greens (74%).

At the same time, visions of the future are more than simply ideas, as they also provide guidance on which societal goals are being pursued and by what criteria political decisions can be assessed. Concrete visions and narratives of the future can also have emotional appeal, helping people understand why efforts, changes, or sacrifices may be worthwhile. Positive visions of the future thus make desirable futures imaginable and can make voters feel hopeful, confident, and motivated.

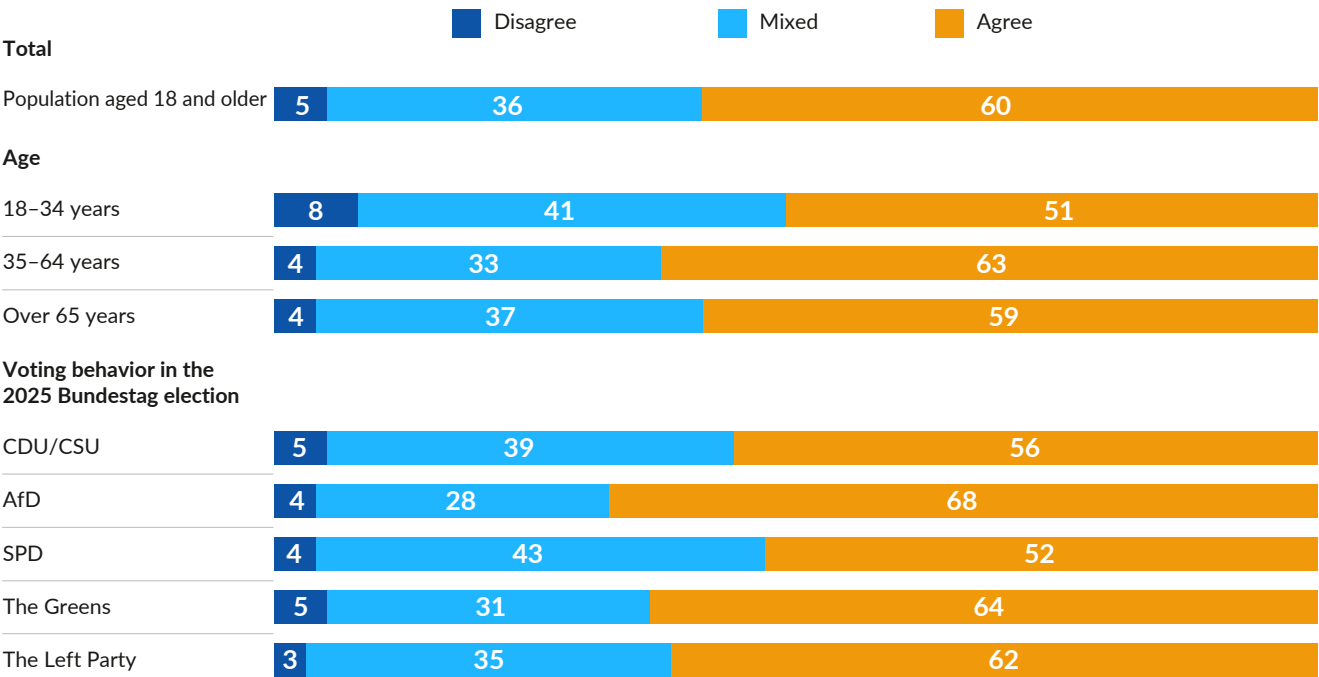
Without such visions of the future, it is more difficult to place current measures and reforms within society’s longer-term trajectory. “Without visions and images of the future,” Metelmann and Welzer (2020: 12) note, “societies and their policies inevitably revolve

only around the small moment that is the present and encounter problems precisely because, without a horizon for the future, it is difficult to say why a particular measure or law is being implemented or enacted.” An analysis of the debates in the Bundestag (Küsters and Andritzky 2024) supports this observation, as it shows that the number of debates in parliament on short-term challenges is increasing.

What’s more, it’s not just positive visions of the future that many people lack. In the view of many respondents, long-term perspectives also play only a minor role in political decision-making (see Figure 9). Well over half of respondents (60%) feel that political decisions these days are rarely based on a long-term vision. What is noteworthy here, as well, is not so much the difference between the groups as the broad consensus across political preferences and age groups. Indeed, rather than being a marginal phenomenon, the perception of short-termism in politics is a widespread

FIGURE 9 Long-term orientation in political decision-making

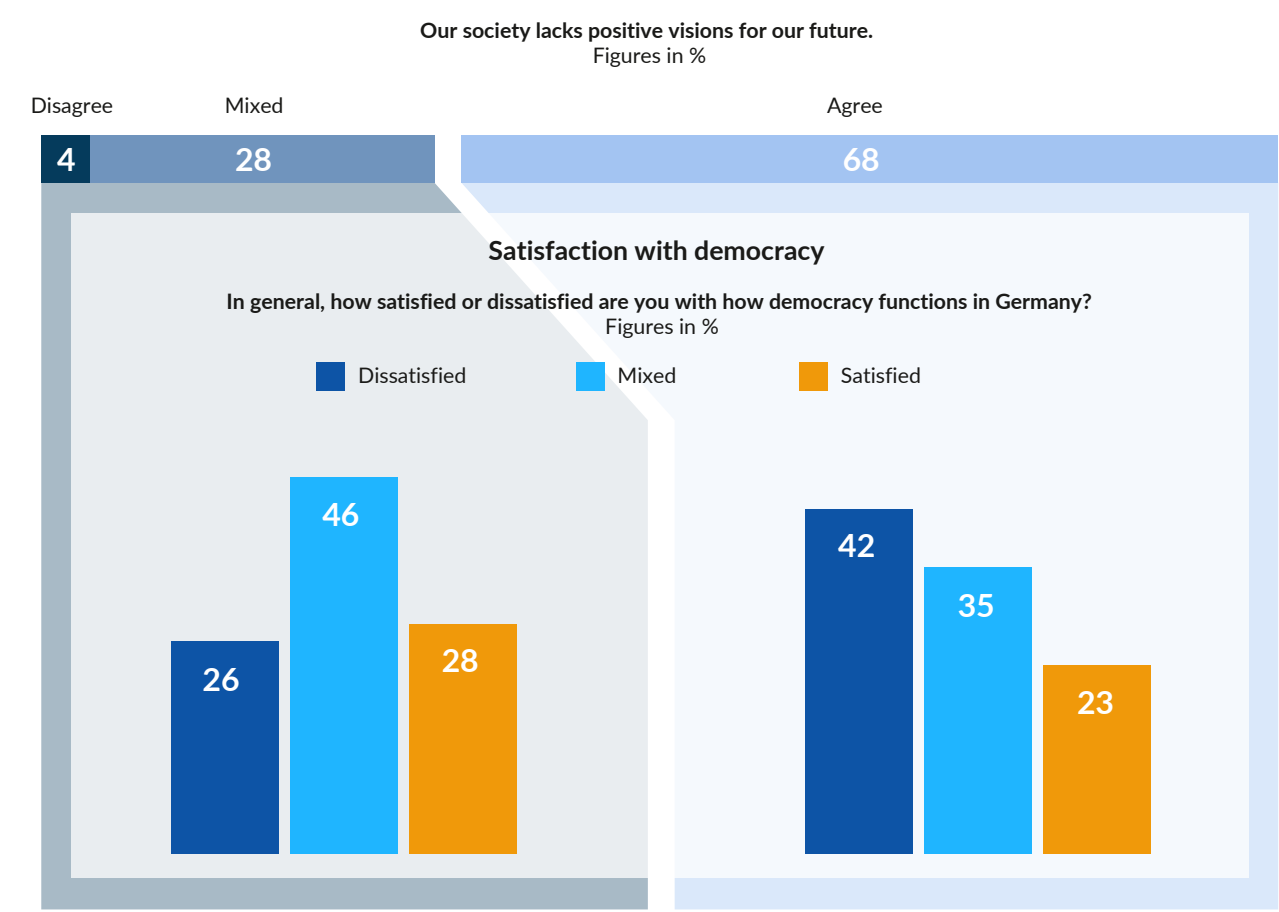
“I feel that political decisions these days are rarely based on a long-term vision.”
Figures in %



Agreement with the statement was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “11 = strongly agree.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: disagree, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: agree. The BSW, the FDP and other parties are not depicted due to low response numbers. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

Source: YouGov. Representative of the resident population aged 18 and older; 2,117 respondents; December 9–23, 2025

FIGURE 10 Satisfaction with democracy according to the lack of positive visions for the future



Agreement with the statement “lack of positive visions” was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = strongly disagree” to “11 = strongly agree.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: dissatisfied, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: satisfied. To ensure meaningful group sizes, the responses “disagree” (response options 1–4) and “mixed” (response options 5–7) were combined into a single group. Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale ranging from “1 = not at all satisfied” to “11 = very satisfied.” To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: dissatisfied, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: satisfied. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

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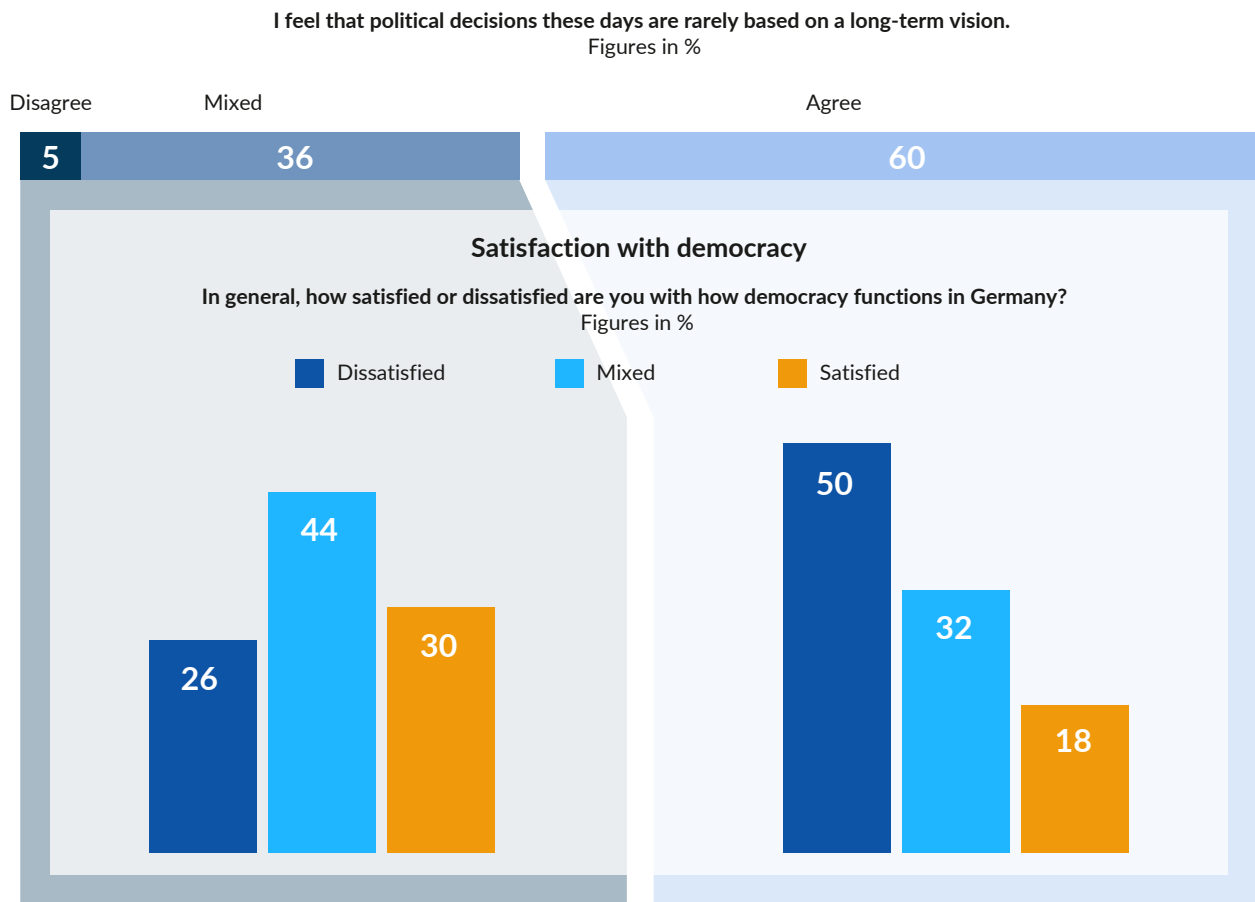
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one. Many people apparently expect not only effective crisis management, but also a clear vision of the direction in which society should develop in the long term. Such guidance could reduce uncertainty and create a shared framework that people, businesses, and other societal actors could use to guide their own (long-term) decision-making.

A lack of visions for the future and a lack of long-term thinking go hand in hand with dissatisfaction with democracy (see Figures 10 and 11). Those who feel that political decisions lack a long-term perspective and a positive vision for the future are also more likely

to be dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy. The current level of dissatisfaction with democracy, therefore, does not stem solely from assessments of political performance in the present. Instead, it is also linked to a lack of future perspectives. When there is a lack of positive visions for the future and politics is perceived primarily as short-term crisis management, it becomes more difficult to have confidence in the ability of democratic institutions to shape the future. The question of visions for society’s future is therefore not merely a matter of political communication, but a central challenge to the future sustainability of democracy itself.

FIGURE 11 Satisfaction with democracy according to long-term orientation in political decision-making



Agreement with the statement on the "long-term orientation of political decision-making" was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "11 = strongly agree." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: dissatisfied, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: satisfied. To ensure meaningful group sizes, the responses "disagree" (response options 1–4) and "mixed" (response options 5–7) were combined into a single group. Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale ranging from "1 = not at all satisfied" to "11 = very satisfied." To make the results easier to interpret, we have categorized them as follows: 1–4: dissatisfied, 5–7: mixed, 8–11: satisfied. The figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding differences.

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Recommendations

The findings of this policy brief suggest that expectations about the future, visions of the future, and perceptions of the long-term orientation of political decision-making are not limited to individual attitudes. Instead, they are also correlated with satisfaction with democracy and political orientation. Thus, a lack of a positive outlook on the future appears not merely as an individual problem that could be addressed through positive communication, but as a fundamental democratic challenge. Three key levers for policy and society emerge from this.

Recommendation 1:

Anchor the future in democratic processes

Many people perceive political decision-making as being too short-sighted. International experience shows that institutional mechanisms can help ensure that long-term perspectives are incorporated more systematically into political decision-making. Finland illustrates how a structured dialogue on the future between the government and parliament – supported by a comprehensive National Foresight Network – can provide strategic direction and integrate short-term measures into long-term development paths. Experi-

ence from Wales also shows that institutions designed to take future generations into account are most effective when they are backed by clear mandates, resources, and reliable political processes (Rose and Hoffmann 2026).

In Germany, as well, there are already institutions and approaches designed to integrate long-term perspectives into political decision-making. At the same time, the findings of this study show that many people continue to view politics as too short-sighted. Thus, the question of how long-term perspectives and the interests of future generations can be more effectively integrated into political decision-making remains a pressing one. This also includes greater involvement of young people, who, on average, are more optimistic about the future than older people, but who, as a political minority, are structurally underrepresented (Kurz 2026; El-Mafaalani, Kurtenbach and Strohmeier 2025). To this end, the Bertelsmann Stiftung will evaluate international experiences in the coming years and develop concrete reform options for Germany.

Recommendation 2:

How political parties can leverage the future

Expectations about the future are linked to political orientation: People with more pessimistic expectations about the future are less likely to support centrist political parties, and many respondents do not perceive these parties as presenting a clear political offering for the future. For parties close to the political center, this presents the challenge of treating the future not merely as a category on their political platforms, but of once again viewing it more strongly as a topic of political competition. Simply managing the present or criticizing the policies of others is not enough. Instead, political parties should articulate the direction in which they believe society should develop, the values and goals they associate with this direction, and the criteria by which progress should be measured in the future:

a) Make future-oriented political offerings visible:

In addition to being articulated in policy documents, visions of the future should also be consistently visible in parliamentary debates, public appearances, and day-to-day political communication – both in person and online.

b) Make future-oriented political offerings concrete:

Visions of the future must be both credible and desirable. They should therefore address not only economic and technological development, but also make clear how quality of life, social cohesion, health, safety, and other dimensions of a good society should evolve. Inclusive and co-creative processes can help ensure that such visions of the future are more closely aligned with people's ideas and experiences as well as provide guidance even while they are being developed.

For parties close to the political center, this course of action represents a twofold opportunity: A clear vision for the future can provide political direction while also sharpening the party's own political profile.

Recommendation 3:

Make the future tangible through engagement

Many people lack a positive vision of the future for society as a whole. At the same time, spaces are already emerging in many places where the future can be tested in practice and experienced: in clubs, community foundations, multigenerational homes, village stores, energy cooperatives, digital communities, and many other venues. They demonstrate that society's future can be shaped and create concrete experiences of collective agency that go beyond narratives of crisis and fears of societal decline.

Politicians, foundations, and civil society should make a concerted effort to support such places, facilitate their creation, and increase their visibility while also removing any barriers to civic engagement that are already in place. Optimism about the future stems not only from political communication, but also from the experience of being able to shape the future together. Where people experience that they can influence the direction that society takes and that civic engagement makes a difference, a positive outlook on the future becomes something that can be experienced in practice rather than merely imagined.

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