



“Mitte”-Study 2022/23: Key Findings

What is the “Mitte”-Study and who is surveyed?

The “Mitte-Studies” of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) provide information on the spread, development and background of extreme right-wing, devaluating and anti-democratic attitudes in the societal center (Mitte) of Germany. Since 2006, FES has published a new edition of the “Mitte-Study” approximately every two years. Since 2014, the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University is responsible for the scientific quality. This concept was developed together with researchers at the University of Leipzig and integrated the IKG concept of Group-Focused Enmity (GFE) into the series of “Mitte-Studies” in 2014. IKG previously developed and investigated GFE from 2002-2011 as part of the long-term study “Deutsche Zustände (German States), published at Suhrkamp Publisher.

Basically, the study is a representative population survey conducted every two years. Accordingly, to methodological and ethic principles a sample of the German population is interviewed by telephone (CATI). The sample represents the German resident population in terms of its social structure (including gender, age, provenance or level of education); in other words, it’s a reflection of society. Due to the interview situation, the inhibition to answer openly may be somewhat higher than in a written survey. The reported attitudes should therefore be seen as a conservative estimate and are sometimes higher in other surveys. As in the 2020/21 “Mitte-Study”, the results from the current survey period 2022/23 refer not only to people with German citizenship, but to the entire resident population. Nevertheless, knowledge of the German language represents a barrier to accessing the survey, as it is unfortunately not financially possible to translate into other languages.

The most recent edition of the “Mitte-Study”, published in September 2021 open access by Dietz-Publisher is called “The distanced Center”. It is available in German only; this summary has been translated into English and can be downloaded [here](#) as well as the book and all information in German only.

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Is the centre tiring of democracy?

Amidst crises and conflicts, insecurity is proliferating throughout society. More than half of those surveyed (55 percent) feel that Germany has been strongly affected by crises and a large proportion (42 percent) say that the succession of crises leaves them feeling insecure. In response to this, parts of the societal mainstream call for authoritarian solutions and could end up distancing themselves from democracy:

“The effect of the current succession of crises – including the pandemic, climate change, inflation and war in Ukraine – is to make attitudes towards democracy more distanced. Trust in democracy and its institutions is declining, while nationalist ideas about society are gaining ground.” (Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick, University of Bielefeld)

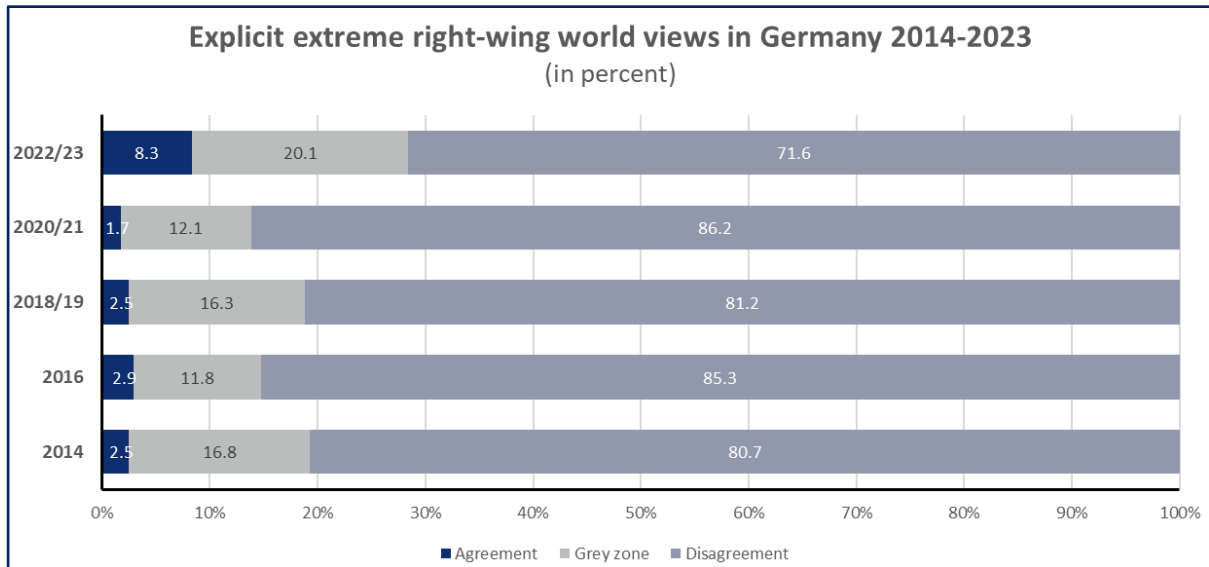
Past crises have contributed to doubts about democracy as a model for governing society, and have been associated – most recently during the Covid pandemic – with delegitimising tendencies. In our 2022/23 survey we identify a generalised perception of crisis feeding into a coping mode characterised by the return of nationalist discourses and demands for social closure and inequality, and potentially eclipsing calls for an “open” society based on solidarity and rationality. This is associated with higher rates of agreement with attitudes that pose a threat to democracy. But despite the widespread perception of crisis, the “open-minded crisis mode” is still the most prevalent among our respondents.

Approval of different crisis modes (in percent)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither/Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
»Close-minded crisis mode« (M = 3.44, SD = .84, n = 2,009, α = .76)					
It is now crucial that...					
... we revive our old virtues.	9.0	15.0	29.0	27.4	19.6
... Germany pursues its own interests first.	8.1	15.6	27.3	23.8	25.1
... border controls are increased.	11.6	14.1	21.8	20.7	31.7
... the German nation shows its strength.	10.1	11.4	27.9	26.3	24.3
... those who do the work in our society are rewarded.	7.5	13.6	32.4	27.3	19.1
... more is demanded of the youth.	4.7	12.9	25.4	30.0	27.0
»Open-minded crisis mode« (M = 4.0, SD = .76; n = 2,022, α = .58)					
... we all stick together.	1.6	4.6	14.7	25.5	53.5
... society shows solidarity with the weakest.	2.9	6.0	22.6	26.4	42.1
... the experts and scientists are listened to.	3.3	6.9	27.6	33.8	28.4

Notes: M = arithmetic mean, SD = standard deviation; n = number of respondents; α = Cronbach's alpha.

First and foremost, the significant increase in extreme right-wing attitudes needs to be taken seriously. One in twelve Germans has an extreme right-wing worldview (8 percent). More than 6 percent would like to see a dictatorship with just one strong party and a Führer (2014–2021: 2–4 percent). More than 16 percent believe that Germany is a superior nation and say it is “finally time” for a strong national feeling and politics whose foremost objective should be to secure Germany the power and influence it deserves (2014–2021: 9–13 percent). Almost 6 percent hold social-Darwinist views, for example agreeing that “some lives are worthless” (2014–2021: 2–3 percent). The zone of ambivalence – where extreme right-wing attitudes are not explicitly supported, but not rejected either – has also grown significantly. The proportion of those surveyed who place themselves right of centre has also grown from just under 10 percent to now 15.5 percent.

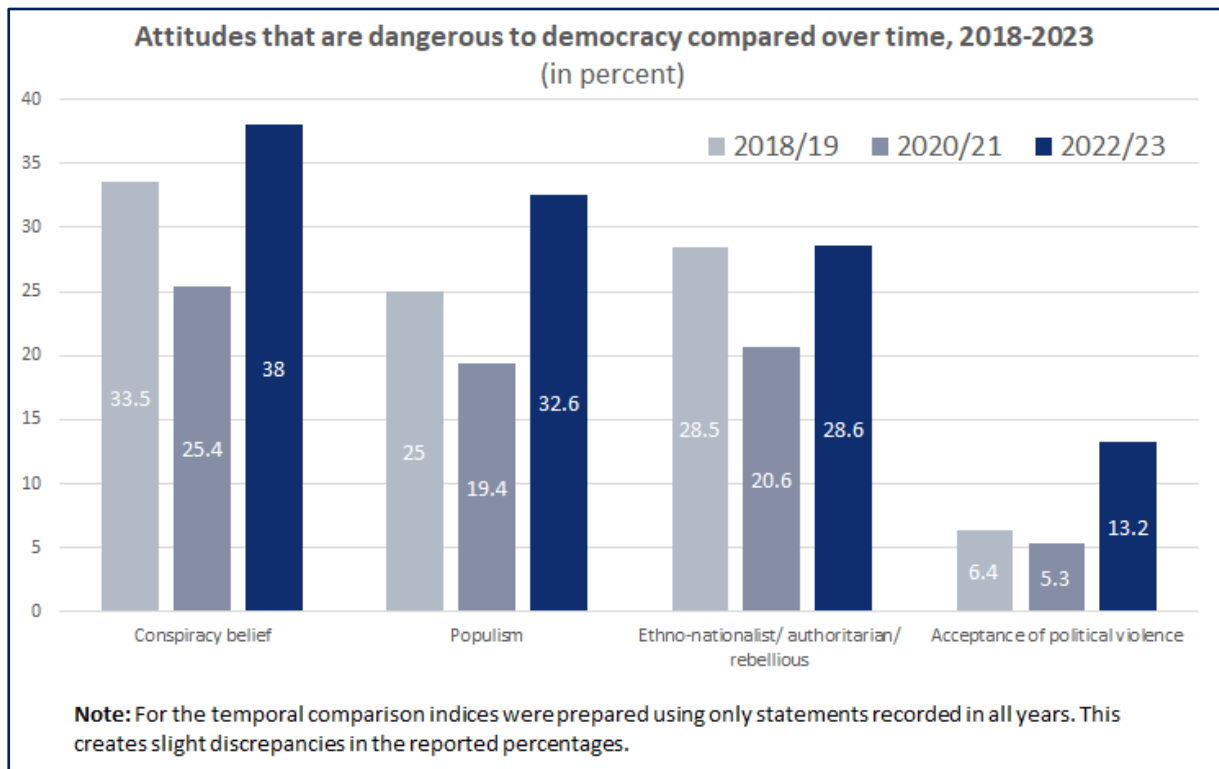
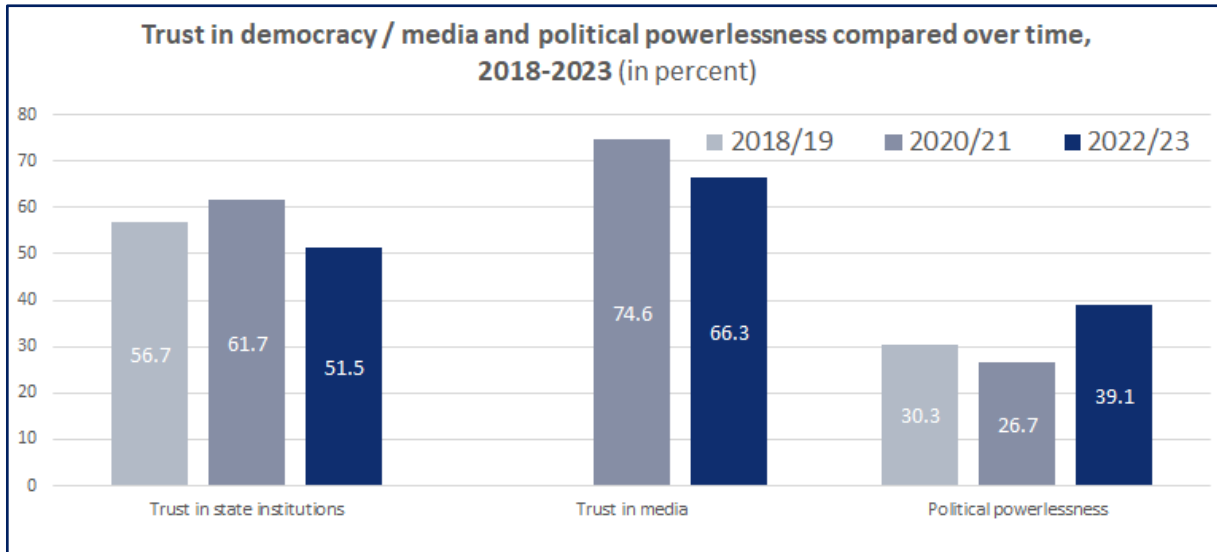
“More people in the centre now agree with extreme right-wing positions. These are not a majority, but this is a centre facing crisis and increasingly seeking solace in national chauvinism, support for dictatorship, ethnic social-Darwinism and devaluation of minorities. Amidst global crises more people are seeking security through right-wing authoritarian nationalism.” (Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick, University of Bielefeld)



Democracy in Germany still enjoys the support of an absolute – but shrinking – non-extremist majority. Our findings indicate a normalisation of extreme right-wing positions, not least in the zones of ambivalence where one can detect underlying signs of a malfunctioning democratic system and a centre that has been forced onto the defensive in recent years. Furthermore, extreme right-wing attitudes have also been closely associated with approval and justification of political violence. For example, 13 percent of those surveyed thought that some politicians deserved what they got if “the anger against them” led to violence (2020/21: 5 percent). In other words, the findings must be viewed in the context of actions as well as attitudes.

Distancing and radicalisation

Trust in institutions and the functioning of democracy has fallen below 60 percent. A significant proportion of the interviewees hold conspiracy beliefs (38 percent) and/or populist (33 percent) and ethno-national/authoritarian/rebellious (29 percent) positions. This represents an increase of about one third in comparison to the survey conducted during the pandemic, and support for democracy-threatening ideas has also increased in comparison to 2018/19. For example, today 32 percent believe that “politics and the media are in cahoots” (2020/21: 24 percent). In the current survey, 30 percent agree that “The governing parties defraud the people”, almost twice as many as two years previously. And one in five believe that “These days our country looks more like a dictatorship than a democracy” (2020/21: 16 percent in both cases). This great susceptibility for right-wing extremism, populism and conspiracy myths can potentially pave the way for anti-democratic radicalisation. The lack of political trust and subjective agency revealed here makes our democratic culture vulnerable to subversion by the extreme right. As Prof. Dr. Beate Küpper from Hochschule Niederrhein puts it: “If you mistrust democracy you are open to populist ideas and even extreme right-wing ideology.”



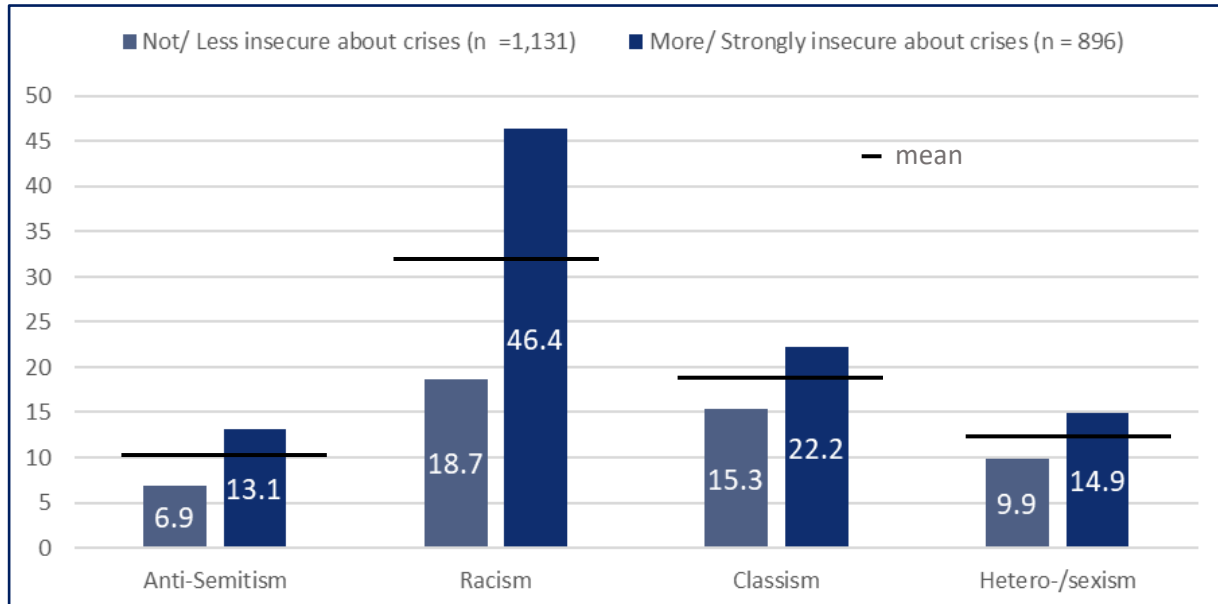
Group-focussed enmity strong again

The centre in 2022/23 is conspicuously hostile and discriminatory towards minorities, after a slight improvement during the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020/21. 34 percent of those surveyed believe that refugees come to Germany only to exploit its welfare systems.

16.5 percent believe firmly that Jewish people today seek to derive benefit from the Nazi past, with another 19 percent agreeing to some extent. And that kind of ambivalence towards anti-Semitic positions and other forms of discrimination and prejudice is increasing. 17 percent are disdainful of trans* people and 11 percent think that women should concentrate more on their role as wives and mothers again. Classism on the basis of social status is also widespread. About one third (35 percent) believe that the long-term unemployed enjoy an easy life at the expense of society.

In the current study, there is a new categorisation of the existing subcategories into four clusters. We distinguish four fundamental dimensions of group-related discrimination: racism, anti-Semitism, hetero-/sexism (devaluation of LGBTIQ people and support for traditional gender roles) und classism (devaluation on the basis of socio-economic status). Support for racist, hetero-/sexist and anti-Semitic beliefs is increasing in particular among those with a heightened sense of crisis, while classist attitudes are widespread across the board. Authoritarian and dominance-oriented belief systems offer explanations for differences in the forms of prejudice. Study lead Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick:

“Especially in times of crisis, when uncertainty can lead to questioning of the viability of democracy, it is crucial to have a strong centre that reinforces the foundational values of democracy. The prominent growth in right-wing views and group-focussed enmity in the upcoming generation raises doubts as to the long-term stability of liberal democracy.”



Disagreement / Agreement with statements about group-focussed enmity 2022/23 (agreement in percent)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither/Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Racism (M = 2.83; SD = 1.04; n = 2,023; $\alpha = .82$)					
Most refugees only come here to exploit the welfare system.	19.1	17.4	29.3	15.1	19.0
Muslims should be prohibited from immigrating to Germany.	41.1	17.7	23.0	9.7	8.4
Sinti and Roma are prone to criminality.	23.6	22.1	25.8	16.9	11.5
Those who are new somewhere should be happy with less to start with.	8.6	13.8	29.9	27.4	20.2
Anti-Semitism (M = 1.98; SD = 1.00; n = 1,973; $\alpha = .79$)					
Many Jews today try to derive an advantage from the past of the Third Reich.	44.8	20.0	18.8	8.8	7.7
Jews share blame for their persecutions because of their behaviour.	68.0	14.0	10.8	4.1	3.1
Given the politics of Israel I can well understand that people object to Jews.	40.2	20.2	24.2	10.1	5.3
Hetero-/sexism (M = 1.97; SD = 1.00; n = 2,022; $\alpha = .81$)					
I think it is silly if a man would prefer to be a woman or respectively a woman would prefer to be a man.	50.8	15.7	16.8	7.5	9.3
It is disgusting if homosexuals kiss in public.	56.3	12.7	14.8	8.3	7.9
Women should focus more on the role of wife and mother again.	58.3	16.7	14.4	7.1	3.5
Equality is actually about women getting more power than men.	48.8	20.9	18.1	7.9	4.3
Classism (M = 2.50; SD = .95; n = 2,025; $\alpha = .77$)					
The long-term unemployed make a comfortable living at the expense of society.	17.7	16.2	31.2	17.2	17.6
Welfare recipients tend to be lazy.	24.9	19.7	32.5	14.7	8.2
Poor people cannot handle money.	42.7	28.2	20.3	5.8	3.0
Begging homeless people should be removed from pedestrian precincts.	32.8	25.1	22.4	10.9	8.9

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; n = number of respondents; α = Cronbach's alpha



The mysteries of the immigration authorities and discrimination against refugees

Society's crises are felt strongly in the immigration offices, as Souad Lamroubal reports in the Mitte-Study. The reasons for failure to integrate frequently lie less in the individual than in lacking structures and problematic power relations that reinforce a form of structural racism. Civil society must be sensitive to such issues, in order to avoid attributing responsibility for supposedly "failed integration" to a lack of willingness on the part of the subject. The human component often falls short. The specific perspective for being able to stay is decisive for the possibilities to integrate, and the enormous overload of the immigration authorities also creates obstacles to integration. Overload means that implementation of possible residency opportunities for refugees are very limited and this leads to frustration and hopelessness among refugees and case workers alike. Ultimately the options for refugees depend above all on their residency prospects. The additional burden on the agencies and the resulting inadequacies of implementation can in themselves be anti-democratic. In order to initiate improvements, we need a national concept for dealing with the situation in the immigration offices that rapidly reduces the burden on staff and clients. Souad Lamroubal underlines:

"Society has a range of standards for a functioning administration. Some would regard an immigration office as functional if it worked principally to restrict migration as far as possible, and to select out of concerns for security. Others would prefer to promote diversity through a welcoming culture in government agencies."

Subordinate treatment of newcomers by the state / Discrimination experience of minorities (agreement in percent)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither/Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
State deprioritisation of newcomers (M = 2.95; SD = 1.20; n = 2,015; α = .82)					
The german state cares more for refugees than for Germans in need.	17.0	17.9	23.7	18.4	23.0
The administration should prioritise the affairs of Germans.	26.1	19.2	23.4	14.7	16.6
If you come to Germany you should not complain if the authorities take a little longer to handle your business.	20.8	16.5	25.6	18.0	19.1
In Germany there is discrimination against ethnic/cultural and religious minorities.	17.2	22.9	33.9	17.9	8.2

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; n = number of respondents; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Unequal treatment of migrants is not only practiced by government agencies, but demanded and promoted by the societal mainstream. A third of the sample for the 2022/23 Mitte-Study got different answer choices for what they thought about Germany accepting refugees from Africa, Syria or Ukraine respectively. The finding was clear, with acceptance highest for refugees from Ukraine and lowest for those from Africa:

"The region from which people come to Germany plainly plays an important role in how welcome they are here. This is an alarming development for democracy and a bitter message for people from Syria and Africa who had to leave their homes to seek security and protection when faced with war, persecution and other predicaments." (Dr. Jens Hellmann, University of Bielefeld)

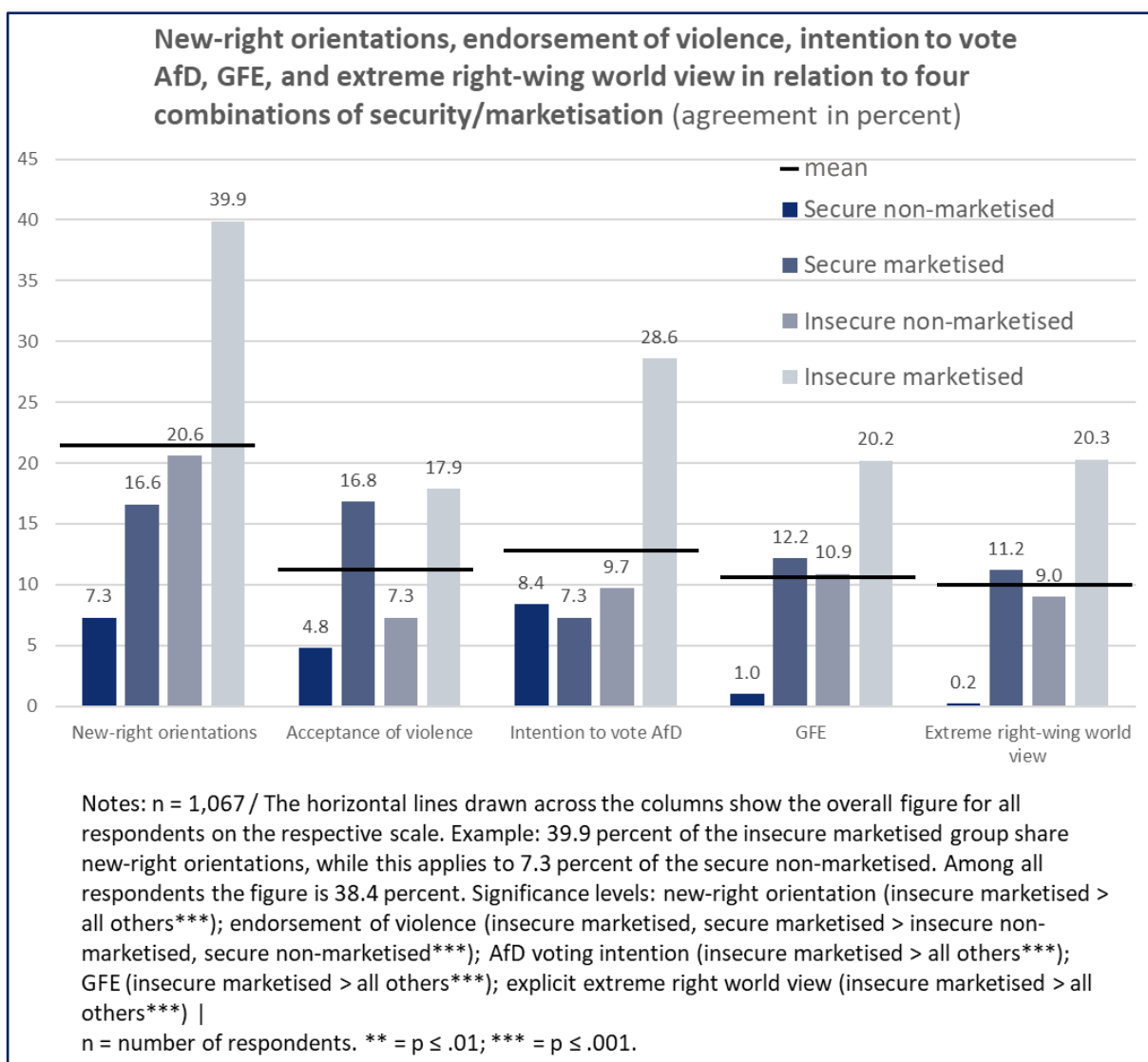
It is also interesting that support for the necessity of engagement for an open and diverse society has fallen (in comparison to the last two surveys in 2018/19 and 2020/21) while demands for prerogatives for established residents have grown. This is also reflected in a sense of entitlement, where 11 percent of those surveyed believe that they and people like them are entitled to more than others. This sense of entitlement is more prevalent in Eastern Germany than in the western states. Respondents with a sense of entitlement also exhibit elevated racism, classism, hetero-/sexism und anti-Semitism. Supporters of the AfD also demonstrate a stronger sense of entitlement than supporters of other parties.

Agreement / Disagreement on statements about entitlement (agreement in percent)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither/Nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Entitlement thinking (M = 1.92; SD = 1.02; n = 1,063; α = .89)					
People like me deserve more than others.	45.9	24.9	20.0	7.0	2.1
People like me have earned better treatment than others.	50.1	24.3	15.3	7.6	2.7

Notes: M = arithmetic mean; SD = standard deviation; n = number of respondents; α = Cronbach's alpha.

Crisis, insecurity and entrepreneurial universalism

The longstanding promise of a competition-driven meritocracy is becoming increasingly hollow, and support for the corresponding motifs has fallen significantly (2014: 59 percent; 2016: 65 percent; 2023: 35 percent) within multiple crises. “Marketised insecurity” – in the sense of identification with success based on competition in combination with perceived loss of security caused by current crises – promotes a libertarian authoritarianism that is particularly susceptible to conspiracy beliefs, disregard for democracy, group-focussed enmity and right-wing ideologies. Almost 20 percent of the respondents fall in the “marketised insecurity” group. Many of these are individuals in precarious and disadvantaged conditions – but by no means all, as Prof. Dr. Eva Groß and Dr. Andreas Hövermann underline: “It is in particular subjective experiences of crisis and associated loss of security that lead those who identify with success and achievement (specifically in the centre of society) to drift into authoritarian and illiberal ideas”. In fact, marketised insecurity is part and parcel of the middle class. But the sociologist Amelie Nickel adds: “Politically the marketised insecurity group still feels best represented by the AfD.”

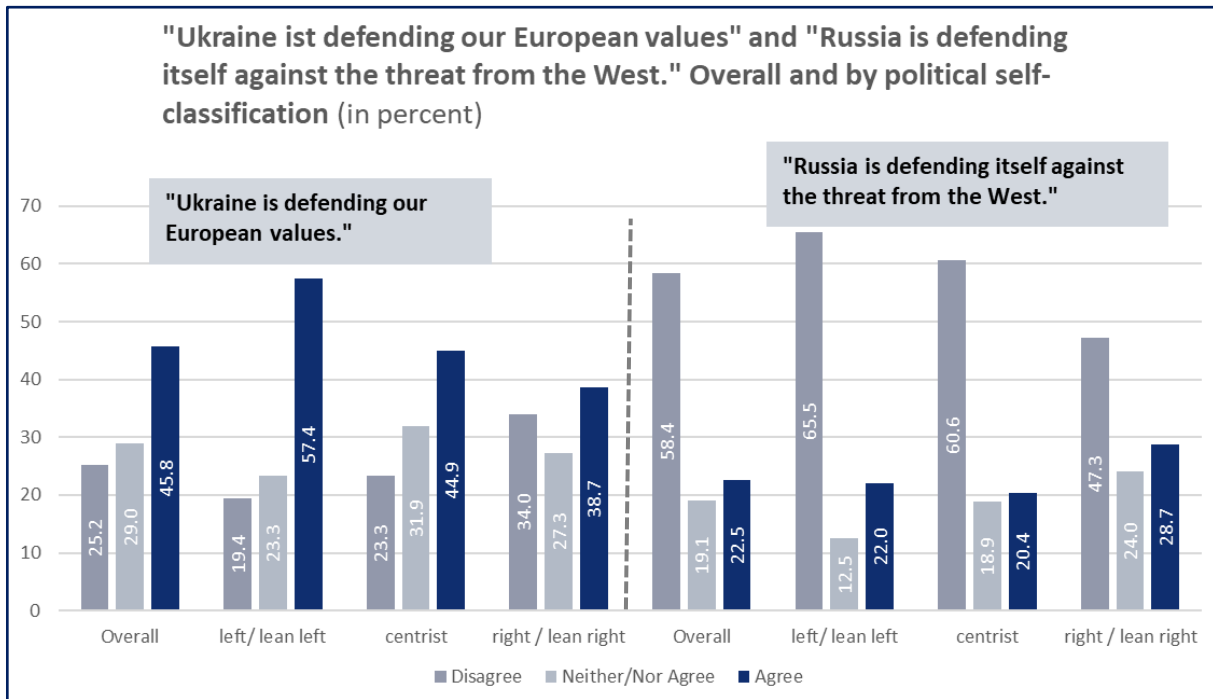


The Ukraine war and a centre between pacifism and militarism

Concerning attitudes to the Ukraine war – and Germany’s fundamental foreign policy orientation – there is a strong centre that transcends party-political divides. On the right there is a considerably stronger feeling that Russia acted in response to a threat from the West and that European values are not being defended in Ukraine. The fundamental foreign policy orientation of the centre still revolves around

European and transatlantic cooperation. Concerns about consequences of the war are closely associated with populist tendencies:

“In relation to attitudes to the Ukraine war and Germany’s fundamental foreign policy orientation, we see a strong centre that transcends party-political lines. Affinity to populism and a right-wing or hard left political orientation mark the poles here. Rejection of support for Ukraine and/or a strong Western orientation as a whole are thus often also associated with rejection of the democratic system.” (Prof. Dr. Mathias Albert, University of Bielefeld and Dr. Lena Hilkermeier, Protestant University of Applied Sciences RWL)

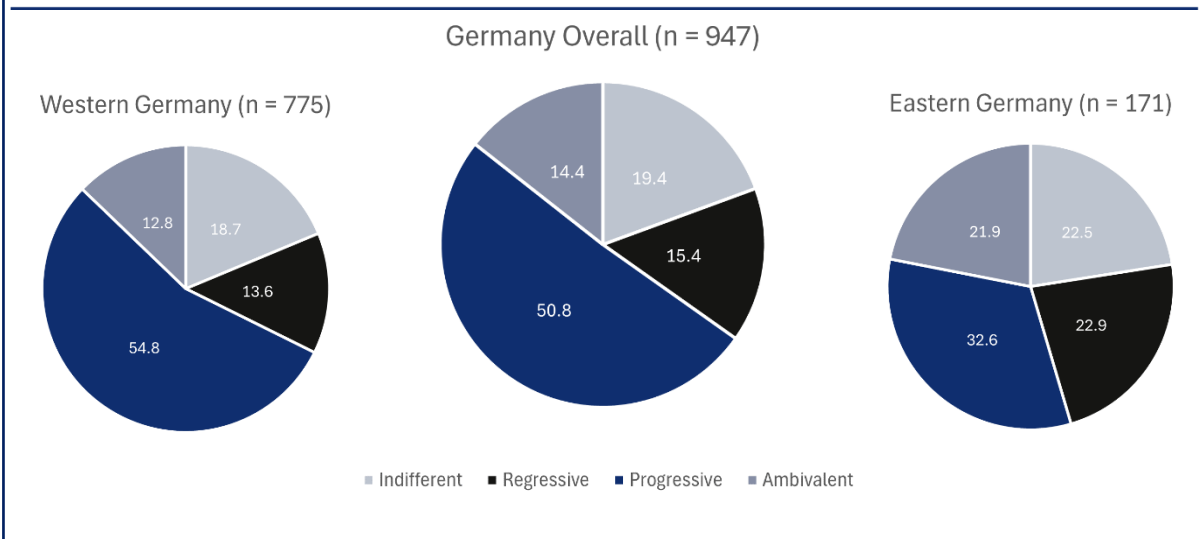


A majority holds progressive attitudes towards climate policies

Almost one third of those surveyed exhibit understanding for the blockades and protests organised by climate activists, and another 23 percent find them at least partly plausible. But worries about the consequences of the war in Ukraine (specifically rising energy prices) dampen support for climate protection and the transition towards green energy. In fact, about a quarter of those surveyed (26.5 percent) believe that: “We should settle with Russia and start importing Russian oil and gas again.” Those who believe that Russia is defending itself against “a threat from the West” (22.5 percent), also tend to oppose climate protection and the transition towards green energy. That part of the population also leans significantly more strongly towards mistrust of democracy, populism and extreme right-wing attitudes. Conversely, those who trust democracy and reject populism tend to have more progressive attitudes on climate. However, 65 percent of those surveyed see a need for greater public participation in the energy transition. That creates an opening for democratic culture, as Prof. Dr. Beate Küpper and Dr. Fritz Reusswig point out:

“Climate protection demands more, not less democracy. Climate politics will inevitably be associated with challenges and contradictions, which need to be openly discussed and negotiated. Pandering to a small number of opponents and obstructors is harmful to climate protection and democracy alike.”

Progressive and regressive climate attitudes in Germany as a whole and by residence in eastern/western Germany (in percent)

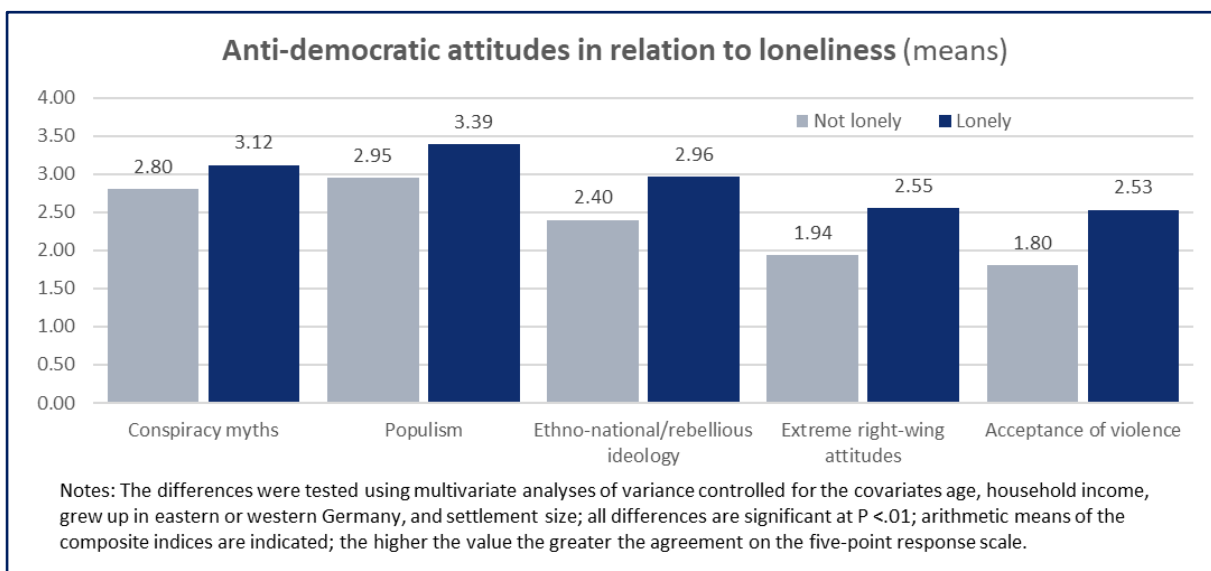


Loneliness and social inequality weaken participation and democracy

13 percent of those surveyed report experiencing loneliness often or frequently, while respondents feel uncomfortable at home (28 percent), at work (36 percent), and especially in public space (46 percent). Those who feel excluded, isolated and outside of society are less resilient, less politically involved and more likely to have prejudiced and anti-democratic attitudes. Lonely people also have less trust in democracy and in state-funded media outlets. Living at a greater distance from popular leisure locations also correlates with anti-democratic attitudes. As Prof. Dr. Claudia Neu explains:

“Loneliness is more than a bitter personal feeling. It weakens trust in people, places and institutions. Lonely people are more likely to feel subject to discrimination, but also more likely to disparage other social groups. Loneliness has the power to be a threat to democracy.”

Socio-economic status also affects how people experience and reflect on politics and society. Respondents with less income and education, who place themselves at the “bottom” of society, are more likely to express prejudice towards groups identified as “the others”. But especially the respondents from the socio-economic centre increasingly exhibit a dangerous scepticism concerning democratic norms and universal equality. Alexander Mavroudis from Koordinationsstelle Kinderarmut at LVR-Landesjugendamt says for example: “Poverty prevention is also democracy promotion: If people feel their needs are seen and taken seriously, they will also see themselves as members of society and behave accordingly.”





Football is a leisure activity that occupies a place at the heart of civil society. Altogether, however, racist attitudes are significantly more prevalent among members of football clubs than among other respondents. Anti-racist initiatives need to be strengthened and made more visible, permanent racism monitoring needs to be established across amateur and professional sports, and independent complaints offices for those affected by racism and discrimination need to be created and/or strengthened.

“The current Mitte-Study shows clearly that racist attitudes are especially virulent in football. In the run-up to the European Championship 2024 it is unfortunate that the racism task force has been in abeyance since 2016.” (Dr. Hannes Delto, University of Osnabrück)

Agreement to Group-focussed enmity by sports club membership (in percent)		
	Sports club membership	
	Football club (n = 206)	Other sports clubs (n = 343)
GFE index	14.1***	5.2***

Notes: *** = $p \leq .001$; n = number of respondents.

Political education for a (non-)distanced centre

Despite existing programmes to promote democracy, the findings of the 2022/23 Mitte-Study reveal a shift to the right in parts of society. Herein lies a misunderstanding concerning the functional logic of political education, which needs to extend far beyond extremism prevention and to permeate education policy (not merely in the form of projects). Political education must promote and strengthen the democrats. The existing prevention programmes do too little of this. At the same time political actors like parties, politicians and the media must distance themselves clearly and visibly from group-focussed enmity and anti-democratic right-wing positions and avoid legitimising them as belonging to the democratic spectrum of opinion. They themselves function as political educators and need to reflect this more clearly.

The Mitte-Study also addresses loneliness and identifies “uncomfortable places” such as school, work, training and also public spaces. These are central locales of political socialisation, (learning) spaces where people come together, where conflicts are negotiated and compromises achieved. All these structures require democratisation and sensitisation to discrimination. That includes possibilities for participation and co-determination, anti-discrimination and solidarity. Political education initiatives promote such democratic development processes. While there are growing calls for affirmative economic and financial education to teach people how to cope with inflation and learn to save and provide for the future, political education argues for a critical take on the (also global) power structures and for capitalism-critical education work. The dark sides of the neoliberal “meritocracy” are becoming increasingly obvious and evoking hate and scepticism of democracy among those who do not live up to its ideals. Questioning these structures is also foundational for the social-ecological transformation and dealing with the climate crisis.

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