



Future of democracy | 02.2020

## Populism Barometer 2020

### Turnaround in public opinion:

**populist attitudes have become much less pronounced and widespread, above all in the political center. As populism declines, populists have been put on the defensive. At the same time, further radicalization on the right is becoming a more serious danger.**

Currently, only about two in ten German voters (20.9 percent) hold populist views. Thus, populism is down by about 11.8 percentage points — or by just over a third — compared with November 2018 (32.8 percent). At the end of 2018, about one in three voters had a populist attitude, whereas now, this figure has fallen to only one in five. The proportion of non-populist voters has increased by a similar amount. Compared with 31.4 percent at the end of 2018, almost half of all voters (47.1 percent) have now shown themselves to be non-populist in the Populism Barometer 2020. Thus, the proportion of non-populist voters has even risen by exactly half.









The strength of populist attitudes has also decreased considerably, particularly in the political center. The counter-mobilization of democratic anti-populism was also an anti-populist counter-mobilization of the political center. This shows that it is the political center, above all, which has turned out to be capable of learning from the process of confronting the temptations of populism.

The corona crisis may have stabilized and somewhat reinforced the turnaround in political attitudes in Germany. However, the corona effect is neither the cause nor the sole driver of this change. Already well before the crisis began, a shift had been achieved. On the one hand, it was driven by significantly improved and more inclusive work on the part of the government. On the other hand, we are beginning to see the learning effects brought about by democratic anti-populism in engaging with populists.

At the same time, the remaining populists are increasingly becoming a danger, especially on the right-wing margins. The first signs of this can be seen in their growing tendency to adopt right-wing extremist attitudes. This applies above all to the AfD, which is moving away from the purely right-wing populist mobilization movement seen in 2016 and 2017, towards a party whose voters are increasingly characterized by right-wing extremist attitudes.

## What is populism?

Below are various statements on politics and society. For each statement, please indicate the degree to which you agree:

		POPULIST ATTITUDES				
		strongly agree	or	mostly agree	mostly disagree	strongly disagree
The people are often in agreement but the politicians pursue quite different goals.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Political parties only want peoples' votes and do not care about their opinion.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The political differences between the elite and the people are much greater than the differences among the people.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Important questions should not be decided by parliament but by popular referendums.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The politicians in the German parliament need to follow the will of the people.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The people in Germany agree, on principle, about what should happen politically.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.		<input type="radio"/>		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Source: Own items as well as items taken from Hawkins, Kirk, Scott Riding and Cas Mudde (2012). "Measuring Populist Attitudes". The Committee on Concepts and Methods. Working Paper 55. 1–35, and Akkerman, Agnes, Cas Mudde and Andrej Zaslove (2013). "How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters". Comparative Political Studies. 1–30.

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**BRIEF EXPLANATION:** Populism as a particular idea of democracy is defined by the distinction between the "true people" and "corrupt elites", the notion of a general will of the people and the idea that society is homogeneous. From this, three constitutive dimensions of populism emerge: "anti-establishment", "pro-popular-sovereignty" and "anti-pluralism". In these three dimensions, it is also possible to measure populist attitudes empirically through surveys: the more strongly voters agree with statements and positions corresponding to the three dimensions of populism, the more populist they are. The eight items used to identify populism were developed and tested in numerous studies. Today they are largely accepted in this form or a similar form as a methodological standard for the comparative measurement of populist attitudes. In order to understand populism, it is important to note that none of the three dimensions is enough on its own to identify populist attitudes. All three dimensions are necessary conditions for populism and have to be fulfilled simultaneously. The same also goes for the eight items: only when they all interact with each other at the same time do individual statements become an overall populist understanding of democracy and politics. Therefore, for our Populism Barometer, only someone who either "strongly" or "mostly" agrees with all eight statements counts as "populist". Respondents who "strongly disagree" with at least one statement, or who "mostly disagree" with at least half of the eight statements, are described as being non-populist. All other respondents are neither populist nor non-populist, and fall into the category of "mixed."

### Source:

All figures, illustrations and analyses in this Policy Brief are based on the results of the "Populismusbarometer 2020": Vehrkamp, Robert, and Wolfgang Merkel (2020). Populismusbarometer 2020 - Populistische Einstellungen bei Wählern und Nichtwählern in Deutschland 2020. Gütersloh. DOI 10.11586/2020044. The Populism Barometer 2020 explores the findings of several online surveys conducted between May 2017 and June 2020, which were carried out by infratest dimap and YouGov Germany. In the most recent survey from June 2020, a total of 10,055 people were interviewed. The results presented are representative for the German population aged 18 and over. This Policy Brief corresponds to the "Executive Summary" of the study "Populismusbarometer 2020" cited above.

## Turnaround in public opinion: a sharp decline in populist attitudes

In the year of the 2017 federal elections and the year afterwards, populist attitudes were widespread among German voters. In 2017, around three in ten voters held populist views. In fact, in the year after the federal elections, their populism became even stronger and more prevalent (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018).

Currently, only about two in ten people in the German electorate (20.9 percent) hold populist views. That is 11.8 percentage points or slightly over a third less than in November 2018 (32.8 percent). Or to put it differently: while every third voter had a populist attitude at the end of 2018, now it is only every fifth.

“The Corona crisis may have stabilized and reinforced the turnaround in public opinion, but it did not cause it.”

The proportion of non-populist voters has risen to a similar degree. Compared with 31.4 percent at the end of 2018, almost half of all voters (47.1 percent) have now shown themselves to be non-populist in the Populism Barometer 2020. Thus, the proportion of non-populist voters has even risen by exactly a half.

At the same time, the group of “mixed” (partly populist) voters has decreased by 3.8 percentage points to 32 percent. This reinforces the clarity of the trend. The decline in populist attitudes has not simply coincided with a similarly significant increase in “mixed” attitudes among voters. On the contrary: the increase in the proportion of non-populist voters was even noticeably greater than the decrease in the proportion of populist voters.

But there has not only been a sharp decrease in the proportion of populist voters. Populist attitudes have themselves also become much less pronounced. In comparison with the situation at the end of 2018, the tendency towards populism on average across the electorate on the populist scale from 0 (non-populist) to 8 (populist) has sunk by 0.68 scale points to 4.66. That is by far the lowest level since the first surveys carried out for the Populism Barometer in spring 2017. Here, too, we can see that populists in Germany are once again on the defensive.

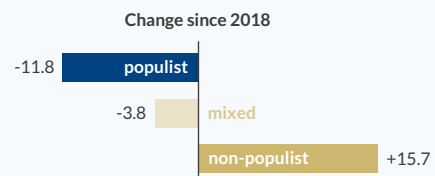
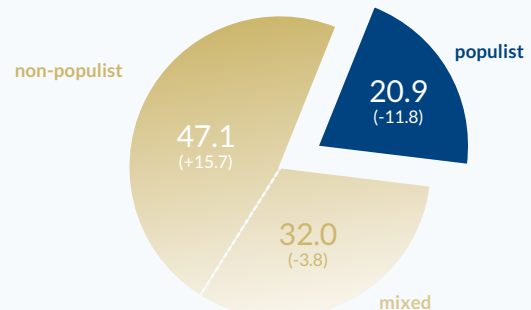
## Not only corona: populism on the defensive

The turnaround in public opinion is certainly also an effect of increased approval ratings for politics and the government in the course of the corona crisis so far. But by no means exclusively. An anti-populist shift in public opinion had already been achieved in 2019, and was then stabilized and reinforced by the corona crisis.

This can also be seen when we trace the level of populism over time. On the one hand, the five data points in the Populism Barometer between March 2017 and June 2020 show the populist tendency of public opinion before and after the 2017 federal elections: while the proportion of voters with populist views rose from 29.2 percent in March 2017 to almost a third (32.8 percent) in November 2018, over the same period the proportion of non-populist voters sank from 36.9 percent to only 31.4 percent.

### How populist are the Germans?

As a percentage of all respondents



Changes since November 2018 in brackets  
Target population: German population aged 18 and over (sample size 2020: 10,055).

Source: infratest dimap and YouGov  
on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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The populist wave in Germany reached its highest point so far at the end of 2018. By the end of 2019, the proportion of populists was already much lower and the proportion of non-populists was significantly higher than in the run-up to the 2017 federal elections. The turnaround had taken place, and

the new trend continued as the corona crisis arrived in March 2020.

Whether the trend would have continued to be reinforced even without the crisis must remain a matter for speculation. The onset, development and political management of the crisis certainly have strengthened and reinforced the trend. The “return of trust” (Vehrkamp and Bischoff 2020) in good, reliable and inclusive government action has also put the populists on the defensive. However, when it comes to learning from previous years and engaging politically with populists, it is important to note that the corona crisis was not the triggering factor.

## The decline of populism in the political center

This is particularly noteworthy because in recent years, the political center has often — and with reason — been described as democratically unstable, fragile and certainly not resistant enough to the temptations of populism and extremism. This was also a central finding of the Populism Barometer 2018, which pointed to the “increasing populism of the political center”. At that time, no other segment of the German electorate showed such a marked increase in populism as the political center. In particular, the right-wing populist AfD had succeeded in mobilizing the political center with its extreme brand of populism.

Against this background, it is important that the anti-populist shift is also being supported and driven particularly by the political center. This segment of the electorate is now much more resilient and resistant to populism than it was in the context of the 2017 federal elections. At any rate, democratic anti-populism and the anti-populist mobilization are currently being sustained and pushed forward from the political center of the electorate.

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**“It is precisely the political center that has shown itself capable of learning from the populist temptation.”**

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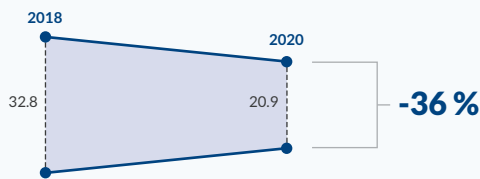
The proportion of non-populists in the political center of the electorate has risen by almost two thirds, from only 27 percent in May 2018 to 44 percent today. At the same time, the proportion of populists in the political center has declined from 34 percent to 23 percent. The sharp rise in the proportion of non-populists is particularly striking: their share in the political center rose much more steeply than it did across the electorate on average. While non-populism rose on average by 50 percent across the whole electorate, it rose by around 70 percent in the political center.

This shows that the political center is in fact particularly capable of learning from the past, taking action and resisting populist temptations. Public opinion is cooling towards populism, and the political center is proving to be a stabilizer and driver in this shift.

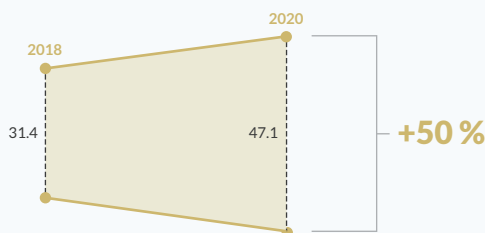
### Populism on the defensive

As a percentage of all respondents

How the **populist** electorate has changed since 2018



How the **non-populist** electorate has changed since 2018



Change in percentage compared with November 2018  
Target population: German population aged 18 and over (sample size 2020: 10,055).

Source: infratest dimap and YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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Thus, democratic anti-populism does not necessarily need a “big crisis”, but can also succeed as a process of democratic self-assertion within everyday politics. 2019 was a good example of this. Liberal democracy responded to populist mobilization with a democratic counter-mobilization — also and especially in the political center. Thus, the counter-mobilization of democratic anti-populism was also an anti-populist counter-movement from the political center.

## Much more resistant to populism: the party system before the 2021 federal elections

Analyzing the voters of each party in the political center leads to the same conclusion. Their populism has decreased sharply in strength and prevalence. Thus, for the moment, the CDU/CSU and the FDP have been prevented from sliding further into the populist voter segment. The CDU/CSU and FDP are therefore once again firmly anchored in the non-populist voter segment slightly to the right of the political center.

For the first time since 2017, the overall picture of all parties shows that the five parties slightly to the left and right of the political center (CDU/CSU, the Greens, SPD and FDP) are all clearly below average in their level of populism. This non-populist bloc of established parties in the political center currently

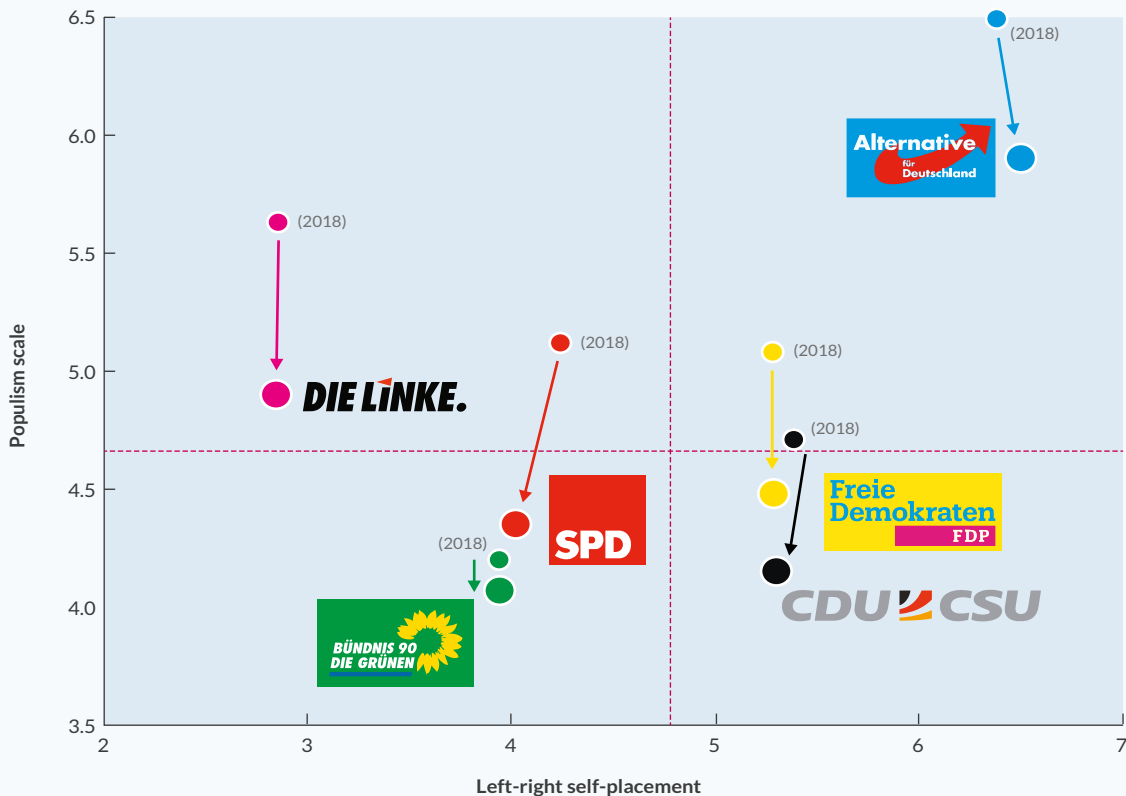
represents just over 80 percent of all voters. The populism of the political margins is also much less pronounced than it was in 2017/2018.

One of the most important results of the Populism Barometer 2018 was the creeping increase in populist attitudes in the traditional center. Voters of the CDU/CSU and FDP had shown themselves to be significantly more populist than in the election year 2017. This development has corrected itself again in the year before the 2021 federal elections: in the Populism Barometer 2020, voters in the traditional center were actually less populist than in the election year 2017. It seems that for the time being, their excursion into the realms of populism is over.

The temptation of the CDU/CSU and the FDP to follow, imitate or at least rhetorically adapt to the populism of the AfD has been recognized as a mistake and corrected.

### Party voters by populism and left-right orientation

Significant changes since 2018 are represented by arrows.



Note: Points indicate average for each party's voters; dashed red lines indicate average of all eligible voters in 2020. Target population: German electorate aged 18 and over (sample size 2020: 7,924). Source: infratest dimap and YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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Voters in the left-liberal center had already largely escaped the populist dynamic of public opinion in Germany before and after the 2017 federal elections. In 2020, Green voters will remain the least populist of all in Germany, and the SPD's scale figures even show a slightly above-average decrease in the degree of populism of its voters. The voters of Die Linke are also currently less left-wing and are now less populist too. This means that they have moved closer to the positions of the SPD and the Greens.

Thus, the party landscape in Germany is much more resistant to populism in the year before the 2021 federal elections than it was before and after the 2017 elections.

interesting. How right-wing extremist are the voters of the AfD?

A clear majority (56 percent) of all AfD voters hold either latently right-wing extremist (27 percent) or even manifestly right-wing extremist attitudes (38 percent). At the same time, 73 percent of all AfD voters are either clearly populist (38 percent) or at least partly populist (35 percent). The proportion of AfD voters who are both non-populist and also not right-wing extremist is only 13 percent. Thus, almost nine out of ten AfD voters (87 percent) hold either very clearly or at least latently populist and/or right-wing extremist views.

In summary, the AfD has a unique selling point in the German Bundestag, not only as a right-wing populist mobilization movement, but also as a party whose voters are characterized by at least implicitly right-wing extremist attitudes. And the more populism dies down and populist voters from the center return to the mainstream parties, the more dominant right-wing extremist attitudes are becoming among AfD voters.

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**"A clear majority of all AfD voters hold either latently or even manifestly right-wing extremist views."**

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## No alternative for Germany

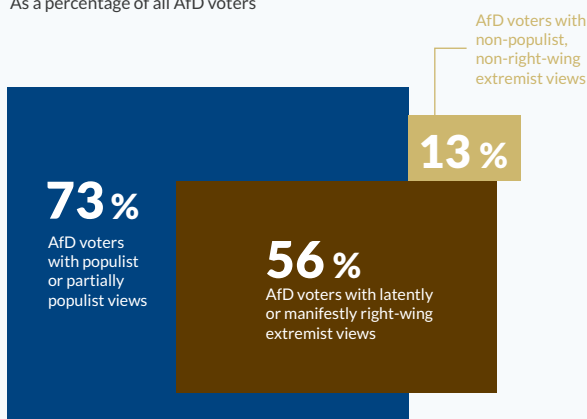
It is also particularly striking that the enormously high rejection rates of the AfD have not improved at all since it entered the German Bundestag. With a rejection rate of 71 percent among all German voters, its negative party identity is almost at the same level as in March 2017. Six months later, it succeeded in entering the Bundestag for the first time in the 2017 federal elections. Still, establishing its presence in parliament did not allow the AfD to improve its rejection rate. More than seven in ten German voters still have a "very low" opinion of the AfD, and would therefore be very unlikely to vote for the party in the near future.

This picture has shifted for Die Linke: in March 2017, its rejection rate was still at 51 percent, but it has now managed to reduce this to around 40 percent. In June 2020, it was therefore roughly on a par with the FDP.

At the end of 2018, the FDP was still in a very narrow range with the SPD, the Greens and the CDU/CSU, with

### Populism and right-wing extremist views among AfD voters

As a percentage of all AfD voters



Target population: AfD voters (sample size: 1,115).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung. | BertelsmannStiftung

### AfD: increasing dominance of right-wing extremist attitudes

The AfD remains an extreme outlier in the German party landscape of 2020. It continues to occupy a position in the right-wing populist segment of the electorate which, in terms of populist attitudes and ideological orientation, is by far the furthest removed from all other parties and from the average of all eligible voters. With a score of 5.9 for populism and 6.5 for right-wing orientation, the AfD has even boosted its unique selling point as an extreme right-wing populist party.

For this reason alone, a closer look at the extent, degree and radicalism of its right-wing attitudes is



around 30 percent rejection across all voters. Since then, its rejection rates have risen by a third to 40 percent, which is probably due above all to the way in which the party behaved after the state elections in Thuringia.

The parties of the Grand Coalition have had a different fate: they were only recently able to improve their ratings somewhat as part of their management of the corona pandemic.

In any case, the extremely low and stable “glass ceiling” for the AfD remains a key feature of negative party identities in Germany.

### "More direct democracy" as an opportunity for mobilization

For anyone seeking an issue which appeals to populists and non-populists alike and could mobilize both groups, “more direct democracy” is the most promising choice — also in the upcoming federal election campaign in 2021.

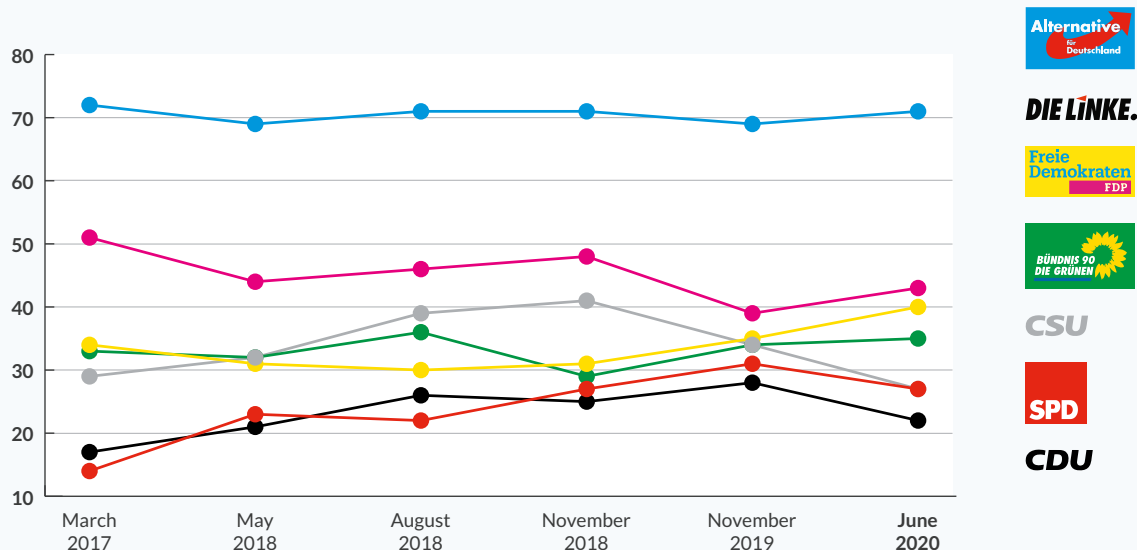
Across the voters of all parties, high approval ratings for more direct democracy show that this is a topic with broad appeal. Within a range of nine to 19 percentage points, the ratings for all individual parties are somewhere between the values for non-populists and populists, and are at least just under a third more than the value for non-populists.

“The issue of “more direct democracy” offers all parties the opportunity to gain approval and mobilize voters.”

Although there are clear differences between the parties here, the issue of “more direct democracy” offers all parties the opportunity to gain approval and mobilize voters. Across the electorate, there is the greatest possible coalition for “more direct democracy”. This suggests that all parties could take advantage of this in the coming federal election campaign in 2021.

## Negative party identities over time

As a percentage of all respondents



Note: Percentage of respondents who stated that they had a “very low” opinion of a particular party. Target population: German population aged 18 and over (sample size 2020: 10,055).

Source: infratest dimap and YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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## Turnaround: a sharp decline in populist attitudes

At the end of 2018, we warned at this point against the further rise in populism. The populist dynamic of public opinion had reached its peak. As we said at the time, populism in democracies is always a symptom. It is never successful without reason. Successful anti-populism means finding new solutions, building bridges, overcoming emerging lines of division, closing gaps in representation and reducing responsiveness deficits (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018).

Has this been achieved? Does the decline of populism in Germany show that democratic anti-populism works? Are we seeing the effects of an assertive, self-critical approach to democracy?

At least partly: once the government crises of 2017/18 were overcome, a more inclusive and socially responsive form of governance did show results. The Grand Coalition's restrictive migration policy has weakened the mobilizing power of the migration and refugee issue. The Coalition had earned itself a bad reputation, but since early 2019 it has been working better. Socio-economic issues are coming more to the fore.

This has been reinforced by its crisis management in the corona pandemic, which has been well-received by many people so far. Although it was late to the point of negligence, the anti-populist reaction from the parties in the political center has also had an effect. The public and media debate on populism has improved. The effect of this would be even greater if there were less arrogance and cosmopolitan self-importance involved.

Moreover, the decline of populism in the center is reducing the mobilization potential of right-wing populism and leaving behind an increasingly right-wing extremist AfD. The right-wing populist mobilization movement of 2017/18 is becoming a party whose voters are increasingly characterized by right-wing extremist attitudes. The rise of right-wing populism has been pushed back for the time being. There are many indications that the trend is reversing.

However, it is still far too early to draw a final conclusion. The populist wave in Germany may have broken, but it has not yet ebbed away entirely. In other countries, it is leaving behind democracies permanently damaged by authoritarianism, even in Europe. And the populist temptation remains a latent presence in Germany too.

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## Further reading:

Merkel, Wolfgang, and Felix Scholl (2018). "Illiberalism, Populism and Democracy in East and West". Czech Journal of Political Science 25 (1). 28–44.

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Vehrkamp, Robert, and Lars Bischoff (2020). A Return of Trust? EINWURF – Policy Brief by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (1). 1–8.

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### A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens' participation. It is published 6-8 times per year on an unfixed basis.