

Weizenbaum Report 2023: Political Participation in Germany

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WEIZENBAUM REPORT 2023

Political Participation in Germany



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Political Participation in Germany 2022

With the lifting of most COVID infection control measures, the year 2022 offered citizens significantly more opportunities to engage in politics, after the previous two years had been characterized by far-reaching restrictions on public life. In addition, global political events such as Russia's attack on Ukraine and the protests against the authoritarian regime in Iran had a mobilizing effect on the German population, which is reflected in an increasing number of demonstrations compared to the previous year.

The aim of the Weizenbaum Panel is to observe long-term developments in political participation and to analyze the digital transformation of civic action. The longitudinal study on political participation and communication, which has been conducted annually since 2019, looks at political participation and civic engagement in Germany. In addition to the changing role of digital media for people's political actions, this year's report investigates authoritarianism as a driver of anti-democratic participation, so-called "dark participation" on the internet (pp. 10–12), and the effects of social inequality on political participation (pp. 14–16).

The annual Weizenbaum Report presents selected findings from the representative longitudinal survey, which was conducted for the fourth time from October to December 2022.

More information on the Weizenbaum Panel, the methodological details of the survey, all previous reports and additional publications are available online at: <https://panel.weizenbaum-institut.de/en/>

Main Findings

1 Population is ambivalent about artificial intelligence (AI) and social media

- \ While the internet and its use are widely accepted in society and have a positive connotation, there is a more critical view of social media among the German population. Around one third of respondents rate social media as very or rather negative.
- \ When evaluating artificial intelligence, respondents' attitudes are characterized by uncertainty and indecisiveness.

2 Digital forms of participation and lifestyle politics take root

- \ Traditional forms of political participation are declining while digital forms of political engagement remain popular.
- \ Politics play a major role in everyday life. Around half of the respondents engage in political consumerism for political, ethical or social reasons.

3 NetzDG and civic engagement take effect against hate on the internet

- \ Despite a perceived decrease in hate speech on the internet, people continue to speak up against hate and its incitement, and against misinformation on the internet.

4 Authoritarian individuals are less politically active than other citizens

- \ People with authoritarian attitudes participate significantly less in politics than the citizens on average. This also applies to participation on social media.

5 Digital media can reduce inequalities in political participation

- \ Socially disadvantaged people participate less in politics and civil society, especially with regard to traditional forms of participation. In the case of newer and more networked activities, the inequalities are less pronounced.

About This Study

In order to comprehensively describe political participation in Germany and observe it over time, the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society conducts a scientific survey every year between October and December in cooperation with Freie Universität Berlin. The survey is designed as a so-called “rolling panel” which means that the same people are interviewed each year, where possible, and new participants are recruited to compensate for panel attrition.

In the fall of 2022, a total of 2,023 people¹ were interviewed by telephone, 41 % of whom² had already participated in the previous year 2021. The newly added respondents were selected at random from the German-speaking population in Germany aged 16 and over.³ During telephone interviews of just under 30 minutes, the participants were asked what media they use, how they inform themselves about political issues, how they view digitization and how they get involved in politics. They were also asked about political attitudes, including questions about trust in the government, their understanding of democracy and authoritarian attitudes. This was supplemented by questions about social status, East and West German socialization and “citizenship norms,” i.e. individual ideas of how a “good citizen” should behave in a democracy.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in the telephone studio of Freie Universität Berlin, which could be used at full capacity again in 2022 for the first time since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 500 additional interviews were conducted by the Institute for Surveys, Analyses and Data Science (UADS) in Duisburg.

The following report provides an initial overview of selected findings from the 2022 survey and changes compared to the previous years of 2019 to 2021. Further information and a detailed explanation of the methodology can be found here: <https://panel.weizenbaum-institut.de/en/ressources/>

¹ All distributions reported and presented here and below are weighted according to the respondents’ highest educational attainment in order to make statements that are representative of the German share.

² The relatively low proportion is explained by the fact that the number of participants was significantly increased again in 2022; in 2021, a total of only 1,595 people were surveyed.

³ In sample surveys, conclusions about the population as a whole are subject to a certain degree of uncertainty due to random effects in sampling. In this case, the range of uncertainty is approximately ± 3 percentage points. Example: If the value found in the sample is 85%, the actual value in the population as a whole is (with a probability of 95%) between 82% and 88%.

Attitudes towards Politics and Digital Media in Germany

Political participation and political attitudes can be strongly influenced by current political events. The “rally-around-the-flag” effect describes the phenomenon that crisis situations can cause public opinion to shift towards support for the government and incumbents. Such an effect was observed in Germany at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Data from the previous waves of the Weizenbaum Panel also show a slight increase in the German population’s confidence in the government between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020.⁵

By contrast, no such effect can be observed regarding the war in Ukraine and the “Zeitenwende” proclaimed by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which started between the survey waves at the end of 2021 and the end of 2022: while at the end of 2021 around one-third (34.5%) of the population agrees with the statement that the political opposition should sup-

port rather than criticize the government’s work, in 2022, this figure is only slightly higher, at 36.4%. Similarly, the share of those who trust the government decreases only marginally (and not statistically significantly) between 2021 (32.9%) and 2022 (30.3%).

The increase in trust in government presumably caused by the COVID-19 pandemic thus does not seem to have continued, which studies from other countries confirm.⁶ However, trust in the government does not decline after the end of the pandemic. In contrast, the fact that there was no “rally-around-the-flag” effect after the Russian invasion in Ukraine suggests that this war did not lead to as great a sense of crisis among the population as was the case with the pandemic.

Attitudes Towards Digitalization

The current intense debates about the importance of social media and artificial intelligence show that digitalization and its consequences are becoming increasingly important for all areas of life. The greater the role of the internet and digital technologies in society, the more important it is for citizens to develop knowledge and an informed attitude toward these technologies, to be able to continue to

live self-determined lives in a digitalized society. For this reason, the fourth wave of the Weizenbaum Panel in 2022 investigated people’s attitudes toward the internet in general and specific digital offerings such as social media and artificial intelligence for the first time.

⁴ Dietz, M., Roßteutscher, S., Scherer, P., & Stövsand, L.-C. (2021). Rally effect in the Covid-19 pandemic: The role of affectedness, fear, and partisanship. *German Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2021.2016707>

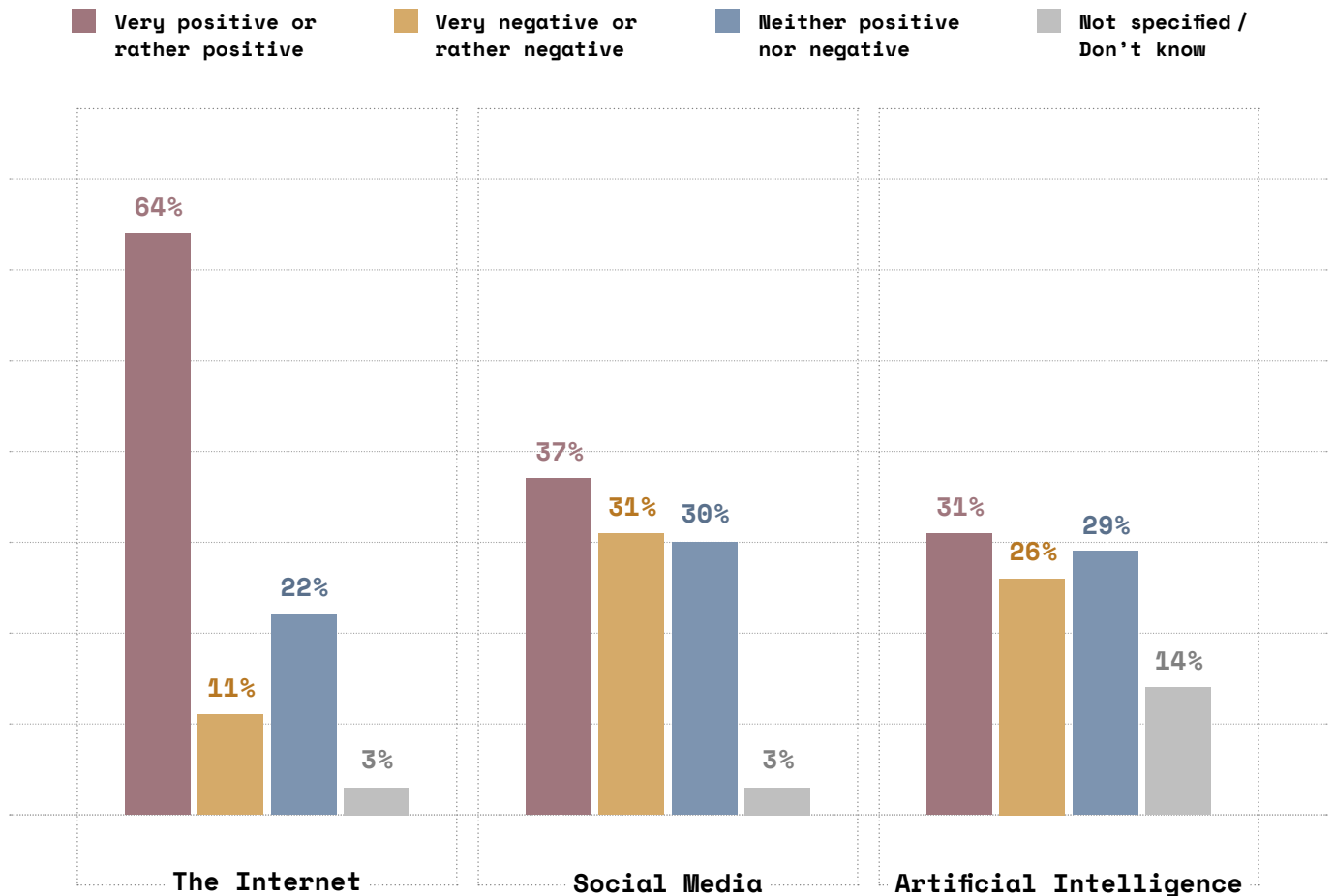
⁵ Heger, K., Leißner, L., Emmer, M., & Strippel, C. (2022). *Weizenbaum Report 2022: Politische Partizipation in Deutschland*. [Weizenbaum Report 2022: Political participation in Germany.] Berlin: Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society. Access: https://www.weizenbaum-institut.de/media/Publikationen/Weizenbaum_Report/WI-Report-2022.pdf

⁶ Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., & Shehata, A. (2021). When the rally-round-the-flag effect disappears, or: When the COVID-19 pandemic becomes “normalized”. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31(1), 321–334. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924742>

The overwhelming majority has a largely positive view of the internet, while a small minority of 11% views it rather negatively. Around a quarter of Germans have neither a positive nor a negative opinion of the internet, or are unable or unwilling to make a statement.

Regarding social media, connotations among the population are not as clear-cut: While slightly more than a third of Germans have a positive attitude toward social media, just under a third rate them negatively, and another third of respondents are undecided about an assessment or abstain.

Of particular interest is the public’s attitude toward artificial intelligence, which received a great deal of media attention towards the end of 2022 with the release of the ChatGPT chatbot: Slightly more people in Germany have a positive than a negative attitude toward the use of artificial intelligence. At just under 30%, a relatively large proportion of respondents have a neutral attitude toward artificial intelligence. However, it is particularly noteworthy that a comparatively large proportion (14%) cannot or do not want to make a statement on this topic.



Attitudes of the population toward topics of digitalization
 Basis and scale: „There is a lot of talk about digitalization going on at the moment. I will name three areas of digitalization and you will tell me, how positive or negative you are evaluating these in general: „very positive“, „rather positive“, „neither positive nor negative“ , „rather negative“, or „very negative“, rounded percentages, n = 1,196

The internet seems to have largely become part of people's everyday lives – only a small minority view it critically. This acceptance is reflected in the broad and intuitive use of digital media and digital political participation (see pp. 8–9). It represents a potential not yet fully exhausted by policymakers and public administrators, as current debates about Germany's digitization backlog show – from broadband and mobile coverage to administrative digitization.⁷

Social media, which account for a significant share of internet use, especially among younger people, are viewed much more ambivalently. The critical public debates about platform corporations such as Facebook, Google and Twitter certainly play a role here. However, studies also show that social media users are well aware of the risks of these platforms, for example with regard to data protection or the manipulation of public opinion.⁸ In this respect, these assessments are not necessarily an effect of

media reporting alone, but may also be the result of personal experience.

Finally, when it comes to artificial intelligence, there is a clear gap in knowledge which prevents many people from developing a clear attitude. In light of the rapid progress in this field, which is already shaping decision-making in many areas of life and politics, this gap has become a problem for citizens' democratic self-determination. Precisely here lie some of the key societal challenges that were clearly identified more than fifty years ago by the Weizenbaum Institute's namesake, Joseph Weizenbaum, whose birthday is celebrated this year.

Political Participation over Time

For the fourth year, data on the political participation of people in Germany show how the patterns of participation change over time. While results generally remained stable, some downward trends can be observed: The number of people who are involved in more traditional political activities, i.e. who participate by joining political parties, contacting politicians, doing volunteer work, or trying to mobilize others, has declined in recent years.

In contrast, instances of participation that can be described as modern forms of "lifestyle politics", such as consciously buying or avoiding certain products, has remained stable, with about half of respondents practicing "buycotts" or boycotts.⁹ Political participation on the internet and on social media also remains stable: Around a quarter of respondents comment on or share political content on social media, for example.

⁷ European Commission. (2023). *Digital economy and society index*. Access: <https://digital-agenda-data.eu/datasets/desi/visualizations>

⁸ Gagrčin, E., Schaetz, N., Rakowski, N., Toth, R., Renz, A., Vladova, G., & Emmer, M. (2021). *We and AI – Living in a datafied world: Experiences & attitudes of young Europeans*. Berlin: Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, Goethe-Institut e.V. Access: <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/74359>

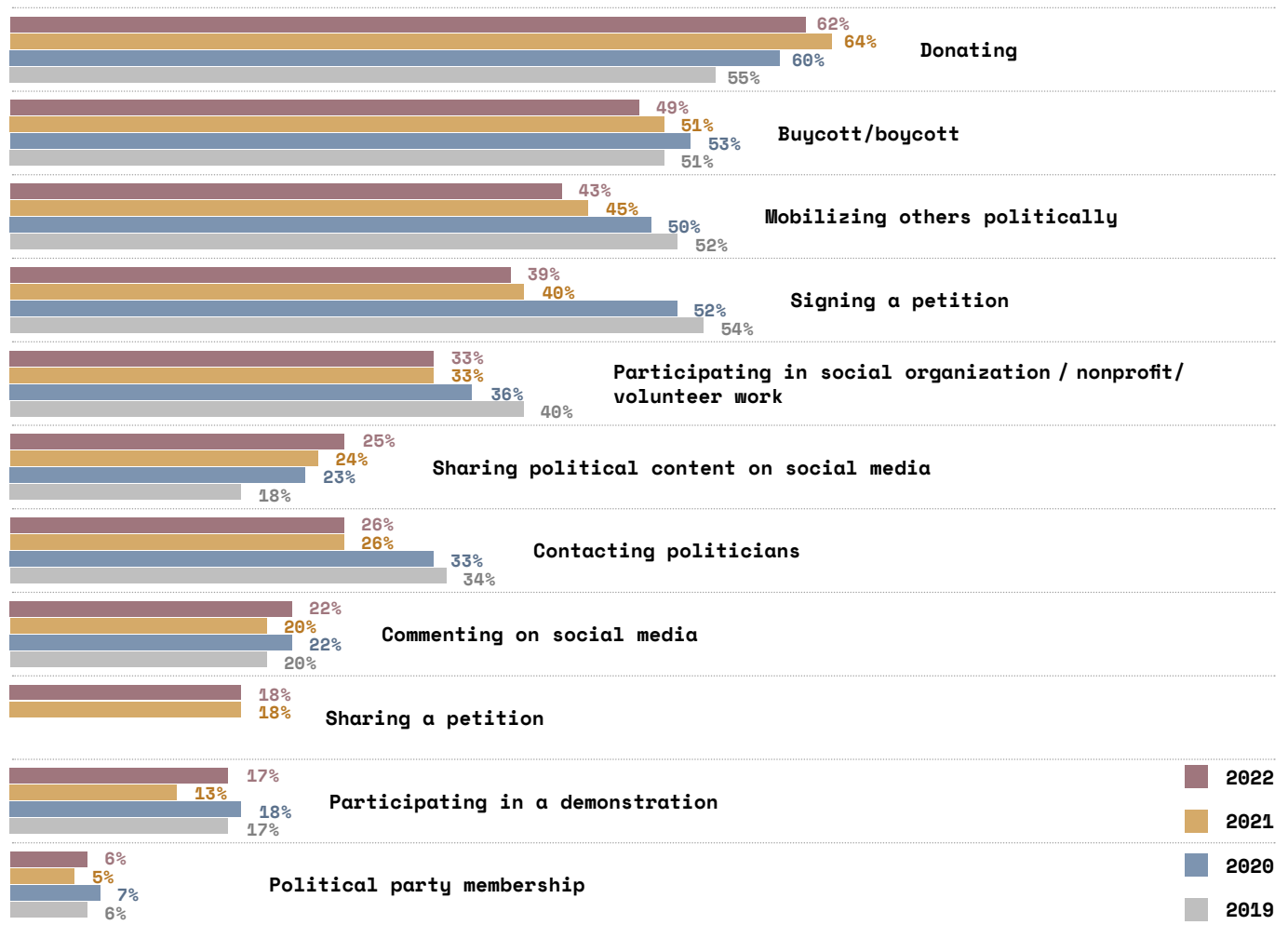
⁹ Leißner, L. (2021). *Die Digitalisierung von Lebensstilpolitik. Wie Soziale Medien lebensstilpolitisches Engagement prägen*. [The digitalization of lifestyle politics. How social media shape lifestyle politics.] *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft*, 69(3), 380–396. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634X-2021-3-380>

The internet has become an integral part of the participatory repertoire of German citizens, but it also appears to have reached a certain level of saturation, because here, too, levels of increase have stified.

The most popular form of involvement over the years has been donating money to political, social or charitable organizations. The fact that despite political uncertainties and inflation, participation in the form of donations remains stable at a high level – and has even increased in a longer-term com-

parison – may be due to conflicts and emergency situations, for example in connection with the war in Ukraine.

Participation in demonstrations generally remains stable. The fact that there are signs of recovery after a minor slump in 2021 could be a consequence of the easing of COVID-19 restrictions on public life.



Forms of political participation exercised¹⁰

Basis: engaged in one of the mentioned political activities within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, n = 2,023 (2022)

¹⁰ Sharing petitions is surveyed only since 2021.

Authoritarianism and Anti-Democratic Participation

Democracy thrives on the political participation of its citizens, but this does not mean that every form of political activity automatically strengthens democracy. The manifold possibilities of democratic participation can also be misused in an attempt to attack democratic institutions or even democracy itself. The violent demonstrations that culminated in attacks on the Reichstag building in Berlin in 2020 or the U.S. Capitol in Washington in 2021 illustrate this, as did organized hate and disinformation campaigns on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the diverse opportunities for democratic participation can also be abused in an attempt to attack democratic institutions or even democracy itself.

This phenomenon, known as “dark participation,”¹¹ is analyzed in the current survey of the Weizenbaum Panel by differentiating the respondents according to their democratic or authoritarian attitudes. Respondents with authoritarian (and thus less democratic) attitudes are put in comparison with other respondents to illustrate which political practices play a role as “dark participation” activities in the repertoire of people with anti-democratic attitudes.

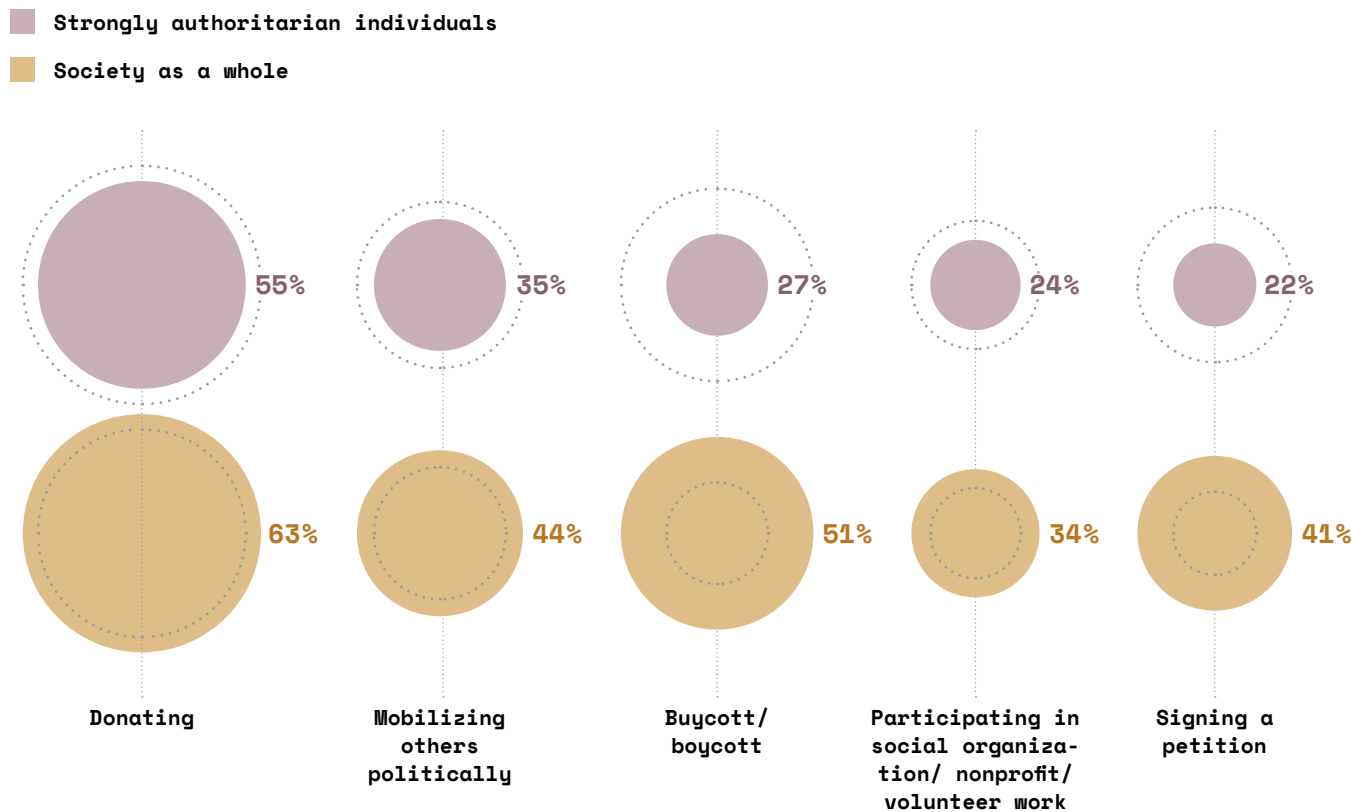
Around nine percent of the German population agreed “fully” or “rather” with all three statements used to measure these authoritarian attitudes in the survey (conventionalism, authoritarian submissiveness and authoritarian aggression).¹² Sociodemographically, this strongly authoritarian group differs only slightly from the rest of the population: on average, authoritarians are eight years older, have a stronger right-wing political orientation¹³ and a slightly lower than average level of formal education.

How do they participate in democracy? Various scenarios are conceivable here: Authoritarians could be particularly active because they reject the political system in which they live and therefore actively try to change it. Increased media attention for certain forms of dark participation and its spectacular examples mentioned above speak to this. Conversely, a rejection of democratic processes could also lead to aversion and passivity in participation. Discernable patterns may emerge in which certain forms of participation turn out to be particularly important, while others are rather unimportant.

¹¹ Quandt, T. (2018). Dark participation. *Media and Communication*, 6(4), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1519>

¹² Heller, A., Decker, O., Schmalbach, B., Beutel, M., Fegert, J. M., Brähler, E., & Zenger, M. (2020). Detecting authoritarianism efficiently: Psychometric properties of the screening instrument Authoritarianism – Ultra Short (A-US) in a German representative sample. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.533863>

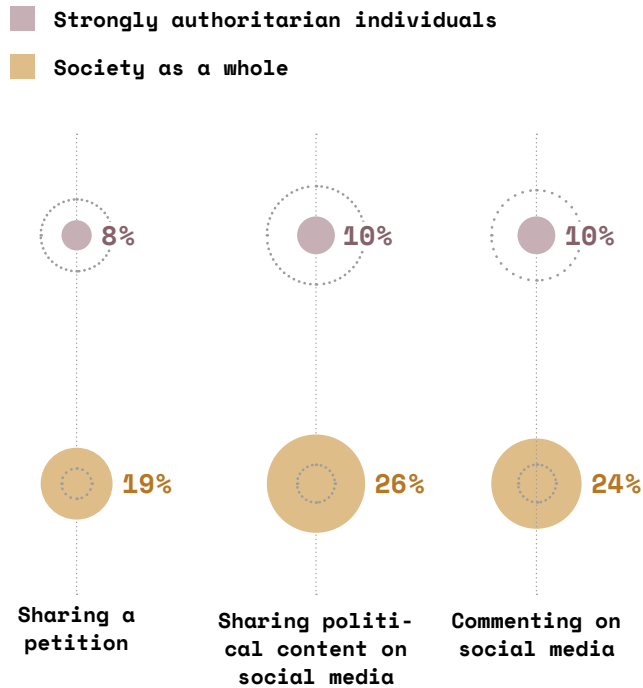
¹³ Basis: self-evaluation on the political left-right-scale from 1 representing “very left-winged” to 10 representing “very right-winged”



Political participation of strongly authoritarian individuals compared to society as a whole
 Basis: engaged in one of the mentioned political activities within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, $n = 2,023$

The findings clearly support the second assumption: The proportion of participants in the group of authoritarian-minded individuals is significantly lower than in the population as a whole. This also applies to internet-based forms of participation, i.e. Telegram groups as a meeting place for conspiracy believers, which are seen as the focus of anti-democratic activism in public discourse.

We also see significantly lower levels of participation among authoritarian-minded individuals than in the population as a whole: only around 10% (versus 24%) comment on political content on social media, almost as few (10% versus 26%) share political content there; only eight percent (versus 19%) share petitions. The often perceived onslaught of anti-democratic posts on the internet is thus very likely due to only a small number of particularly active individuals and social media accounts.



Political online participation of strongly authoritarian individuals compared to society as a whole

Basis: engaged in one of the mentioned political activities within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, $n = 2,023$

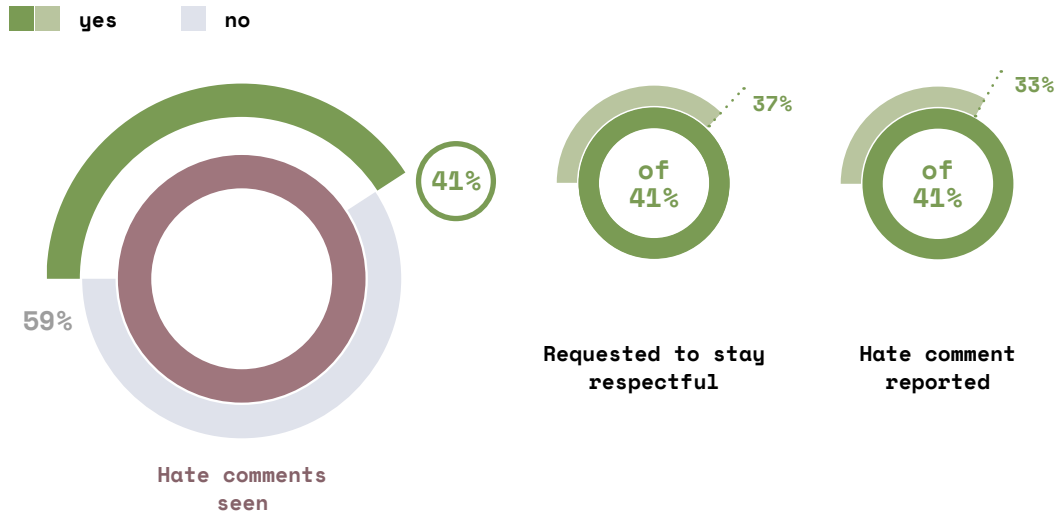
Online Civic Intervention: Civil Courage on the Internet

A counterpart to “dark participation” is the active intervention of citizens against hate speech and misinformation on the internet (so-called “online civic intervention”)¹⁴. These activities are an indicator of societal resilience against attacks on democratic values in political disputes.

In 2022, 41% of the German population say they have seen hateful comments on the internet, continuing the declining trend of previous years (2019: 54%; 2020: 51%; 2021: 43%). More than a third (37%) of them say that they have already taken action against these comments by calling on the authors of these posts to behave respectfully. 33% have already reported such comments for the platform operators to intervene. These figures are quite stable compared with the previous years.

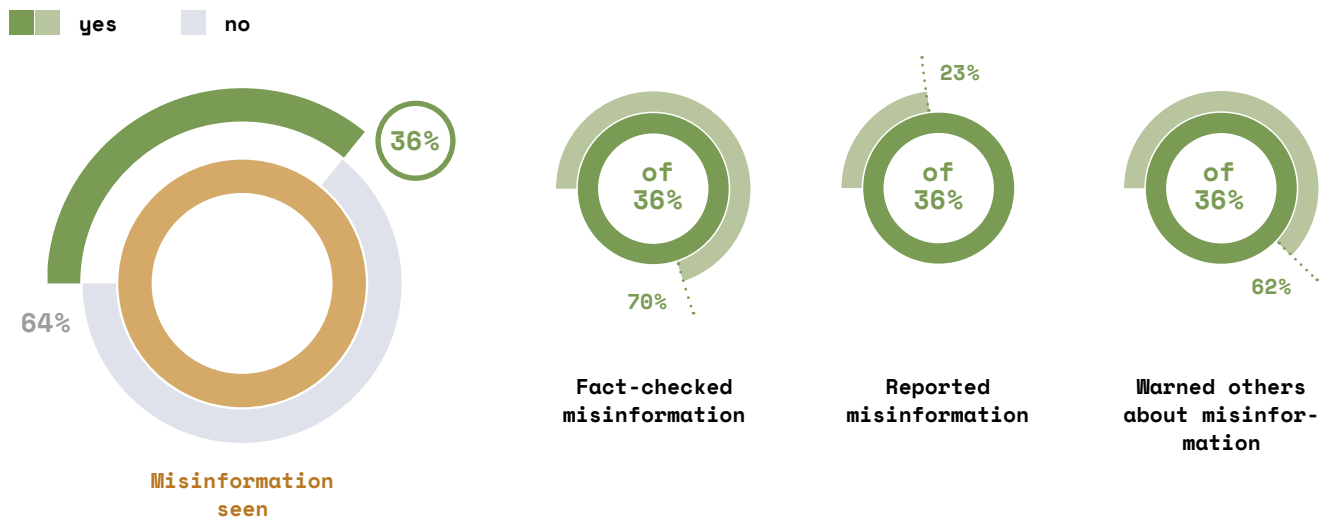
Similar to previous years, 36% of the German population said they had come across misinformation on the internet. 70 percent of them say they have already fact-checked such reports and 62% say they have warned other internet users about misinformation at least once in the last 12 months. In contrast, only around a quarter (23%) say they have reported misinformation in 2022. This may be due to a lack of confidence in the responsiveness of platform operators or doubts about the effectiveness of such reports.

¹⁴ Porten-Chée, P., Kunst, M., & Emmer, M. (2020). Online Civic Intervention: A new form of political participation under conditions of a disruptive online discourse. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 514–534. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10639>



Observation of and reaction to hate comments

Basis: observation of at least one hate comment within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, n = 2,023; of which people stated whether they have requested authors of hate comments to stay respectful, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, n = 820; basis: people stating that they have reported hate comments to the platform operator, scale: yes/no, rounded percentages, n = 820



Observation of and reaction to misinformation

Basis: observed misinformation at least once within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, n = 2,023; of which people stated whether they fact-checked misinformation, scale: yes/no, n = 689; individuals who stated that they have reported misinformation to the platform operator, scale: yes/no, n = 689; basis: individuals who stated that they have warned other users about misinformation, scale: yes/no, n = 689

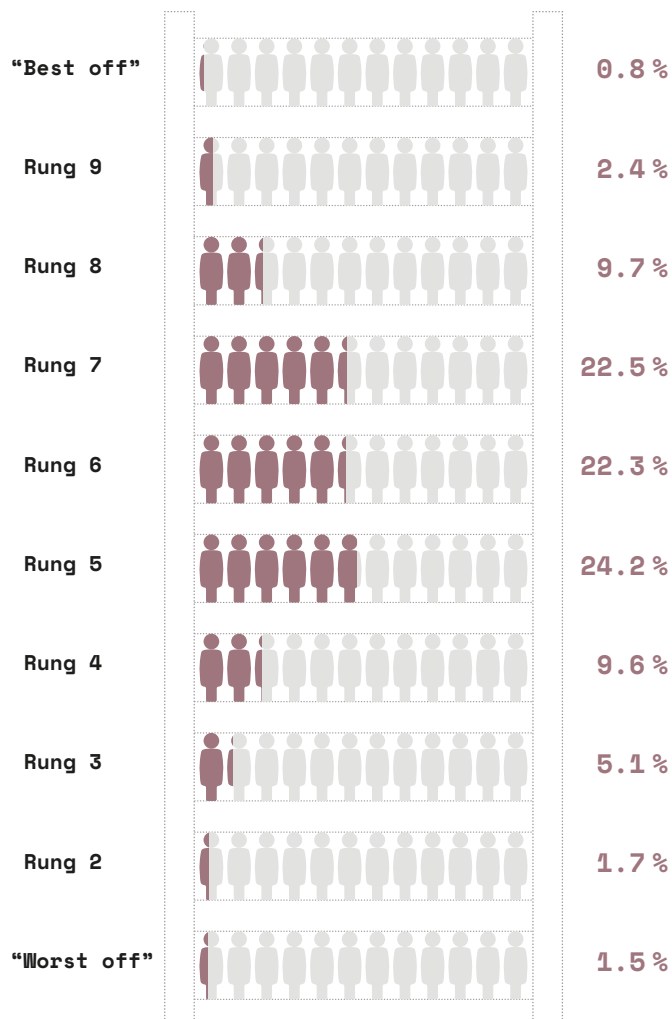
Overall, the development trend is positive: While the frequency in which hateful comments on the internet occur appears to be steadily decreasing, the figures for online civic intervention remain largely stable. This is presumably a consequence of the stronger regulation of platforms, for example by the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG).

Social Inequality in Political Participation

Democracy requires the broadest possible inclusion of all segments of the population. Social inequalities in participation therefore question the legitimacy of democratic processes indirectly. Many forms of political participation require time, money or specific skills, for example in dealing with social media. If there is a lack of resources, this can make political participation more difficult.¹⁵ On the other hand, a feeling of dissatisfaction, for example with one's own financial situation, can also mobilize people politically.¹⁶

In order to find out how people from different social groups participate politically, the survey examined people's self-ranking on a "social ladder". People who consider themselves as "best off" rank themselves at the top of this ladder, while those who believe they are "worst off" locate themselves at the bottom rung. This allows to indirectly determine if, and, if yes, how strongly people see themselves as socially disadvantaged. Such a feeling of relative deprivation could be a reason for either withdrawing from social engagement or becoming more involved out of a desire to change their personal situation or the prevailing conditions.

Around 42% of respondents place themselves on the bottom five rungs of this social ladder, whereas the majority of respondents (58%) consider themselves to be higher up.

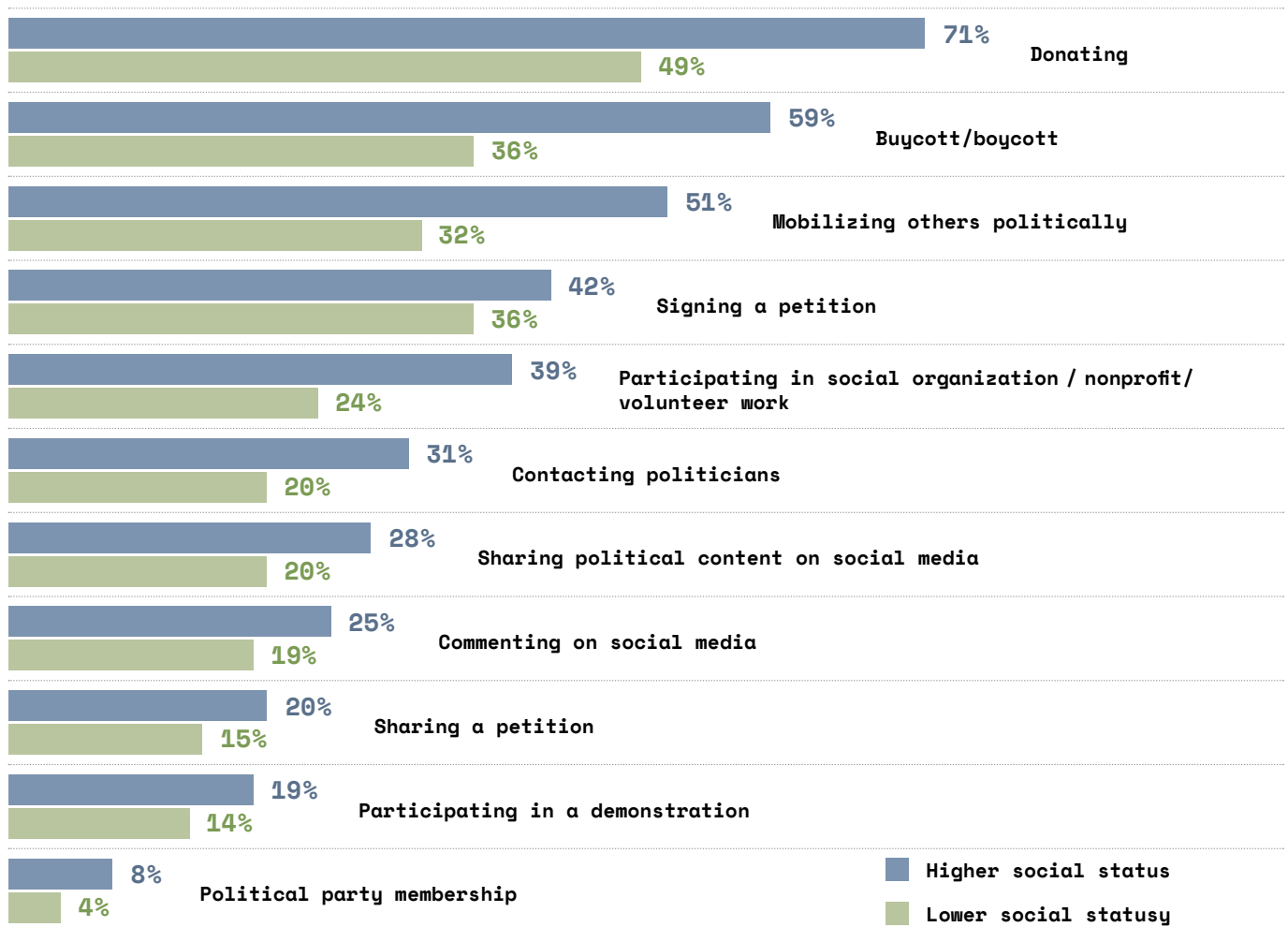


Self-assessment of respondents on the social ladder

Basis: "Now I ask you to imagine our society as a social ladder, from 1 "at the bottom" to 10 "at the top." At the top of the ladder are those, who are best off, that is, those with the most money, the highest education and the best professions. At the bottom of the ladder are those, who are the worst off. Please locate yourself on this ladder between 1 being "at the bottom" up to 10 "at the top", scale: 1 to 10; n = 2,023

¹⁵ Brady, H., Verba, S., & Schlozman, K. (1995). Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(2), 271–294. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082425>

¹⁶ Kurer, T., Häusermann, S., Wüest, N., & Enggist, M. (2019). Economic grievances and political protest. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(3), 866–892. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12318>
Kern, A., Marien, S., & Hooghe, M. (2015). Economic crisis and levels of political participation in Europe (2002–2010): The role of resources and grievances. *West European Politics*, 38(3), 465–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.993152>

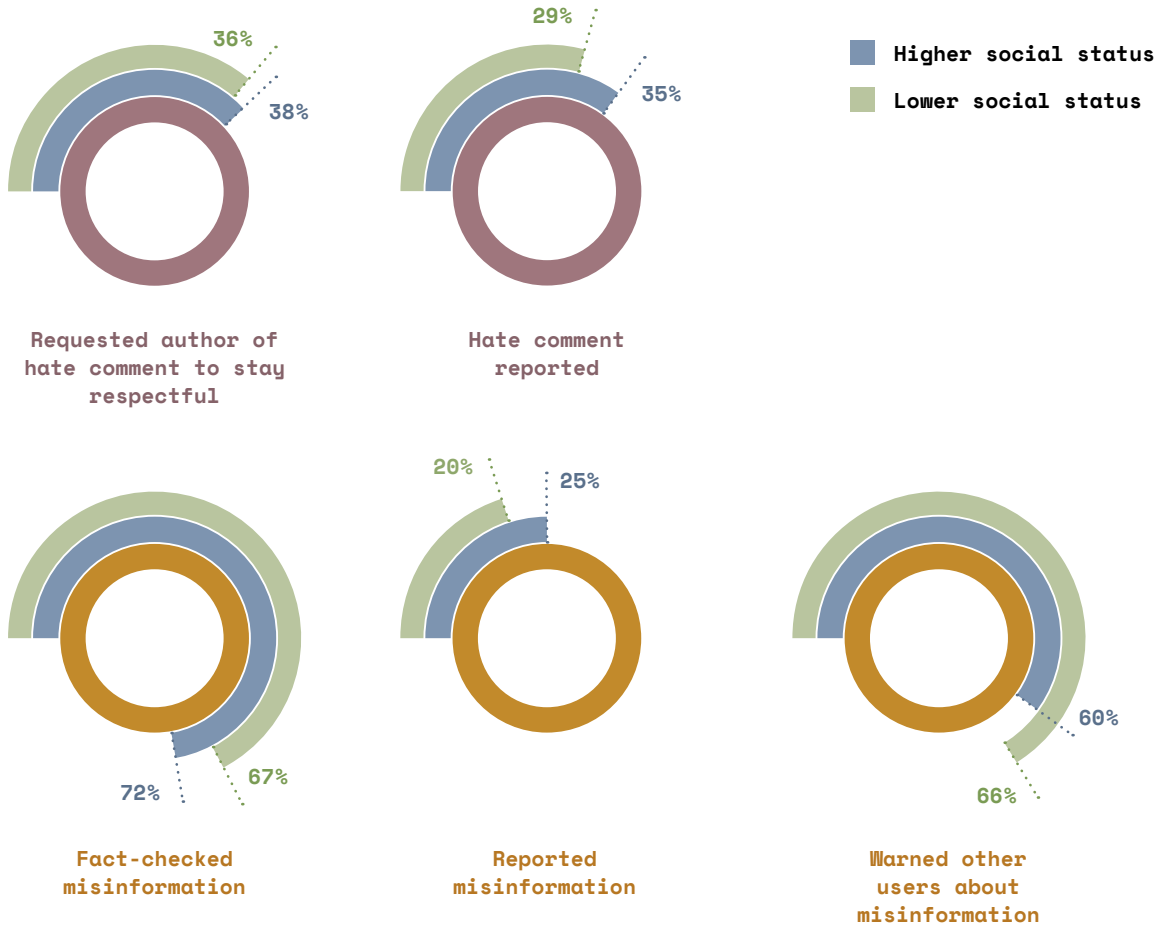


Political participation of people, who rate their social position lower or higher

Basis political participation: engaged in one of the mentioned political activities within the last 12 months, scale: yes/no, n = 2,023; basis social status: self-assessment on a scale from 1 "worst off" to 10 "best off", scale pictured: summary of the scale points 1 to 5 as "lower social status" and 6 to 10 as "higher social status", n = 2,023

In general, people who consider themselves as socially worse off participate less often than those who are better off. This is particularly true in the case of traditional and institutionalized forms of participation such as party membership, civic volunteering or contacting politicians, but also of donations and political consumerism. Nevertheless, there are also activities that are less strongly related to subjective social status: These include, above all, "online civic intervention" against hate speech and misinformation.

Even though "better off" individuals report seeing hate comments and misinformation online more often, the differences in their reactions to them are only minimal.



Interventions against hate speech and misinformation on the internet by people, who rate their social position lower or higher
Basis interventions: engaged in one of the mentioned political activities within the past 12 months, scale: yes/no, n = 820 (hate comments) /689 (misinformation); basis social status: self-assessment on a scale from 1 "worst off" to 10 "best off", scale pictured: summary of the scale points 1 to 5 as "lower social status" and 6 to 10 as "higher social status", n = 2,023

There is a tendency towards newer, more communicative and digital forms of participation to be less strongly influenced by difference in social status. This suggests that the so-called "digital divide" in the area of political participation is nar-

rowing and that the increasing digitalization of political engagement offers potential for more inclusive participation.