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Article

"Similar levels of political interest between East and West, notable differences in turnout": Six questions to Martin Kroh

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Prof. Dr. Martin Kroh, Deputy Head of the Research Infrastructure Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study at DIW Berlin

SIX QUESTIONS TO MARTIN KROH

»Similar levels of political interest between East and West, notable differences in turnout«

1. Professor Kroh, on October 3, 1990, the German Democratic Republic acceded to the Federal Republic of Germany. Have differences between the political cultures in eastern and western Germany persisted or has some convergence been observed here? There is no clear answer to this question. It really depends on what area you are looking at.
2. How do attitudes toward political parties differ between eastern and western Germany? Over the past 25 years, the expected weaker political party attachment in eastern Germany has approached western German levels. In this sense, there has been a convergence. It is important to add here, however, that this is not just a matter of eastern German political culture converging on western German attitudes. In this case, the reverse is also true and, over the last 25 years, we have actually observed a decline in political party attachments in western Germany and, at the same time, a slight increase in eastern Germany. This has resulted in a narrowing of the gap.
3. How does voter turnout differ between eastern and western Germany? The weak party attachment is frequently used as an explanation for a higher number of floating votes or the willingness of the electorate to more strongly support new political parties. If we examine voter turnout in isolation, the differences by electoral level were, on the whole, not particularly significant. At least this was the case for local government and European elections and, for a long time, also for Länder elections. Particularly with respect to the latter, however, the gap has increased over the last few years and it is widely known that voter turnout was below 50 percent in the most recent Länder elections in Saxony and Brandenburg. For national elections, overall, we have observed a relatively stable difference between eastern and western Germany of just a few percentage points across all elections.
4. Where do we find the most politically active individuals? Our survey data extend as far back as 1990 and, in some cases, even cover the period prior to reunification.

The data show that, at the time, East Germans were more politically active in all spheres than West Germans. This was to be expected during the reunification period. However, since then we have observed minimal differences with respect to interest in politics. Thus, the fundamental willingness to actively participate in politics appears to be very similar in eastern and western Germany. Levels of participation in citizens' initiatives and local politics are also very similar in both parts of the country. It is therefore impossible to generalize and say that individuals in one part of the country or another are more or less politically active since it depends largely on the form of participation you examine. For example, though voter turnout may be somewhat weaker in eastern Germany, there are also indications that the willingness of individuals to participate in demonstrations is greater than in the west.

5. To what extent do fundamental attitudes to the political system and welfare state differ between the two parts of Germany? Our report focuses on attitudes to the welfare state. In eastern Germany, at the beginning of the 1990s, it was commonly expected that the welfare state was responsible for many spheres of life than is actually the case in western Germany and the injustice of social inequalities was felt much more keenly than in the west. Over the last few years, however, eastern and western Germany have gained some common ground. Social injustices are perceived more strongly in western Germany and to a lesser extent in eastern Germany. Thus some convergence between the two parts of Germany has been observed.
6. Do these differences also apply to the younger generation which grew up or was already born in the reunified Germany? Many of the differences also apply to this younger generation even though they did not, in fact, grow up in either East or West Germany before reunification. One exception here is the aforementioned party attachment where, for the younger generation, there are no longer any differences between eastern and western Germany.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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