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**Working Paper**

## Fears of Social Decline in Germany: Magnitude and causes in times of growing right-wing populism

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# WORKING PAPER FORSCHUNGSFÖRDERUNG

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Number 110, December 2018

## Fears of Social Decline in Germany

Magnitude and Causes in Times of Growing  
Right-Wing Populism

Bettina Kohlrausch

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## Summary

In Germany's 2017 parliamentary elections, people from all strata of society elected the AfD party (Alternative for Germany), albeit in different dimensions. Public debates on the topic argued that the social background of its respective voters could therefore not explain the AfD's success. Nor could social uncertainty account for the AfD's victory, as fears of social decline, measured based on fears of unemployment, are at a historic low. Instead of a social divide, the country's cultural schism is the assumed rationale for the AfD's rise in power.

Contrary to this explanation, this paper will argue that social uncertainty and social fears motivated voters to elect the AfD. Operationalizing fears of social decline in terms of fear of unemployment is insufficient and results in social uncertainty among the general population being underestimated. Therefore, this paper takes a differentiated approach to measuring the extent and the causes of social fears and social uncertainty. It will demonstrate that fears regarding the employment situation, concerns about the short-term or long-term deterioration of an individual's financial situation or general standard of living, or fears of worse working conditions are not congruent and affect different segments of the population to a varying degree. Evaluations carried out by an online panel show that fears of social decline extend well into the middle classes and even affect individuals with a relatively high net income:

- In January 2017, approx. 25 percent of the sampled population had large or even major concerns about its employment situation. However, significantly more people (39 percent) indicated that they had large or even major concerns about their own financial situation, while almost half (49 percent) expressed concern or great concern about their financial situation after they retire and agreed with the statement (47 percent): "I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run." Many people are clearly worried about their social status although they do not fear for their job.
- The findings show that fears of social decline are most pronounced among segments of the population with a low income on the margins of society. The social situation is therefore decisive in the magnitude of fears regarding social decline. Nevertheless, low-paid individuals and people who feel marginalized by society are not the only ones worried about not being able to maintain their standard of living.
- Fears of social decline therefore reflect perceived social uncertainty resulting from the difficult material situation of people in the lower social strata. Yet this uncertainty is also prevalent among individuals who are not directly threatened by social decline.

It would therefore appear that it is not just a case of personal experience with social marginalization or social decline but rather the fear it will occur in the first place. Specific experiences, especially within the work context, feed this fear. The AfD capitalizes on this rather vague feeling of social uncertainty. A policy that hopes to oppose this should provide opportunities for better social protection within the lower classes of society. At the same time, it would better to convey that central social challenges can be shaped politically.

## Fears of Social Decline in Times of Growing Right-Wing Populism

The AfD's strong performance during the last parliamentary elections raises the question as to how a right-wing populist party could receive such fervent support. Public debate surrounding the subject currently maintains that the rise of the AfD can be explained by a manner of cultural struggle with regard to the achievements of social modernization, such as equal rights for homosexuals or growing multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. The rejection of the refugee policy put forward by Merkel's government is also rooted in this cultural struggle. As a result, Holger Lengfeld states the following about AfD voters on Spiegel Online (2017): "They are concerned with the fundamental question of what society and the country will look like in the future. Evidently, we are dealing with more than just a tiny minority of the population that utterly rejects the cultural changes that took place over the last few years." Frequently, this interpretation is presented as an explicit contradiction to explanations that attribute the rise of the AfD primarily to increased social fragmentation (ibid.). Empirical evidence suggesting that the AfD was also elected by individuals who are not threatened by social marginalization serves as a reference point for this "cultural" attempt at an explanation (Hilmer, Kohlrausch et al. 2017, Lengfeld 2017, Bergmann, Diermeier et al. 2016). At the same time, however, a series of analyses have proven that socio-structural characteristics, such as education, income, and professional status, also have an impact. Lux (2018) demonstrated that purported losers of modernization were more likely to vote for the AfD (opinion poll). Hilmer, Kohlrausch et al. 2017 found that blue-collar workers were much more likely to vote for the AfD (opinion poll) (also see Dörre). Moreover, it became apparent in numerous analyses that concern for an individual's own status increased their willingness to vote for the AfD (Kohlrausch 2018, Hall and Gidron 2017).

The present working paper will argue that the conclusion that the rise of the AfD is not at all associated with the social situation of its voters is inadequate, causing important reasons behind the upsurge of this party to be left in the dark. When applying the line of reasoning posed by Gidron and Hall to Germany, it also provides empirical evidence showing that concerns for social status (status concerns) have a significant impact on willingness to vote for the AfD (Hilmer, Kohlrausch et al. 2017).

- Controlling for the variables income, level of education, and conventional socio-structural characteristics, AfD voters are also more afraid of social decline than voters from other parties.

- AfD voters therefore experience a divide between their objective social position and their subjective fears, which does not mean that the two are completely isolated from one another.
- This also becomes clear based on the example of unemployment: concrete experience with unemployment has no considerable impact on voting behavior. People who are or were unemployed are not more likely to vote for the AfD. In contrast, the perceived opportunities of finding work again after being unemployed do have an influence on voting behavior. As such, people who believe that it would be difficult or impossible to find a new job after becoming unemployed are more likely to vote for the AfD.
- It would therefore appear that it has less to do with personal experience regarding social marginalization or social decline and more to do with the fear of that very occurrence. However, this fear is also fed by concrete experiences. The work context plays an important role in this regard.

Therefore, in order to understand why the AfD was able to receive such support during the last parliamentary elections, it is important to analyze in detail which experiences inflame social uncertainty and fears of social decline. These considerations will serve as the starting point for the present paper, which paints a differentiated picture of the fears of social decline in the Federal Republic of Germany.

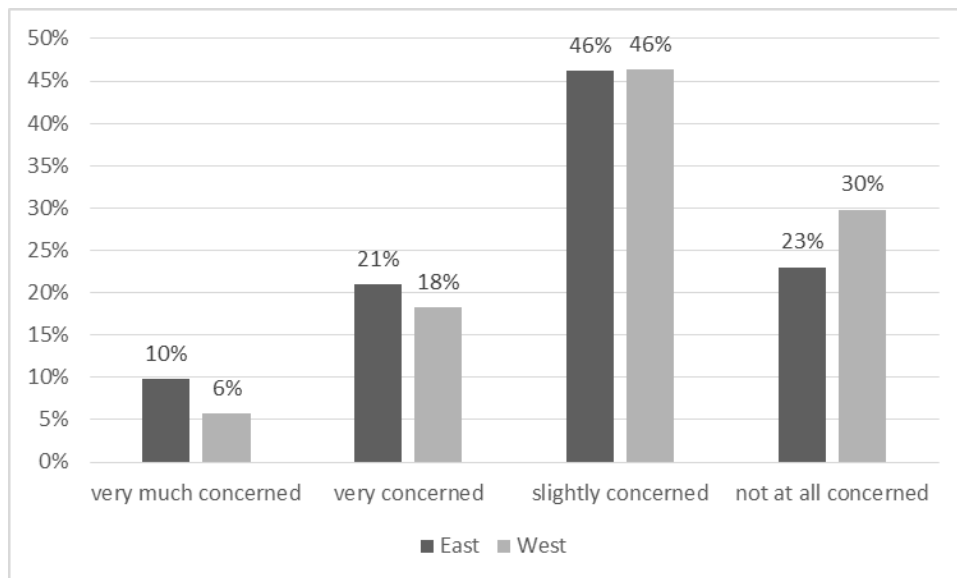
## How Can Fears of Social Decline be Measured?

Social mobility is defined as “movement or transition between professional positions (professional mobility) or between social situations, strata, or classes (strata or class mobility)” (Berger 2011). Accordingly, social decline refers to downward mobility, that is, the worsening of an individual's social status. Fear of social decline is the substantiated or ungrounded fear of this degradation. The fear of being excluded from the labor market continues to be a decisive factor, albeit surely not the only factor. Equally important parameters for defining social status include: professional position, educational background, and income or financial situation (cf. Ditton and Maaz 2011). In this respect, these aspects should also be taken into account to ensure a comprehensive understanding of fears regarding social decline. Furthermore, the question arises as to the reference point for assessing an individual's social situation. Social mobility can always be analyzed from an intergenerational perspective, meaning in relation to the individual biography and the question as to whether the current standard of living can be maintained in the short or long term, and from an intergenerational perspective, meaning compared to the individual's parents or children. These aspects will be assessed below based on a panel dataset collected by the ‘policy matters’ institute by order of the Hans Böckler Foundation. The representative survey of 4892 voters was created as an online panel survey. The survey was carried out in December 2016 (cf. Hilmer, Kohleausch et al. 2017).

## Fears of Social Decline in Germany

Previously, fears of social decline were frequently gauged by measuring job-related fears (see, for example, Lengfeld and Hirschle 2009, Lengfeld 2017) <sup>1</sup>. Therefore, this aspect of fear of social decline will also be used as the basis for the following analyses. At the time of the survey (December 2016), approx. 25 Percent of respondents had large or even major concerns about their employment situation. Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that concerns about employment are greater in East Germany than in West Germany.

*Figure 1: Concern regarding employment situation in East and West Germany*



*Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 3057*

If concern regarding the deterioration of the financial situation is used as a basis for evaluating fears of social decline, it can be seen that these fears affect different portions of the population to a varying degree, depending on which dimensions of fear of social decline are examined. A good 39 percent of respondents indicated that they had large or even major concerns about their own financial situation. 20 percent assume that their financial situation will become slightly or significantly worse

<sup>1</sup> In the data set, there is no question that explicitly covers the fear of job loss. Therefore, concern regarding employment was used for the following evaluations.

within the next 3 to 5 years. 49 percent are concerned or greatly concerned with their financial situation after retirement. Almost 47 percent agree with the statement “I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run.”<sup>2</sup> In the intergenerational comparison, 27 percent of respondents indicate<sup>3</sup> that their standard of living is worse than that of their parents, and 20 percent of respondents with children assume that their children will be even worse off than they themselves with regard to their standard of living.

## Ratio of Job-Related and Financial Concerns

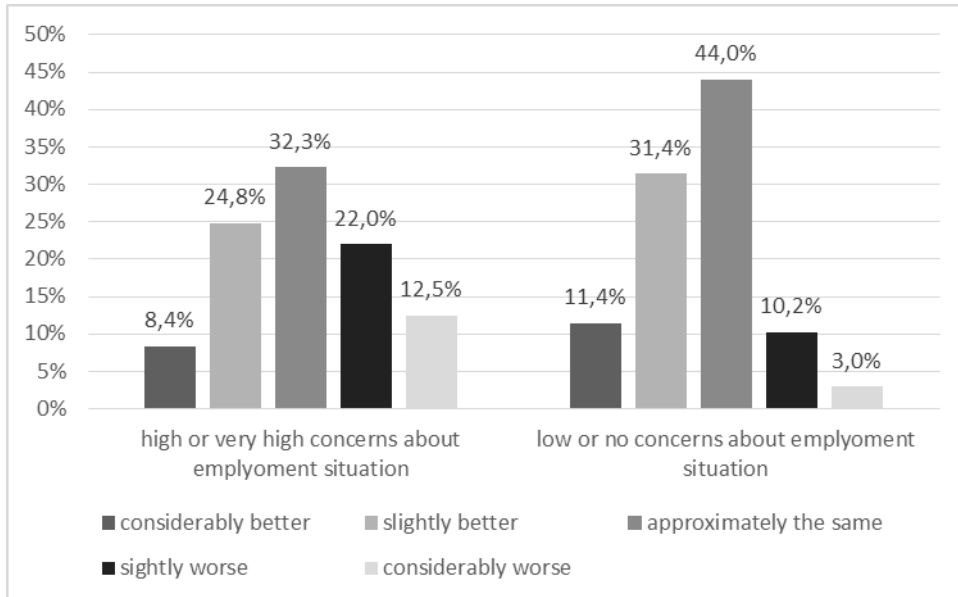
Below, the concern regarding an individual’s own employment situation is considered in relation to the other dimensions mentioned above regarding fear of social decline. Figure 2 clearly shows that there are relatively large correlations between job-related concerns and financial concerns. However, 13 percent of respondents who have no or only minor concerns about their employment situation still assume that their financial situation will deteriorate in the near future.

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2 Alternative answer option: disagree.

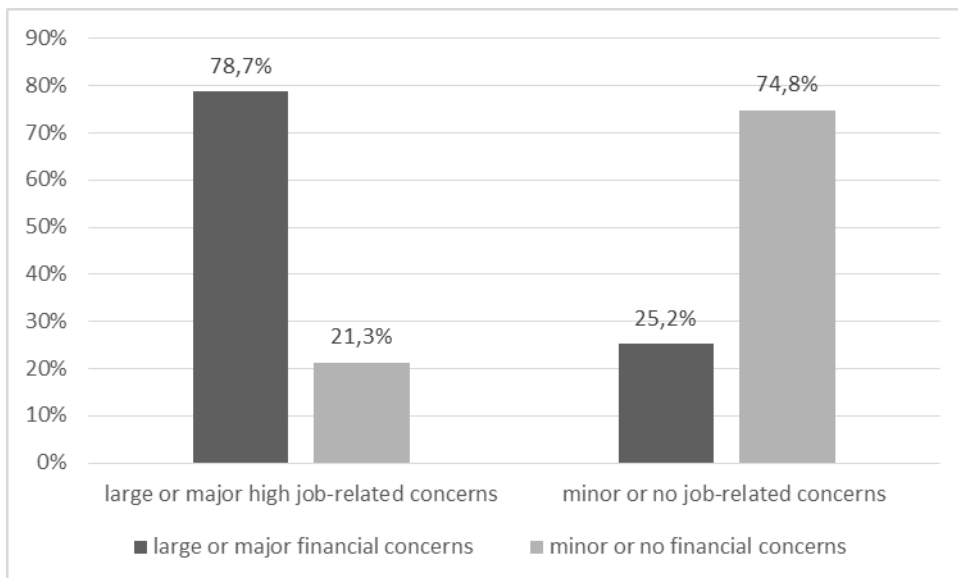
3 36 percent indicate that they are doing better; 31 percent consider their standard of living comparable, and 6 percent answered “I do not know”.

*Figure 2: Estimated development of an individual's own financial situation over the next three to five years and concerns about employment situation*



Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 2945

*Figure 3: Financial concerns and job-related concerns*

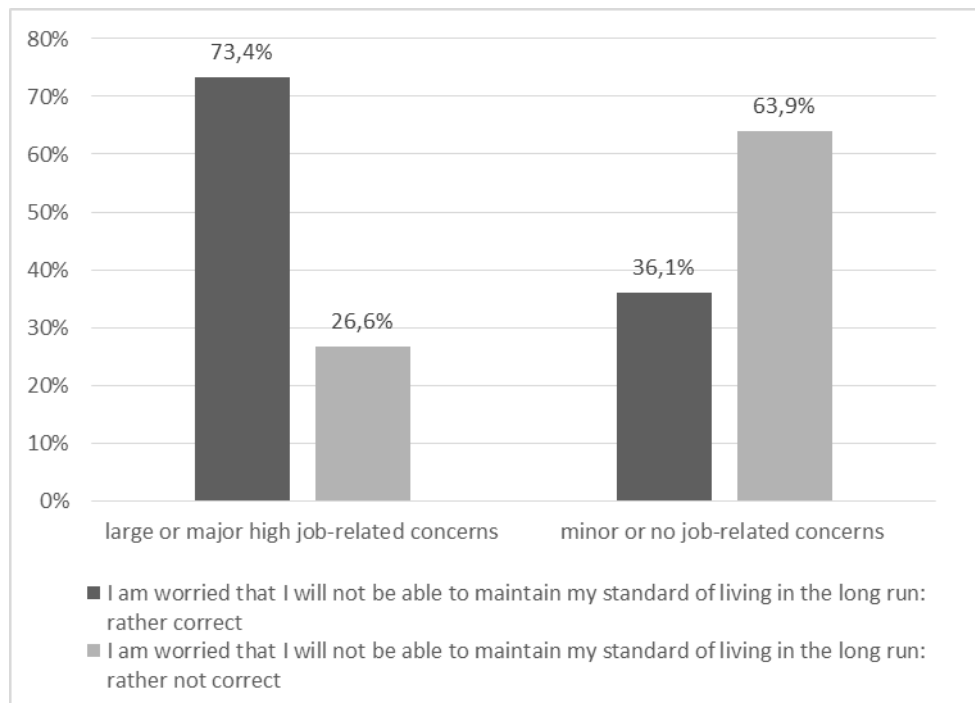


Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 2945

Figure 3 reveals that for approximately three fourths of the population job-related concerns go hand in hand with financial concerns. However, about one fourth of the population that is not worried about its job has large or even major concerns about their financial situation. These people are concerned about their social status although they do not fear for their job.

While the two aspects indicated above are first related to short-term to mid-term perspectives, this raises the question as to the extent to which individuals' view of their personal job situation is associated with their long-term perception of their financial situation. An even stronger dissociation can be observed here between financial concerns and job-related concerns: At least one third of the population that has no or only minor concerns about their employment situation assumes that they will not be able to maintain their standard of living in the long term and feels threatened by social decline as a result (Figure 4). Roughly 42 percent of those who are relatively unconcerned about their employment situation have large or even major concerns about their situation after retirement (Figure 5).

*Figure 4: Long-term concerns about standard of living and job-related concerns*



Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 4892

### **Summary: Fears of Social Decline are Multidimensional and Affect Large Segments of the Population**

In summary, it can be concluded that fears of social decline can be depicted in various dimensions. Depending on which dimension is used as a basis, between 20 and 50 percent of the voting population is affected by fears of social decline. Based on the above-mentioned definition of social decline as a deterioration of the social status, the statement "I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run" is the most accurate reflection of whether or not a person is worried about experiencing a social decline. "Standard of living" can certainly be understood as a customary interpretation of "social status". Almost half of the respondents agreed with this statement. Nevertheless, it involves a wide collection of fears of social decline, which does not reflect the extent to which social decline is perceived as an existential threat. In order to take these aspects into consideration, focusing on concerns about the financial situation provides more concrete insights. Almost 40 percent of the voting population indicate that they have large or even major concerns about their financial situation.

## Causes Behind Fears of Social Decline

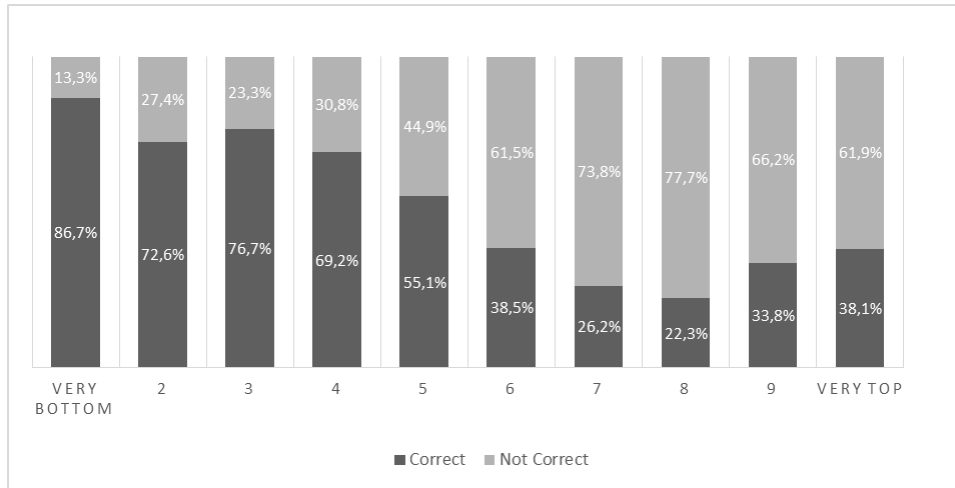
After demonstrating that fears of social decline in Germany are more complex and widespread than is often presumed, a subsequent step will go on to investigate the causes behind those fears. For this purpose, fears of social decline will be examined below in relation to the objective social situation (measured based on net income), the subjective social situation, and experiences in the work context.

### Fears of Social Decline in Relation to Net Income and Subjective Social Position

In order to shed light on the causes behind fears of social decline, the following section will analyze how fears of social decline are related to an individual's net income and subjective social position within society. The following question serves to measure the second aspect: "Society can be divided into "upper" and "lower" class. How would you categorize yourself: at the top, at the bottom, or somewhere in between?" Respondents had the option of classifying themselves on a scale of 1 (at the very top) to 10 (at the very bottom).

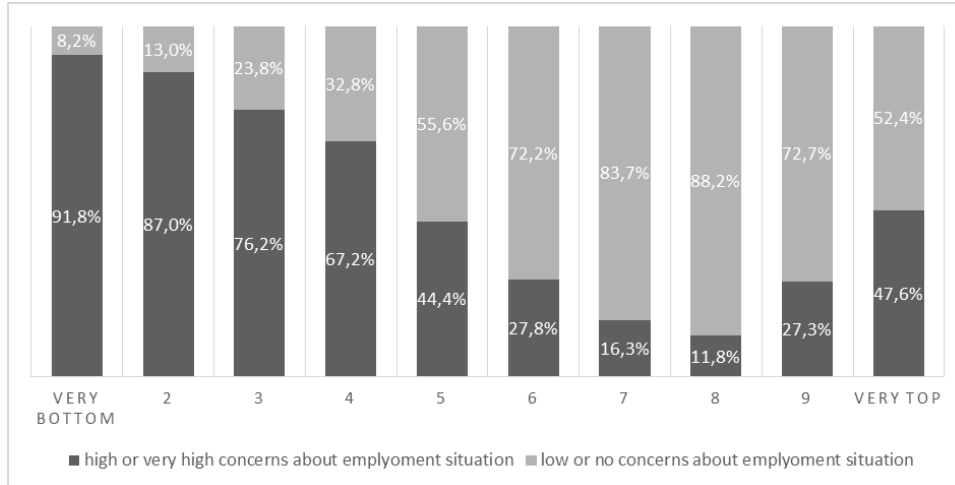
Figure 5 shows that fears of social decline and an individual's subjective social position are related to one another. The following applies for the majority of the respondents: The lower the subjective social classification, the greater the fears of social decline. Unexpectedly, the fear of not being able to maintain the standard of living in the long term increases again at the upper margin of society. The findings outlined in Figure 5 regarding concerns about standard of living (long-term perspective) coincide with the findings regarding concerns about financial situation (short-term to mid-term perspective). Figure 6 illustrates that over 90 percent of individuals who classify themselves as being at the "very bottom" of society indicate that they have large or major financial concerns. These concerns steadily decrease as the social self-classification increases, although financial concerns are still rife among individuals who categorize themselves as belonging to the lower middle class, thus affecting roughly half of the respondents. What is both striking and unexpected is the fact that financial concerns increase again at the upper margin of society. 47.6 percent of respondents who classify themselves as being at the "very top" of society indicate that they have large or major financial concerns.

Figure 5: Long-term concerns about standard of living and social position in society



Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 4767

Figure 6: Concerns about financial position and social position in society

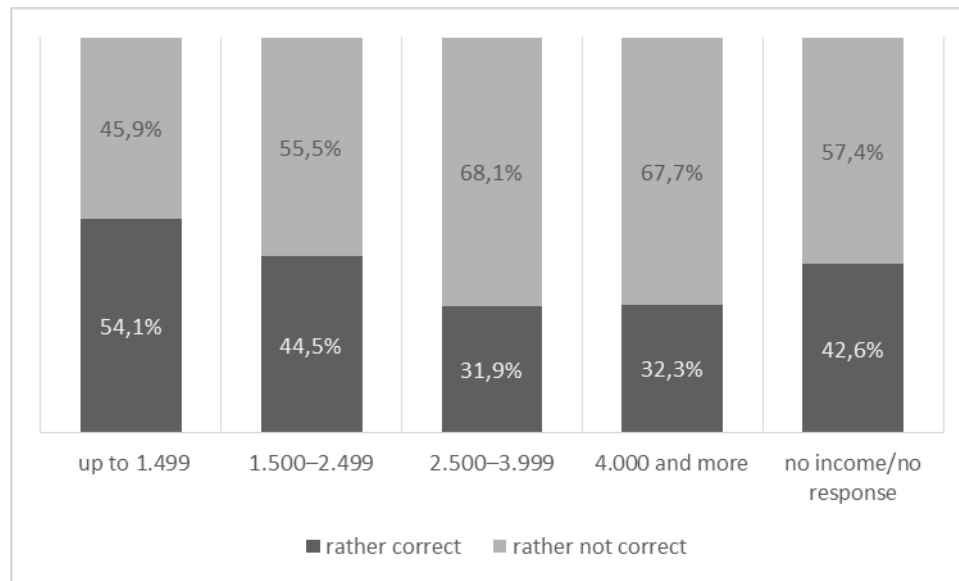


Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 4767

Although the subjective classification in society is a good indicator for the “perceived” social position, it does not necessarily reveal anything about the objective social situation. Therefore, Figure 7 illustrates fears of social decline in relation to the individual’s net income. It shows a clear correlation between fears of social decline and income. Over half

of the individuals who earn less than EUR 1.500 fear that they cannot maintain their own standard of living in the long term (see Figure 7). Likewise, almost one third of the people with a net income of more than EUR 4.000 have this same fear.

Figure 7: Long-term concerns about standard of living and income



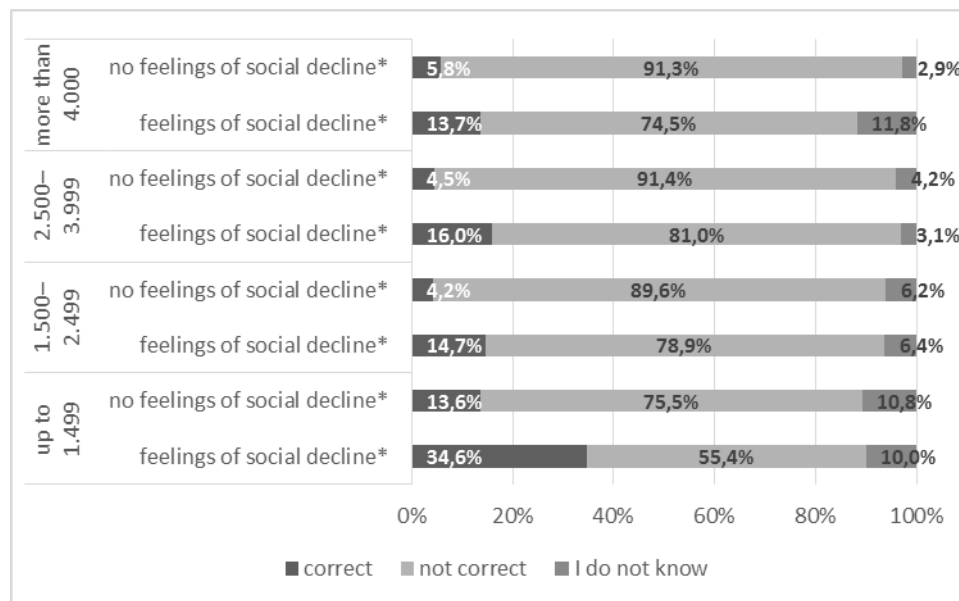
Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;  
N = 4892

## Fears of Social Decline within the Work Context

As a final step, this paper will investigate how fears of social decline are related to experiences within the work context. In this respect, it is evident that individuals who agree with the following statements are more likely to have fears of social decline regardless of their income group: “I am stuck in insecure, low-paid jobs”, “Supervision and monitoring at my workplace are increasing as a result of digitalization”, and “External factors determine my life”. Thus, fears of social decline are also derived from the feeling of being at the mercy of the uncertainties generated by social changes, such as digitalization or globalization. After all, they are the expression of an individual’s feeling of having lost control over choosing how to live their own life. This fear courses through all income groups. It is therefore widely dissociated from the respective financial situation. Nevertheless, it has a real social impact: namely, the concrete experiences gathered by people at the workplace.

Figure 8 shows, as expected, that the awareness of being stuck in insecure, low-paying jobs is much more pronounced among individuals with lower salaries than it is among those with higher salaries. At the same time, people in income groups who indicate that they are stuck in an insecure, low-paying job have significantly greater fears of social decline.

*Figure 8: Fears of social decline and agreement with the statement “I am stuck in insecure, low-paying jobs” according to income group*



\*Fears of social decline defined as agreement with the statement “I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run.”

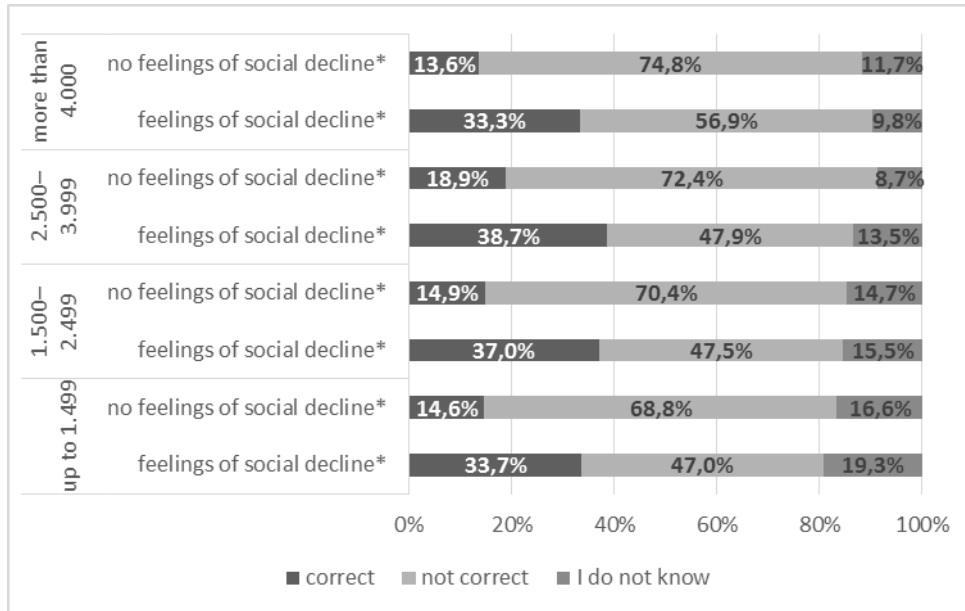
Note: does not include people without income and without a response

Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;

N = 2958

Interestingly enough, agreement with the statement “External factors determine my life” is especially high among individuals with medium salaries. At the same time, a third of the people in all income groups who experience fears of social decline agree with this statement.

Figure 9: Fears of social decline and agreement with the statement “External factors determine my life” according to pay grade



\*Fears of social decline defined as agreement with the statement “I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run.”

Note: does not include people without income and without a response

Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;

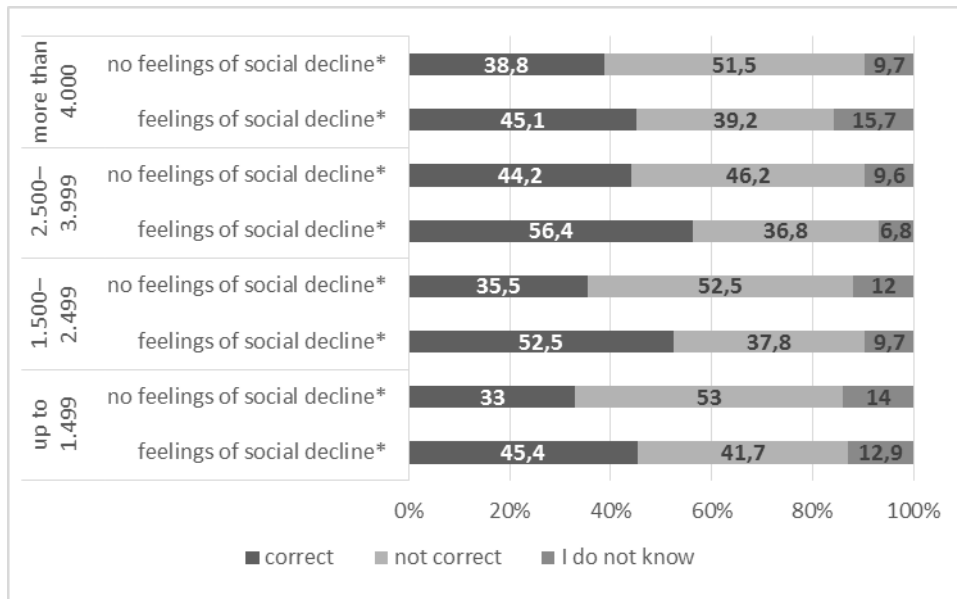
N = 2958

Figure 10 illustrates that agreement with the statement “Supervision and monitoring at my workplace are increasing as a result of digitalization” is even higher than agreement with the other two statements. Thus, the impacts of digitalization on the workplace appear to be a problem that troubles many employees, especially those with medium salaries. At the same time, fears of social decline are particularly high among people who agree with this statement. Fears of social decline, defined as concern about an individual's social position, are therefore fueled not only by financial concerns or even job-related concerns, but rather by the fear of a change in the employment system, the effects of which could worsen the individual's situation (e.g., due to closer monitoring of work performance) and are beyond the influence of the individual.

These findings also reveal that the fear of social decline is connected to experiences within the employment system and is less related to the fear of being excluded from the employment system. The fear of unem-

ployment is therefore only suitable for measuring fears of social decline to a limited extent.

*Figure 10: Fears of social decline and agreement with the statement “Supervision and monitoring at my workplace are increasing as a result of digitalization” according to income group*



\*Fears of social decline defined as agreement with the statement “I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run.”

Note: does not include people without income and without a response

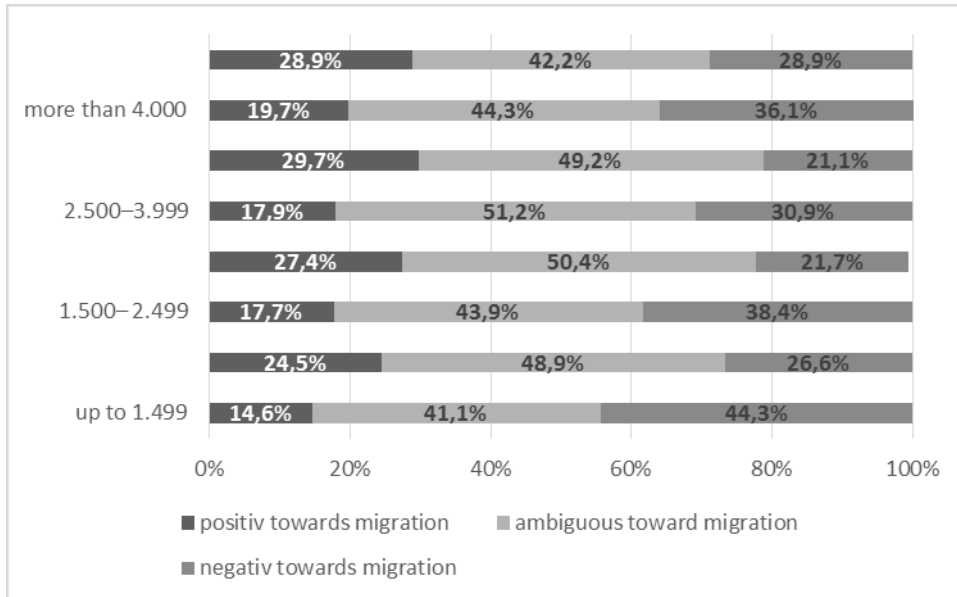
Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;

N = 2958

## Fears of Social Decline and Migration

This last section will now examine the relationship between the rejection of migration, an individual's net income, and fears of social decline. Figure 4 shows that people who have fears of social decline across all pay grades are more likely to have a negative attitude towards migration. Furthermore, it shows that rejection of migration decreases as salary increases. Individuals who earn more than EUR 4000 constitute an exception to this. In this group, rejection of migration rises again.

Figure 11: Fears of social decline and acceptance or rejection of migration according to income group, figures as a percentage



\*Fears of social decline defined as agreement with the statement “I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run.”

Note: does not include people without income and without a response

Source: Online survey by pmg – policy matters (2017), own diagram;

N = 4582

## Conclusion: Fears of Social Decline in Germany

The starting point for analyzing fears of social decline was the discovery that those fears represent a major driver for deciding to vote for the AfD (cf. Hilmert, Kohlrausch et al. 2017). At first glance, this appears to contradict the finding that people with higher salaries and levels of education vote for the AfD as it is assumed that these groups are relatively unconcerned about social decline. However, it was demonstrated that fears of social decline, defined as the fear of an individual's social status worsening, have multiple dimensions. Although these various dimensions – concerns about the employment situation and concern about an individual's financial situation or general standard of living worsening in the short or long term – overlap with one another, they are not completely congruent.

Depending on which dimension is used as a basis, between 20 and 50 percent of the voting population is affected by fears of social decline. In December 2016, approx. 25 percent of respondents had large or even major concerns about their employment situation. A good 39 percent of respondents indicated that they had large or even major concerns about their own financial situation. 20 percent assumed that their financial situation would become slightly or significantly worse within the next 3 to 5 years. 49 percent were concerned or greatly concerned with their financial situation after retirement. Almost 47 percent agreed with the statement "I am worried that I will not be able to maintain my standard of living in the long run."

Furthermore, the findings show that fears of social decline are most pronounced among segments of the population that have a low income and that are situated on the lower margins of society. Nevertheless, concerns about not being able to maintain an individual's standard of living in the long run do not just prevail among low-income earners. They extend far into the middle classes and also affect people whose net income indicates that they do not have any immediate cause to feel that their social existence is in danger.

Fears of social decline therefore reflect perceived social uncertainty resulting from the difficult material situation of people in the lower social strata. Yet this uncertainty is also prevalent among individuals not directly threatened by social decline. This can be accounted for by the fact that fears of social decline are also based on a feeling of helplessness. Experiences at the workplace, such as the sensation of increased monitoring of work performance, play a crucial role in creating this feeling. The AfD capitalizes on this rather vague feeling of general social uncer-

tainty. On the one hand, a policy that hopes to oppose this should therefore provide opportunities for better social protection within the lower classes of society. On the other hand, it is also a matter of better conveying the message that central social challenges can be shaped politically.

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The right-wing populist party AfD's victory in the last parliamentary election raises the question of the causes of social uncertainty and fears of social decline. Uncertainty involves a concern about maintaining social status and extends well into the middle classes. In the lower social strata, fears of social decline can be explained by a difficult economic situation. Yet social uncertainty is also prevalent among individuals who are not directly threatened by social decline. This can be accounted for by the fact that fears of social decline are also based on a perception of helplessness, especially within the context of work. The AfD capitalizes on this rather vague feeling of general social uncertainty.

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