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Research Report

On the sidelines? The relationship between perceptions of inequality and political participation

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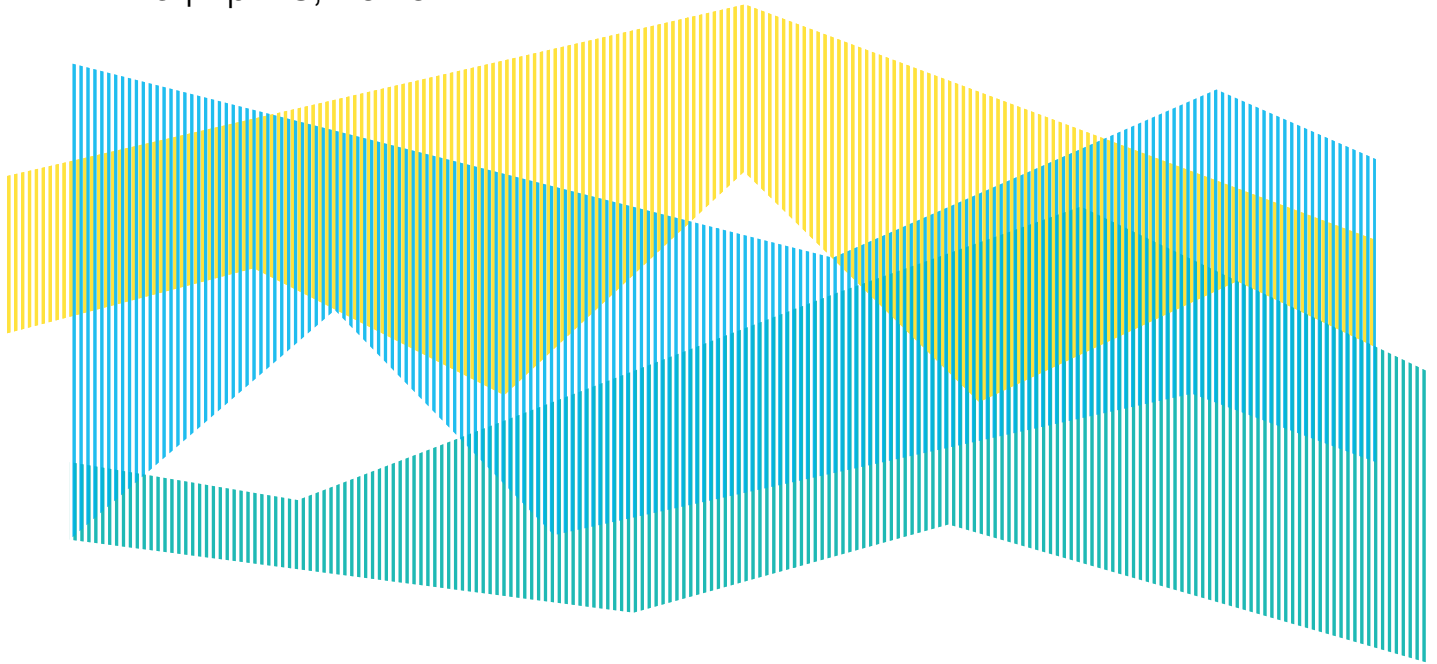
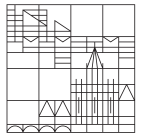
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Inequality Barometer – Inequality and Social Mobility

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On the Sidelines? The Relationship Between Perceptions of Inequality and Political Participation

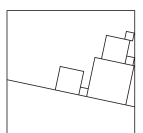
Abstract

This policy paper explores the relationship between perceptions of political efficacy and economic inequality. The latest findings from the Konstanz Inequality Barometer show that many people feel they have little influence on political decision-making and perceive political institutions as being unresponsive to their needs. As a result, they feel politically sidelined. The study identifies clear statistical correlations between perceptions of political efficacy and economic inequality. The paper concludes with concrete policy recommendations for (re)strengthening political participation.



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The survey

The data presented here were collected through an online survey of the German adult resident population implemented by the survey agency Verian (formerly Kantar Public). The survey was conducted between November 11 and December 5, 2024, with a total of 6,152 respondents. The data are quasi-representative; any remaining deviations are corrected through weighting. Whenever the survey refers to income, this concerns the household net income in Germany, including wages, salaries, pensions, child benefits, and other sources of income, after taxes and social security contributions. Respondents were informed of these definitions during the survey. For the income-based analysis, respondents were classified into two groups—'low' and 'high' income—based on the median income of the sample (€2,800). Educational attainment was measured on a three-tier scale:

- Low education: no diploma, *Hauptschule* (lower secondary) diploma, or other qualification
- Medium education: intermediate secondary school diploma (*Realschulabschluss*)
- High education: university entrance qualification (*Abitur*)

Introduction

Although issues such as migration and the current economic situation dominated the recent Bundestag election campaign, social inequality remains one of the most significant political concerns for many people in Germany. This is in part because inequality is a cross-cutting issue that affects multiple policy areas, from the welfare state and education to refugee policy. Since 2020, the Konstanz Inequality Barometer has conducted regular surveys to capture the perceptions and attitudes of the German adult resident population on inequality (see information box). In this policy paper, we present initial findings from the most recent survey wave, conducted in fall 2024, focusing on the relationship between perceptions of inequality and patterns of political participation and attitudes. The core finding of our analysis is that economic and political inequality are mutually reinforcing, such that a high (perceived) level of economic inequality correlates with a more negative assessment of one's own ability to influence politics. In the long run, this dynamic could erode trust in democracy and its political institutions.

Subjective perceptions of political and economic inequality

Whereas previous research has largely focused on how objective factors—such as income, educational background, age, gender, or occupation—shape political attitudes and behavior, more recent studies highlight the role of subjective perceptions.¹ Subjective perceptions serve as a crucial filtering mechanism that translates objective conditions into individual experiences, significantly influencing political choices and attitudes toward the welfare state beyond what objective factors alone would suggest.

Furthermore, research has shown that subjective perceptions of inequality are often biased and only partially reflect objective realities.² The Konstanz Inequality Barometer has also found evidence of such systematic biases.³ One notable example is the pronounced “middle-class or centrist bias” where relatively wealthy individuals tend to perceive themselves as less wealthy than they objectively are, while poorer individuals see themselves as less disadvantaged than they are. However, when assessing broader trends in societal inequality, previous findings from the Inequality Barometer suggest that respondents tend to overestimate negative trends, perceiving inequality as more severe than it is in reality.⁴

¹ Examples include Hartmann, Jörg, Karin Kurz and Holger Lengfeld. 2022. “Modernization Losers’ Revenge? Income Mobility and Support for Right- and Left-Wing Populist Parties in Germany.” *European Sociological Review* 38(1): 138–52; Burgoon, Brian, Sharon Baute and Sam van Noort. 2023. “Positional Deprivation and Support for Redistribution and Social Insurance in Europe.” *Comparative Political Studies* 56(5):655–93.

² Bobzien, Licia. 2020. “Polarized Perceptions, Polarized Preferences? Understanding the Relationship between Inequality and Preferences for Redistribution.” *Journal of European Social Policy* 30(2):206–20; Cruces, Guillermo, Ricardo Perez-Truglia and Martin Tetaz. 2013. “Biased Perceptions of Income Distribution and Preferences for Redistribution: Evidence from a Survey Experiment.” *Journal of Public Economics* 98:100–12; Gimpelson, Vladimir and Daniel Treisman. 2018. “Misperceiving Inequality.” *Economics & Politics* 30(1):27–54.

³ Bellani, Luna, Nona R. Bledow, Marius R. Busemeyer and Guido Schwerdt. 2021. “When Everyone Thinks They’re Middle-Class: (Mis-)Perceptions of Inequality and Why They Matter for Social Policy.” Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” Policy Paper No 6.

⁴ Busemeyer, Marius R., Nanna Lauritz Schönhage, Sharon Baute, Luna Bellani and Guido Schwerdt. 2023. “Gloomy prospects: The Konstanz Inequality Barometer shows that inequality is perceived to have increased.” Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” Policy Paper No 12.

This policy paper first examines subjective perceptions of political influence, which were captured in greater detail in the latest survey wave of the Inequality Barometer than in previous waves. Political scientists distinguish between two dimensions of political efficacy: internal political efficacy and external political efficacy.^{5, 6} Perceptions of internal political efficacy refer to an individual's sense of being politically informed and, as a result, their general potential to engage in politics. This dimension includes whether people feel knowledgeable about political issues and how confident they are in actively participating in political discussions. In contrast, external political efficacy refers to people's perception of whether politicians and political actors respond to the needs and concerns of their constituents, and whether there are meaningful opportunities for them to influence actual political decision-making. These two dimensions are only loosely connected: it is entirely possible for individuals to perceive themselves as politically competent while still believing that the political system is largely unresponsive to their concerns.

The findings presented in Figure 1 confirm the hypothesis that internal and external political efficacy do not necessarily align. The figure illustrates the proportion of respondents in the Inequality Barometer who either “strongly disagree” or “somewhat disagree” with the statements on the left-hand side. Respondents could rate each statement on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Thus, the figure represents the extent to which respondents reject the respective statements. The first two statements measure internal political efficacy. Overall, most respondents report a high sense of political self-efficacy: only 19 percent do not agree with the statement that they are capable of understanding and evaluating major political issues. For the second statement, which concerns active participation in political discussions, 26 percent do not agree. The lower two statements measure respondents' perception of external political efficacy—that is, the extent to which they believe the political system responds to the needs and concerns of voters. Here, skepticism is significantly higher: 85 percent of respondents feel that politicians do not care about what “ordinary people” think, while 82 percent believe that politicians make little effort to stay closely engaged with the public.

⁵ For a definition and distinction of internal and external political efficacy, see: Balch, G. I. (1974). “Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept ‘Sense of Political Efficacy.’” *Political Methodology*, 1(2), 1–43.

⁶ On measuring the two dimensions, see: Beierlein, C., Kemper, C., Kovaleva, A., & Rammstedt, B. (2012). Ein Messinstrument zur Erfassung politischer Kompetenz- und Einflussersparungen. *Political Efficacy Kurzska (PEKS)*.

Figure 1: Disagreement with various statements measuring internal and external political efficacy.

● Everyone

By education

● Low

● Middle

● High

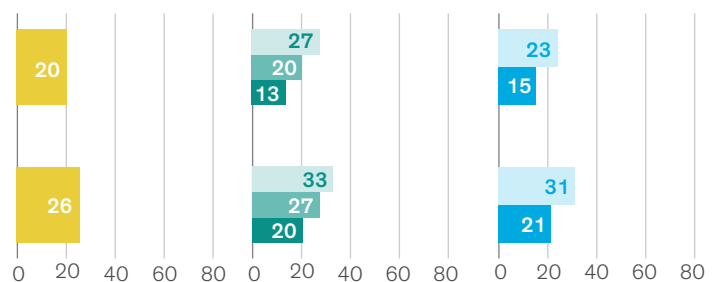
By income

● Low

● High

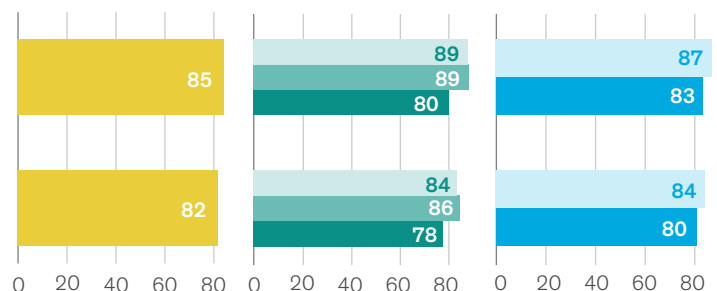
Internal

Rejection: Understand political issues



External

Rejection: Politicians care about the thoughts of ordinary people



The figure thus reflects respondents' deep skepticism regarding their ability to influence political decision-making—despite relatively high levels of internal political efficacy. Moreover, perceptions of political self-efficacy vary significantly by educational background (middle column) and income (right column). Individuals from lower-income groups and those with lower educational attainment systematically perceive fewer opportunities for political influence and are less confident in their ability to participate in political discussions. The gap between respondents with high and low educational attainment regarding their ability to engage in political discussions is 13 percentage points. Similarly, disparities in external political efficacy are substantial: for example, the difference between highly educated and less educated individuals in believing that politicians care about the concerns of “ordinary people” is 9 percentage points. This serves as an initial indication of how economic and political dimensions of inequality are interconnected.

But how exactly are perceptions of economic and political inequality related? As in previous survey waves, the Inequality Barometer continues to measure subjective perceptions of economic inequality. Figure 2 provides an overview of various measures of these perceptions from the most recent survey wave. Unlike the previous figure, this chart presents the percentage of respondents who “somewhat” or “strongly” agree with each statement. Again, prior findings are confirmed: a significant portion of respondents perceives economic inequality in Germany as pronounced and problematic. For example, 81 percent of respondents believe that income disparities in Germany are too large. Both the incomes of the poor (67%) and the incomes of the middle class (70%) are viewed as too low.

Figure 2: Various measures of perceptions of economic inequality

- Income differences are too great
- Most Germans would be better off if income differences were smaller
- Personally, I would be better off if income differences were smaller
- Incomes of the poor are lower than they should be
- Middle class incomes are lower than they should be

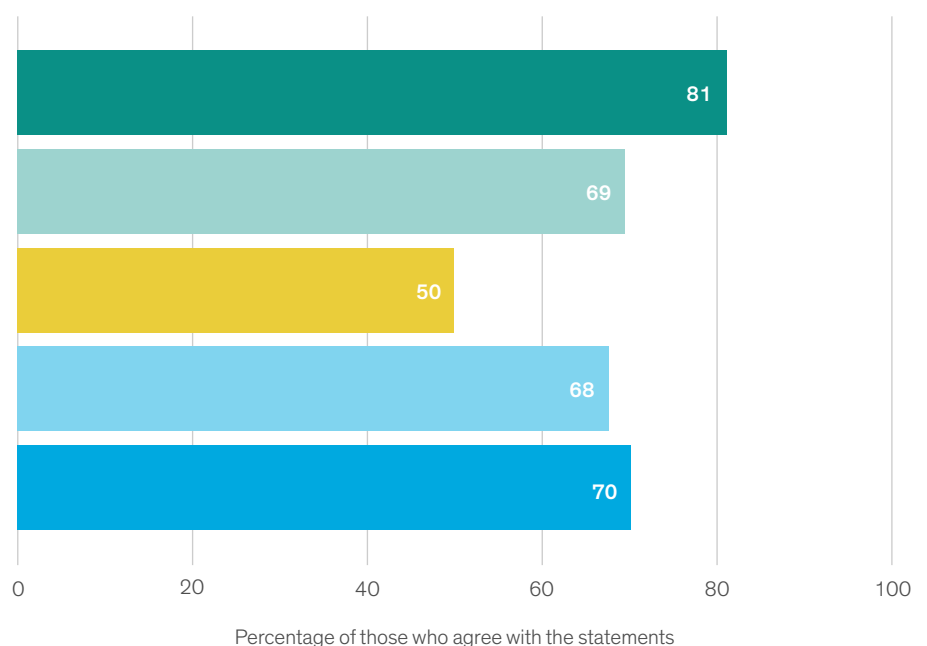


Figure 3: Internal and external political efficacy in relation to the perception of economic inequality, measured by the statement “Income disparities in Germany are too large.”

- Income distribution differences too large
- Income distribution differences not too large

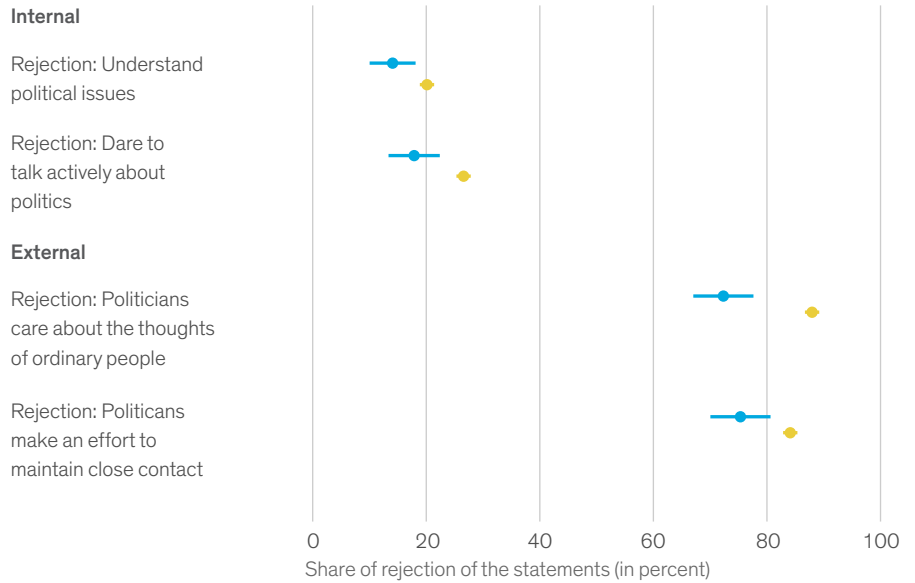


Figure 3 shows a systematic and statistically significant link between these two dimensions of inequality. Respondents who agree with the statement that income disparities are too large also express significantly lower levels of both internal and external political efficacy. In other words, individuals who perceive a high degree of inequality are also less confident in their ability to influence political outcomes through their own actions.

Figure 4: Relationship between the perception and evaluation of inequality, measured using an index, and political efficacy.

- Index distribution differences too large
- Index distribution differences not too large

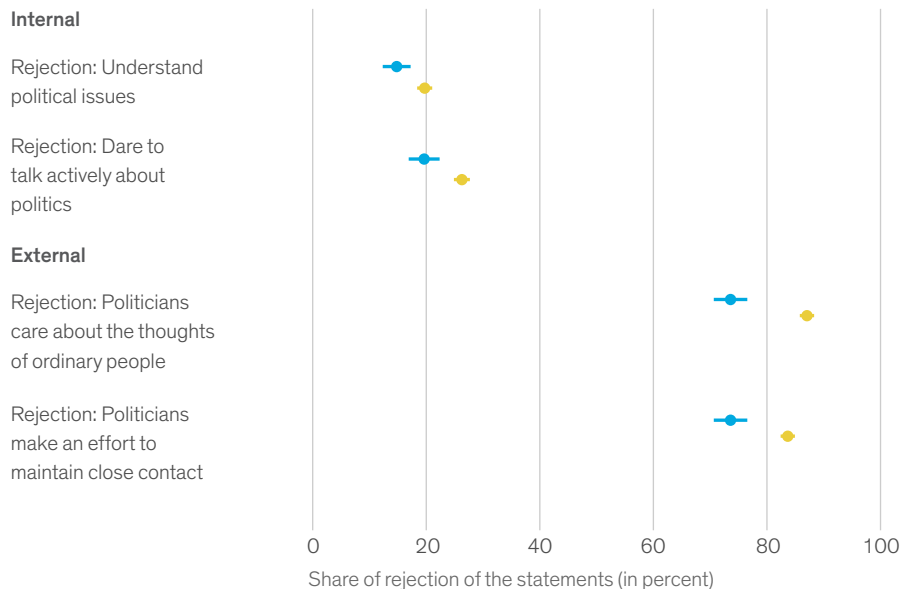


Figure 4 presents this connection from a slightly different perspective. Instead of relying on a single survey item, it uses an index of perceived distributional inequality that combines multiple previously mentioned measures.⁷ This broader approach to measuring perceptions of inequality confirms the negative relationship for both internal and external political efficacy. Thus, the link between perceived economic inequality and perceived political efficacy remains evident even when measured more comprehensively.

⁷ To construct the index, the average level of agreement with the five inequality measures shown is calculated for each respondent. The scale is then divided at the midpoint to classify respondents' answers as either "distributional differences are too large" or "distributional differences are not too large."

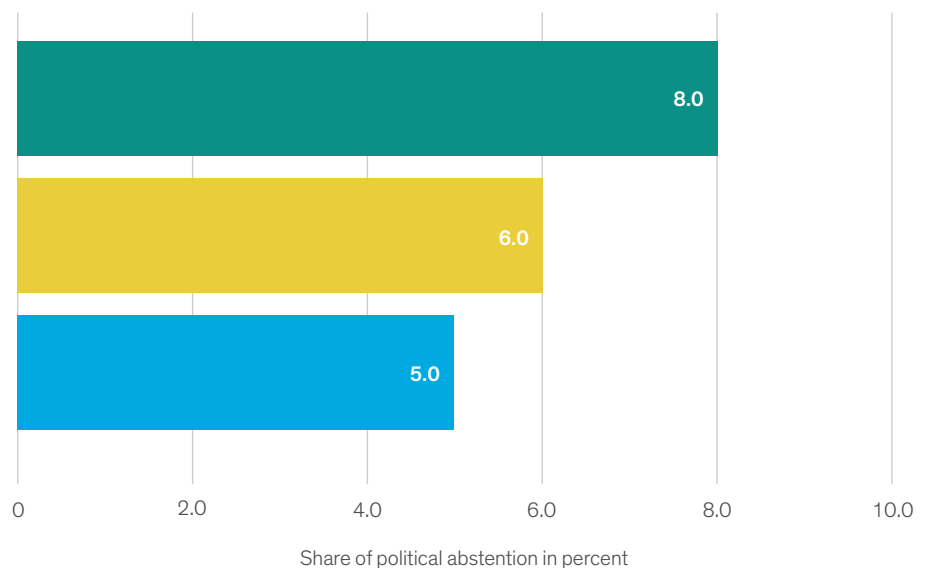
Economic inequality and actual political behavior

Electoral research has consistently shown that individual resources, such as income and education, are strongly correlated with the level of political participation.⁸ Lower levels of education and income are associated with lower political engagement, further reinforcing the negative link between economic and political inequality. But what role do subjective perceptions of inequality play in this dynamic?

Figure 5 reveals a certain link between subjective perceptions of economic inequality and concrete political behavior intentions, in this case, the likelihood of abstaining from voting.⁹ Statistically speaking, however, this relationship is somewhat weaker than previously observed associations between different types of perceptions. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that individuals who perceive a high level of economic inequality are also less likely to participate in politics. This is likely because they also hold negative views about their ability to influence political decision-making.

Figure 5: Relationship between the perception of excessive income disparities and the preference for political disengagement (as indicated in the voting intention question).

- Agree
- Partly agree
- Disagree



Next, we examine the relationship between perceptions of political efficacy and either intended party choice or political disengagement. Figure 6 reveals a clear correlation between low internal and external political efficacy and a greater likelihood of abstaining from voting. This means that subjective perceptions of political efficacy are closely tied to actual political behavior, with tangible political consequences.

⁸ Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "A Resource Model of Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 89(2):271-94.

⁹ Non-voting was recorded as part of the question on voting intention ("Sonntagsfrage"). In addition to selecting one of the major parties, respondents could also indicate that they would not vote.

Figure 6: Relationship between party preference or non-voting and internal/external political efficacy.

- Political abstention
- Preference for a party

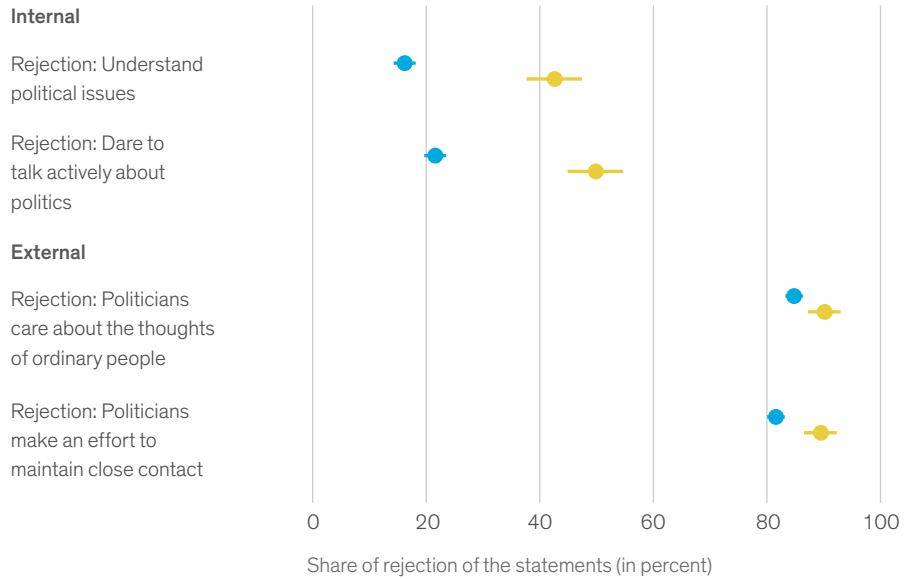
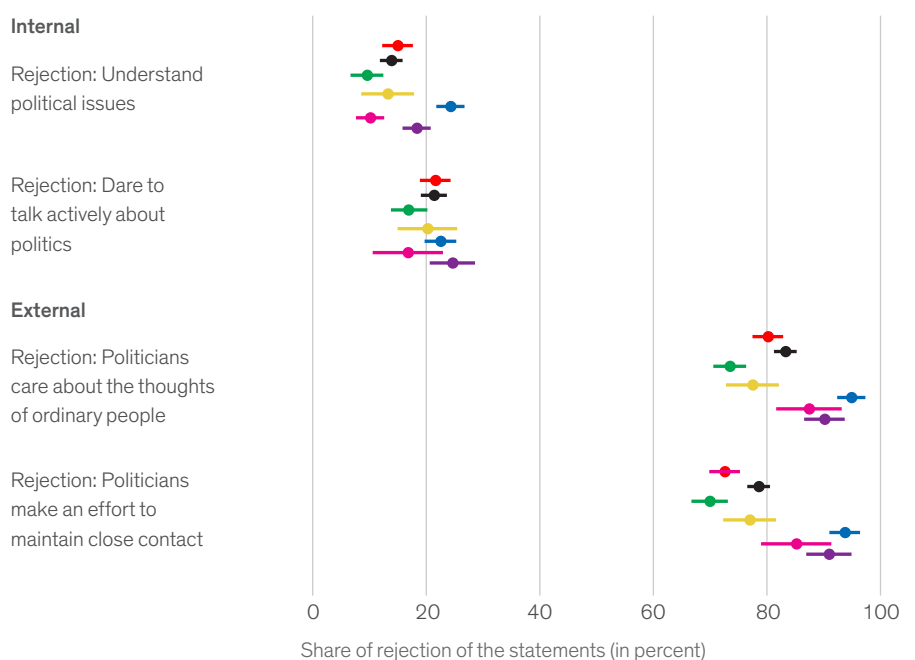


Figure 7 illustrates the relationship between perceived political efficacy and intended party choice. The figure shows that disagreement with statements about internal political efficacy is relatively consistent across party preferences. It is only among those intending to vote for the right-wing populist AfD that a somewhat higher proportion (24%) reports not understanding political issues.

Responses regarding external political efficacy show a broader distribution. Supporters of parties in the ideological center (SPD, CDU/CSU, Greens, FDP) are less likely to disagree with the two statements on external efficacy than those backing parties at the ideological margins (AfD, BSW, Left Party). The highest levels of perceived external political efficacy are found among Green Party supporters, with 74 percent and 70 percent rejecting the statements that politicians care about people's concerns. In contrast, AfD supporters overwhelmingly report low external political efficacy, with 95 percent and 94 percent agreeing that politicians do not respond to public concerns. This reveals a clear pattern: individuals who feel they have little political influence are significantly more likely to support populist and/or extreme parties.

Figure 7: Relationship between perceived political efficacy and intended party choice.

- SPD
- CDU/CSU
- The Greens
- FDP
- AfD
- The Left
- BSW



Policy implications and recommendations

This policy paper examined the relationship between perceptions of political efficacy and economic inequality. What implications and recommendations arise from these findings for policymakers?

- 1.** The first recommendation concerns political communication. Elected representatives, as professional communicators, regularly engage with their constituents. However, despite these efforts, politics is often perceived as a closed system, making access particularly difficult for people with fewer economic or educational resources. Beyond elected officials, political parties, above all, are called upon to not only reach out to politically interested individuals but also to effectively involve them into participatory and decision-making processes. The recent membership growth of some parties and the high voter turnout in the latest federal election suggest that there is a significant public willingness to engage more actively in politics.
- 2.** A second, closely related recommendation is to deliberately create and expand spaces for democratic political debates in everyday settings—workplaces, schools, universities, and other institutions. When political discourse is confined to talk shows featuring prominent guests and televised debates between chancellor candidates, it is unsurprising that people's sense of political efficacy declines. The democratic debate over effective solutions must be more firmly anchored in real-life everyday interactions again. This can be achieved by promoting and expanding democratic participatory structures in public institutions, workplaces, and educational settings.
- 3.** A third recommendation is to expand civic education, especially among individuals with low internal political efficacy, as they are less likely to participate in elections. To effectively reach this group, specific civic education programs could be beneficial. More broadly, civic education plays a crucial role in strengthening democratic awareness and should be utilized as a powerful tool to enhance political efficacy perceptions.

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"The Politics of Inequality. Perceptions,
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Imprint

The Politics of Inequality

Perceptions, Participation and Policies

is an interdisciplinary Cluster of Excellence at the University of Konstanz within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. The gap separating the poor from the rich, the worldwide rise of populism, the division of burdens in the fight against climate change, unfairly distributed access to education — many current debates are as much about inequality as they are about other issues. These topics pose highly complex questions, yet scientifically grounded answers are still few and far between. This is where we come in to investigate "The Politics of Inequality": the political causes and consequences of inequality.

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