

Boese-Schlosser, Vanessa A.; Meißner, Daniel; Ziblatt, Daniel

Working Paper

Voters' orientations towards democracy: A new conceptual framework

WZB Discussion Paper, No. SP V 2026-701

Provided in Cooperation with:

WZB Berlin Social Science Center

Suggested Citation: Boese-Schlosser, Vanessa A.; Meißner, Daniel; Ziblatt, Daniel (2026) : Voters' orientations towards democracy: A new conceptual framework, WZB Discussion Paper, No. SP V 2026-701, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/338884>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

WZB

Berlin Social Science Center



Vanessa A. Boese-Schlösser
Daniel Meißner
Daniel Ziblatt

Voters' Orientations Towards Democracy: A New Conceptual Framework

Discussion Paper

SP V 2026-701

März 2026

Research Area

Dynamics of Political Systems

Research Group

Waves of Regime Transformation

WZB Berlin Social Science Center
Reichpietschufer 50
10785 Berlin
Germany
www.wzb.eu

Copyright remains with the author(s).

Discussion papers of the WZB serve to disseminate the research results of work in progress to encourage the exchange of ideas and academic debate. Inclusion of a paper in the discussion paper series does not constitute publication and should not limit publication in any other venue. The discussion papers published by the WZB represent the views of the respective author(s) and not of the institute as a whole.

Vanessa A. Boese-Schlosser, Daniel Meißner, Daniel Ziblatt
Voters' Orientations Towards Democracy: A New Conceptual Framework
Discussion Paper SP V 2026-701
Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (2026)

Affiliation of the authors:

Vanessa A. Boese-Schlosser
WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany.

Daniel Meißner
WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany.
Freie Universität Berlin, Germany.

Daniel Ziblatt
WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany.
Harvard University, United States.

Abstract

Voters' Orientations Towards Democracy: A New Conceptual Framework¹

by Vanessa A. Boese-Schlosser, Daniel Meißner, Daniel Ziblatt

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for assessing individual democratic commitment and demonstrates its usefulness in the German context. Building on and bridging existing strands of research (e.g. on support for democracy, conceptualizations of democracy, evaluations of democracy), the framework distinguishes between citizens' personal definitions of democracy and three analytically distinct but interconnected layers of democratic attachment: normative importance, evaluations of democratic performance, and affective engagement, captured through concern about democracy's future. Together, these elements clarify how citizens relate to democracy as they understand it.

Drawing on a nationally representative survey conducted in December 2023, we provide descriptive evidence on each layer and their distribution across social and political groups in Germany. While democratic importance is very high overall, evaluations of democratic performance are more moderate and concern about democracy's future is widespread, particularly among supporters of the AfD and residents of eastern Germany. This configuration underscores the importance of distinguishing between the strength of democratic attachment and the substantive content individuals associate with democracy. Without this distinction, high concern and strong support could be misinterpreted as indicators of democratic commitment, even when citizens' personal definitions of democracy stand in tension with democratic principles. Our findings thus also highlight the importance of the affective layer as a key mobilization potential.

Keywords: democratic commitment; democratic attachment; AfD, Germany

¹ Acknowledgements: We thank Nikolina Klatt and Janice Ngiam for their essential contributions to the "What Is Democracy (To You)?"-survey on which the empirical case study in this paper is based, as well as for helpful input at early stages of the project. We are also grateful for feedback from Claudia Landwehr as well as to the "Transformations of Democracy"- Unit at WZB Berlin. We thank Leon Gellrich for skilful research assistance.

1 Introduction

Public attitudes toward democracy are widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic resilience (Almond and Verba, 1963; Bermeo, 2003; Claassen, 2020). At the same time, many contemporary democracies have been witnessing the rise of right-wing populist movements that challenge liberal-democratic institutions while claiming to act in the name of democracy itself (Bermeo, 2016; Merkel and Lührmann, 2021; Schmidtke, 2023; Vittori, 2022). This development raises a deeper question about how people's democratic commitment should be understood. The growing support for right-wing populist actors does not appear to be driven primarily by indifference toward democracy. On the contrary, many citizens who support such movements explicitly claim to be defending democracy and express strong concern about its future. Importantly, this paper focuses on ordinary citizens rather than political elites. While party leaders may strategically invoke democratic language, many of their supporters appear to sincerely believe that the political projects advanced in democracy's name are, in fact, democratic. The challenge, therefore, is not simply a rejection of democracy, but a divergence in what democracy is understood to mean.

This divergence is politically consequential. When citizens adopt understandings of democracy that emphasize unconstrained majority rule or unmediated popular will while rejecting liberal-democratic constraints (Steiner and Landwehr, 2018), they may evaluate the functioning of existing democratic institutions as deeply deficient. Not because those institutions are failing on their own terms, but because they are measured against a different benchmark. In such contexts, strong democratic attachment can coexist with persistent democratic dissatisfaction and high levels of concern, creating fertile ground for political actors to further promote illiberal or exclusionary conceptions of democracy.

To make sense of these dynamics, this paper introduces a layered framework of democratic commitment that distinguishes between what citizens understand democracy to be and how they relate to it. We conceptualize democratic commitment as comprising two analytically distinct but interrelated elements. The first concerns individuals' personal definitions of democracy, that is, the principles and institutional features they associate with democratic rule.¹ The second concerns different layers of democratic attachment through which citizens relate to this personal definition of democracy: a normative layer capturing the importance they attach to democracy, an evaluative layer capturing their assessment of how well democracy is realized in practice, and an affective layer capturing their emotional engagement with democracy's future, most visibly through concern. Crucially, individuals' personal definitions of democracy permeate all three layers of attachment: people value, evaluate, and worry about democracy as *they* understand it. By analytically separating definitions from layers of attachment, the framework makes it possible to assess not only how strongly citizens are attached to democracy, but also what kind of democracy they are attached to. This distinction provides diagnostic leverage in contexts where strong democratic attachment coexists with dissatisfaction and concern, and helps avoid conflating democratic commitment with support for liberal-democratic institutions.

¹The literature employs a range of terms (including *definitions*, *meanings*, *understandings*, and *conceptions* of democracy) to capture how individuals think about democracy, see Osterberg-Kaufmann et al. (2020), p. 306, Table). We treat these terms as interchangeable for the purposes of this study.

We illustrate the analytical leverage of this framework using Germany in late 2023 as an empirical use case. Germany constitutes a particularly informative diagnostic setting. It is an established liberal democracy in which expert-based measures detect no democratic backsliding, yet public debate has become increasingly contested and support for the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) has grown markedly. Existing research shows that supporters of the AfD tend to endorse understandings of democracy that emphasize unconstrained majority rule, unmediated responsiveness, and skepticism toward pluralism—conceptions that stand in tension with Germany’s liberal-democratic constitutional order (Steiner and Landwehr, 2018). At the same time, Germany exemplifies a broader dynamic observed across contemporary democracies, in which democratic institutions are challenged in the name of democracy itself (Schmidtke, 2023). Unlike highly polarized two-party systems such as the United States, the German multi-party context allows us to examine these dynamics outside a setting of advanced partisan polarization or ongoing institutional backsliding. Empirically, the analysis draws on an original, preregistered, nationally representative survey of 3,399 respondents conducted in December 2023 as part of the broader *What Is Democracy (To You)?* project. We use this case descriptively to demonstrate how distinguishing between personal definitions of democracy and different layers of democratic attachment helps clarify why strong democratic attachment, dissatisfaction, and concern can coexist and how such configurations may complicate conventional interpretations of democratic commitment.

Applying the framework to the German case reveals a distinctive and potentially misleading configuration of democratic attitudes. Across the electorate, democracy is overwhelmingly valued as a political ideal. At the same time, evaluations of how democratic Germany currently is are markedly more critical, and concern about democracy’s future is widespread. These patterns are particularly pronounced among supporters of the AfD, who (despite attaching substantial importance to democracy) perceive Germany as significantly less democratic than other citizens and express exceptionally high levels of concern about democratic decline. When considered in isolation, this combination of strong normative attachment, dissatisfaction, and concern could be interpreted as evidence of democratic engagement or alarm. However, once personal definitions of democracy are taken into account, a different picture emerges: AfD supporters are systematically more likely to endorse majoritarian, unmediated, and anti-pluralist understandings of democracy, helping to explain why they evaluate Germany’s liberal-democratic institutions so negatively: They do not evaluate these institutions against the same reference point.

Together, the findings demonstrate that strong democratic attachment can coexist with conceptions of democracy that stand in tension with liberal-democratic principles, underscoring the importance of distinguishing between the strength and the substance of democratic commitment.

This paper contributes to research on democratic attitudes by integrating several strands of scholarship that have largely developed in parallel. Existing work has examined citizens’ support for democracy, their evaluations of democratic performance, and, more recently, emotional orientations such as concern or anxiety about democratic decline. At the same time, a growing literature has documented that citizens differ substantially in what they understand democracy

to mean, including the extent to which they endorse liberal-democratic constraints such as minority rights, pluralism, and institutional mediation. Rather than introducing a new set of attitudes, this study brings these perspectives together in a single framework of democratic commitment that analytically separates individuals' personal definitions of democracy from distinct layers of democratic attachment. By doing so, it allows us to distinguish the strength of citizens' attachment to democracy from the substantive content of the democratic ideals to which they are attached, thereby clarifying how similar patterns of support, dissatisfaction, or concern can reflect fundamentally different democratic orientations.

Beyond its conceptual contribution, the paper has broader implications for how democratic attitudes are interpreted in contemporary democracies. The findings underscore that high levels of democratic importance, dissatisfaction, and concern should not automatically be read as indicators of liberal-democratic commitment. When citizens evaluate democracy against benchmarks that diverge from liberal-democratic principles, democratic dissatisfaction may become structurally persistent rather than episodic, even in the absence of institutional backsliding. This misalignment creates incentives for political actors to further promote illiberal or majoritarian understandings of democracy, potentially reinforcing cycles of democratic discontent and mobilization. More generally, the results highlight the importance of treating democratic concern as an affective mobilization potential rather than as a normatively unambiguous signal. For research on democratic resilience and decline, this implies that assessing public commitment to democracy requires careful attention not only to how strongly citizens are attached to democracy, but also to what they understand democracy to be.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the conceptual framework for assessing democratic commitment by distinguishing between citizens' personal definitions of democracy and three layers of democratic attachment. Section 3 introduces the empirical application (3.1), describes the preregistered survey conducted in Germany in December 2023 (3.2), and details how the framework's concepts are operationalized (3.3). Section 3.4 presents descriptive findings from the German case, first documenting variation in the three layers of democratic attachment and then examining how differences in personal definitions of democracy help interpret these patterns. Section 4 discusses the broader implications of the framework and the empirical results, including limitations and directions for future research. Section 5 concludes.

2 A Conceptual Framework For Assessing Democratic Commitment

Research on democratic attitudes has generated a rich body of knowledge on how citizens think about democracy, how strongly they support it, and how they evaluate its performance. Rather than proposing an entirely new set of concepts, this study brings together several established strands of research into a single integrative framework that helps assess the state and nature of democratic commitment at the individual level.

Democratic commitment here refers to the degree and manner in which individuals are attached to democracy as they understand it. Our central claim is that understanding democratic

commitment requires distinguishing between (1) citizens' *personal definitions of democracy* and (2) the different *layers of democratic attachment* through which citizens relate to that definition as displayed in Figure 1 and discussed in detail below.

Taken together, personal definitions of democracy and layers of democratic attachment provide a structured framework for assessing democratic commitment. Rather than asking whether citizens support democracy in general, this framework allows us to examine *what kind of democracy citizens are committed to, how strongly they are attached to it, how they evaluate its realization, and how emotionally invested they are in its future.*

This multidimensional perspective is particularly important in contexts where political actors mobilize democratic language to legitimize demands that are at odds with liberal-democratic norms and institutions.

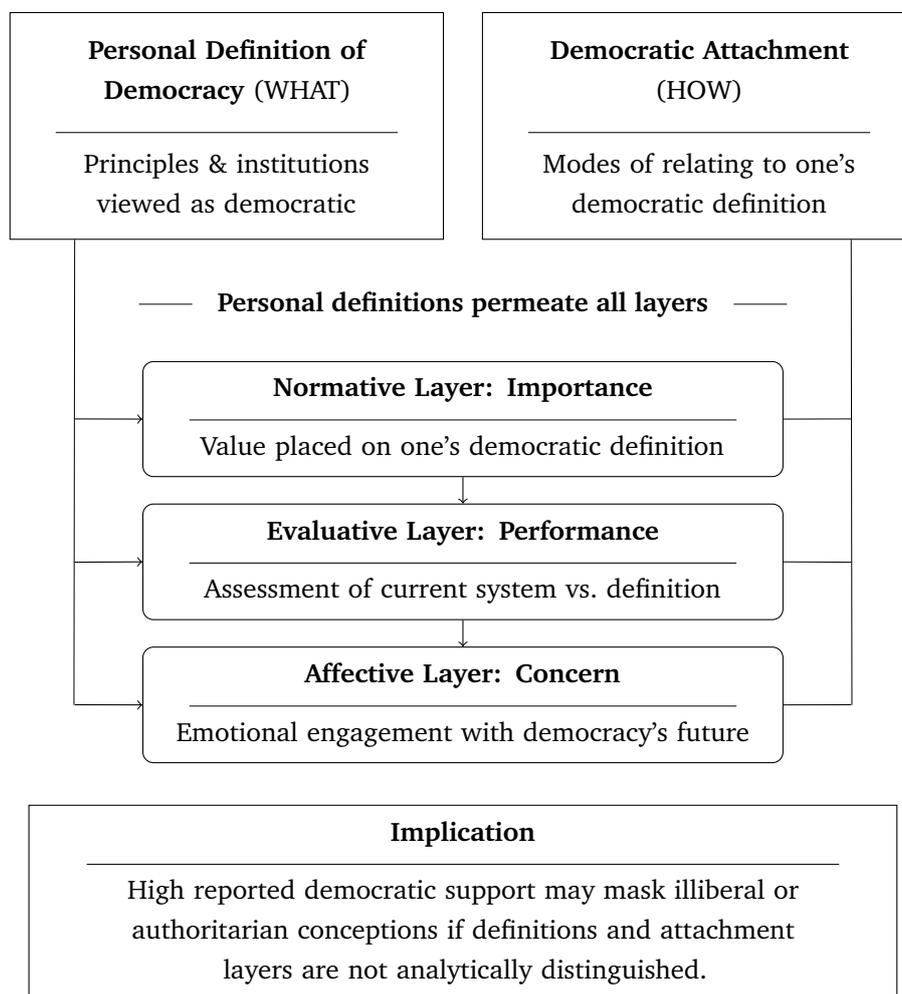


Figure 1: A Layered Framework of Democratic Commitment

Notes: The figure presents an analytical framework distinguishing between individuals' personal definitions of democracy (WHAT) and their modes of democratic attachment (HOW). The individuals' personal definitions permeate three analytically distinct layers of democratic attachment: normative (importance), evaluative (performance), and affective (concern). The layers are analytically ordered such that evaluative judgments are formed by comparing perceived democratic performance to individuals' normative ideals, while affective responses reflect emotional reactions to this evaluative comparison. Arrows indicate conceptual linkages rather than causal or empirical relationships.

2.1 Personal Definitions of Democracy

Citizens do not approach democracy as a universally agreed-upon concept. A long tradition of research has shown that individuals associate democracy with different institutional components and principles, such as elections, majority rule, responsiveness, civil liberties, pluralism, and minority protection (Baviskar and Malone, 2004; Bratton, 2010; Chu et al., 2008; Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). Early contributions already noted that citizens may incorporate authoritarian or illiberal elements into their understanding of democracy, even while sincerely endorsing it as a political ideal (e.g. Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995). More recent work confirms that citizens sometimes classify clearly undemocratic practices as democratic (Kirsch and Welzel, 2019).

We refer to these understandings as individuals' *personal definitions of democracy*. These definitions describe what citizens believe democracy *is* or *should be*, and which institutional components they regard as essential. Importantly, these personal definitions are formed against the backdrop of an ongoing scholarly consensus that democracy itself is a multidimensional concept. Political science research has long emphasized that democracy comprises multiple institutional dimensions and varieties, rather than a single, uncontested set of features (Vanessa Alexandra Boese, 2019; Teorell et al., 2019). While competitive elections constitute a core component, scholars diverge on the extent to which democratic rule should be constrained by liberal institutions such as constitutional checks and balances, judicial independence, and the protection of minority rights. Liberal, majoritarian, participatory, and other perspectives thus place different emphasis on distinct institutional elements, implying that both scholarly and citizen understandings of democracy may legitimately prioritize different components.

In the German context, which forms the empirical focus of this study, democracy is institutionally defined as a *liberal democracy*: Political authority is derived from the people through elections, but it is constitutionally constrained, for example through separation of powers and rule of law (Art. 20; Art. 1(3) Federal Republic of Germany, 2025). Majority rule is therefore not unconstrained; rather, it operates within a framework designed to prevent the domination of minorities and to safeguard fundamental rights (Landwehr and Steiner, 2017).

Personal definitions of democracy may deviate from this liberal-democratic model in important ways. In particular, some citizens place disproportionate emphasis on majoritarianism or direct responsiveness while rejecting institutional constraints that are central to liberal democracy. Crucially, the difference between democratic and undemocratic conceptions often lies not in whether citizens value elections or majority rule *per se*, but in the *degree* to which majority power should be constrained and where the rights of minorities begin. These differences in degree are politically consequential, yet they are often obscured when democracy is treated as a binary or uniform concept.

Conceptually, personal definitions of democracy are prior to democratic attitudes. Individuals do not first decide how much they value democracy and only then define it; rather, their definition of democracy conditions how they value it, how they evaluate its performance, and how they emotionally respond to its perceived trajectory.

2.2 Layers of Democratic Attachment

While personal definitions capture what democracy means to citizens, they do not capture how citizens *relate* to democracy. To address this, we distinguish between three analytically separate but interrelated *layers of democratic attachment*: a normative, an evaluative, and an affective layer. These layers describe different modes through which individuals engage with democracy as they personally define it. Distinguishing layers of attachment from personal definitions allows us to separate the strength of democratic commitment from its substantive content.

The Normative Layer: Importance of Democracy

The normative layer captures the extent to which individuals value democracy as a desirable form of political order, i.e. the importance they attach to democracy as an ideal. This dimension builds on classic work on regime support and political legitimacy: Lipset (1959) defines political legitimacy as the capacity of a political system to sustain the belief that its institutions are “the most appropriate” for society, and argues that such legitimacy is a key requisite of democratic stability. Building on this foundation, Easton (1965) distinguishes between *diffuse* and *specific* support: Diffuse support mirrors our normative layer and refers to a more generalized attachment to the regime and its principles that is relatively independent of day-to-day performance evaluations, while specific support maps onto our evaluative layer and reflects evaluations of how well political authorities and institutions are functioning.

Empirically, the normative layer/diffuse support is commonly measured using survey items that ask how important democracy is to respondents or whether democracy is preferred over alternative forms of government (Claassen, 2020; Norris, 2011b).

A central implication of our framework, however, is that responses to such items are not anchored in a single shared understanding of democracy. Individuals answer questions about the importance of democracy by implicitly applying their own personal definition of what democracy is or should be. High reported importance therefore indicates strong normative attachment to democracy *as understood by the respondent*—not necessarily attachment to liberal democracy as institutionally defined in a given polity.

The Evaluative Layer: Perceived Democratic Performance

The evaluative layer captures how citizens judge the functioning of actually existing democracy. Evaluations reflect the perceived distance between democracy as an ideal and democracy as experienced in practice (Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016; Norris, 2011a; van Ham et al., 2017). These judgments are inherently relational: citizens assess political reality against their personal democratic ideal.

Negative evaluations may therefore have very different meanings. They may indicate concern about democratic backsliding relative to liberal-democratic standards, but they may also reflect dissatisfaction that existing institutions do not conform to a more majoritarian or exclusionary democratic ideal. Treating evaluations as a separate layer makes it possible to identify democratic dissatisfaction without presuming a shared benchmark of democratic quality.

The Affective Layer: Emotional Engagement and Concern

The affective layer captures citizens' emotional engagement with democracy, most visibly through concern about democracy's future. Political psychology has long shown that emotions such as fear, anger, and anxiety shape political judgments and behavior (Marcus et al., 2005; Shah, 2024; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019). In contemporary politics, democratic concern has become a central mobilizing force, particularly in the context of rising support for populist and far-right actors.

Importantly, concern about democracy does not carry an inherent normative direction. It signals emotional investment and perceived urgency, but not whether this concern is oriented toward defending liberal-democratic institutions or toward transforming democracy in illiberal ways. Treating affective engagement as a distinct layer prevents the misinterpretation of democratic concern as synonymous with liberal-democratic commitment.

2.3 How Personal Definitions Permeate Democratic Attachment

Although analytically distinct, personal definitions of democracy permeate all three layers of democratic attachment. Citizens value, evaluate, and worry about democracy *as they understand it*. As a result, similar levels of normative support, dissatisfaction, or concern can reflect fundamentally different political orientations.

Failing to distinguish between definitions and layers risks conflating democratic attachment with commitment to liberal democracy. In particular, it obscures how citizens with illiberal or populist conceptions of democracy can remain strongly normatively and emotionally attached to democracy while simultaneously supporting institutional changes that undermine liberal-democratic principles.

3 Empirical Application: The German Case

In this section, we apply the layered framework of democratic commitment to the German case to illustrate its empirical leverage. We first motivate Germany as a case study and provide contextual background on the political situation at the time of the survey. We then describe the survey design and data. Finally, we present empirical findings that show how distinguishing between personal definitions of democracy and different layers of democratic attachment allows us to identify and differentiate distinct forms of democratic commitment among citizens in Germany in late 2023.

3.1 Germany as a Case for Studying How People Relate to Democracy

Public opinion research on understandings/definitions of democracy has often been concentrated within the United States or heavily polarized and backsliding democracies. A significant portion of studies examining public opinion about democracy has been conducted in the context of political backsliding in the U.S., a highly polarized two-party system (Gidengil et al., 2022; Graham and Svobik, 2020; Grossman et al., 2022; Simonovits et al., 2022). A smaller body of literature has focused on multi-party settings such as Poland (Wunsch et al., 2022) and Hungary

(Wunsch and Gessler, 2023), both of which are also cases of highly polarized settings. Thus, as noted by Wunsch et al. (2022), the existing literature on the U.S. likely privileges partisan-based explanations due to deep partisan polarization.

In Germany, we find a unique setting where democratic backsliding has not been detected². Germany presents a case of low polarization and a multi-party system, reducing the likelihood that citizens' understanding of democracy is primarily driven by polarized partisan identities, as seen in the U.S.

The multi-party system in Germany is structured not only along the traditional left-right dimension but also introduces a third dimension with the presence of the Green Party. Notably, the Green Party has been a significant political force in Germany since the 1980s, actively participating in parliamentary and government roles. This extended presence enhances the relevance of Germany as an ideal case for exploring diverse perspectives on democracy.

The rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) further reinforces the relevance of Germany as a case for studying how citizens relate to democracy. Research shows that AfD supporters are disproportionately characterized by populist conceptions of democracy, such as strong majoritarianism, demands for unmediated responsiveness of politicians, and skepticism toward pluralism, which significantly predict AfD vote choice and shifts in party preference over time (Steiner and Landwehr, 2018). At the same time, the party's growing electoral strength and the emerging debate over maintaining a political "firewall" against cooperation with the AfD illustrate how challenges to liberal-democratic norms can arise even in otherwise stable democratic systems (Schroeder et al., 2025) and even in the name of "democracy" (Schmidtke, 2023). Parts of the AfD, including its youth organization and the regional branch in Thuringia, have been officially classified as right-wing extremist by the domestic intelligence agency (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, BfV), a designation upheld by German courts in 2024.³

Germany's divided history also provides unique within-country variation in democratic socialization. Citizens raised in the former GDR experienced different democratic traditions than their Western counterparts, creating natural variation in democratic understandings and expectations (Neundorff, 2010). This East-West divide, still visible in political attitudes decades after reunification, offers leverage for understanding how historical experiences shape contemporary democratic orientations (Boese-Schlosser et al., 2023).

The timing of the survey, conducted at the end of 2023, offers a particularly interesting political context in Germany. The period was marked by increasing public dissatisfaction with political leadership and rising tensions within the governing "traffic light" coalition of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Free Democrats (FDP), and Alliance 90/The Greens. The focus of German politics in 2023 shifted away from global toward domestic policy issues (Angenendt and Kinski, 2024): Public debate was dominated by conflicts within the coalition over the direction of economic and fiscal policy, exemplified by controversies surrounding the Heating Act (*Heizungsgesetz*) and the reform of Child Basic Security (*Kindergrundsicherung*). These conflicts

²As of 2025, various V-Dem indices (see Coppedge et al., 2024), including the Liberal Democracy Index and the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (see Edgell et al., 2025; Maerz et al., 2023), indicate that Germany is not experiencing democratic regression today and has not been for decades.

³See press release by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

strained coalition cohesion, contributed to electoral losses for the governing parties in state elections, and coincided with growing support for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). The survey thus took place amid the escalating tensions and declining public confidence that culminated in the collapse of the federal government in late 2024 and the subsequent early elections in February 2025.

Overall, the structure and characteristics of the German political system and the described political climate in 2023 provide a meaningful case for interpreting how citizens relate to democracy within a diverse political landscape and in times of institutional strain and rising public discontent.

3.2 Survey Design and Data

For the empirical application of our framework we rely on data from an online survey conducted in Germany in December 2023. The survey was implemented as part of the research project *What is Democracy (To You)?*, which was preregistered on the Open Science Framework prior to data collection.⁴ A total of 3,399 individuals⁵ participated in the survey. Respondents were recruited through an online access panel using quota sampling to approximate the demographic composition of the adult population in Germany with respect to age, education, gender, and state (Bundesland) of residence. Sample descriptives are reported in Appendix A. The full questionnaire is available in Appendix F.

Below, we describe how the core concepts of our framework (personal definitions of democracy and the three layers of democratic attachment) are operationalized in the survey. Distinguishing between definitions and layers allows us to separate the strength of democratic commitment from its substantive content and, in particular, to identify cases in which strong democratic attachment coexists with conceptions of democracy that deviate from liberal-democratic norms. To illustrate the empirical usefulness of this distinction, we subsequently disaggregate descriptive results by party support. The second subsection therefore also details how party support is measured and classified.

3.3 Operationalizing Layers and Definitions

This subsection describes how the three layers of democratic attachment (normative, evaluative, and affective) as well as individuals' personal definitions of democracy are operationalized in the survey.

Normative layer: importance of democracy. To capture the normative importance respondents attach to democracy, the survey asked: *"How important is democracy to you?"* Responses

⁴The preregistration and full pre-analysis plan are available at <https://osf.io/a794r>. Deviations from the pre-analysis plan are described in Appendix E.

⁵The number of actual responses evaluated in Section 3.4 may vary by question due to "I don't know" answers which are dropped before calculating means and standard deviations. The remaining number of respondents is 3,290 after dropping "I don't know" answers for both *importance* of democracy and *concern* about the future of democracy.

were recorded on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (“not important at all”) to 7 (“extremely important”).⁶

Evaluative layer: perceived level of democracy. To assess how respondents evaluate the functioning of democracy in Germany, participants were asked: “[H]ow democratic is Germany today in your opinion?” Responses were provided on a continuous scale ranging from 0 (“not democratic at all”) to 100 (“perfectly democratic”).

Affective layer: concern about democracy. To measure emotional engagement with democracy, the survey asked respondents: “Are you concerned about the future of democracy in Germany?” Answers were recorded on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all concerned”) to 7 (“extremely concerned”).

Personal definitions of democracy. Unlike the analysis of layers of democratic attachment, which examines variation across the full electorate, the analysis of personal definitions focuses on a targeted comparison between strong AfD supporters (respondents who report a likelihood of voting for the AfD of 9 or 10) and all other respondents. This design choice reflects the purpose of the case study: rather than mapping the full range of possible definitions of democracy, we assess whether groups that appear attached to democracy across the normative, evaluative, and affective layers nonetheless differ systematically in what they understand democracy to entail. This contrast allows us to demonstrate how strong democratic attachment can coexist with personal definitions of democracy that diverge from the liberal-democratic principles embedded in Germany’s constitutional order.

To operationalize individuals’ personal definitions of democracy, we draw on a set of eight survey items originally fielded in the GESIS Panel (GESIS, 2017) and used by Steiner and Landwehr (2018) to demonstrate systematic differences in democracy definitions between supporters of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and other citizens. The items capture the extent to which respondents’ conceptions of democracy emphasize unconstrained majoritarianism, unmediated political decision-making, and anti-pluralist views, i.e. dimensions that are central to distinguishing liberal-democratic definitions from populist-majoritarian understandings of democracy. We adopt the original wording and administer the full battery to all respondents in our sample. The exact item wordings and response scales are reported in Table 3.

3.3.1 Operationalizing Party Supporters

We use respondents’ reported likelihood of voting for each major German party to create a categorical measure of party support. The relevant survey item asked participants:

“We show you a list of the established parties in Germany. For each party, please indicate how likely it is you would ever vote for them on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely).”

⁶Respondents who selected “I don’t know” (= 8) are excluded from the calculation of means and confidence intervals reported in this section.

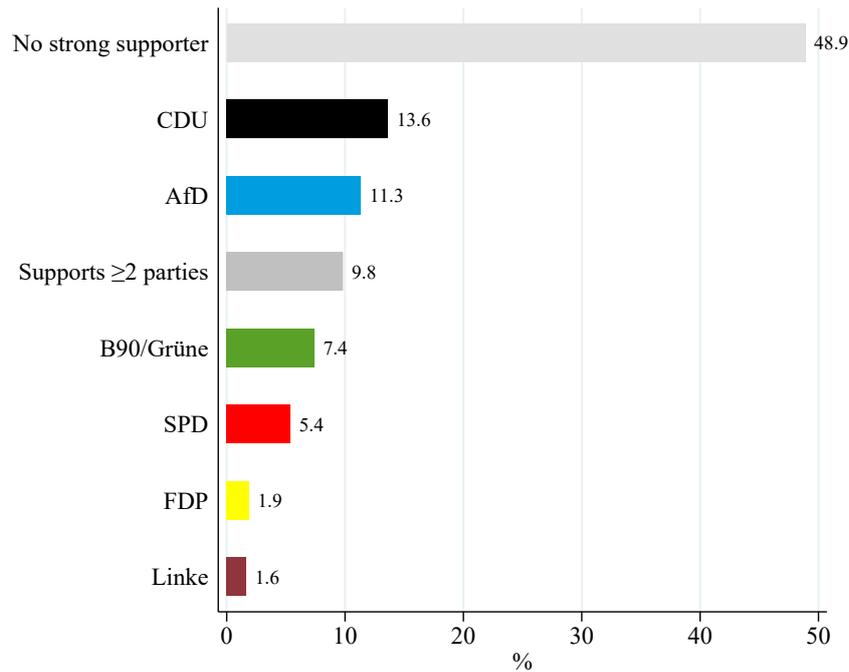


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Party Support in Percent

Notes: This figure reports the percentage distribution of respondents across party-support categories derived from self-reported likelihood-to-vote measures. We classify respondents as strong supporters of a party if they report a likelihood of 9 or 10 for that party. Respondents who report strong support (9/10) for exactly one party are assigned to that party’s category. Respondents who report strong support for two or more parties are classified as “multiple-party supporters”. Respondents who do not report a 9/10 likelihood for any party are classified as “no strong supporter”.

Based on this question, we constructed a derived variable called *party_supporter*. Respondents who selected either 9 or 10 for at least one party were coded as *strong supporters*. The threshold of 9 or 10 was chosen based on an inspection of the empirical distributions of likelihood-to-vote responses for each party. As shown in the histograms reported in Appendix C.1, responses cluster strongly at the scale endpoints, with a large mass at “extremely unlikely” (1) and a distinct upper-end concentration at values 9 and 10. By contrast, intermediate values are more diffusely distributed and likely capture ambivalence or weak partisan affinity rather than firm support. We therefore use a conservative cutoff at the upper end of the scale to identify respondents who expressed a strong likelihood to vote for a specific party. We then classified individuals into three mutually exclusive categories:

- **No strong supporter:** respondents who did not give a score of 9 or 10 to any party.
- **Strong supporter of one party:** respondents who gave a score of 9 or 10 to exactly one party.
- **Strong supporter of two or more parties:** respondents who gave a score of 9 or 10 to at least two parties.

This operationalization allows us to examine whether strong partisan attachments, rather than weaker or ambivalent affinities, are associated with systematic differences in attachment

to democracy. Figure 2 summarizes party support patterns in the sample. Overall, 51% of respondents qualify as strong supporters of at least one party, including 41% who strongly support exactly one party and 10% who strongly support multiple parties, while 48.9% report no strong support for any party. Among respondents who strongly support exactly one party, the CDU is most prevalent (13.6%), followed by the AfD (11.3%) and the Greens (7.4%), with smaller shares for the SPD, FDP, and Die Linke. In absolute terms, this corresponds to 463 CDU supporters, 385 AfD supporters, 252 Greens supporters, 183 SPD supporters, 64 FDP supporters, and 56 supporters of Die Linke; an additional 1,662 respondents do not strongly support any party. Within the group of multiple-party supporters (9.8% of the sample), the most frequent combinations include joint strong support for the Greens and SPD (77 respondents), AfD and CDU (36), and CDU and SPD (30).⁷ A small number of respondents (14) report strong support for all listed parties. Such responses may partly reflect satisficing behavior, such as repeatedly selecting high values across items, rather than a substantively meaningful pattern of political preferences.

3.4 Findings from the German Case

This section applies the layered framework for assessing democratic commitment among our survey respondents in Germany. We first examine citizens' *layers of democratic attachment*, i.e., the importance they assign to democracy (normative layer), their evaluation of how democratic Germany is, and their concern about democracy's future (affective layer). Taken on their own, these layers make some groups appear democratically committed and emotionally engaged, even if their personal definition of democracy is at odds with liberal-democratic norms and values. We then turn to citizens' *personal definitions of democracy* to clarify what definition of democracy respondents are attached to. Bringing both elements together allows us to distinguish attachment to liberal-democratic institutions from attachment to alternative, potentially even illiberal definitions of democracy. This also illustrates why people with such definitions are disappointed with the functioning of democratic institutions in Germany: because German political institutions were not designed according to (potentially illiberal) personal definitions but rather to represent a liberal democratic order.

Table 1 summarizes mean values and mean differences for the three layers of democratic attachment: the importance attributed to democracy, the perceived level of democracy, and the concern about the future of democracy. Across all three measures, AfD supporters differ significantly from other respondents (this includes strong supporters of other parties, strong supporters of multiple parties, and those not strongly supporting any party). Two-sided Welch t-tests reject the null hypothesis of equal means in every case ($p < 0.001$). Substantively, AfD supporters report markedly lower perceived levels of democracy and attribute less importance to democracy than other respondents (while still high in absolute terms: 5.86 out of 7), while at the same time expressing significantly higher levels of concern about the future of democracy. The observed differences are large in magnitude and consistent across all three layers of attachment.

⁷Figure 5 in Appendix C.1 displays the full set of party-support combinations among multiple-party supporters.

Table 2 shows that similar but substantively smaller differences emerge along the historical East–West divide. Respondents residing in or originating from the former GDR report lower perceived levels of democracy and slightly lower importance attributed to democracy, while expressing moderately higher concern about its future, with all differences statistically significant.

Table 1: Mean Differences in Democratic Attachment by Party Support

	Others	AfD	Diff.	% of scale	p-value
Importance of democracy	6.29	5.86	0.43	7.2%	< 0.001
Perceived level of democracy	62.58	33.88	28.70	28.7%	< 0.001
Concern about future of democracy	4.96	6.05	-1.09	-18.2%	< 0.001

Notes: The table reports mean values for AfD supporters and all other respondents, mean differences (Others – AfD), scale-normalized percentage differences, and two-sided p-values from Welch t-tests allowing for unequal variances. Percentage differences express the mean gap as a share of the respective scale range (1–7 for importance and concern; 0–100 for perceived level of democracy). Higher values indicate higher perceived levels of democracy, greater concern about the future of democracy, and greater importance attributed to democracy, respectively. Party support is derived from respondents’ reported likelihood of voting for each major German party.

Table 2: Mean Differences in Democratic Attachment by Region

	FRG	GDR	Diff.	% of scale	p-value
<i>by state of residence</i>					
Importance of democracy	6.27	6.03	0.24	4.0%	< 0.001
Perceived level of democracy	61.15	51.14	10.01	10.0%	< 0.001
Concern about future of democracy	5.00	5.39	-0.39	-6.5%	< 0.001
<i>by country of birth</i>					
Importance of democracy	6.30	6.04	0.26	4.3%	< 0.001
Perceived level of democracy	61.22	51.60	9.62	9.6%	< 0.001
Concern about future of democracy	4.99	5.46	-0.47	-7.8%	< 0.001

Notes: The table reports mean values for respondents residing/born in the territory of the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), mean differences (Former FRG – Former GDR), scale-normalized percentage differences, and two-sided p-values from Welch t-tests allowing for unequal variances. Percentage differences express the mean gap as a share of the respective scale range (1–7 for importance and concern; 0–100 for perceived level of democracy). Higher values indicate higher perceived levels of democracy, greater concern about the future of democracy, and greater importance attributed to democracy, respectively. Berlin is excluded from the analysis.

3.4.1 Layers of Democratic Attachment

Since strong supporters of the AfD stand out from the rest (as discussed above), we now examine respondent’s democratic attachment along each layer in relation to their likelihood to vote for different parties. This allows us to include the full sample (not only strong supporters but rather everyone who answered the likelihood to vote questions).

To examine how the layers of democratic attachment vary across the electorate, Figure 3 plots mean levels of (a) democratic importance, (b) perceived democratic performance, and (c) democratic concern by respondents’ self-reported likelihood of voting for each major party.

Across most parties, democratic attachment varies only modestly across the likelihood-to-vote scale. The group of AfD supporters stands out from the rest: respondents' proximity to the AfD is associated with pronounced shifts across all three layers of attachment: lower perceived democratic performance, slightly lower democratic importance, and markedly higher democratic concern. Further, the response pattern clearly indicates a polarization of the "likelihood to vote for the AfD" (see Figure 4a): while the vast majority of respondents state that they are extremely unlikely to vote for the AfD, a smaller group reports strong support.

Taken on their own, these patterns can be read in at least two ways: they may reflect citizens who remain democratically engaged but are deeply dissatisfied with how democracy functions, and/or they may reflect attachment to a different understanding of what democracy should entail. The following analysis documents this distinctive profile; the subsequent section on personal definitions clarifies which interpretation is warranted.

Normative attachment: importance of democracy. Across the full sample, respondents assign very high importance to democracy. The mean importance score is 6.24 on a seven-point scale (see red dashed line in Figure 3), with a median of 7, indicating that democracy is widely valued as a political ideal in Germany.

Against this backdrop of broadly high normative support, Figure 3 reveals a distinctive pattern with respect to proximity to the AfD. Respondents who report being *extremely unlikely* to vote for the AfD assign the highest importance to democracy. Importance declines as respondents' likelihood of voting for the AfD increases and is very low among those who report being *extremely likely* to vote for the party. Importantly, even among strong AfD supporters, the average importance of democracy remains relatively high (around six on the seven-point scale). Judged solely on the normative layer, AfD-proximate respondents would therefore still appear as democratically committed citizens, albeit less strongly so than those most opposed to the party.

Beyond party proximity, normative attachment to democracy is strongly structured by civic engagement and political information. Respondents who did not vote in the last election report substantially lower importance (mean = 5.63) than those who did vote (mean = 6.30), while those who did not report their voting history closely resemble non-voters. A similarly pronounced gradient emerges with political news consumption: respondents who follow political news daily assign significantly higher importance to democracy (mean = 6.56) than those who consume such news only sometimes (mean = 5.94) or never (mean = 5.36).

Socio-demographic differences are comparatively modest.⁸ Importance increases slightly with age and income, and respondents with a university degree report somewhat higher importance than the average. Gender differences are negligible. A persistent East–West divide is also visible: respondents born in or residing in the former GDR assign lower importance to democracy than their West German counterparts, although average levels remain high in both groups.

Taken together, the normative layer suggests a picture of broad democratic commitment across German society. Even groups that are highly critical of Germany's democratic performance,

⁸Appendix C.3 provides in-depth discussion of socio-demographic and political correlates of the importance the respondents attach to democracy.

most notably respondents proximate to the AfD, continue to attach considerable importance to democracy as a political ideal. On its own, this layer would therefore classify these respondents as normatively committed democrats.

Evaluative attachment: perceived level of democracy. On average, respondents rate Germany's level of democracy at 59.4 out of 100 (median = 65), suggesting that while many citizens view Germany as broadly democratic, some do not perceive it as a fully realized democracy. This assessment stands in notable contrast to expert-based evaluations: according to V-Dem's *Liberal Democracy Index* (Coppedge et al., 2024), Germany scored approximately 81,2 out of 100 in 2023. Naturally, citizen perceptions and expert-based indices are not *directly* comparable: V-Dem relies on expert codings of specific institutional components of democracy, whereas the survey captures respondents' subjective evaluations. Yet, the expert-based assessment serves as a cross-national comparative benchmark/reference point and is indicated by a blue dashed line in Figures 3, 9 and 10.

The evaluative layer reveals a clear gradient: the more supportive respondents are of the AfD, the less democratic they perceive Germany to be. Respondents who are *extremely unlikely* to vote for the AfD rate Germany as relatively democratic, with average values close to the upper end of the distribution in Figure 3 (around 68 on a 0–100 scale). As the likelihood of voting for the AfD increases, perceived democratic performance declines steadily. Respondents who are *extremely likely* to vote for the AfD on average place Germany's level of democracy at 38. That is far below the assessments of all other voter groups, indicating a substantial perceived democratic deficit. Taken at face value, this combination of high democratic importance and low performance evaluations is consistent with an interpretation of AfD supporters as normatively committed but deeply disappointed citizens.

Beyond party proximity, the evaluative layer of democratic attachment to democracy is strongly structured by patterns of political disengagement and weak civic integration.⁹ Respondents who abstained from voting, report no strong support for any party, (or those who express strong support for the AfD) consistently perceive substantially lower levels of democracy than more politically integrated groups. A similarly pronounced gradient emerges with political engagement and information: individuals with low political interest, infrequent participation in political discussion, or rare consumption of political news report markedly lower perceived democratic performance than respondents who engage with politics more regularly.

Socio-demographic differences are similar to those observed for the layer of normative attachment. Lower perceived levels of democracy are associated with lower income and educational attainment, as well as with being born in or residing in the former GDR, indicating a persistent East–West divide in evaluative orientations toward democracy. By contrast, differences across age groups are smaller than those observed for normative attachment, suggesting that generational variation plays a more limited role in shaping perceptions of democratic performance.

⁹Appendix C.4 provides a detailed discussion of socio-demographic and political correlates of perceived democratic performance.

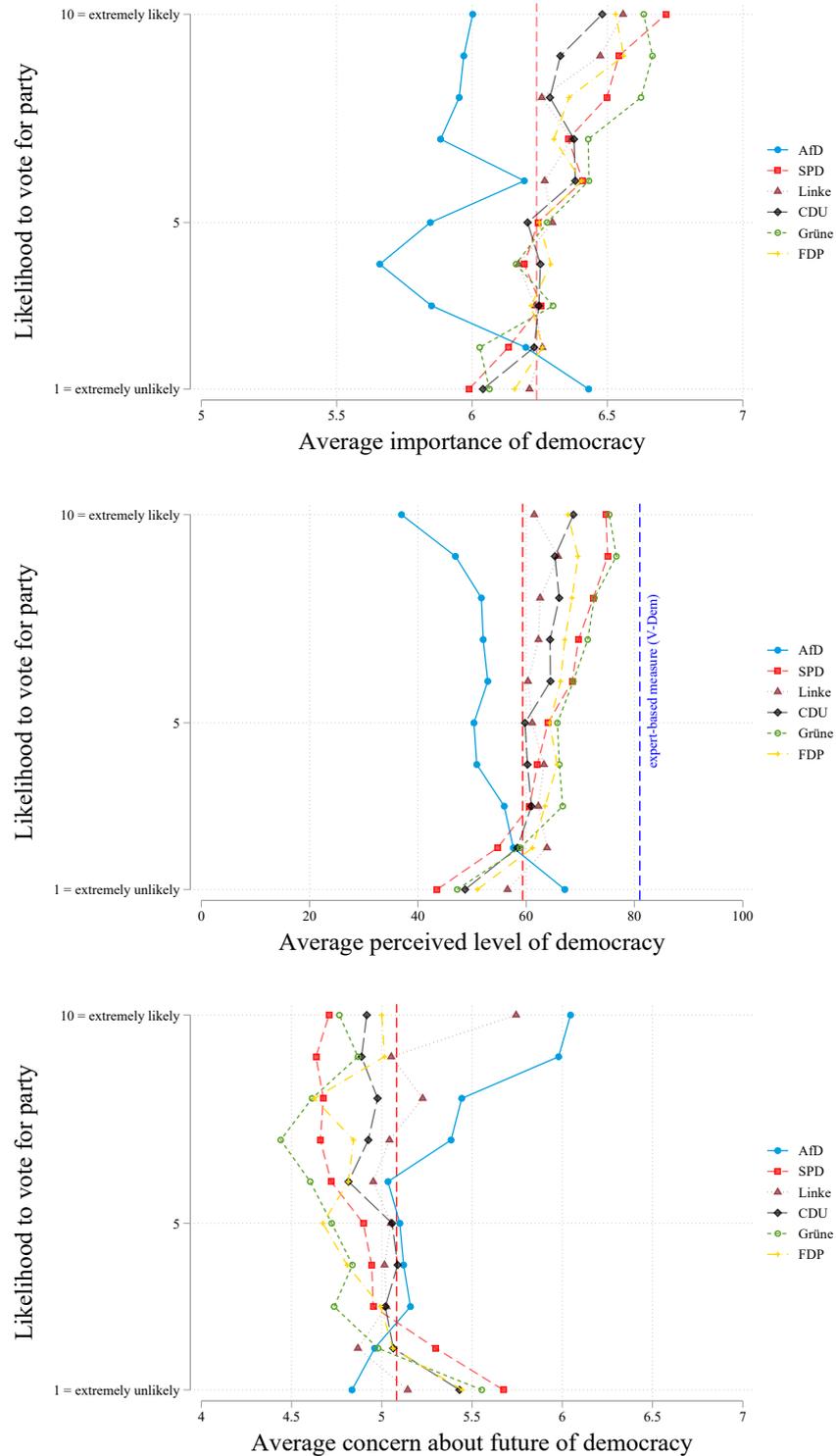


Figure 3: Democratic Attachment by Likelihood of Voting for Major German Parties

Notes: Each panel displays the relationship between respondents’ reported likelihood of voting for major German parties (AfD, SPD, CDU/CSU, Greens, FDP, and Die Linke) and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) the perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Within each panel, dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their likelihood of voting for a given party; lines connect group means to aid visual interpretation. The likelihood of voting for each party is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting “don’t know” (= 11) are excluded. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. Lines are descriptive and do not represent fitted regression models. Figures with confidence intervals for each party can be found in Appendix C.6.

Affective attachment: concern about democracy. Across the full sample, concern about the future of democracy is comparatively high. On a seven-point scale, the average level of concern is close to five, indicating that worries about democratic development are widespread rather than confined to specific political subgroups. Thus, affective engagement with democracy appears broadly shared among respondents.

Against this backdrop of generally elevated concern, Figure 3 reveals a striking and counter-intuitive pattern with respect to proximity to the AfD. Concern does not peak among respondents most opposed to the party. Instead, it increases steadily with respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the AfD and reaches its maximum among those who are most likely to support it. Strong AfD supporters exhibit exceptionally high concern, with an average value of 6.05 on the seven-point scale, substantially above the already elevated sample mean.

This pattern complicates an exclusively liberal-democratic interpretation of democratic concern: Respondents who are most critical of Germany's democratic performance are simultaneously those who express the strongest emotional engagement and sense of urgency regarding democracy's future. Consistent with the conceptual framework, concern therefore likely captures the intensity of affective engagement rather than the substantive direction of democratic commitment.

Beyond party proximity, affective attachment to democracy, captured by respondents' concern about the future of democracy, exhibits a less clearly structured pattern across both political and socio-demographic characteristics compared to normative and evaluative attachment.¹⁰ While lower political interest, infrequent engagement in political discussion, and rare consumption of political news are associated with lower levels of concern, differences between voters and non-voters are minimal, suggesting that affective orientations toward democracy are only weakly tied to formal political participation. Overall, the distribution of concern appears more diffuse and less systematically aligned with indicators of political integration than in the normative or evaluative dimensions.

Socio-demographic variation likewise remains comparatively ambiguous. Younger respondents tend to report lower levels of concern, potentially reflecting weaker political engagement rather than more positive democratic assessments, while women are slightly more concerned than men. Very low income and the absence of formal qualifications are associated with reduced concern, yet no consistent gradient emerges across broader income or education categories. In contrast to the muted socio-economic patterns, a pronounced regional divide persists: respondents residing in, particularly in Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, and Saxony, or born in the former GDR report considerably higher levels of concern about democracy's future than their West German counterparts.

The “don't know” category. Respondents who select “don't know” when asked about their likelihood of voting for the AfD do not resemble AfD supporters. Instead, their mean attitudes generally fall closer to intermediate groups, suggesting that “don't know” responses should not

¹⁰Appendix C.5 provides a detailed discussion of socio-demographic and political correlates of concern about the future of democracy.

be interpreted as concealed AfD support (Figure 13, Appendix C). In terms of importance, they still assign relatively high levels to democracy. Their evaluation of Germany's level of democracy is more moderate, and their level of concern about democracy is not particularly elevated.

Taken together, the three layers of attachment portray a distinct profile among AfD supporters: democracy remains important to them, they evaluate Germany's democracy particularly negatively, and they report high levels of democratic concern. These patterns suggest that negative evaluations of democratic performance among AfD supporters cannot be understood without considering the standards against which democracy is evaluated. The next section therefore examines whether this apparent democratic engagement reflects commitment to liberal-democratic principles or attachment to substantively different personal definitions of democracy.

3.4.2 Personal Definitions of Democracy

The analysis of democratic attachment revealed that AfD supporters appear normatively committed to democracy, highly concerned about its future, and deeply dissatisfied with its current functioning. These patterns, however, remain analytically ambiguous without considering what respondents understand democracy to entail. We therefore turn to personal definitions of democracy and compare strong AfD supporters with all other respondents. Focusing on three dimensions of people's personal definitions which can be in tension with liberal democratic principles, i.e. majoritarianism, unmediated politics, and anti-pluralism, we show that AfD supporters hold systematically different democratic benchmarks. These differences help explain why democratic dissatisfaction and concern among AfD supporters coexist with strong democratic attachment across the layers.

Table 3 displays averages for each item among AfD supporters and all other respondents. The results point in the same direction as the central empirical findings of Steiner and Landwehr (2018): supporters of the AfD exhibit systematically different understandings of democracy than all of our other respondents combined. In particular, AfD supporters are more likely to endorse conceptions of democracy that emphasize unconstrained majoritarianism, demand unmediated responsiveness from political representatives, and express skepticism toward political pluralism, elements that are invoked in the name of democracy but stand in tension with core principles of liberal democracy. This is why assessing democratic commitment requires considering both democratic attachment and the content of democratic beliefs.

Appendix D further illustrates that AfD supporters hold a substantively distinct understanding of democracy across all three dimensions compared to respondents who support any other, or no party at all, or two or more parties. As shown in Figures 19–21 (Appendix D.4), AfD supporters consistently occupy the most extreme positions, expressing strong support for unconstrained majority rule, skepticism toward political pluralism and compromise, and a preference for direct responsiveness over institutional mediation. In contrast, supporters of other parties cluster closer to the scale midpoint and display more internally heterogeneous views. These findings underscore that AfD supporters' democratic dissatisfaction is likely anchored in a personal definition of democracy that diverges from the liberal-democratic logic of Germany's constitutional order.

Table 3: Mean Differences in Populist Attitudes: AfD Supporters vs. Others

	Mean (Others)	Mean (AfD)	Difference	p-value
<i>Majoritarianism</i>				
maj1	5.38	4.53	0.85	< 0.001
maj2	4.68	5.22	-0.54	< 0.001
maj3	4.64	5.17	-0.53	< 0.001
<i>Unmediated Politics</i>				
unm1	3.38	2.15	1.23	< 0.001
unm2	5.37	6.03	-0.65	< 0.001
unm3	3.86	2.65	1.20	< 0.001
<i>Anti-pluralism</i>				
anti1	4.40	4.99	-0.59	< 0.001
anti2	3.24	3.56	-0.32	0.005

Notes: The table reports mean values for AfD supporters and all other respondents, mean differences (Others vs. AfD), and two-sided p-values from t-tests. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree completely; 7 = fully agree); Higher values indicate more populist attitudes for maj2, maj3, unm2, anti1, anti2. Lower values indicate more populist attitudes for maj1, unm1, unm3. Party support is derived from respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party. Respondents reporting a likelihood of 9 or 10 for at least one party are classified as strong supporters.

Items:

(maj1) "Minority rights must also be protected from majority decisions."

(maj2) "Majority decisions must apply, even if they restrict the rights of minorities."

(maj3) "If a political decision is supported by a large majority of the population, this indicates that the decision is the right one."

(unm1) "The government should stick to planned measures even if the majority of citizens are against them."

(unm2) "The government should change planned measures if the majority of citizens do not support them."

(unm3) "Members of parliament should make decisions according to their conscience, even if the majority of citizens disagree."

(anti1) "The conflicts between different interest groups in our society are detrimental to the common good."

(anti2) "As a rule, conflicts cannot be resolved through discussion and negotiation."

A potential concern is that these differences may be driven by East–West variation in democratic socialization rather than by party support per se, given the persistent East–West divides observed across the layers of democratic attachment. To address this, we replicate the analysis i) for respondents born in the former GDR and ii) for respondents currently living in former East German states (reported in Appendix D.4) While respondents from the former GDR exhibit somewhat stronger majoritarian and unmediated democratic views than those from the former FRG, these differences are smaller and less consistent than those observed for AfD supporters, suggesting that the latter pattern cannot be explained by GDR–FRG socialization alone.

3.5 Limitations

The broader survey included an experimental component that randomized the order of one open- and several closed-ended questions on the meaning of democracy. As shown elsewhere (Boese-Schlösser et al., 2025), the closed-ended questions in this survey can act as primes, leading respondents to reflect on specific dimensions of democracy. The questions used to operationalize the normative and the evaluative layers were asked *before* participants encountered a block of

items about democratic decision-making and *before* they were prompted to answer the open-ended question “What is democracy to you?”. In contrast, the question on the affective layer, i.e. on concern about the future of democracy appeared only *after* respondents had reflected in depth on what democracy means to them. This sequencing may have influenced how people assessed their concern. Multivariate regressions reported in Table 5 (Appendix B) indicate that question order has a small effect on reported concern. Respondents who received the closed-ended questions first report slightly lower concern on average (-0.13 on a 1–7 scale).

More broadly, survey-based measures of democratic attachment rely on self-reported responses to abstract questions, which may not fully capture individuals’ priorities when confronted with concrete trade-offs. Experimental evidence shows that expressed support for democratic principles can diverge from revealed preferences, particularly under conditions of material stress, highlighting the interpretive limits of attitudinal self-reports while underscoring their value as indicators of stated democratic commitment rather than behavioral commitment (Mortenson and Nisbet, 2025).

4 Discussion & Implications

Distinguishing between AfD elites and supporters: democratic benchmarks and endogenous cycles of discontent. Our findings suggest that negative evaluations of democratic performance are best understood not only as responses to institutional outcomes, but also as reflections of the standards against which democracy is evaluated. Among AfD supporters, democratic dissatisfaction appears closely linked to personal definitions of democracy that diverge from the liberal-democratic principles embedded in Germany’s constitutional order. When citizens evaluate democracy against benchmarks that existing institutions were never designed to meet, disappointment becomes structurally likely rather than episodic. This opens the door to an endogenous cycle in which AfD politicians have incentives to promote increasingly illiberal or majoritarian conceptions of democracy, thereby shifting citizens’ evaluative reference points further away from institutional realities and generating persistent democratic discontent. While our descriptive analysis cannot establish causal direction, the framework highlights how democratic dissatisfaction may be actively produced and politically mobilized rather than simply reflecting objective institutional decline. The potentially self-reinforcing, endogenous cycle between party messaging, personal definitions of democracy, democratic dissatisfaction, and electoral support, warrants further investigation.

Causation, endogeneity, and multidirectional relationships. This study does not make causal claims about the direction of influence between party support, democratic attachment, and personal definitions of democracy. The relationships we observe are likely multidirectional and endogenous. Citizens who are more concerned about democracy may be more receptive to populist messages, just as sustained exposure to such messages may heighten concern and dissatisfaction. Our contribution lies not in resolving these causal questions, but in providing a framework that brings conceptual clarity to the relationships involved and helps structure future research aimed at disentangling these dynamics.

The motivational potential of different layers of democratic attachment. Existing research has examined the mobilizing potential of democratic dissatisfaction and negative performance evaluations. Much less is known about the motivational role of affective attachment, feelings such as concern, anxiety, or perceived urgency regarding democracy. Our findings suggest that the affective layer may be particularly important for political mobilization, including mobilization in illiberal directions. Understanding how emotions related to democracy translate into political behavior remains a crucial task for future research.

Personal definitions of democracy as malleable and often implicit. Personal definitions of democracy should not be understood as fixed, fully conscious ideological commitments. Rather, they are often implicit, malleable, and shaped by political discourse and elite messaging. As shown in related work (Boese-Schlösser et al., 2025), such definitions can even be influenced by question framing and informational cues. This underscores the vulnerability of democratic definitions to strategic manipulation by populist actors and highlights the importance of studying how democratic meanings are formed, reinforced, and contested in public discourse.

Misalignment rather than deception. Our results do not imply that citizens with illiberal conceptions of democracy are intentionally misrepresenting their democratic commitments. Instead, they point to a genuine misalignment between citizens' personal understandings of democracy and the liberal-democratic principles embedded in Germany's constitutional order. Individuals may sincerely endorse democracy while holding definitions that are partially incompatible with liberal democracy. This distinction is crucial for avoiding normative mischaracterizations of citizens as disingenuous or anti-democratic.

Degrees, trade-offs, and the weighting of democratic principles. Most citizens' understandings of democracy are not wholly opposed to liberal democracy. Elements such as majority rule and popular sovereignty are integral components of liberal-democratic systems as well. The key differences lie in questions of degree, prioritization, and trade-offs, particularly regarding the extent to which majority rule should be constrained by minority rights, rule of law, and institutional checks. These findings highlight the need to think more carefully about substitutability and complementarity among democratic dimensions, both in empirical research and in normative debates. Furthermore, evidence suggests that these political prioritizations are often moderated by external material factors, with citizens acting as "benefit seekers" who may trade away abstract procedural norms for economic security when foundational needs are not met (Ceka and Magalhães, 2020; Mortenson and Nisbet, 2025). Future research is needed to determine whether these external trade-offs operate by depressing the normative importance of democracy relative to survival, or by triggering negative evaluations and affective concern when a system is perceived as failing to deliver tangible distributive outcomes.

5 Conclusion

This study introduces a layered framework of democratic commitment that analytically separates the substantive principles citizens associate with democracy, i.e. their personal definitions, from the modes through which they attach/relate to these ideals. We conceptualize this attachment as

comprising three distinct layers: a normative layer (the importance one attaches to democracy), an evaluative layer (the assessment of democratic performance), and an affective layer (emotional engagement, such as concern about its future). Personal definitions permeate all three layers of attachment: People value, evaluate, and worry about democracy *as they understand it*.

The central theoretical contribution of this study lies in distinguishing between the *what* of democratic commitment, i.e. citizens' personal definitions of democracy, and the *how*, i.e. the layers through which they relate to these definitions normatively, evaluatively, and affectively. By integrating both elements (the “what” and the “how”), the framework provides the diagnostic leverage necessary to identify when strong democratic attachment actually masks support for illiberal or majoritarian institutional transformations.

The empirical application of this framework to a representative survey of 3,399 respondents in Germany in late 2023 demonstrates that failing to separate these dimensions risks conflating fundamentally different forms of democratic commitment: Across the electorate, normative importance of democracy is overwhelmingly high, yet evaluations of performance are critical, and affective concern is widespread. These patterns were most pronounced among supporters of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), who reported exceptionally high concern and the lowest performance evaluations. However, our analysis of personal definitions showed that AfD supporters are systematically more likely to endorse majoritarian, unmediated, and anti-pluralist definitions of democracy. This suggests their disappointment is rooted in a genuine misalignment between their personal benchmarks and Germany's constitutional liberal-democratic order, rather than a rejection of democracy as a label.

For both researchers and practitioners, our findings underscore the importance of explicitly engaging with competing understandings/personal definitions of democracy. Avoiding normative clarification may allow illiberal interpretations to gain traction under the umbrella of democratic rhetoric. Democratic resilience therefore requires sustained public debate about what democracy means, where its limits lie, and why liberal-democratic constraints are essential features rather than obstacles to popular rule, particularly in the German context, where democracy was explicitly designed to guard against unconstrained majoritarianism.

References

- Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton University Press. Retrieved June 8, 2023, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183pnr2>
- Angenendt, M., & Kinski, L. (2024). Germany: Political developments and data in 2023. *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook*, 63(1), 171–182. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/2047-8852.12448>
- Baviskar, S., & Malone, M. F. T. (2004). What democracy means to citizens—and why it matters [ISBN: 0924-0608 Publisher: JSTOR]. *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe/European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 3–23.
- Bermeo, N. (2003). Ordinary people in extraordinary times: The citizenry and the breakdown of democracy.
- Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of democracy*, 27(1), 5–19.
- Boese, V. A. [Vanessa Alexandra]. (2019). How (not) to measure democracy. *International Area Studies Review*, 22(2), 95–127.
- Boese-Schlosser, V. A., Bayerlein, M., Gates, S., Kamin, K., & Murshed, S. M. (2023). *Trust issues? how being socialised in an autocracy shapes vaccine uptake* (tech. rep.). WZB Discussion Paper.
- Boese-Schlosser, V. A., Klatt, N., Meißner, D., Ngiam, J., & Ziblatt, D. (2025). How survey design influences people’s understanding of democracy. *WZB TD Discussion Paper SP V*, (504).
- Bratton, M. (2010). The Meanings of Democracy: Anchoring the” D-Word” in Africa [ISBN: 1086-3214 Publisher: Johns Hopkins University Press]. *Journal of Democracy*, 21(4), 106–113.
- Ceka, B., & Magalhães, P. C. (2020). Do the rich and the poor have different conceptions of democracy? socioeconomic status, inequality, and the political status quo. *Comparative Politics*, 52(3), 383–412. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5129/001041520X15670823829196>
- Chu, Y.-h., Diamond, L., Nathan, A. J., & Shin, D. C. (2008). *How east Asians view democracy*. Columbia University Press.
- Claassen, C. (2020). Does public support help democracy survive? *American Journal of Political Science*, 64(1), 118–134.
- Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Borella, C., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, H., Linnea Gjerløw, Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Krusell, J., Marquardt, K. L., ... Ziblatt, D. (2024). V-dem country-year dataset v14. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds24>
- Easton, D. (1965). A systems analysis of political life er.
- Edgell, A. B., Maerz, S. F., Maxwell, L., Morgan, R., Medzihorsky, J., Wilson, M. C., Boese, V. A. [Vanessa A], Hellmeier, S., Lachapelle, J., Lindenfors, P., et al. (2025). Episodes of regime transformation dataset (v15. 0). *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*.

- Federal Republic of Germany. (2025). Basic law for the federal republic of germany (revised version published in the federal law gazette part iii, classification number 100—1, as last amended by the act of 22 march 2025 (federal law gazette 2025 i, no. 94)) [Accessed: 15 January 2026]. *Federal Law Gazette / Bundesgesetzblatt*.
- Ferrín, M., & Kriesi, H. (2016). *How Europeans view and evaluate democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- GESIS. (2017). Gesis panel–standard edition (gesis data archive, za5665 data file, version 17.0.0).
- Gidengil, E., Stolle, D., & BERGERON-BOUTIN, O. (2022). The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: A comparative perspective. *European Journal of Political Research*, 61(4), 901–929.
- Graham, M. H., & Svobik, M. W. (2020). Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States [ISBN: 0003-0554 Publisher: Cambridge University Press]. *American Political Science Review*, 114(2), 392–409.
- Grossman, G., Kronick, D., Levendusky, M., & Meredith, M. (2022). The majoritarian threat to liberal democracy. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 9(1), 36–45.
- Kirsch, H., & Welzel, C. (2019). Democracy Misunderstood: Authoritarian Notions of Democracy around the Globe. *Social Forces*, 98(1), 59–92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soy114>
- Klingemann, H.-D., & Fuchs, D. (1995). *Citizens and the State* (Vol. 1). OUP Oxford.
- Landwehr, C., & Steiner, N. D. (2017). Where democrats disagree: Citizens' normative conceptions of democracy. *Political Studies*, 65(4), 786–804.
- Lipset, S. M. (1959). Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy. *American political science review*, 53(1), 69–105.
- Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Wilson, M. C., Hellmeier, S., & Lindberg, S. I. (2023). Episodes of regime transformation. *Journal of Peace Research*, 00223433231168192.
- Marcus, G. E., Sullivan, J. L., Theiss-Morse, E., & Stevens, D. (2005). The emotional foundation of political cognition: The impact of extrinsic anxiety on the formation of political tolerance judgments. *Political Psychology*, 26(6), 949–963.
- Merkel, W., & Lührmann, A. (2021). Resilience of democracies: Responses to illiberal and authoritarian challenges.
- Mortenson, C. R., & Nisbet, E. C. (2025). Benefit seekers or principle holders? experimental evidence on americans' democratic trade-offs. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–23.
- Neundorff, A. (2010). Democracy in transition: A micro perspective on system change in post-socialist societies. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(4), 1096–1108.
- Norris, P. (2011a). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Norris, P. (2011b). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Osterberg-Kaufmann, N., Stark, T., & Mohamad-Klotzbach, C. (2020). Challenges in conceptualizing and measuring meanings and understandings of democracy. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, 14(4), 299–320.
- Schmidtke, O. (2023). The 'will of the people': The populist challenge to democracy in the name of popular sovereignty. *Social & Legal Studies*, 32(6), 911–929.

- Schroeder, W., Ziblatt, D., & Bochert, F. (2025). *Hält die brandmauer? eine gesamtdeutsche analyse: Wer unterstützt die afd in den deutschen kreistagen (2019–2024)* (Discussion Paper SP V 2025-501). Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB). Berlin.
- Shah, T. M. (2024). Emotions in politics: A review of contemporary perspectives and trends. *International Political Science Abstracts*, 74(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208345241232769>
- Simonovits, G., McCoy, J., & Littvay, L. (2022). Democratic hypocrisy and out-group threat: Explaining citizen support for democratic erosion. *The Journal of Politics*, 84(3), 1806–1811.
- Steiner, N. D., & Landwehr, C. (2018). Populistische demokratiekonzeptionen und die wahl der afd: Evidenz aus einer panelstudie. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 59(3), 463–491.
- Teorell, J., Coppedge, M., Lindberg, S., & Skaaning, S.-E. (2019). Measuring polyarchy across the globe, 1900–2017. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 54, 71–95.
- van Ham, C., Thomassen, J., Aarts, K., & Andeweg, R. (2017). *Myth and reality of the legitimacy crisis: Explaining trends and cross-national differences in established democracies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198793717.001.0001>
- Vasilopoulos, P., Marcus, G. E., Valentino, N. A., & Foucault, M. (2019). Fear, anger, and voting for the far right: Evidence from the november 13, 2015 paris terror attacks. *Political Psychology*, 40(4), 679–704. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12513>
- Vittori, D. (2022). Threat or corrective? assessing the impact of populist parties in government on the qualities of democracy: A 19-country comparison. *Government and Opposition*, 57(4), 589–609.
- Wunsch, N., & Gessler, T. (2023). Who tolerates democratic backsliding? a mosaic approach to voters' responses to authoritarian leadership in hungary. *Democratization*, 1–24.
- Wunsch, N., Jacob, M. S., & Derksen, L. (2022). The demand side of democratic backsliding: How divergent understandings of democracy shape political choice.

Online Appendix

A	Sample Descriptives	(i)
B	Multivariate Regressions	(iv)
C	Descriptives	(vii)
C.1	Distribution of <i>Likelihood to Vote for Party [...] Variables</i>	(vii)
C.2	Distributions of <i>Layers of Democratic Attachment Variables</i>	(ix)
C.3	Descriptives for the Normative Layer: Importance of Democracy	(x)
C.4	Descriptives for the Evaluative Layer: Perceived Level of Democracy	(xiii)
C.5	Descriptives for the Affective Layer: Concern about the Future Democracy	(xvii)
C.6	Layers of Democratic Attachment by Party Support	(xx)
D	Evidence on Populist Conceptions of Democracy by Party Support	(xxvii)
D.1	Anti-Pluralism	(xxvii)
D.2	Majoritarianism	(xxviii)
D.3	Unmediated Politics	(xxix)
D.4	Mean Differences in Populist Conceptions (T-Tests)	(xxx)
E	Deviations from the Pre-Analysis Plan	(xxxii)
F	Full Survey	(xxxiii)

A Sample Descriptives

The sample comprises respondents from diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education, income, and political engagement (see Table 4). Most participants are between 30 and 59 years old, with the largest group aged 60–75 (27%). The majority were born in the Federal Republic of Germany (76%), though a notable share were born in the former GDR (19%). Educational attainment is relatively high: over half of respondents completed an apprenticeship (50%) or technical school (14%), and another 26% hold a university or technical college degree. Income levels vary, based on self-reported monthly net household income, with the largest group earning between €1,500 – €2,499 per month (25%), followed by €2,500 – €3,499 (21%). The sample consists of slightly more females (50.5%) than males (49.2%), with a small number of respondents (<1%) identifying as non-binary, other, or preferring not to disclose. The sample includes residents from all German states, with the highest proportions from North Rhine-Westphalia (22%), Bavaria (15%), and Baden-Württemberg (13%). A large majority (90%) report having voted in previous elections. Interest in politics is moderate to high for most respondents, and political news consumption as well as political discussions are common, though only a minority engage in them daily.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Sample

Variable	Category	N	Percent	Cumulative
State				
	Baden-Wuerttemberg	445	13.09	13.09
	Bayern	512	15.06	28.16
	Berlin	132	3.88	32.04
	Brandenburg	101	2.97	35.01
	Bremen	33	0.97	35.98
	Hamburg	68	2.00	37.98
	Hesse	231	6.80	44.78
	Mecklenburg-Western-Pomerania	66	1.94	46.72
	Lower Saxony	342	10.06	56.78
	North-Rhine Westphalia	754	22.18	78.96
	Rhineland-Palatine	170	5.00	83.97
	Saarland	34	1.00	84.97
	Saxony	171	5.03	90.00
	Saxony-Anhalt	101	2.97	92.97
	Schleswig-Holstein	137	4.03	97.00
	Thuringia	102	3.00	100.00
Age				
	18 to 29 years	627	18.45	18.45
	30 to 39 years	578	17.01	35.45
	40 to 49 years	549	16.15	51.60
	50 to 59 years	720	21.18	72.79
	60 to 75 years	925	27.21	100.00

Continued on next page

Table 4 continued

Variable	Category	N	Percent	Cumulative
Income				
	0-499	113	3.32	3.32
	500-1499	554	16.30	19.62
	1,500-2,499	833	24.51	44.13
	2,500-3,499	724	21.30	65.43
	3,500-4,499	524	15.42	80.85
	4,500-5,499	361	10.62	91.47
	5,500 or more	290	8.53	100.00
Education				
	without qualification	176	5.18	5.18
	apprenticeship	1,702	50.07	55.25
	technical school	490	14.42	69.67
	university/technical college degree	889	26.15	95.82
	still in vocational training	95	2.79	98.62
	other degree	47	1.38	100.00
Partisanship				
	no strong supporter of any party	1,662	48.90	48.90
	strongly supports one party	1,403	41.28	90.17
	strongly supports two or more parties	334	9.83	100.00
Country of birth				
	GDR	636	18.71	18.71
	FRG	2,590	76.20	94.91
	other	173	5.09	100.00
Voted in previous elections				
	No	287	8.44	8.44
	Yes	3,067	90.23	98.68
	No answer	45	1.32	100.00
Political interest				
	1 = not interested at all	177	5.21	5.21
	2	156	4.59	9.80
	3	293	8.62	18.42
	4	513	15.09	33.51
	5	851	25.04	58.55
	6	879	25.86	84.41
	7 = extremely interested	514	15.12	99.53
	I don't know	16	0.47	100.00
Discussing politics with others				
	never	187	5.50	5.50
	sometimes	1,251	36.80	42.31
	regularly	797	23.45	65.75
	often	886	26.07	91.82
	every day	254	7.47	99.29
	I don't know	24	0.71	100.00
Consumption of political media				
	never	169	4.97	4.97

Continued on next page

Table 4 continued

Variable	Category	N	Percent	Cumulative
	sometimes	780	22.95	27.92
	regularly	800	23.54	51.46
	often	521	15.33	66.78
	every day	1,100	32.36	99.15
	I am not sure	29	0.85	100.00

Note: The sample was drawn using quota sampling based on age, gender, state, and education, aligned with the population structure defined in the b4p (best for planning) 2022 III survey with Sinus-Milieus.

B Multivariate Regressions

Table 5: Multivariate Survey Regressions on Attitudes Toward Democracy

Dependent variable:	(1) Importance	(2) Level of Democracy	(3) Concern
Age	0.006*** (0.001)	-0.010 (0.025)	0.007*** (0.002)
Country of birth (ref. GDR):			
FRG	0.167** (0.068)	3.574*** (1.168)	-0.143* (0.086)
other	0.179 (0.126)	7.366*** (1.948)	-0.118 (0.143)
State (ref. Baden-Wuerttemberg):			
Bayern	0.148** (0.066)	0.034 (1.286)	0.086 (0.097)
Berlin	0.108 (0.108)	2.084 (1.823)	0.035 (0.154)
Brandenburg	0.133 (0.125)	-2.711 (2.527)	-0.003 (0.183)
Bremen	0.035 (0.152)	2.019 (3.784)	-0.122 (0.256)
Hamburg	0.084 (0.145)	-1.307 (2.828)	0.035 (0.196)
Hesse	0.045 (0.086)	0.182 (1.632)	0.060 (0.125)
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	-0.297 (0.195)	1.063 (3.159)	-0.346 (0.247)
Lower Saxony	0.082 (0.077)	0.225 (1.397)	0.027 (0.109)
North Rhine-Westphalia	0.123* (0.064)	0.886 (1.214)	0.028 (0.094)
Rhineland-Palatine	0.077 (0.089)	-0.017 (1.796)	-0.205 (0.142)
Saarland	-0.159 (0.201)	-0.554 (3.026)	0.023 (0.242)
Saxony	0.128 (0.107)	0.150 (1.898)	0.174 (0.137)
Saxony-Anhalt	0.173 (0.129)	0.850 (2.479)	0.006 (0.165)
Schleswig-Holstein	0.157 (0.105)	4.289** (2.050)	-0.057 (0.162)
Thuringia	0.086 (0.153)	0.661 (2.515)	0.280 (0.171)
Gender (ref. female):			
male	-0.116*** (0.038)	2.880*** (0.746)	-0.350*** (0.055)
non-binary	-0.685 (0.594)	-0.079 (5.879)	-1.292 (0.978)
prefer not to disclose	-0.422	9.846**	2.175***

Continued on next page

Table 5 continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Importance	Level of Democracy	Concern
	(1.031)	(4.023)	(0.357)
other	0.381***	33.846***	-1.539***
	(0.139)	(2.434)	(0.178)
Education (ref. without qualification):			
apprenticeship	-0.122	-0.790	0.184
	(0.109)	(1.883)	(0.138)
technical school	-0.216*	-0.458	0.166
	(0.115)	(2.031)	(0.152)
university/technical college degree	-0.182*	0.690	0.030
	(0.110)	(1.924)	(0.145)
still in vocational training	0.119	2.143	0.048
	(0.142)	(2.577)	(0.197)
other degree	-0.240	7.824**	-0.036
	(0.185)	(3.161)	(0.295)
Income			
	0.031**	1.065***	-0.008
	(0.013)	(0.237)	(0.019)
Voted in previous elections (ref. No):			
Yes	0.328***	4.484***	-0.143
	(0.098)	(1.443)	(0.113)
No answer	-0.324	2.815	0.058
	(0.264)	(3.872)	(0.293)
Political interest			
	0.174***	1.887***	0.045*
	(0.022)	(0.343)	(0.025)
Discussing politics with others (ref. never):			
sometimes	0.179	-0.468	-0.209
	(0.133)	(2.039)	(0.174)
regularly	0.144	-2.036	-0.075
	(0.140)	(2.204)	(0.184)
often	0.224	-3.042	0.166
	(0.142)	(2.268)	(0.187)
every day	0.341**	-5.899**	0.524**
	(0.153)	(2.646)	(0.206)
I don't know	0.846***	-15.102***	-0.464
	(0.302)	(4.850)	(0.469)
Consumption of political news (ref. never):			
sometimes	0.131	4.505**	-0.104
	(0.152)	(2.231)	(0.177)
regularly	0.127	6.479***	-0.136
	(0.159)	(2.348)	(0.182)
often	0.032	8.178***	-0.169
	(0.164)	(2.455)	(0.190)
every day	0.156	11.395***	-0.342*
	(0.165)	(2.455)	(0.191)
I am not sure	0.121	5.478	0.747**
	(0.301)	(4.528)	(0.364)
Question order (ref. OE first):			
CE first	0.058	0.671	-0.129**
	(0.036)	(0.696)	(0.053)

Continued on next page

Table 5 continued

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Importance	Level of Democracy	Concern
Likelihood voting for:			
CDU/CSU	0.018*** (0.006)	1.175*** (0.126)	-0.029*** (0.009)
Grüne	0.030*** (0.007)	1.385*** (0.137)	-0.039*** (0.011)
SPD	0.012* (0.007)	1.223*** (0.154)	-0.054*** (0.013)
FDP	-0.002 (0.007)	0.170 (0.157)	-0.025** (0.012)
AfD	-0.043*** (0.007)	-2.225*** (0.125)	0.077*** (0.009)
Linke	-0.002 (0.007)	-0.500*** (0.149)	0.048*** (0.011)
Constant	4.194*** (0.233)	22.676*** (3.417)	5.374*** (0.283)
Number of observations	3,399	3,399	3,399

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses
Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

C Descriptives

C.1 Distribution of Likelihood to Vote for Party [...] -Variables

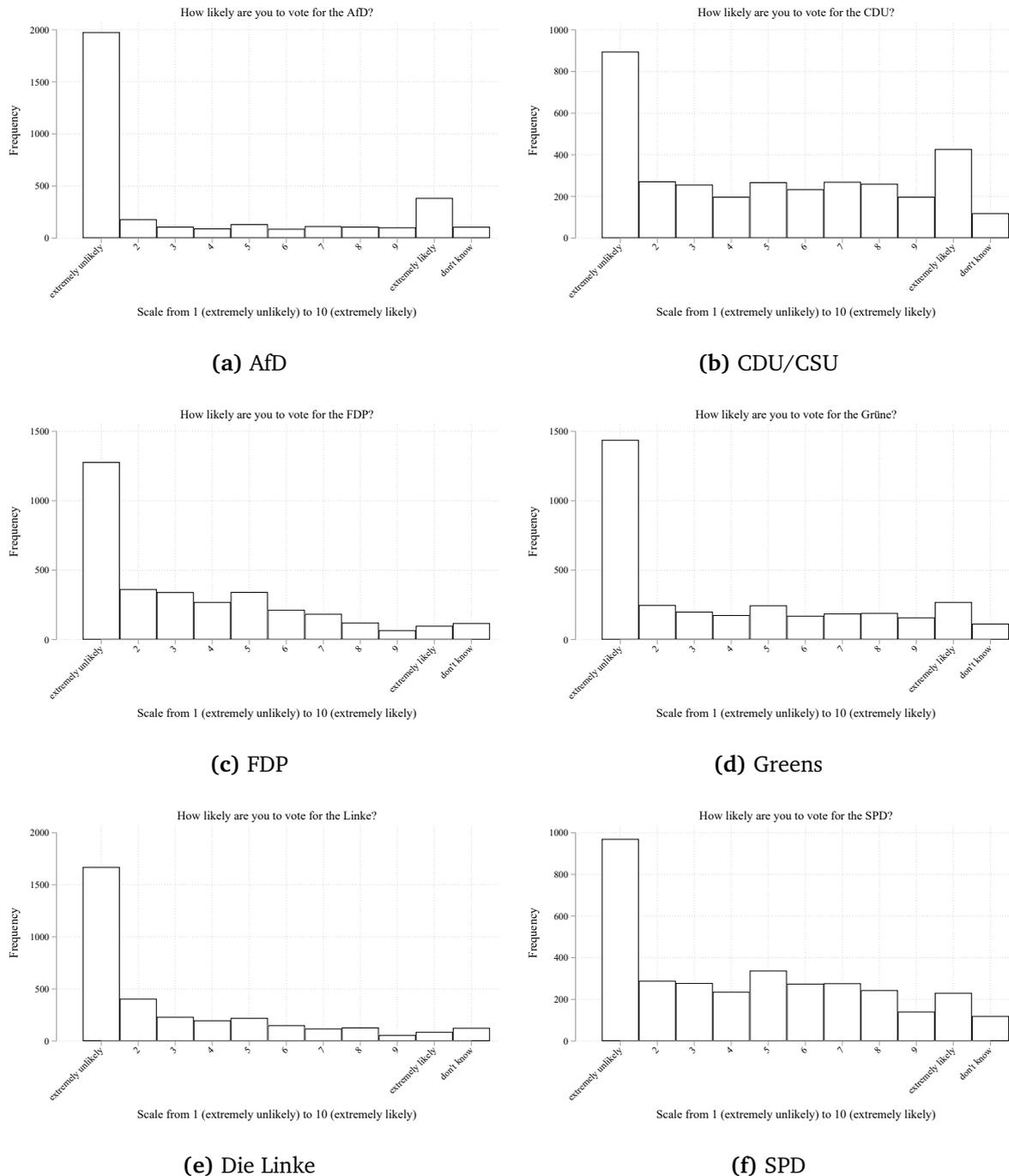


Figure 4: Distributions of Likelihood to Vote for Major German Parties

Notes: The figure displays the frequency distribution of respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party. Each panel shows responses on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely). Respondents selecting "don't know" (=11) are included in all panels. Higher values indicate a greater stated likelihood of voting for the respective party.

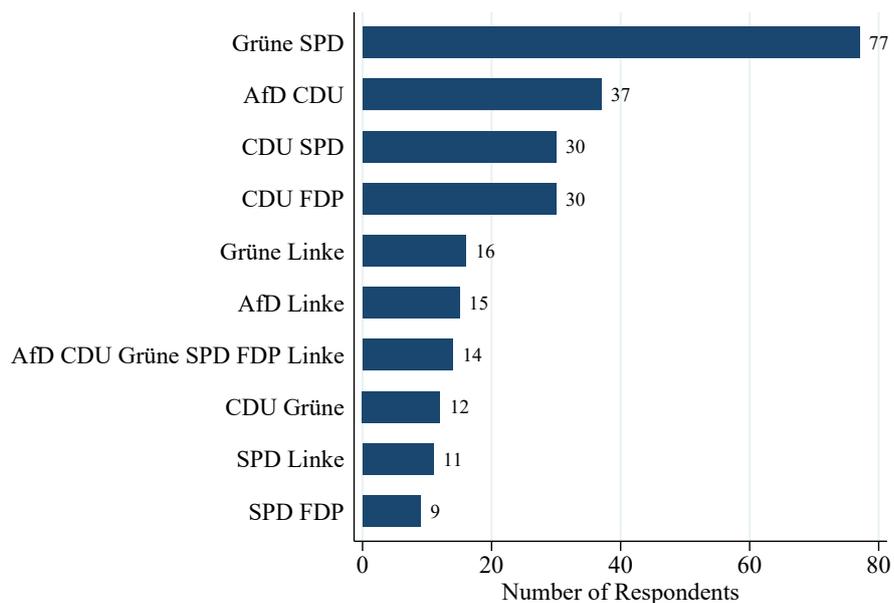


Figure 5: Party Support Combinations among Multiple-Party Supporters

Notes: The figure reports the most common combinations of political parties among respondents who express strong support for more than one party. Party support is derived from respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major party on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely). Strong support is defined as a likelihood score of 9 or 10. Each bar represents the number of respondents who report strong support for the corresponding combination of parties.

C.2 Distributions of *Layers of Democratic Attachment-Variables*

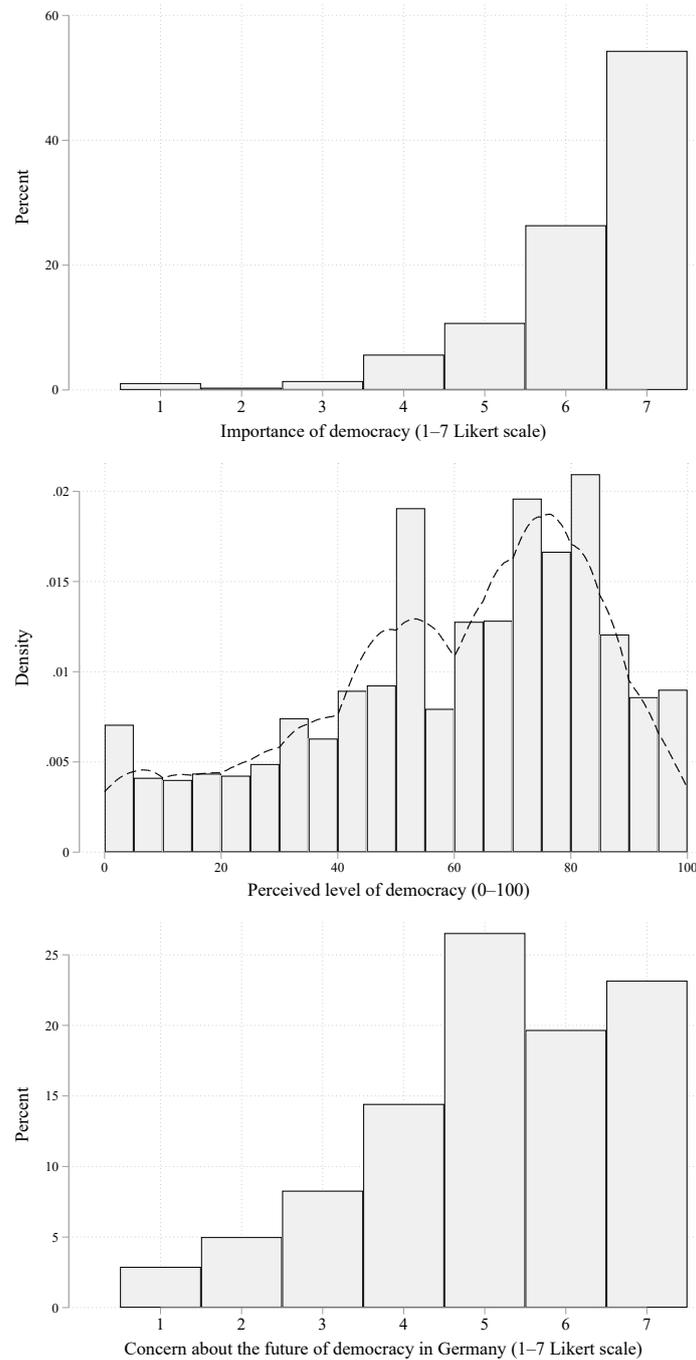


Figure 6: Distributions of Democratic Attitudes

Notes: The figure displays the distribution of respondents' attitudes toward democracy across three dimensions: (a) the importance of democracy, (b) the perceived level of democracy in Germany, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Panels (a) and (c) show the percentage distribution of responses on 7-point Likert scales, where higher values indicate greater importance and greater concern, respectively. Panel (b) presents the density distribution of the perceived level of democracy measured on a 0–100 scale; the histogram is overlaid with a kernel density estimate to illustrate the shape of the distribution. All figures report descriptive distributions of individual responses; no conditioning on covariates or model-based estimates is applied.

C.3 Descriptives for the Normative Layer: Importance of Democracy

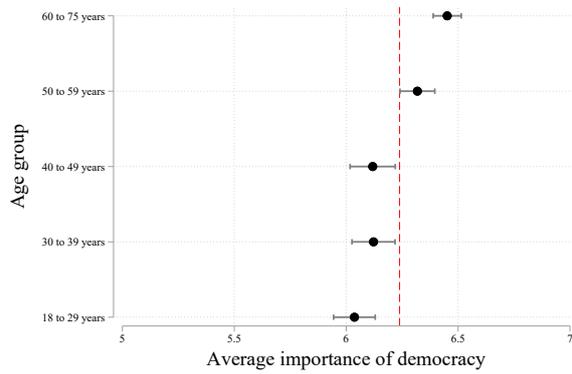
Overall, respondents assign high importance to democracy (mean = 6.24 on a 0–7 scale; median = 7, where 0 denotes the least and 7 the highest importance).

Patterns linked to civic engagement and information are pronounced. Those who did *not* vote in the last election for which they were eligible (255 respondents) report markedly lower importance (group mean = 5.63) than those who did vote (2,998 respondents; group mean = 6.30). Respondents who refrained from answering the voting-history question (37 respondents) resemble non-voters (group mean = 5.62). A similarly clear gradient appears for consumption of political news: respondents who follow political news *every day* assign substantially higher importance (group mean = 6.56) than the average, whereas those who consume such news only *sometimes* (5.94) or *never* (5.36) fall significantly below the mean. We make no causal claim here; the association may equally reflect that people who attach greater importance to democracy consume more political news.

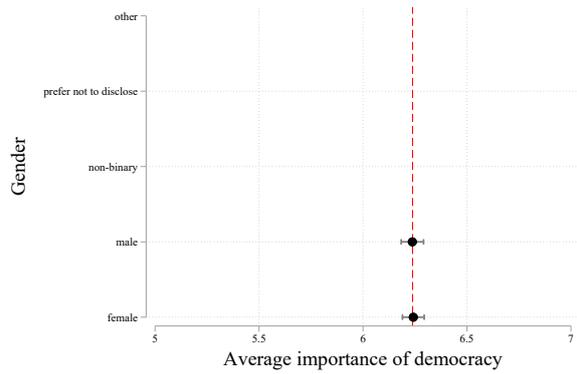
Socio-demographic contrasts are more modest. Importance rises with age: respondents aged 50 and above report slightly higher scores than those under 49. Education shows one notable deviation from the overall mean: respondents with a university degree (or equivalent) rate democracy more highly (group mean = 6.32) than the average, while other educational groups do not differ significantly. We observe no significant differences by gender. Income is positively associated with importance: respondents in higher-income households (\geq €3,500 per month) report higher importance (group means \geq 6.32) than those in the lowest income bracket (\leq €499; group mean = 5.9).

Origins and geography also matter. Respondents born in the Federal Republic of Germany assign higher importance (group mean = 6.30) than those born in the GDR (6.04), while respondents born elsewhere cluster around the full-sample mean. Looking at place of residence, respondents living in the formerly East German states (excluding Berlin; 514 respondents) score, on average, 0.24 points lower than those in the formerly West German states (excluding Berlin; 2,274 respondents). Differences are particularly pronounced between Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (group mean = 5.68) and several West German states—Bayern (6.31), Hessen (6.26), Niedersachsen (6.29), Nordrhein-Westfalen (6.32), Rheinland-Pfalz (6.25), and Schleswig-Holstein (6.35). Only respondents in Bayern report values significantly above the full-sample average.

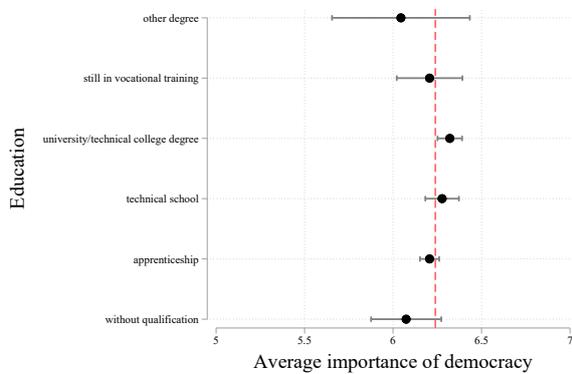
Partisanship is associated with clear differences. The strength-of-support measure shows a monotonic pattern: respondents who do not strongly support any party (1,585 respondents) report an average of 6.08, those who strongly support exactly one party (1,374 respondents) average 6.33, and those who strongly support two or more parties average 6.62; the differences are statistically significant. Considering specific parties, supporters of the governing-coalition parties at the time of the survey, report the highest levels of importance (SPD = 6.60, Greens = 6.62, FDP = 6.62), followed by CDU (= 6.38) and *Die Linke* (= 6.44, above the mean but not statistically significant). By contrast, strong supporters of the AfD (369 respondents) report a considerably lower average (= 5.86).



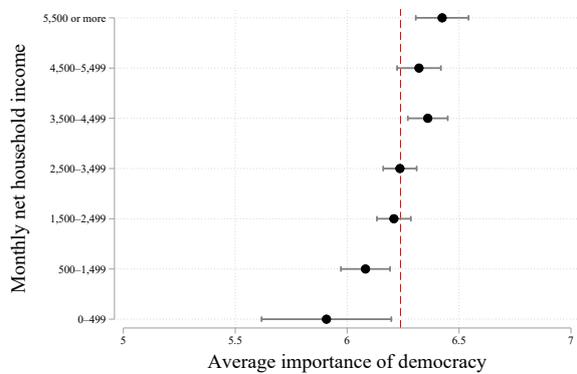
(a) By age group



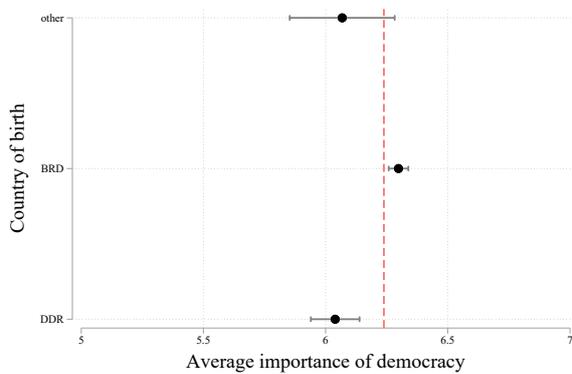
(b) By gender



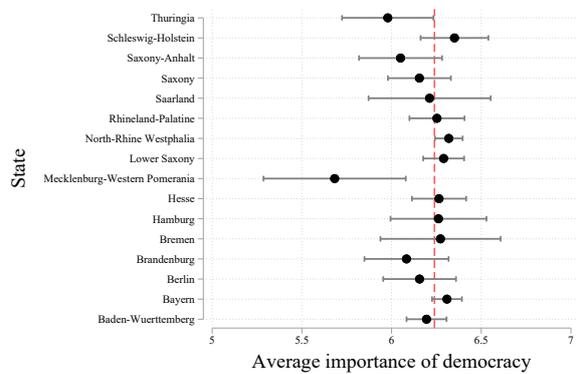
(c) By education



(d) By income



(e) By country of birth



(f) By state of residence (Bundesland)

Figure 7: Importance of Democracy by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the reported importance of democracy across selected sociodemographic characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by age group, gender, education, household income, country of birth, and state of residence (Bundesland), respectively. Due to the very small number of respondents identifying outside the binary gender categories, separate analyses for these groups were not feasible and are therefore not reported. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale, with higher values indicating a greater importance attributed to democracy.

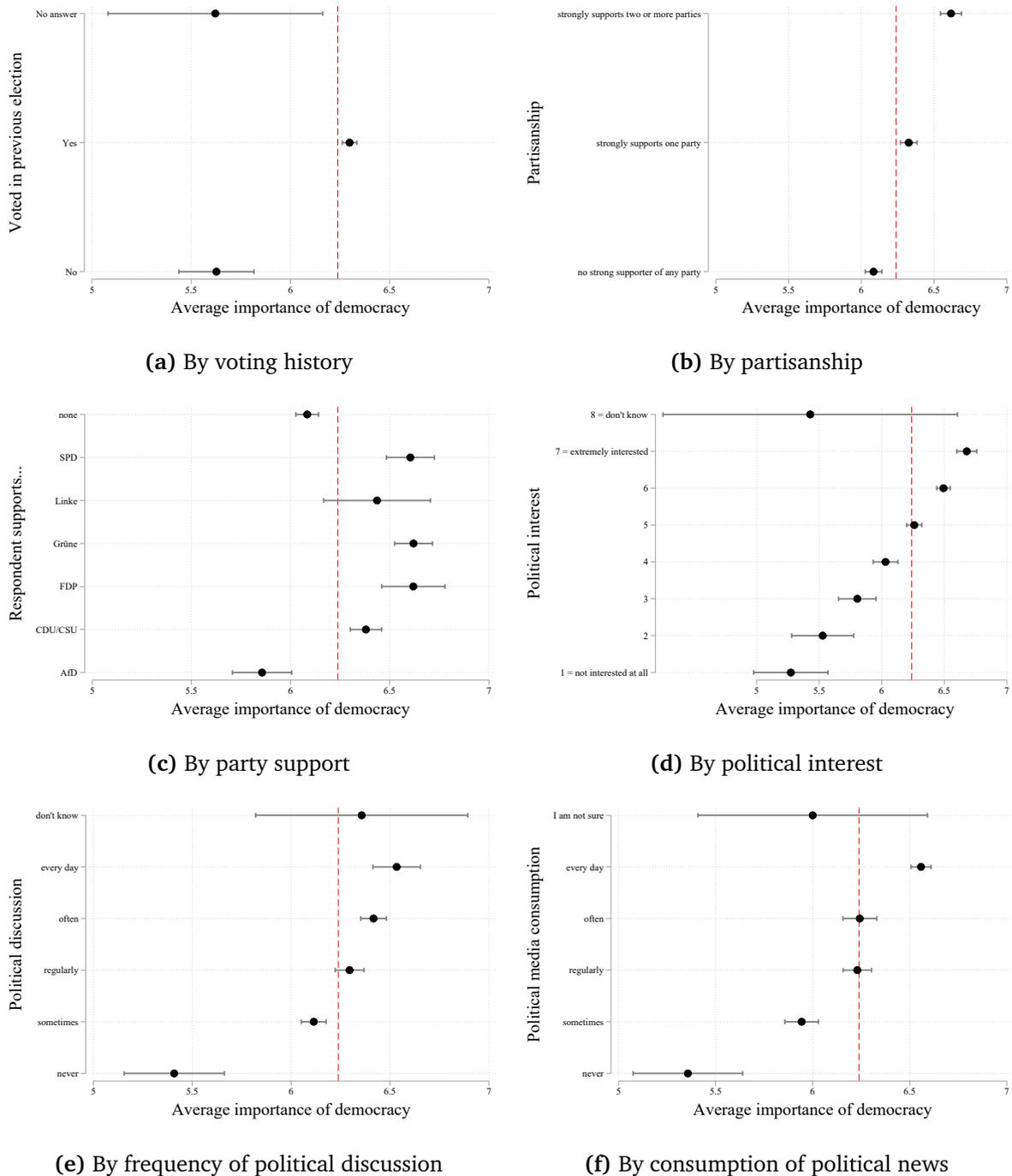


Figure 8: Importance of Democracy by Political Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the reported importance of democracy across selected political characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by voting history, partisanship, party support, political interest, frequency of political discussion, and consumption of political news, respectively. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale, with higher values indicating a greater importance attributed to democracy. Party support categories are derived from respondents’ reported likelihood of voting for each major German party. Respondents selecting “don’t know” are excluded from all panels.

C.4 Descriptives for the Evaluative Layer: Perceived Level of Democracy

On average, respondents perceive Germany's democracy to stand at **59.4 out of 100**, with a median of **65**. This indicates that, while most citizens regard Germany as generally democratic, they stop short of describing it as a fully realized democracy.

Strikingly, ordinary Germans perceive their democracy as considerably less democratic than expert assessments suggest. In the cross-national and historical perspective offered by V-Dem, Germany's democracy ranks among the world's most robust regimes: According to the *V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index*, Germany scored roughly **81 out of 100** in 2023.

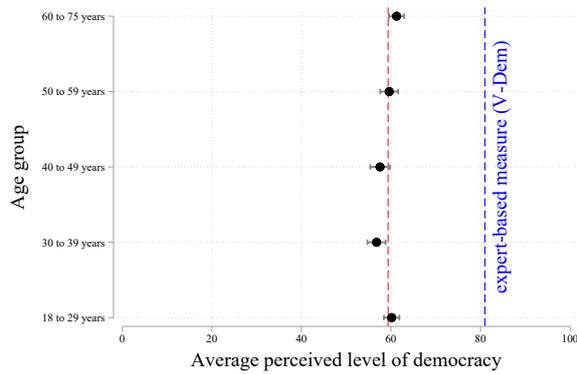
A word of caution is warranted when comparing these citizen perceptions to expert-based indices: V-Dem's experts coders are not asked to answer the same question as our survey respondents. Rather, they systematically code specific institutional and behavioral components, related to freedom of expression, electoral competitiveness, judicial independence, and equality before the law, which are then aggregated into a composite score. Thus, the expert-based measure reflects the extent of democratic attributes in a comparative, methodological sense, whereas the survey captures citizens' subjective evaluations on that day. Still, the *Liberal Democracy Index* provides this broader reference frame illustrating where Germany stands relative to other countries and over time. In Figures 9 and 10, the corresponding expert-based value is indicated by a **blue dashed vertical line**, allowing direct visual comparison between citizens' perceptions and the scholarly benchmark.

The overall perception of Germany's democracy masks notable variation across social, regional, and attitudinal groups. Differences by age are modest. Only the oldest respondents—those aged 60 to 75 years—tend to view Germany as somewhat more democratic than average, assigning an average score of 61.3, about 1.9 points higher than the overall mean. Middle-aged respondents, especially those between 30 and 49 years, are slightly more skeptical, reporting averages between 56.8 and 57.6. Younger respondents (18–29 years) and those aged 50–59 align closely with the sample average.

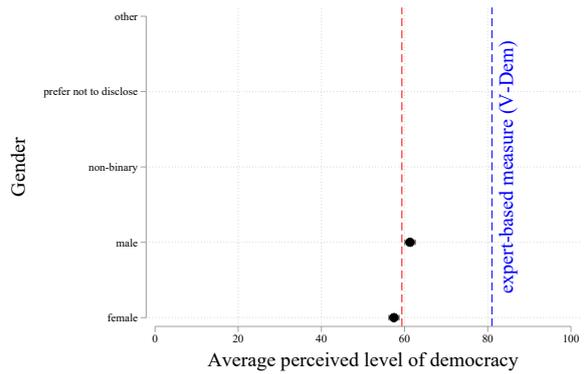
Respondents' place of birth reveals a much clearer divide. Those born in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) perceive Germany's democracy considerably less favorably, with an average of 51.6, roughly ten points below the overall mean and far below the 61.2 reported by respondents born in the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Respondents born outside Germany, by contrast, fall near the full-sample average: their views differ significantly from those born in the GDR, but not from West-born respondents.

Education is another important correlate of perceived level of democracy. Perceptions rise systematically with higher levels of education. Respondents without formal qualifications report an average of 58.0, those with apprenticeship training 55.8, and those with a technical school background 60.3. University or technical college graduates report markedly higher evaluations, averaging 65.1, while respondents still in vocational training average 61.7. Those with "other" forms of degrees express the most positive views, averaging 66.6. Taken together, this pattern suggests a strong association between education and confidence in Germany's democratic performance.

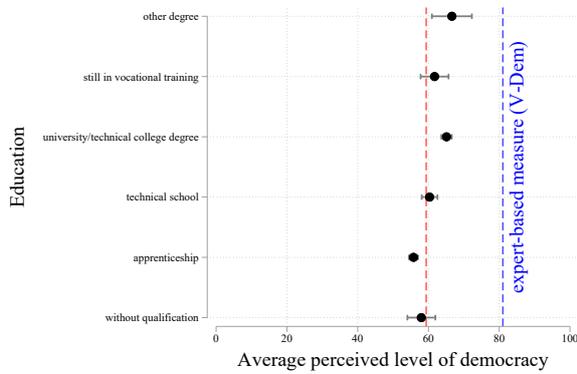
Voting history also appears closely tied to how people perceive democracy. Respondents who didn't vote in previous elections view Germany's democracy far less favorably (50.3) than those



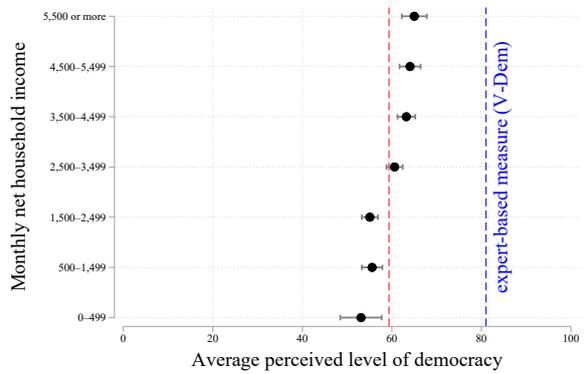
(a) By age group



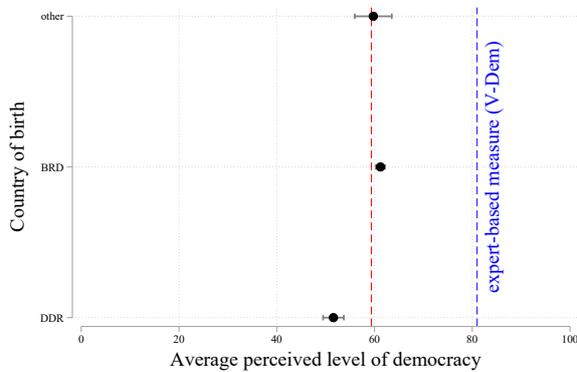
(b) By gender



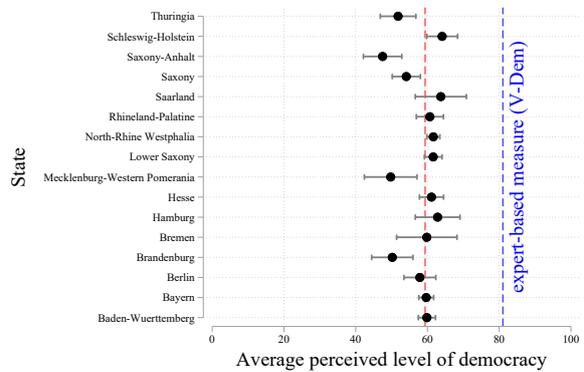
(c) By education



(d) By income



(e) By country of birth



(f) By state of residence (Bundesland)

Figure 9: Perceived Level of Democracy by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the perceived level of democracy across selected sociodemographic characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by age group, gender, education, household income, country of birth, and state of residence (Bundesland), respectively. Due to the very small number of respondents identifying outside the binary gender categories, separate analyses for these groups were not feasible and are therefore not reported. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. The blue dashed vertical line indicates an expert-based benchmark, measured by the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Responses are measured on a 0–100 scale, with higher values indicating a greater perceived level of democracy.

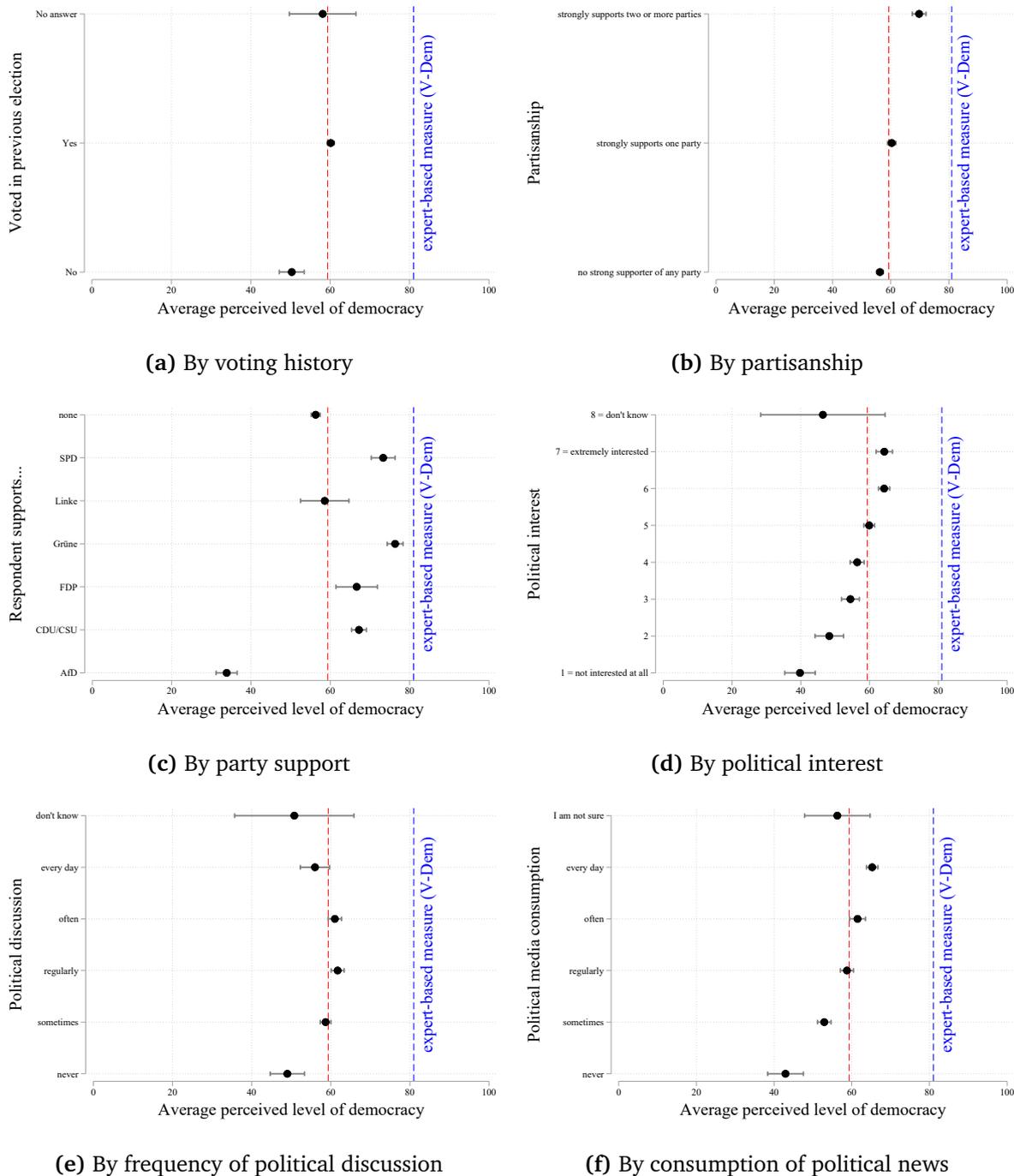


Figure 10: Perceived Level of Democracy by Political Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the perceived level of democracy across selected political characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by voting history, partisanship, party support, political interest, frequency of political discussion, and consumption of political news, respectively. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The red dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. The blue dashed vertical line indicates an expert-based benchmark, measured by the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Responses are measured on a 0–100 scale, with higher values indicating a greater perceived level of democracy. Party support categories are derived from respondents’ reported likelihood of voting for each major German party. Respondents selecting “don’t know” are excluded from all panels.

who have participated in past elections (60.1). Those who skipped the question on previous voting behavior fall closer to the latter group, with an average of 58.1. The direction of causality cannot be inferred from these descriptive results, but the relationship is consistent with the idea that electoral engagement and perceived democratic quality reinforce each other.

Gender differences are relatively minor but consistent: men tend to evaluate Germany's democracy more positively (61.3) than women (57.4). Income, by contrast, shows a clear gradient. Respondents in the lowest income bracket (up to €499 per month) report the lowest average perceptions (53.1). Perceptions increase steadily with income, reaching 60.6 among those earning between €2,500 and €3,499, and continuing upward for higher-income brackets. The most affluent respondents—those earning €5,500 or more per month—perceive the highest level of democracy, averaging 65.0.

A similar monotonic pattern emerges with political news consumption. Respondents who never consume political news report very low scores (42.9), whereas those who follow political news daily perceive democracy far more positively (65.3). Between these extremes, perceptions increase steadily: occasional consumers average 52.9, regular consumers 58.8, frequent consumers 61.5, and respondents who were unsure about their media habits 56.3. These differences highlight a strong link between information engagement and confidence in the democratic system.

Geographical variation adds another layer of divergence. Respondents from Schleswig-Holstein (64.1) and Nordrhein-Westfalen (61.6) rate Germany's democracy above the national mean. In contrast, several eastern states—Thüringen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Sachsen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and Brandenburg—report substantially lower evaluations, with Sachsen-Anhalt at the bottom at 47.5. This East–West gap remains one of the most striking divides in perceptions of democracy within Germany.

Finally, patterns by partisanship indicate that political attachment may shape perceptions as well. Respondents who strongly support one political party report average scores of around 60, while those who strongly support two or more parties report considerably higher values, slightly below 70. Individuals without strong partisan attachments perceive the lowest levels of democracy, averaging 56.3. Together, these findings suggest that stronger political identification coincides with more positive evaluations of Germany's democratic state.

C.5 Descriptives for the Affective Layer: Concern about the Future Democracy

Overall, respondents express a moderately high level of concern about the state of democracy in Germany (mean = 5.08 on a 0–7 scale; median = 5, where 0 denotes the least and 7 the highest concern), with only limited variation across most social groups. Concern tends to rise slightly with age: respondents above 39 express the highest levels of concern (group means around 5.15–5.20), while the youngest group (18–29) is least worried (4.80 on average).

Country of origin again marks a notable line of difference. Respondents born in the former GDR show the highest level of concern (5.46), well above those born in the former FRG (4.99). Respondents born outside Germany fall in between these two groups, averaging 5.05. Thus, while levels of concern are generally high across all groups, they are most pronounced among those with roots in East Germany.

Differences by education are smaller but still visible. Respondents with apprenticeship training (5.21) or technical school education (5.17) express slightly higher concern than those with a university or technical college degree (4.90). Across all educational backgrounds, the range is narrow—from 4.78 among respondents still in vocational training to 5.21 among those who completed an apprenticeship—indicating only modest variation by education level.

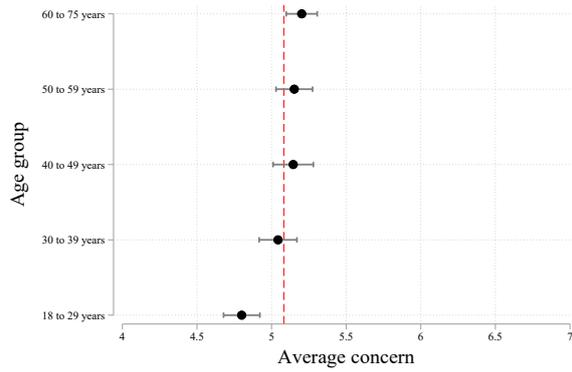
Voting behavior also correlates slightly with democratic concern. Those who voted in the previous election show a group mean of 5.09, compared to 5.04 among non-voters and 4.78 among those who chose not to answer. This pattern suggests that engagement in electoral participation does not strongly differentiate levels of concern, but voters tend to be marginally more worried.

Gender differences are modest but consistent: women express slightly higher concern (5.18) than men (4.99). When looking at income, an inverted U-shaped pattern emerges. Concern is lowest among both the lowest and highest income groups, and highest among those in the middle income brackets. Specifically, respondents earning between €1,500 and €2,499 report the highest average concern (5.23).

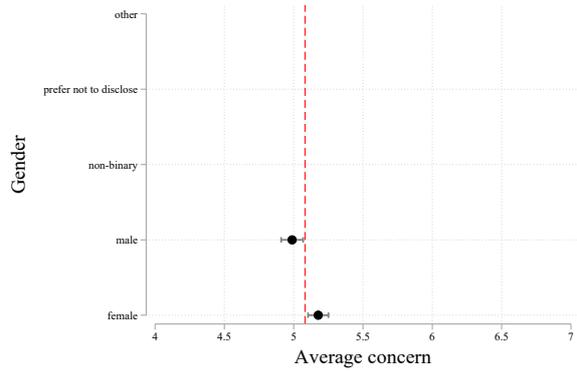
Patterns of political news consumption show notable differences in concern about democracy. Respondents unsure of their media habits report the highest concern (5.33). Overall, concern tends to increase with greater consumption frequency—from never (4.86) to every day (5.15). These findings suggest an association between higher engagement with political news and elevated concern about democracy.

Regional variation and partisanship also matter, though data for some states and voter categories need to be checked for completeness. Among party supporters, respondents aligned with SPD (4.63), the Greens (4.70), FDP (4.75), and CDU (4.85) display similar levels of concern. Those who do not strongly support any party express somewhat higher concern (5.05), while supporters of Die Linke register still higher levels (5.38). The most pronounced outliers are AfD supporters, whose average concern reaches 6.05—the highest of all partisan groups.

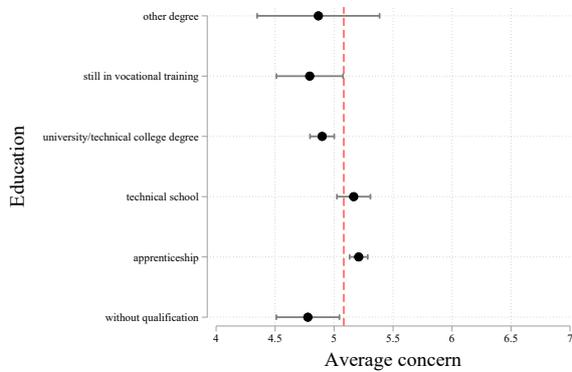
Taken together, the results show that concern about democracy is widespread and generally high across society. It varies only moderately by socio-demographic factors but becomes more pronounced among East-born respondents, those with intermediate education and income levels, and among supporters of the AfD. These patterns suggest that democratic concern is not confined



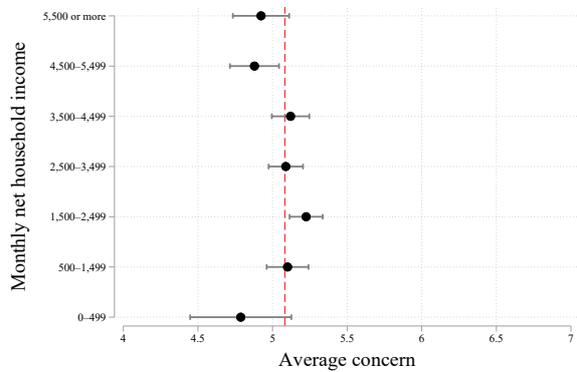
(a) By age group



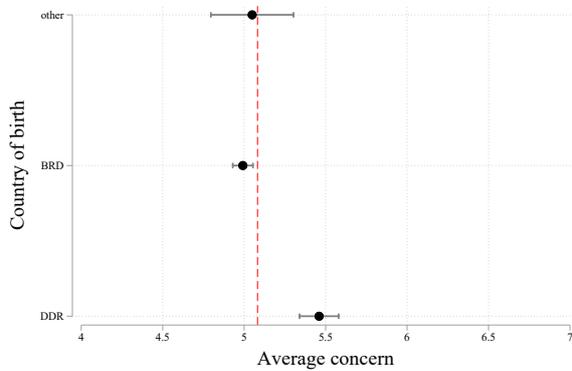
(b) By gender



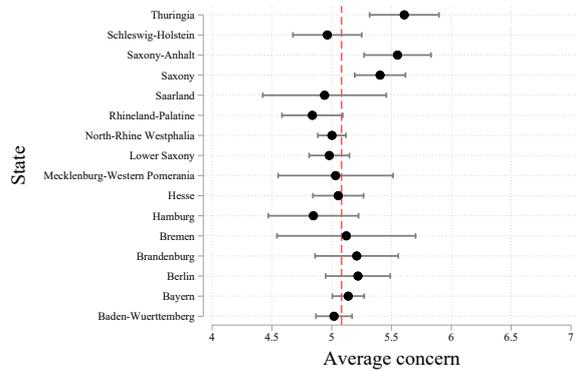
(c) By education



(d) By income



(e) By country of birth



(f) By state of residence (Bundesland)

Figure 11: Concern about the Future of Democracy by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the perceived level of democracy across selected sociodemographic characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by age group, gender, education, household income, country of birth, and state of residence (Bundesland), respectively. Due to the very small number of respondents identifying outside the binary gender categories, separate analyses for these groups were not feasible and are therefore not reported. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale, with higher values indicating a greater concern about the future of democracy.

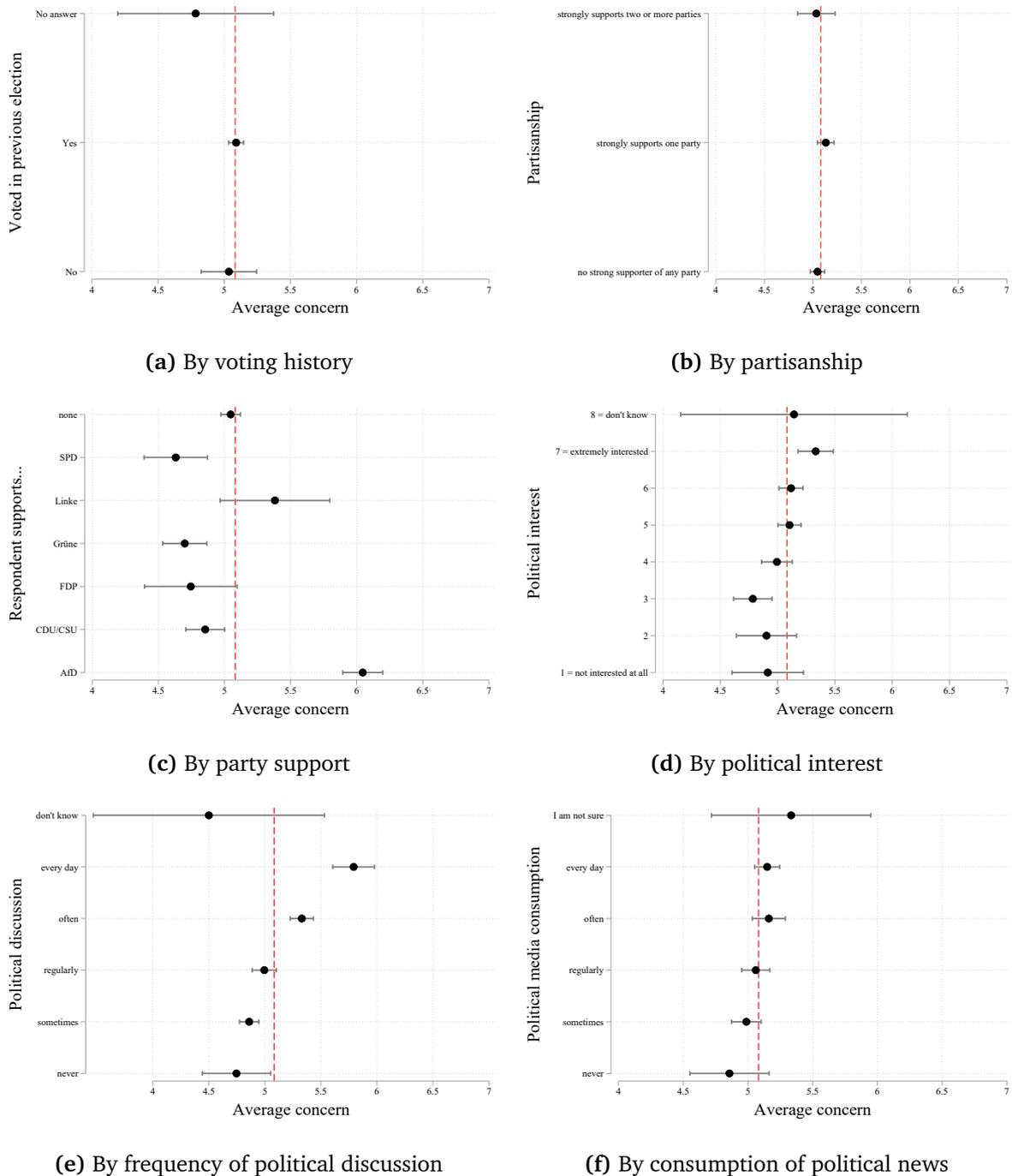


Figure 12: Concern about the Future of Democracy by Political Characteristics

Notes: The figure reports subgroup-specific mean levels of the reported concern about the future of democracy across selected political characteristics. Panels (a)–(f) display mean values by voting history, partisanship, party support, political interest, frequency of political discussion, and consumption of political news, respectively. Dots indicate group means; horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed vertical line denotes the full-sample mean. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale, with higher values indicating a greater concern about the future of democracy. Party support categories are derived from respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party. Respondents selecting “don't know” are excluded from all panels.

to one social stratum but cuts across age, gender, and education, with certain political and regional contexts amplifying it.

C.6 Layers of Democratic Attachment by Party Support

Table 6: Summary Statistics by Party Support Category

Party Support Category	Importance	Level of Democracy	Concern
0 = No strong supporter of any party	6.08 (1.16)	56.31 (23.17)	5.05 (1.51)
1 = Strongly supports one party	6.33 (1.07)	60.37 (27.07)	5.13 (1.62)
2 = Strongly supports two or more parties	6.62 (0.67)	69.77 (21.77)	5.04 (1.79)
Total	6.24 (1.10)	59.36 (25.06)	5.08 (1.58)

Notes: The table displays means with standard deviations (in parentheses) for the three variables corresponding to the three layers of democratic attachment (importance of democracy, perceived level of democracy, concern about democracy), by respondents' party support category. Importance: 1 to 7, with 7 extremely important; Level of Democracy: 0 to 100, with 100 perfectly democratic; Concern: 1 to 7, with 7 extremely concerned.

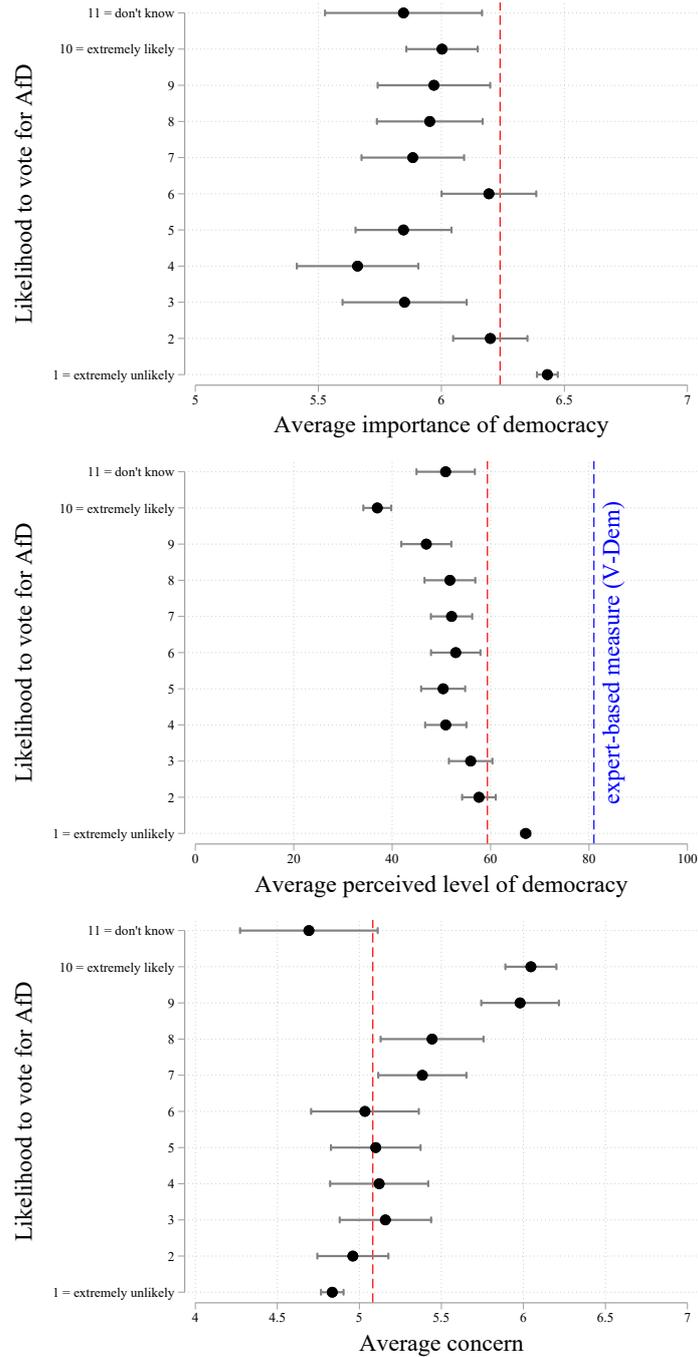


Figure 13: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for the AfD

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the AfD and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

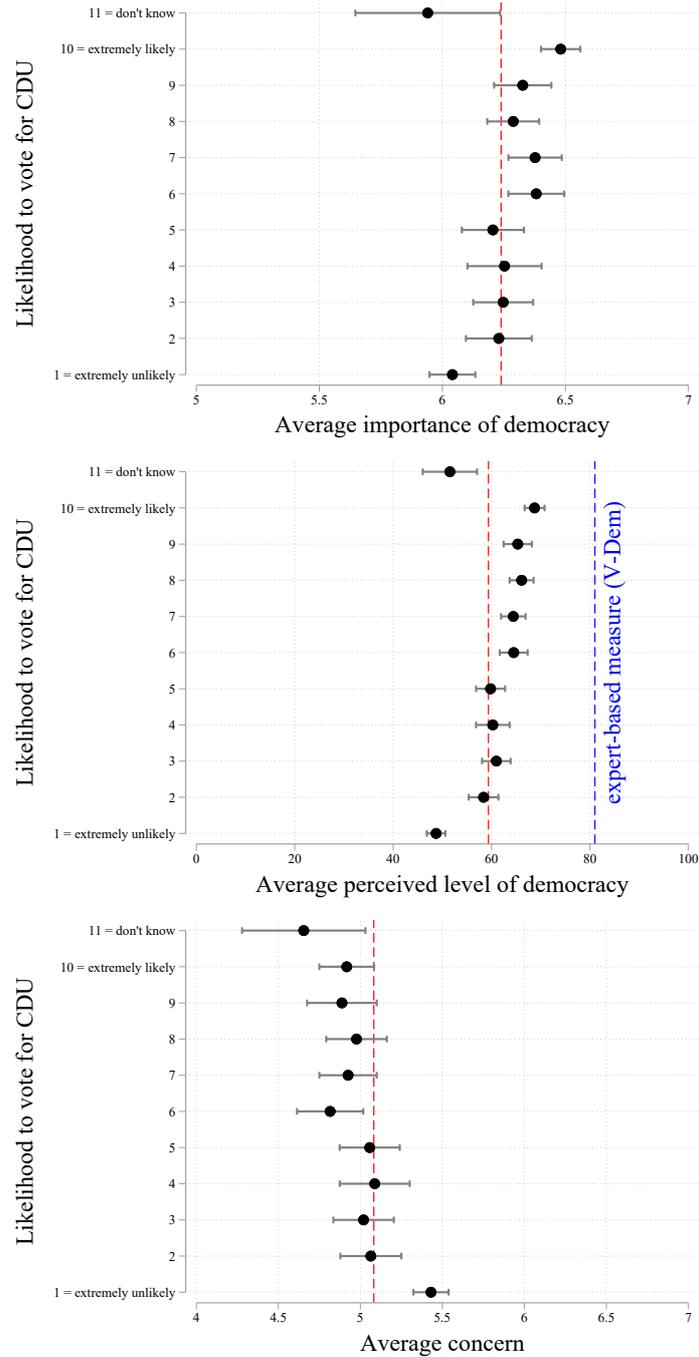


Figure 14: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for the CDU/CSU

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the CDU/CSU and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

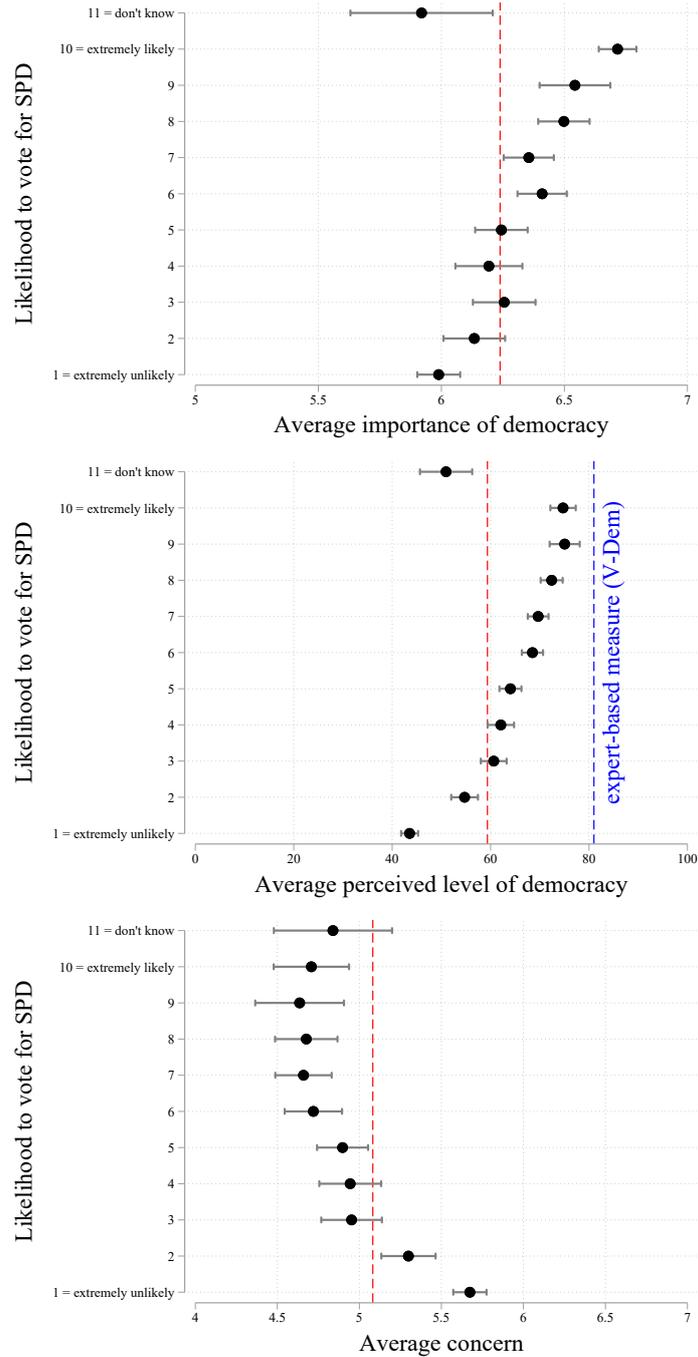


Figure 15: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for the SPD

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the SPD and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

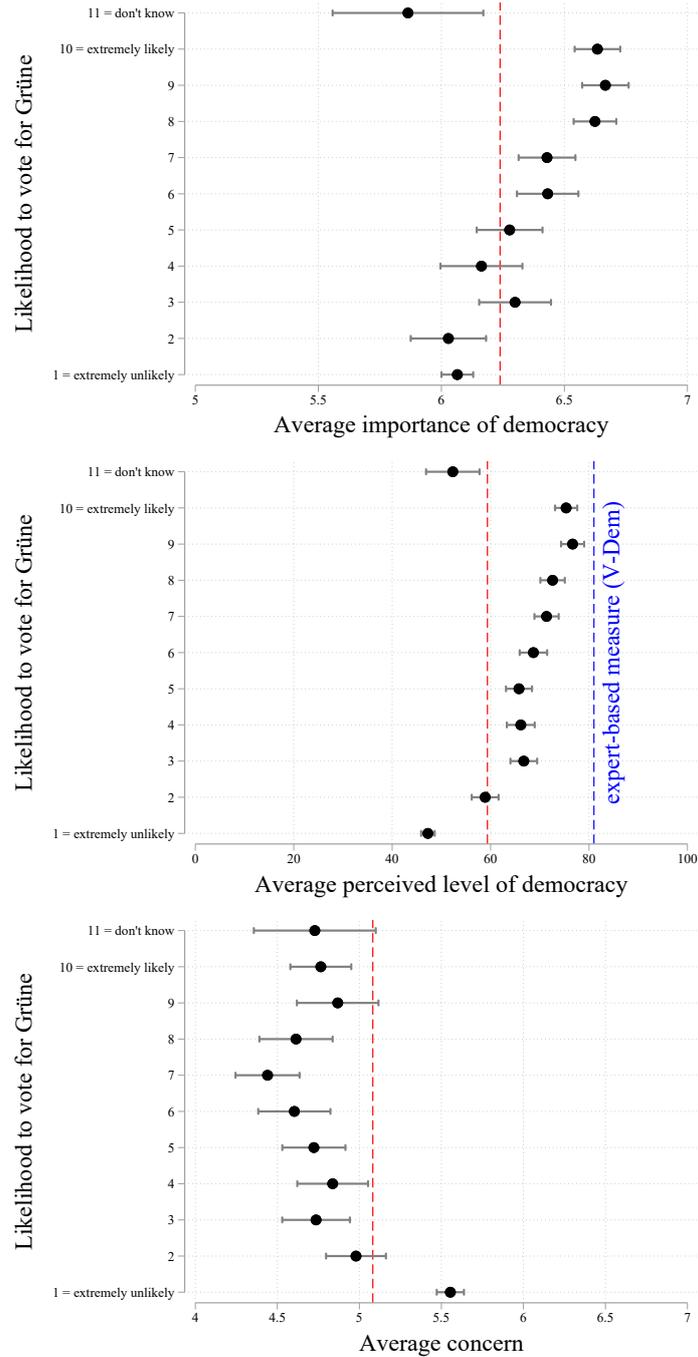


Figure 16: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for the Greens

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the *Greens* and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

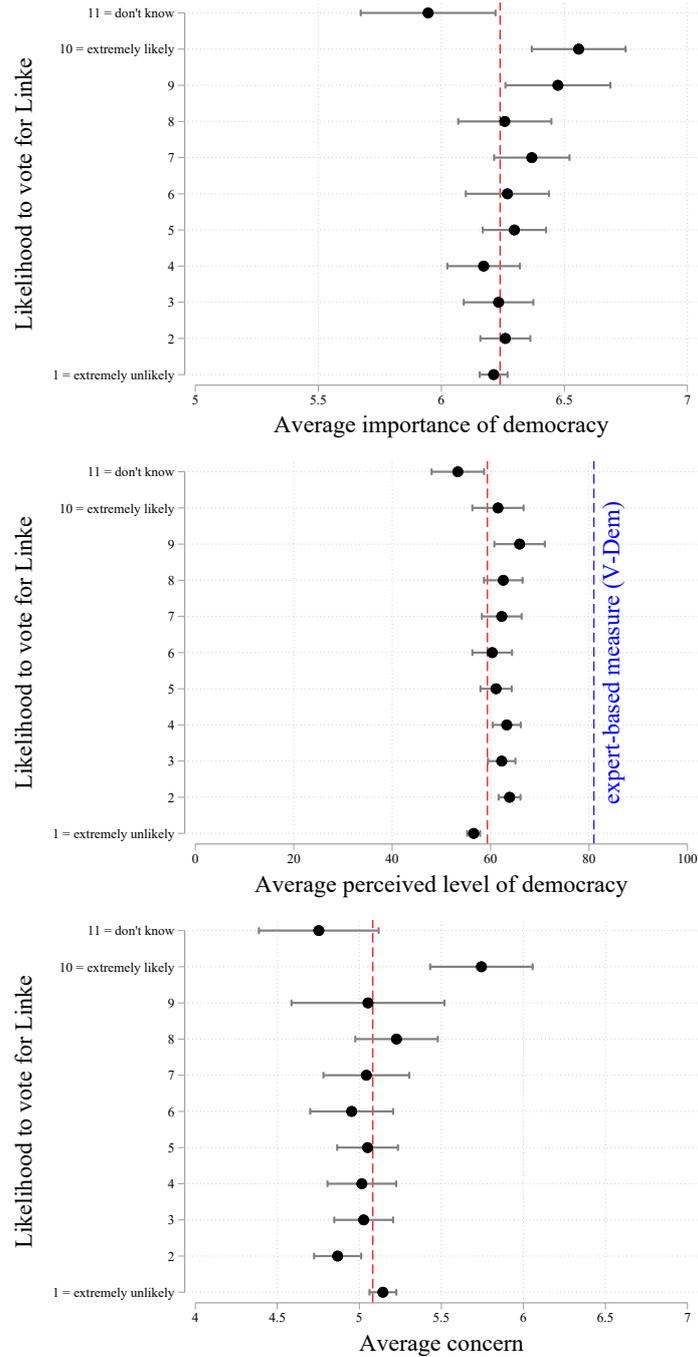


Figure 17: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for *Die Linke*

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for *Die Linke* and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

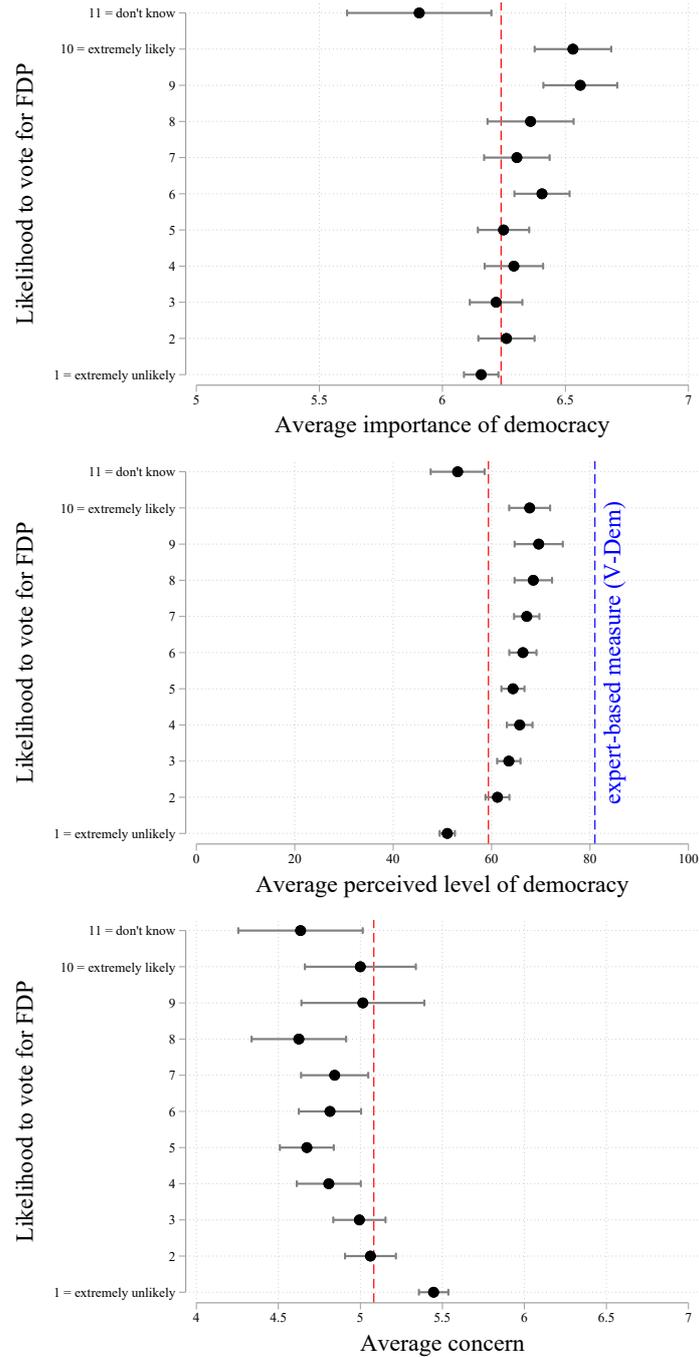


Figure 18: Attitudes Toward Democracy by Likelihood of Voting for the FDP

Notes: The figure displays the relationship between respondents' reported likelihood of voting for the FDP and three democratic attitudes: (a) importance of democracy, (b) perceived level of democracy, and (c) concern about the future of democracy. Dots represent mean values of the respective democratic attitude for respondents grouped by their reported likelihood of voting for the party; vertical bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The likelihood of voting is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 10 (extremely likely); respondents selecting "don't know" (= 11) are included. Higher values indicate greater importance attributed to democracy, higher perceived levels of democracy, and greater concern about the future of democracy, respectively. All relationships are shown descriptively and do not represent fitted regression models.

D Evidence on Populist Conceptions of Democracy by Party Support

This appendix section replicates key descriptive figures from Steiner and Landwehr (2018) using our sample (i.e. identical survey items but different set of respondents and time period).

The results underscore their central empirical finding: supporters of the AfD exhibit systematically different understandings of democracy than supporters of other parties. In particular, AfD supporters are more likely to endorse conceptions of democracy that emphasize unconstrained majoritarianism, demand unmediated responsiveness from political representatives, and express skepticism toward political pluralism, elements that are invoked in the name of democracy but stand in tension with core principles of liberal democracy.

D.1 Anti-Pluralism

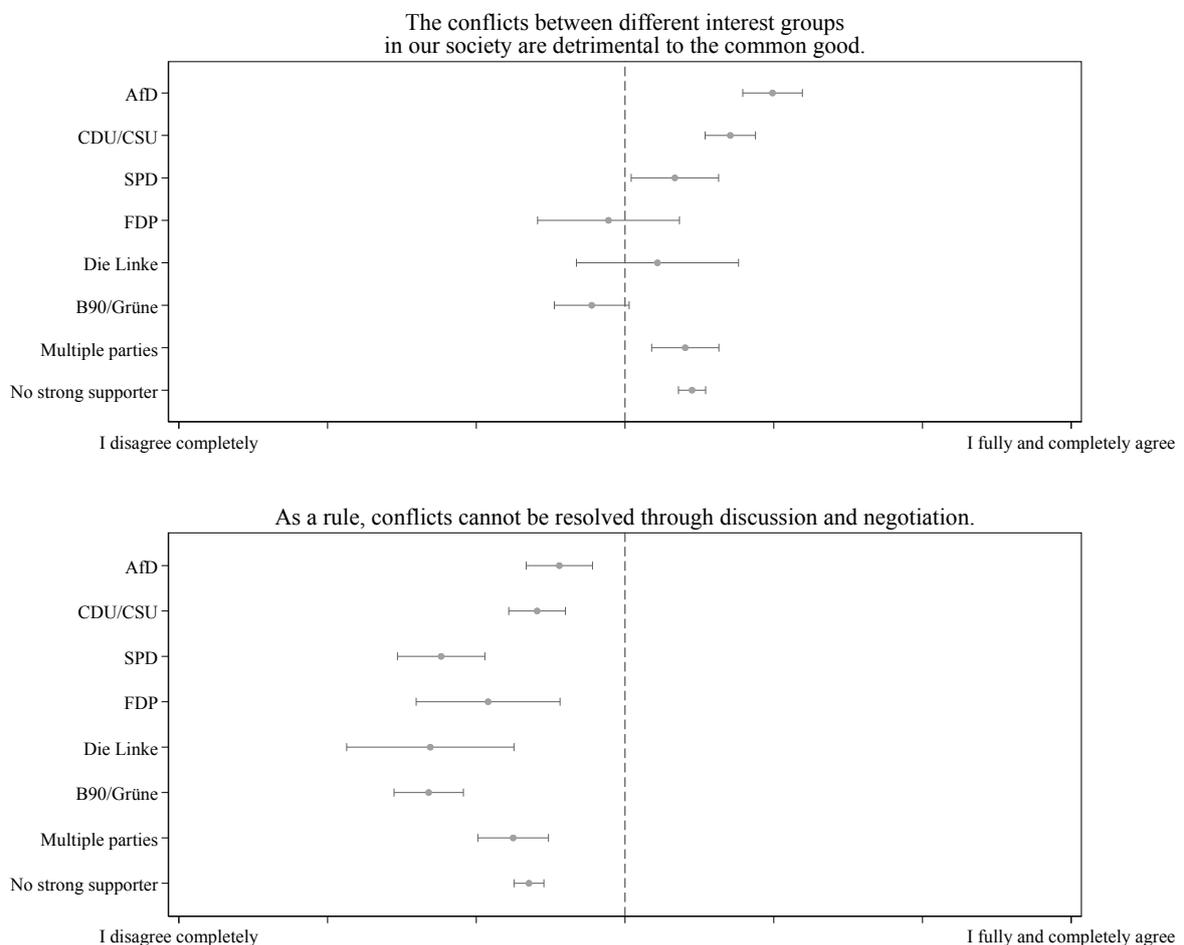


Figure 19: Anti-Pluralism by Party Support

Notes: Dots indicate group means and horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree completely; 7 = fully agree); the dashed vertical line marks the scale midpoint. Party support is based on respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party (1–10 scale). Respondents indicating a likelihood of 9 or 10 are classified as strong supporters and grouped into no strong supporter, supporter of one party, or supporter of multiple parties.

D.2 Majoritarianism

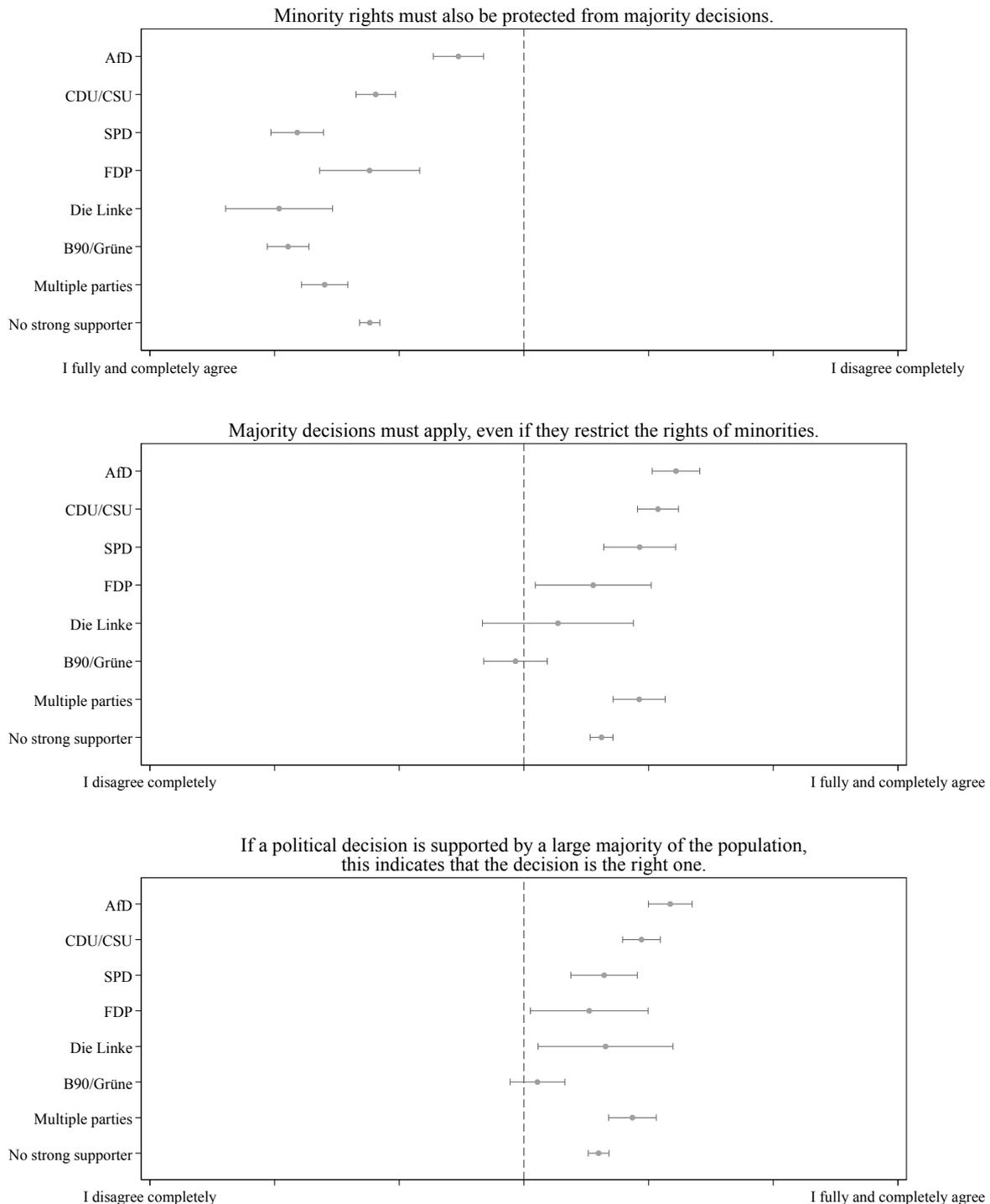


Figure 20: Majoritarianism by Party Support

Notes: Dots indicate group means and horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree completely; 7 = fully agree); the dashed vertical line marks the scale midpoint. Party support is based on respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party (1–10 scale). Respondents indicating a likelihood of 9 or 10 are classified as strong supporters and grouped into no strong supporter, supporter of one party, or supporter of multiple parties. Some items are reverse-coded so that higher values always indicate more populist attitudes.

D.3 Unmediated Politics

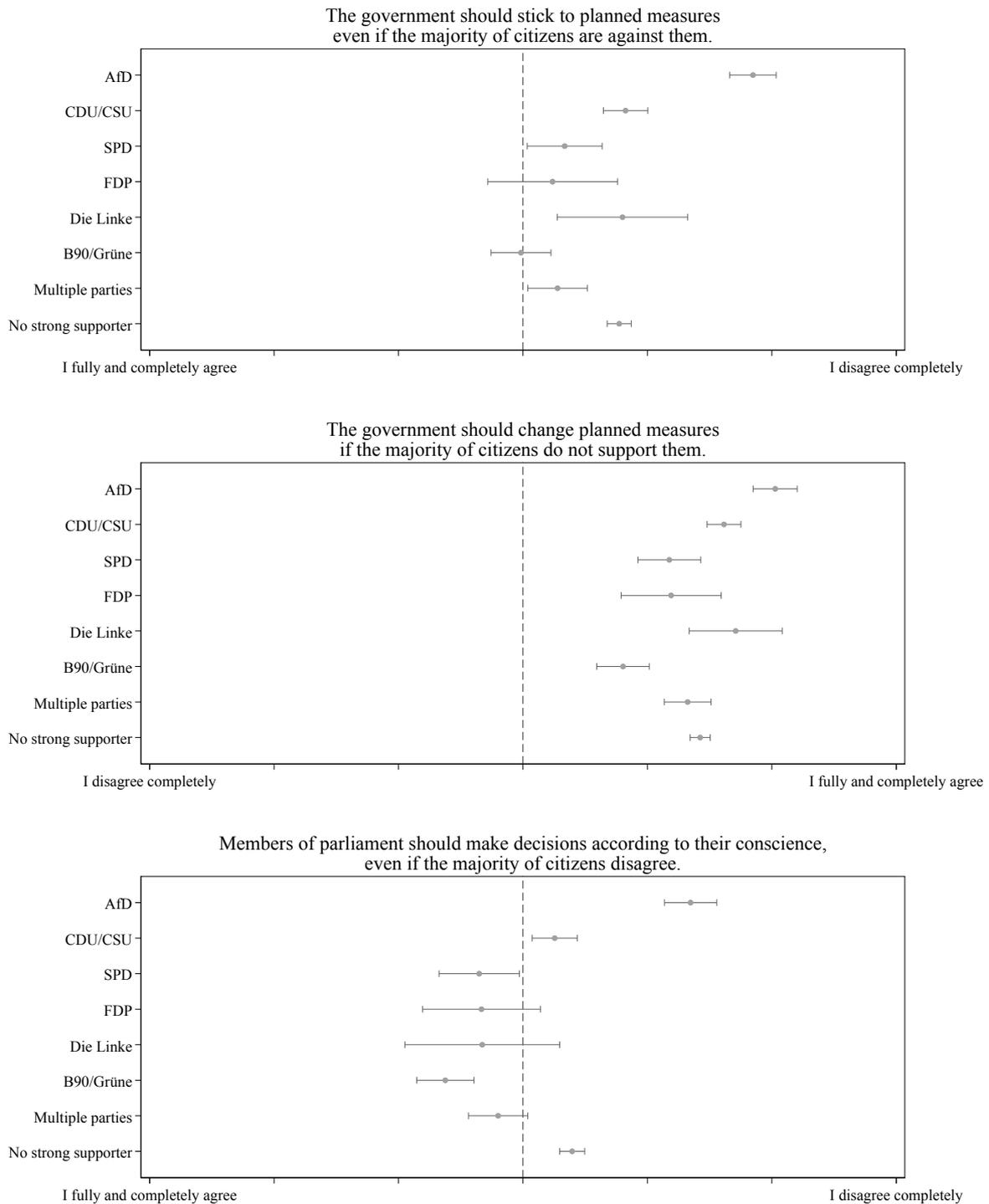


Figure 21: Unmediated Politics by Party Support

Notes: Dots indicate group means and horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree completely; 7 = fully agree); the dashed vertical line marks the scale midpoint. Party support is based on respondents' reported likelihood of voting for each major German party (1–10 scale). Respondents indicating a likelihood of 9 or 10 are classified as strong supporters and grouped into no strong supporter, supporter of one party, or supporter of multiple parties. Some items are reverse-coded so that higher values always indicate more populist attitudes.

D.4 Mean Differences in Populist Conceptions (T-Tests)

Table 7: Mean Differences between Respondents from the Former FRG and Former GDR

	Mean (FRG)	Mean (GDR)	Difference	p-value
<i>by state of residence</i>				
<i>Majoritarianism</i>				
maj1	5.31	5.20	0.10	0.219
maj2	4.75	4.98	-0.23	0.012
maj3	4.69	4.84	-0.16	0.064
<i>Unmediated Politics</i>				
unm1	3.33	2.96	0.37	< 0.001
unm2	5.42	5.64	-0.23	0.005
unm3	3.80	3.45	0.35	< 0.001
<i>Anti-pluralism</i>				
anti1	4.47	4.61	-0.14	0.129
anti2	3.26	3.36	-0.10	0.333
<i>by country of birth</i>				
<i>Majoritarianism</i>				
maj1	5.30	5.19	0.11	0.157
maj2	4.68	5.10	-0.42	< 0.001
maj3	4.64	4.98	-0.34	< 0.001
<i>Unmediated Politics</i>				
unm1	3.29	3.04	0.24	0.008
unm2	5.39	5.63	-0.24	0.001
unm3	3.77	3.61	0.16	0.090
<i>Anti-pluralism</i>				
anti1	4.40	4.72	-0.33	< 0.001
anti2	3.25	3.32	-0.07	0.450

Notes: The table reports mean values for respondents residing/born in the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), mean differences (FRG – GDR), and two-sided p-values from two-sample t-tests assuming equal variances. Sample sizes are $N = 2,274$ (FRG) and $N = 514$ (GDR) for country of residence and $N = 2,515$ (FRG) and $N = 613$ (GDR) for country of birth. Berlin is excluded from the analysis. Responses are measured on a 7-point scale (1 = disagree completely; 7 = fully agree); Higher values indicate more populist attitudes for maj2, maj3, unm2, anti1, anti2. Lower values indicate more populist attitudes for maj1, unm1, unm3.

Items:

(maj1) “Minority rights must also be protected from majority decisions.”

(maj2) “Majority decisions must apply, even if they restrict the rights of minorities.”

(maj3) “If a political decision is supported by a large majority of the population, this indicates that the decision is the right one.”

(unm1) “The government should stick to planned measures even if the majority of citizens are against them.”

(unm2) “The government should change planned measures if the majority of citizens do not support them.”

(unm3) “Members of parliament should make decisions according to their conscience, even if the majority of citizens disagree.”

(anti1) “The conflicts between different interest groups in our society are detrimental to the common good.”

(anti2) “As a rule, conflicts cannot be resolved through discussion and negotiation.”

E Deviations from the Pre-Analysis Plan

The survey analyzed in this paper was implemented as part of the research project *What Is Democracy (To You)?*, which was preregistered on the Open Science Framework prior to data collection.¹¹ The pre-analysis plan primarily outlines analyses concerning different types of democracy understandings and their relationship to democratic concern. At the same time, it explicitly characterizes several components of the study as descriptive or exploratory and anticipates the use of descriptive statistics to examine concern for democracy, its distribution, and its socio-demographic correlates (see Sections 4.14 and 5.1(d) of the pre-analysis plan).

The analyses presented in this paper build on and extend this exploratory component. In particular, we provide a systematic descriptive overview of how citizens in Germany perceived, valued, and worried about democracy at the end of 2023. While these analyses remain consistent with the spirit and scope of the preregistered plan, they go beyond the originally envisioned descriptive summaries in the following way:

In the process of exploring correlates of democratic concern, we found that treating concern for democracy as a homogeneous attitude risks obscuring substantial conceptual heterogeneity. Specifically, without distinguishing between different layers of democratic attachment and individuals' substantive definitions of democracy, descriptive analyses may inadvertently group together respondents who express concern for democracy for fundamentally different and in some cases illiberal reasons. In such cases, respondents may express a desire to “protect democracy”, while rejecting or opposing core principles of liberal democracy itself.

This empirical insight led us to introduce a clearer theoretical distinction between democratic concern, democratic attachment, and substantive conceptions, i.e. personal definitions of democracy. This distinction was not explicitly specified in the pre-analysis plan but emerged inductively from the exploratory analyses. The present paper is therefore the result of bringing together the preregistered exploratory analyses with a theoretically motivated refinement that was prompted by the empirical structure of the data.

Finally, we note that all data collection procedures followed the preregistered design. The survey consisted of multiple sections covering demographic characteristics, political attitudes, and understandings of democracy. The questionnaire was administered in German, approved by the WZB Research Ethics Committee, and respondents were compensated for their participation through the panel provider. No deviations occurred with respect to sampling, measurement, or data collection.

¹¹The preregistration and full pre-analysis plan are available at <https://osf.io/a794r>.

F Full Survey

What Is Democracy (To You)?
Questionnaire for Survey on Democratic Understanding
Transformations of Democracy Unit, WZB

11.2023

Overview of Survey Items

This section provides a short summary of survey items.

Section: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. Year born
2. Place of birth (East or West Germany)
3. Place of residence (Bundesland)
4. Gender
5. Current marital status
6. Number of children
7. Household size
8. Children under 18 living in household
9. Current work status
10. Work hours per week
11. Highest level of education
12. Monthly netto household income
13. Ethnicity
14. Home ownership
15. Religion
16. Importance of religion
17. Citizenship of ' parents

Section: POLITICAL QUESTIONS

1. How important is democracy to you?
2. Which party are you more likely to vote for?
3. Where would you place yourself politically on this scale?
4. Have you voted in previous elections?
5. How interested are you in politics?
6. How frequently do you discuss politics with others?

7. How frequently do you consume political media?
8. What is your impression of the level of democracy in Germany today?

Section: MAIN INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The sample of respondents will be split in half, with one half answering question 1 first (open-ended) followed by questions 2-19 (close-ended). The order will be reversed for the other half of respondents (questions 2-19 first, then question 1).

1. What is democracy to you? (Open-ended question)
- 2.-19. Dis-/agreement & importance of statements about democratic attributes (close-ended questions)

Section: DEPENDENT VARIABLES

1. Concern for the future of democracy
 - 2a. No concern - Why? (open-ended)
 - 2b. Concern - Why? (open-ended)

Full Questionnaire

Cover Page

We are a group of non-partisan researchers interested in better understanding economic, social and political issues in Germany. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes.

Before proceeding, please note that it is important for our survey that you read all questions carefully and answer as accurately as possible. **There are no right or wrong answers so please feel free to state what you think.**

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH STUDY

Study Title: What is Democracy (To You)?

Principal Investigators: Vanessa Boese-Schlösser

DESCRIPTION: We are a group of non-partisan researchers interested in better understanding economic, social and political issues in Germany. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes. The data collected will only be used for future research.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks to your participation in this online study are those associated with basic computer tasks, including boredom, fatigue, or mild stress. The only benefit to you is the learning experience from participating in a research study and the compensation for doing so. The benefit to society is the contribution to scientific knowledge.

COMPENSATION: You will be compensated by bilendi/rispondi for taking this survey. You will not be compensated if your survey is incomplete.

SUBJECT'S RIGHTS: Your participation is voluntary. You may stop participating at any time by closing the browser window or the program to withdraw from the study. Partial data will not be analyzed.

For additional questions about this research, you may contact:

- Vanessa Boese-Schlösser, Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Transformations of Democracy Unit, WZB.
- Email: vanessa.boese@wzb.eu

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact:

- WZB Research Ethics Committee
- Mail to Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, D-10785 Berlin, Germany.

Please indicate, in the "Please indicate" box below, that you are at least 18 years old, have read and understand this consent form, and that you agree to participate in this online research study.

Please Indicate:

I am at least 18 years old, I have read and understand this consent form, and I agree to participate in this online research study.

- No
- Yes

If 'No': Thank you very much – this is the end of the survey.

If 'Yes': Move on to Question 1.

Section: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Question 1

In which year were you born?

Question 2

In which country were you born?

GDR

BRD

If other, please specify: -----

Question 3

What is your place of residence (Bundesland)?

Baden-Württemberg

Bayern

Berlin

Brandenburg

Bremen

Hamburg

Hessen

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern

Niedersachsen

Nordrhein-Westfalen

Rheinland-Pfalz

Saarland

Sachsen

Sachsen-Anhalt

Schleswig-Holstein

Thüringen

Question 4

What is your gender? (check one)

Woman

Man

Non-binary

Prefer not to say

If other, please specify: -----

Question 5

What is your current marital status? (check one)

Single

In a relationship

In a civil union

Married

- Divorced
- Widowed

Question 6

Do you have any children? (check one)

- No
- Yes

Question 7

How many people live in your household?

..... people

Question 8

How many children under 18 live in your household?

..... children

Question 9

What is your current work status (check all that apply)

- Self-employed
- Employed
- Student
- Working student
- Maternity/Paternity leave
- Without employment, looking for work
- Without employment, not looking for work
- Unable to work

Question 10

How many hours do you work per week? (It can be 0)

..... hours per week.

Question 11

Was ist der höchste berufliche Bildungsabschluss, den Sie erreicht haben?

- Ohne beruflichen Bildungsabschluss
- Abgeschlossene Lehre / beruflicher Abschluss ohne Fachschul- oder Fachhochschulabschluss
- Abschluss einer Fachschule (z.B. Techniker / Betriebswirt / Meister)
- Universitäts- / Fachhochschulabschluss (Diplom, Staatsexamen, Bachelor, Master, Promotion)
- Noch in beruflicher Ausbildung
- Anderer Abschluss

Question 12

What is your monthly netto household income in €? (check one)

- 0-499
- 500-1,499
- 1,500-2,499
- 2,500-3,499
- 3,500-4,499
- 4,500-5,499
- 5,500 or higher

Question 13

How would you best describe your ethnicity?

- European/Caucasian
- African
- Carribean
- East Asian/Southeast Asian
- Latino/Hispanic
- Middle Eastern
- Mixed
- South Asia
- No answer
- If other, please specify: _____

Question 14

Do you own any home property? (check one)

- No
- Yes

Question 15

What is your religion? (check one)

- No religion
- Protestant
- Roman Catholic
- Mormon
- Eastern or Greek Orthodox
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- If other, please specify: _____

Question 16

How important is your religion to you?

1 = Not at all important
7 = Very important
8 = I don't know

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know
<input type="radio"/>							

Question 17

How many of the people you consider your parents are German citizens?

- none
- one
- both
- I don't know

Section: POLITICAL QUESTIONS

Question 1

How important is democracy to you?

Please answer on a scale from

1 = Not important at all

to

7 = extremely important.

8 = I don't know

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know
<input type="radio"/>							

Question 2

We show you a list of the established parties in Germany. For each party, please indicate how likely it is you would ever vote for them on a scale of 1 to 10.

-- CDU/CSU

-- Grüne

-- SPD

-- FDP

-- AfD

-- Linke

Question 4

Have you voted in previous elections where you were eligible? (check one)

-- No

-- Yes

Question 5

Generally, how interested are you in politics?

Please answer on a scale from

1 = Not interested at all

to

7 = extremely interested.

8 = Don't know

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know
<input type="radio"/>							

Question 6

How often do you discuss politics with people around you? (online or in-person)

never sometimes regularly often everyday not sure

Question 7

How often do you consume political news/media (online or print)?

never sometimes regularly often everyday not sure

Question 8

On a scale of 0 (not democratic at all) to 100 (perfectly democratic), how democratic is Germany today in your opinion?

Section: INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The sample of respondents will be split in half, with one half answering question 1 first (open-ended) followed by questions 2-19 (close-ended). The order will be reversed for the other half of respondents (questions 2-19 first, then question 1).

Question 1

In your own words, describe what democracy is to you.

On a scale of 1 to 3, rate the importance of each of your own points to your definition of democracy (1 = a little important; 2 = important; 3 = very important)

Follow-up question if you left it blank:

If you left the previous question unanswered, please state some reasons:

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| I don't
know | I have
no
opinion | I don't
care | I prefer
not to
disclose |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Question 2 - 19

For the following questions, participants will be asked to read a statement, and indicate both (1) their agreement/disagreement with the statement, and (2) how important that statement is to their definition of democracy.

Please read the following statement: "[insert statement here]".

1. To what extent do you agree with the statement?

- 1 = I disagree completely
- 7 = I fully and completely agree
- 8 = I don't know

2. How important is this statement for democracy?

- 1 = Not at all important
- 7 = Of the highest importance
- 8 = I don't know

Statements:

- "It would be better if important political decisions were made by independent experts and not by elected politicians."
- "The conflicts between different interest groups in our society are detrimental to the common good."
- "Members of parliament should make decisions according to their conscience, even if the majority of citizens disagree."
- "If a political decision is supported by a large majority of the population, this indicates that the decision is the right one."
- "In political decisions, it is the common good and not one's own interest that should always take priority."
- "The government should develop planned measures in close dialog with citizens and those affected."
- "Democratically made decisions must be accepted in any case, even if they contradict one's own interests."
- "Most people lack the necessary information to be able to decide directly on important political issues."
- "In a democracy, it is important to understand why other people have different opinions."
- "Sometimes it is better if political decisions are made behind closed doors."
- "All bodies involved in political decisions should meet in public."
- "The government should change planned measures if the majority of citizens do not support them."
- "Minority rights must also be protected from majority decisions."
- "Majority decisions must apply, even if they restrict the rights of minorities."
- "Important political decisions should only be made with the consent of the representatives of all affected groups."
- "Important political decisions should be made through discussion and not simply by voting."
- "The government should stick to planned measures even if the majority of citizens are against them."
- "As a rule, conflicts cannot be resolved through discussion and negotiation."

Question 1

Are you concerned about the future of democracy Germany?

1 = Not at all concerned

7 = Extremely concerned

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Don't know
<input type="radio"/>							

Follow-up question if you filled 1 in the previous question:

If you are not at all concerned, please state some reasons:

Follow-up question if you filled between 2 and 7 in the previous question:

Follow-up question: If you stated you are concerned, then please state what makes you concerned:

Debriefing

Thank you for your participation in our study! Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of the Study: The term "democracy" can take on a many meanings - in political science as much as in the real world. What "democracy" means to the people often differs drastically. This survey aims to find out how people in Germany think about democracy, and what their concerns are for the future of democracy in Germany.

Confidentiality: We will keep your data confidential. Your responses will be anonymized, and all data collected from our study will be stored securely on our servers.

Useful Contact Information: If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, its purpose or procedures, or if you have a research-related problem, please feel free to contact Dr. Vanessa Boese-Schlosser (vanessa.boese@wzb.eu).

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the WZB Research Ethics Committee (mail to Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung gGmbH, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer 50, D-10785 Berlin, Germany, or email (contact tbc).

If you feel upset after having completed the study or find that some questions or aspects of the study triggered distress, talking with a qualified clinician may help. If you feel you would like assistance please contact the Federal Chamber of Psychotherapists (BPTK), info@npce.eu.

Please keep a copy of this form for your future reference. Once again, thank you for your participation in this study!