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From Prejudice to Polarization and Rejection of Democracy

Attitudes to Social Plurality as the Litmus Test of a Democratic Political Culture

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Abstract: With the growing success of right-wing populism, there has been an explosion of debates on polarization and social cohesion. In part, social cohesion is seen as being disrupted by right-wing populists and those who blame migration for this alleged disruption of cohesion. The developing polarization is not only social, but also political, so that in some cases there is already talk of a new cleavage. On the one hand, there are right-wing populists, people who do not want any major changes or who have problems with globalization; on the other hand, there are those who want to push through a transformation towards a 'truly' pluralistic society. Two issues in particular serve as bridges for this polarization: Muslim migration and the expansion of sexual and gender diversity. Positions on these two issues mark the content that facilitates the consolidation of opposing group identities. As a result, debates about values and identity dominate, leading to a polarization that reaches far into society.

Keywords: democracy, plurality, polarization, political culture, prejudice

1 Introduction: Polarization and Cohesion as Contemporary Narratives

Two terms have appeared with increasing frequency in newspapers in recent years: 'polarization' and 'social cohesion'. The latter term seems to be a reaction to the perception of polarization processes, with social cohesion therefore

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becoming important only when it seems to be endangered (Deitelhoff et al. 2020: 10–11). This perception of endangerment is based on polarization tendencies (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019; McCarty 2019; Roose and Steinhilper 2022). Such tendencies were first located in the two-party system of the United States, where they were addressed primarily (and especially after the election of Donald Trump) from the point of view of affective polarization (Baldassarri and Bearman 2007; Busby et al. 2021; Gildron et al. 2021).

In Germany and Europe, narratives as well as observations of societal polarization have increased especially since the migration movements of 2015 and the related successes of right-wing populist parties (Arzheimer 2019; Hambauer and Mays 2018; Pickel 2019a). If the latter profited from the fact that German people opposed migration, they then actively sought to keep this issue alive. But it did not stop there, since right-wing populists developed a strategy of polarization that also took up other, and sometimes controversial, issues, such as opposing measures to legitimize greater sexual and gender diversity, or rejecting the idea that climate change is due to human activity (Quent, Richter, and Salheiser 2022). Whether their focus is on differentiating along the communitarian-cosmopolitan axis with a view to addressing the effects of globalization (De Wilde et al. 2019; Lengfeld and Dilger 2018; Merkel 2017; Zürn and de Wilde 2016), or on debates about gender-neutral language, or on discourses about an alleged lack of freedom of expression—these 'contested issues' are always the starting-point of (intentional) polarizations. Whether they are always purely antagonistic or involve two groups is open to debate (see Mau, Lux, and Gülzau 2020). But what is true is that they regularly culminate in mutual accusations, with right-wing populists and supporters of the extreme right almost always shaping these debates and taking a polarized position. And this is true worldwide, as political coups in the United States and Brazil show (also Norris and Inglehart 2019).[1]

It seems that there is an opposition between a democratic, pluralistic and progressive group of people who call for cohesion among all people in the nation state, and a group that thinks that only a limited circle of people merit cohesion.[2] The vehemence with which right-wing populists try to intensify such

1 In the USA, Donald Trump won the 2016 elections with aggressive right-wing populist rhetoric. His polarizing policies, aimed solely at his own voters, escalated into a storm of his supporters at the Capitol when he lost the 2020 election. In Brazil, the radical right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro also won the elections in 2018. His defeat in the 2022 election led to circumstances similar to those in the U.S., a storm on the government quarter.

2 Definitions of social cohesion are disputed (Deitelhoff et al. 2020). Solidarity, social capital, but also tolerance, are components. However, the definition of cohesion is equally shaped by the question of who belongs to society or *Volksgemeinschaft* in the first place (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Holtmann 2018, 23–62).

polarizations seems to be aimed not only at electoral success, but also ultimately at the abolition of pluralistic democracy (Decker et al. 2022c; Erdmann and Kneuer 2011; Pickel 2019a; Pickel and Pickel 2023). Right-wing populists focus on two issues in particular: Muslim migration on the one hand, and feminism and sexual/gender diversity on the other, with campaigns by right-wing populists across Europe being directed primarily against these groups (summarized by Muno and Pfeiffer 2021). The reason is simple: prejudices and resentments that exist among some of the population can be activated and mobilized.

In addition, these issues can strengthen a group's own identity, which is constructed in contrast to the 'establishment' and an 'elitist mainstream'. This strategy has one, partially desired, side effect: namely, that people mobilize against the pluralistically structured democracy. Thus, supporters of certain values who are dissatisfied with developments in society are encouraged to express their rejection of these developments and vote for right-wing populists. This strategy is pursued by the AfD in Germany, the Ressemblement National in France, and Fidesz in Hungary. Its success, however, depends on starting-points in the electorate that can be used for the purposes of polarization. This brings us to our central question: *To what extent do beliefs and attitudes exist in the population that can be used as a basis for polarization or that provide a basis for political polarization?*

We will examine this question in three steps, each represented by a thesis: *(1) Prejudices related to groups and the values expressed in them are the basis of political polarization. (2) This polarization is grouped according to traditional value patterns and finds its strongest representation in the right-wing populist side of the AfD. (3) Polarization and pluralistic liberal democracy are opposed to each other, with the former undermining democratic political culture.* We take Germany as an example for our observations, which we underpin empirically through survey data. The core of our empirical analyses are the Leipzig Authoritarianism Studies 2020/2022 in combination with the related 'Church Membership and Political Culture' and 'Radical Islam—Radical Anti-Islam' (Pickel et al. 2023). After presenting the theoretical foundations (*Section* 2), we will focus on the prejudices and reference points of polarization (*Section* 3). We will then turn to the relationships between the election of right-wing populists (AfD), and these reference points of polarization (*Section* 4), before addressing the significance for democratic political culture (*Section* 5).

2 Theoretical Reflections: Political Culture, Polarization and Prejudice

2.1 Conflict, Plurality and Polarization

Discussions of polarization have increased markedly in recent years, as have discussions of social cohesion (e.g. Deitelhoff, Groh-Samberg, and Middell 2020; Koopmans et al. 2005; Letki 2008; Valdesolo and Graham 2016). In this context, polarization refers to a drifting apart of different groups in the population or between elites and the population (McCarty 2019). This is not a completely new process, but the sharpness of political debate, a stronger affective filling of polarization, and the resulting danger to a democratic political culture have given the topic a gain in relevance (Carothers and O'Donohue 2019). In this context, polarization is usually understood as a distancing between two parties, but it can also include multiple parties. The concept of polarization includes the idea of conflict. Conflict theory provides information on how to understand it. According to conflict theory, conflicts and differences are natural and even productive in a pluralistic society (Coser 1956; Dahrendorf 1956; Schmelzle 2021), since they help negotiate interests and move society forward. However, a society cannot exist on conflict alone. For example, Hirschman (1994) distinguished between negotiable conflicts open to compromise and categorical conflicts where positions are irreconcilable. He counts moral and identity conflicts among the latter. Rather, as Dahrendorf (1956) argues in particular, conflict theory relies on the organized or institutionalized reconciliation of interests between those involved in the conflict. The problem is that this presupposes the willingness of both parties to balance their interests. In other words, the parties to the conflict, whether two or more, must assume that they will reach a compromise that will benefit them somehow. This form of reconciliation of interests aimed at compromise becomes difficult when compromises are not accepted and there are conflicts of values that are irreconcilable from the point of view of the parties involved. In a polarized society, where the antagonists are no longer willing to negotiate, there is no longer a reconciliation of interests possible. If, for example, almost half the German population classify compromise as 'betrayal of one's own principles', then negotiation becomes impossible.[3] Another aspect that is

3 The Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020 featured the item 'What is called compromise in politics is nothing other than a betrayal of principles'. 43 % of respondents agreed with this statement in Western Germany (9 %, fully agreed), and 55 % in Eastern Germany (14.4 %, fully agreed); overall, 45 % agreed (10 %, fully agreed). We are grateful to the EKD for sponsoring an additional survey block for the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020 (EKD 2022; Pickel et al. 2022).

important for democracies is the acceptance of defeat, for example, when an election is lost, also leaving office (Anderson et al. 2005). This, too, is part of the rules of a democracy.

In conflict theory, there is not a denial of the need to understand and follow the rules of the game of conflict reconciliation. Conflict theory, for example, desires above all conflicts that promote social integration and advance society in a contained manner (Dahrendorf 1956). This is especially noteworthy against the background of the existence of minorities, since they have difficulties to assert their rights in negotiation processes, and need a certain level of protection. Only a functioning rule of law and minority rights can protect them. However, processes of polarization automatically mean that significant processes of exclusion can result if a majority does not limit itself, and then ultimately rejects the principles of a pluralistic democracy. Thus, processes of polarization always pose a risk to democratic political culture, which sees the stability of a political system and of democracy as resting on the common acceptance of democratic rules of the game (Lipset 1981; Pickel and Pickel 2022).

2.2 Political Culture—Or the Conflict-Prone Strain on Liberal Democracy

A basic consensus on the rules of the game and on the basic conditions of a democracy is imperative from the perspective of research on political culture. People may be dissatisfied with aspects of political life or with their political representatives, but they need to recognize democracy and its rules of the game to prevent the political system from collapsing. For a democracy, it is *basic democratic rights* that set the rules of the game for the political field (Easton 1965; Fuchs 1989), these being inscribed in the constitution. In a democracy, these rules of the game include far-reaching rights with regard to individual freedom, political and social participation, legal equality, and control of those who are in power. They also include the protection of human rights and individual rights, which necessarily entails openness to *plurality* in society. A challenge for plural democracies is, that democratic political culture requires the population to recognize or support these rights (Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1975; Eckstein 1966; Lipset 1981; Pickel and Pickel 2006; Welzel and Inglehart 2009). If it manages to, then such a culture can also deal with processes of polarization—as long as they do not undermine the democratic system itself.

To make this clearer, we should look briefly at research on political culture and its concept of political support (Easton 1965, 1975; Fuchs 1989; Pickel and Pickel 2006). Easton understands *political support* as an attitude that a person has to orient herself with regard to a political object. It is an analytical rather than an evaluative

term; all political objects, according to Easton, can be supported positively or negatively. For a political system to be sustained, the number of people who are positive towards the system must outweigh the number who are negative. In other words, if more people oppose the democratic system than support it, then it is only a matter of time before the historical conditions arise for its complete collapse (people emerge who overthrow the system, or there are economic crises).

This assumption applies not only to democracies but also to autocracies. Lipset (1981) makes a similar argument. He distinguishes between legitimacy and effectiveness. Here, legitimacy has the task of maintaining the political system or democracy in the long term. There are interrelationships between attitudes and objects at different levels of the political sphere. The support of democracy is crucial for the stability of the political system. In addition to evaluation of performance and the legitimacy of the political system, support for a democratic regime in a country is divided into trust and system support. Current approaches take into account attachment to the political community as well as individual understandings of democracy (Ferrin and Kriesi 2016; Pickel 2016: 552–554).

Thus, the preservation of democracy depends very much on the legitimacy of democracy, and the existence of the democratic system depends on the existence of system support and trust in the institutions (Svolik 2019: 28). The preservation of the political community or society in the prevailing form of government is based on identification with the political community—and its fundamental democratic values. There are interrelationships between the legitimacy of democracy and this identification: in a democracy, social integration requires not only identification with the political community, but also recognition of the central principles of democracy. It is particularly relevant in Western-style liberal democracies, which are strongly oriented towards individual rights (Schmidt 2019, 471–505).

The model of research on political culture that has a structural-functionalist basis sees social conflicts that are not institutionally embedded as dysfunctional for the stability of a political system, and a violation of the basic values of the political community as a threat to social cohesion (Pickel and Pickel 2023, 97–123). Or vice versa: a system collapse can only occur when the common democratic rules of the game are called generally into question. This does not mean individual radical activities to gain attention (such as the Last Generation protest group), but a fundamental, basically extremist rejection of the rules of the game. Conflicts that do not call these rules into question, though, are just as normal in pluralistic societies and harmless for democracy as occasional dissatisfaction with politicians, parties, those performing the roles of political authority, and institutions. In view of debates on polarization, *group differences* at the level of the political community and people's attitudes towards their (political) community take on significance for the political culture of a democracy.

2.3 Prejudice as a Basis for Affective and Value-Oriented Polarization

Group differences become a problem when they turn into polarization—in fact, they are the basis of (psychological) polarization (Van Prooijen 2021). Identity processes and associated devaluations have been found to be particularly important for polarization processes. This is where the concept of *prejudice* comes into play. *Group-related prejudice*, a term from social-psychological research on prejudice, maps delimitations and categorizations of social groups based on perceived and ascribed group characteristics. It thus follows on from the central considerations of research on prejudice (Allport 1979), which understands prejudice as "an antipathy based on a faulty and rigid generalization" and, by group-related extension, as "an attitude or orientation toward a group (or its members) that directly or indirectly devalues them. The reason is often self-interest or the benefit of one's own group" (Allport 1979, 6–9; Jonas, Stroebe, and Hewstone 2014, 509). Prejudice can be positive or negative. For example, Germans are classified as very disciplined and hard-working people, Sinti and Roma as criminal, and Muslims as misogynistic. These prejudices are not necessarily based on experience, but may be constructed secondarily (e.g. via hearsay or media reports). Prejudices can be directed at individuals, but also at social groups, these being assigned certain characteristics and then rejected on the basis of these characteristics. Group-related prejudices are associated with the devaluation of other groups and an understanding of biological or cultural inequality as well as affective rejection.

Central to these devaluation processes is *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1986), which claims that people have a fundamental need for positive identity. This they can achieve by identifying with a group that is evaluated as positive (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 10).[4] A common identity is formed within the *in-group* that is based, for example, on cultural similarities, and that gives the individual self-confidence. The *in-group* benefits by devaluing or subordinating the *out-group.* Revaluating one's own group in contrast to others leads to a particular emphasis on the negative aspects of the *out-group*. The central motive for people to join the *in-group* is thus that doing so increases their own self-esteem. What is important here is the emotional bond that the group member has to her *in-group*. Especially

4 SIT claims that we always belong simultaneously to a variety of in-groups that determine our identity. We constitute our identity by belonging (or assuming that we belong) to different social groups. However, this belonging can vary in terms of how present or important it is to us. This is also true depending on situations and contexts that make belonging to a specific in-group seem more salient, more conscious and more important than belonging to other groups. The processes of demarcation described usually presuppose that the in-group has a high degree of salience.

when has low *mobility in their group memberships* (*social mobility*), emotional significance increases and group membership acquires importance for a person's own identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 11, 16).

This process can help form prejudices, since it is precisely the devaluation of other social groups that helps people secure their own self-worth. As a result, the *out-group* is seen as an object that deviates from a person's own values, and that can potentially endanger the *in-group.* In this way, prejudices against the other group arise in the process of devaluation, these prejudices taking root and becoming independent. This follows a classic pattern of prejudice formation via (1) categorization, (2) stereotyping, and (3) affective charging. If this process is combined with attributions of danger, then prejudice is reinforced or amplified due to an increase in emotional investment (Jonas, Stroebe, and Hewstone 2014, 543–546). Over time, this constellation leads to anxiety and the feeling of threat. As the person increasingly internalizes the image of the 'dangerous other', so increases the importance of proximity to her own collective group.[5] An affective dynamic sometimes (feeling of threat, fear, loss of work, …) develops that leads to the construction of more group-related prejudices, and that turns the rejection of the social group into an end in itself.

Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) (Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran 2000), which focuses on the effects that feelings of threat have, claims that these fears and attributions of threat have a boundary-enhancing effect (Jonas and Fritsche 2013). ITT distinguishes between symbolic and realistic threats that the *in-group*, like its members, might face. *Symbolic threats* result from the perceived difference between the in-group and the *out-group*. A variant of symbolic threat is the concern that the *out-group* wants to suppress the supposed values of the in-group. In contrast, *realistic threats* can be traced back to physical, manifest feelings of threat. This can be fear of terrorist attacks, but also an increase in competition on the labor market. This threat is something that, with its greater economic focus, group-threat theory addresses (Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958; Hjerm 1998). This theory argues that threats are simply attributed to the reference group rejected. These feelings of threat can lead to, or at least strongly reinforce, prejudice (Pickel, Pickel, and Yendell 2020; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010).[6] What we can deduce from these reflections is that perceiving a religious community and its members as posing a strong threat

5 What amplifies a person's identification with her own group, and social differentiation from the foreign group, is the level of loyalty that the person assumes the group requires. The more loyal a person believes she has to be to her group, the more likely she is to reject an outside group.

6 Stephan and Lausanne Renfro (2002) have already pointed out the mutual influence of prejudices and feelings of threat. Thus, it is necessary to infer corresponding causal assumptions contextually or at least to use them cautiously.

reinforces their devaluation (Uenal 2016). It is important to understand this process not as a devaluation and rejection generated 'only by the feeling of threat', which seems perfectly acceptable, but as a component in the reinforcement and spread of prejudice in a society where there are already the rudiments of prejudice. Group stereotypes, however, usually feed on a deeper common knowledge and draw on long-held notions of inequality (Alexopoulou 2021). Thus, identifying relationships between feelings of threat and prejudice by no means denies the existence of racism and resentment. Even if attitudinal research measures attitudes and prejudices, a close look at the findings allows us to assess such attitudes and prejudices as racism.

Also helpful as an explanatory approach is the theory of *authoritarianism* (Adorno et al. 1950; Adorno 1973, 315–328), and on the authoritarian personality, which is identified as a personality structure resulting from experiences in childhood and education. The devaluation of the other thereby becomes a need – and is only partly a consequence of changed life circumstances.[7] Later studies extended these ideas in the direction of a mixture of personality traits and social embeddedness (Decker and Brähler 2020; Pettigrew 1958), arguing that authoritarian attitudes are shaped by unequal living conditions and socialization. Recent studies have repeatedly identified authoritarianism as a predictor of extreme right-wing attitudes, but it also serves as an attachment to a group and a strong authority. Importantly, 'classic' authoritarianism is extended to include the component of the conspiracy mindset (Decker et al. 2020b: 196), this mindset marking people's openness to conspiracy narratives. The last few years, and especially the demonstrations against Covid-19 measures, show how significant and distancing the belief in conspiracy narratives are is (Schließler, Hellweg, and Decker 2020). Thus, the far right is quick to use such narratives to accelerate processes of polarization and to prevent exchanges with those who think differently. At the same time, belief in conspiracy narratives undermines democratic political culture (Pickel, Pickel, and Yendell 2020: 109).

3 Group-Related Prejudices as a Reference Point of Polarization

What are the hallmarks of polarization? First and foremost, of course, polarization entails irreconcilable points of view. Such points of view can exist in many places.

7 This also leads to the classification of anti-Semitism in contrast to other prejudices: namely, as a *ressentiment* with a comprehensive ideological function (Adorno 1973, 110–115).

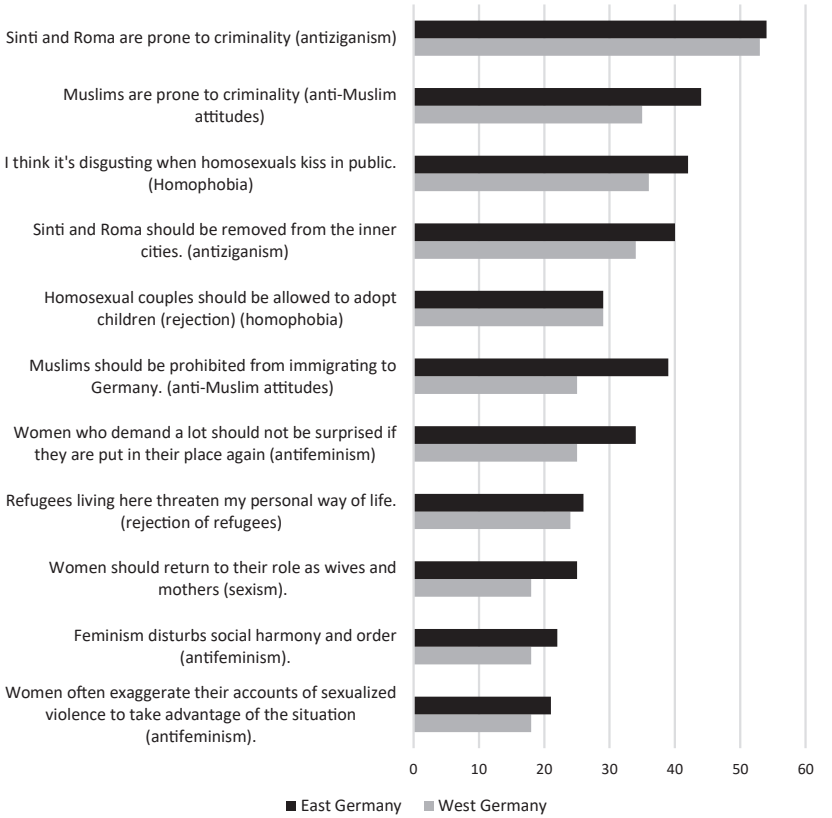
But it is not for nothing that we focused on group-related prejudices in Section 2, since they seem best suited to describe the different positions in society and to depict group- and value-related polarization. On the one hand, there are people who are open to plurality and who aim at social cohesion for all people in a country, whether they belong to a minority or to a majority, whether they have a migration background, or whether they have a non-binary gender identity. They advocate the normalization of sexual and gender diversity, as well as its legal equality, and see migration in terms of the integration and inclusion of migrants. On the other, there are people who invoke a homogenous nationalism of a collective community. They understand belonging homogeneously, reject pluralization in any form, and are critical of current developments in democracy; they may even desire a strong leader or a one-party system of rule by their own party.

These descriptions are, of course, *ideal types.* Nevertheless, current discourse displays the two directions outlined. This polarization overlaps occasionally but not always with opposites such as right and left, conservative and progressive. In reality, ideal types also leave open intermediate positions. Thus, a conservative person who has difficulties with homosexuality is not necessarily against democracy, and a supporter of left-wing ideas is not necessarily pro-democracy (Abrams and Fish 2020).

However, what can be used to identify the polarization that we can observe today is whether a person accepts or rejects pluralization and minorities in society. In doing so, we assume an affective polarization that can take place detached from social-structural groups.[8] A dividing line opens up here that should be understood as a continuum with nuances of proximity or distance to the ideal types shown. Not all proponents or opponents of plurality correspond to the ideal types situated at each end of polarization, but they often move towards them. Let us now look at the rejection and devaluation of other groups, group-related prejudices, and racism (Figure 1).[9] The spectrum of devaluations ranges from anti-feminism, which can be found among one fifth of Germans, to a rejection of homosexuality (between 30 and 40 %), to anti-Muslim attitudes and anti-ziganism (up to half

8 This approach is thus recognizably different from one that uses socio-structural differences as a necessary reference point for polarizations (Mau, Lux, and Gülzau 2020).

9 In the following, we use a mix of survey data for the presentations. However, we refer centrally to our own calculations with the data of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020 in combination with a block of items on prejudice, political culture and racism funded by the EKD (2022) (Decker and Brähler 2020; Pickel et al. 2022). This combination allows us to present broader references than is the case in the also available and more recent Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2022 (Decker et al. 2022). Comparable descriptive results differ only marginally between 2020 and 2022.



Source: Own calculations, Leipzig Authoritarianism Study (LAS) and Church Membership and Political Culture (KMPK) 2020; n=2503; values shown represent the percentage of those agreeing with the statement.

Figure 1: Prejudice against groups in Germany, 2020.

the population). Not everyone devalues all minorities or groups regarded as different from themselves. Nevertheless, prejudice and devaluation are widespread, with Sinti and Roma experiencing this to a particularly high degree. Over 50 % of Germans impute to them, for example, a tendency to criminality (also Decker et al. 2020a, 65–66). This is accompanied by further devaluations (Pickel and Stark 2022, 16–17). Muslims are only a shade less often the target of such prejudice.

Pointing in the direction of anti-Muslim racism are the 25 % of Germans who would like to ban Muslims from immigrating (also Öztürk and Pickel 2019, 2022;

Uenal 2016).[10] The rejection of Muslims is closely linked to the devaluation of refugees, with many Germans seeing both groups as quasi-synonymous after 2015 (Pickel and Pickel 2019). Thus, it is not refugees *per se* who are seen as a problem, but Muslim refugees who are classified as culturally alien. This is shown by the comparatively open attitude towards Ukrainian refugees after the Russian invasion, or even by the attitude towards immigrants from Eastern Europe before that. But affected by devaluation are not only Sinti and Roma or Muslims, i.e. social groups that are classified as foreign, but also women, feminists, homosexuals and transsexuals, with one third of Germans finding it 'disgusting when homosexuals kiss in public'. This is a minority, but not a small minority. The same can be said for anti-feminist or sexist items, where the level of agreement ranges between a quarter and a fifth of Germans. It is striking that rates of agreement are consistently higher in Eastern than in Western Germany (Pickel, Pickel, and Yendell 2020; Zick 2021, 188–191).

These group-related prejudices are interconnected, but not completely the same. Dimensional analyses (factor analyses) yielded a three-way division in the data into (a) devaluation of social groups, (b) rejection of sexual and gender diversity, and (c) anti-Semitism (Pickel et al. 2022, 45; other Heitmeyer 2002). The three dimensions are not completely independent of each other, but quite a few Germans specifically respond in the direction of devaluing one of the three dimensions or a specific group. Now, one could rationally negotiate different attitudes towards groups based on knowledge. This is also true for a large part of the democratic spectrum of people in Germany. But for some groups in Germany, these are value-based positions that are not negotiable. People are vehement in their rejection or acceptance of these social groups, sexual and gender diversity, or Jews. Such sharp differentiation is often based on emotional positions and less on rational debate, even if people might occasionally like to believe that they are motivated by the latter.

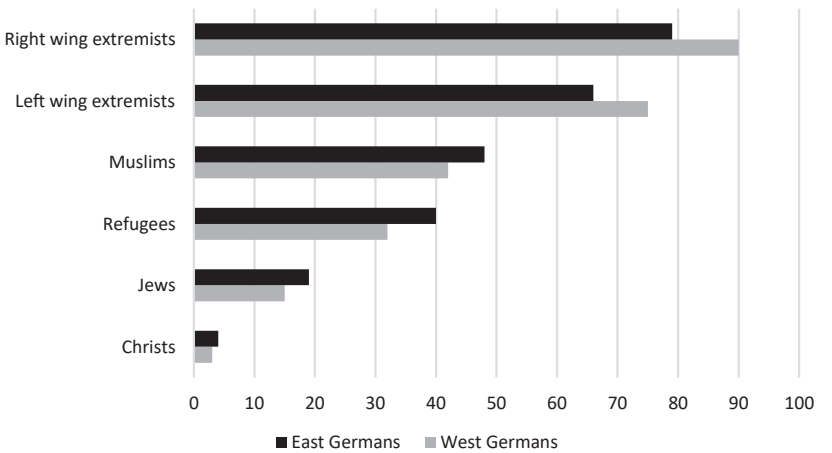
The polarization thus created is fostered by increasing communication via social media. Counterpublics are created that are seen as equivalent to public media, and relatively compartmentalized bubbles are created in which people reinforce their opinions (Kubin and von Sikorski 2021; Melki and Sekeris 2019).

10 Here I use the term anti-Muslim racism, which is used in research on racism, because the devaluation observed is a devaluation based on cultural attributions. See current definitions of racism (Goldberg and Essed 2002, 3–5; Lavorano 2019, 2; Rattansi 2020, 4; Rommelspacher 2011, 44–45). Since racism cannot be measured directly in attitude surveys and only indications can be given in this direction, we speak of anti-Muslim attitudes in corresponding interpretations of empirical material.

Fears of foreignness and the perception of Muslims as threatening make a significant contribution to this rejection. Figure 2 shows the fears that people have of Muslims, for example: between 40 and 50 % of Germans see Muslims as threatening.

Comparable questions in the Religion Monitor even yielded values above 50 % when people were asked about Islam (Pickel 2022, 758–760; Pickel and Yendell 2016). This is considerably higher than the assessment of refugees as threatening, which is also not low. Right-wing and left-wing extremists are seen as more threatening than the other groups, which also shows that reciprocal designations as left-wing or right-wing extremists have a polarizing character.

But back to Muslims. Fears of threat extend the *social identity theory* based social distance, by the defense against primarily symbolic threats to one's own lifeworld. Since people are convinced that the influx of Muslims is a real threat to their own culture, they reject counter-positions as wrong and reprehensible, if they perceive them at all. Thus, there is an increasing polarization between Germans who are open to and tolerant of Muslims, and those who strongly reject them. While anti-Muslim attitudes have long been the most important bridge to the extreme right and the central issue of polarization, Figure 1 above shows that it is not the only issue, with the rejection of sexual and gender diversity having gained prominence, and culminating in positions that can no longer talk to each other.



Source: LAS + KMPK 2020; n=2503; values shown represent the percentage of those agreeing with the statement.

Figure 2: Feelings of threat and fear with regard to different groups.

4 Group-Based Prejudices, Polarization, and Voting for Right-Wing Populists

How is polarization expressed? Here we look at how the devaluations identified as bridge constructs are distributed along the spectrum of political parties. It is immediately apparent that no party is free of voters who are anti-feminist or anti-Muslim.[11] However, the proportions vary significantly, with supporters of the Green party being diagonally opposed to AfD supporters in their attitudes towards Muslims, feminism and homosexuality. The two parties and their constituencies represent the political cornerstones of internal social polarization in Germany. Majority support for anti-Muslim attitudes is higher on average than for anti-feminism. While this is only a descriptive expression of where the majority of the different social positions are found, it already gives a good indication of existing political polarization and which parties reflect it. With a view to the AfD electorate, which stands out from society as a whole, it is worth taking a closer look at the direction of the extreme right-wing group, which is moving away from the majority society. We try to make this claim plausible in the following by using the example of the explanatory factors of voting for the AfD, but also of the turn to extreme right-wing positions. For this purpose, we use the scale used in the data of the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study to capture extreme right-wing attitudes.

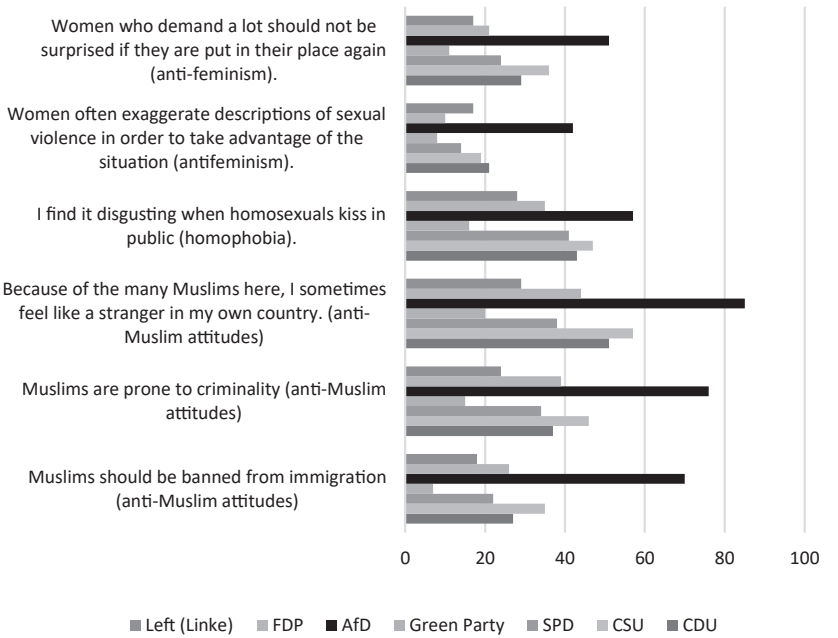
This scale contains 18 items on various dimensions of right-wing extremism, such as advocacy of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, chauvinism, trivialization of National Socialism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and social Darwinism (Decker et al. 2020a). Voting for the AfD, the German representative of right-wing populism, is measured as a dichotomous variable. For reasons of comparability, we use linear regression analysis for both variables. This tells us about the key factors behind voting for the AfD. The result is concise and confirms our initial assumptions: namely, it is precisely anti-feminist and anti-Muslim attitudes that lead people to vote for the AfD.

It is not for nothing that right-wing populist strategy focuses on these attitudes as their main starting-point. The anti-Muslim attitudes can certainly be understood as racist positions. The overlap with the left-right scale is evidenced by the

11 The CDU and CSU represent a party alliance on the conservative side, while the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) belongs to European social democracy. The FDP, free democrats, are an (economic) liberal party. The Left Party emerged from the former SED in the GDR, but today unites various political-ideological left-leaning voters and actors. The Greens represent a further developed ecological party, and the AfD is a right-wing populist party in the sense of the right-wing populism that is becoming established in Europe.

influence of ideological positioning on the left-right axis. If a person assigns herself more to the right side of the political-ideological spectrum, then the likelihood increases that she will vote for the AfD. What also encourages people to vote for the AfD is the feeling that politicians are unresponsive to what people want. This attitude still most closely describes the character of a vote motivated by populist protest (Priester 2007, 78–140).

However, right-wing populist parties always work to retain protest voters, and they often succeed in doing so by tying them to their "thin ideology" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 4) (Figure 3). This comprises the idea that elites are distant and other ideas that can be used against pluralist democracy.[12] Overall, we can explain



Source: LAS + KMPK 2020; n=2503; values shown represent the percentage of those agreeing with the statement.

Figure 3: Prejudice and racism by voting intention.

12 Cas Mudde calls populism a 'thin ideology' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Its goal is to polarize. Establishing a 'host ideology' is often decisive for its ideological orientation; in the case of right-wing populism, this is a right-wing ideology.

the increase in right-wing extremist attitudes very well, and the fact that people vote for the AfD quite well (Figure 4).[13] The central starting-points for why people vote for the AfD are the perception of a spread of feminism and increase of Muslim migration, or Muslims in general.[14] Both sets of indicators, condensed into scales, still have considerable statistical and substantive influence when controlling for many other relevant factors. Thus, it is no coincidence that people vote for the AfD. People who vote for the AfD vote for them because of their policies and positions. It is It therefore makes sense for the AfD to use these points as a means of polarization, since, as we have already seen, these can have an impact far into the middle of the population.

This is also shown by the high levels of anti-Muslim feeling among CDU, CSU and FDP voters. These anchor points of polarization are supported by conspiracy narratives, which focus on how insidious the ruling elites are, while enabling people to create an identity for their own group and for all those who subscribe to these narratives. Thus, distinct publics are created that are held together by conspiracy narratives. These benefit the far right and right-wing populists, as Figure 4 shows. Cultivating such conspiracy narratives that create distances between their own clientele and other people is therefore an important goal of right-wing populists and the far right (Rippl and Seipel 2018). Equally important, however, is how open many people are to such narratives. This is called conspiracy mentality. In Figure 4, we can see the strong influence of this openness to believe in conspiracy narratives on right-wing-extremism and voting for the AfD.

Given the connection between the conspiracy mindset and anti-Semitic resentment, it is not surprising that anti-Semitic resentment also encourages people to vote for the AfD.[15] This contradicts claims made by the AfD that anti-Semitism is

13 We should always keep in mind that statistical findings alone can determine relationships, but not yet causality. What allows us to assume causality are rather theoretical considerations and plausibility reasons.

14 Contemporary observations show that it is not necessarily refugees who are a problem. Ukrainian refugees, for example, are less problematic because of their European and Christian origins than Muslim refugees, who are denied integration in Germany (or other European countries).

15 Paradigmatic for this is the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy narrative. This claims that Jews are orchestrating the replacement of the white Christian population in Europe by Muslims. Primary anti-Semitism refers to a traditional form of rejection of Jews. This resentment has been the common form of anti-Semitism under National Socialism, for example. Since after 1945 even anti-Semites learned that being recognized as an anti-Semite brings disadvantages, a so-called detour communication occurred. People now express their anti-Semitism covertly, for example in the form of a guilt defense or even guilt reversal (see Kiess et al. 2020). An example is the statement 'Reparations claims against Germany often do not benefit the victims at all, but rather a Holocaust industry of resourceful lawyers.' Israel-related anti-Semitism goes in a similar direction (Pickel and Öztürk 2022).

	Voting for the AfD	Right-wing extremism (scale)
Social structure		
Gender (direction: woman)	n.s.	n.s.
Age	n.s.	-.03*
Household income	-.04*	-.02*
Educational level (high formal education)	n.s.	-.04*
Educational level (low formal education)	n.s.	n.s.
Place of residence (direction: East Germany)	n.s.	+.05**
BIK community size (> 500,000 inhabitants)	n.s.	-.05**
Social and political factors		
Ideological left-right orientation (right)	+.15**	+.08**
Social trust	n.s.	n.s.
Assessment of own economic situation as good	n.s.	n.s.
Political effectiveness / no influence on policy	n.s.	n.s.
(Feeling as an East German to be treated as a second-class citizen)	(+.13)**	(+.16)**
Sense that politicians are responsive	-.10**	-.03*
Prejudices and devaluations		
Anti-feminism	*+.17***	*+.18***
Anti-Muslim attitudes	*+.19***	*+.20***
Sexism	n.s.	n.s.
Homophobia	n.s.	+.08**
Transphobia	n.s.	+.05*
Antiziganism	+.05*	+.05*
Anti-black racism	n.s.	+.12**
Primary anti-Semitism	+.13**	+.15**
Secondary anti-Semitism	+.06**	+.05*
Israel-related anti-Semitism	+.12**	+.09**
Social psychological scales		
Authoritarianism	n.s.	+.16**
Conspiracy mindset	+.14**	+.20**
Social dominance orientation	n.s.	+.19**
Corrected R-square	**R = .25**	**R = .73**

Source: Own calculations with linear regressions (pairwise); standardized beta coefficients shown; n.s. = no significant correlation; values shown from *r* = .05; *significant at the 0.05 level, **significant at the 0.01 level; all indicators were used; for reasons of comparability, a linear regression model was used for all calculations, logistic regression analyses conducted in parallel do not give a fundamentally different result for voting for the AfD and a closed far-right worldview; the feeling amongst East Germans that they are treated as second-class citizens only for East Germany, and therefore in parentheses.

Figure 4: Factors influencing why people vote for the AfD and right-wing extremism (scale).

a Muslim phenomenon. Anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic and anti-feminist attitudes are thus the starting-point for right-wing populists to drive polarization. However, they are not alone in creating these attitudes, since the population comprises both people with a fundamentally right-wing ideology and conservative voters who find it difficult to deal with changes in the environment. Such changes include changes to the power hierarchies that they have become accustomed to and that have benefitted them.

Another starting point for right-wing populists are collective identities, which is clearly illustrated by the fact that East Germans feel that they are seen as second-class citizens. This clearly encourages people in Eastern Germany to vote for the AfD (and to embrace extreme right-wing ideas), and helps explain at least in part why the AfD is more successful in the East. Thus, when asked, 57 % of East Germans feel that they are second-class citizens, which compares to only 20 % of West Germans. This collective feeling of deprivation was then also the starting point that the East German AfD used in its (successful) campaign of "unity 2.0" in the state elections from 2020.[16] Since these are identity policy positions, this also fits well with the rejection of Muslim immigration.

There is a very strong similarity between the explanatory pattern for voting for the AfD and the explanatory pattern for extreme right-wing attitudes, the latter being measured in Figure 4 on a continuous scale. Thus, it is not directly a matter that people have a closed and extreme right-wing worldview, which applies to only 3–5 % of people in Germany; rather, it is a matter that people are open to such a worldview, e.g. the more anti-feminist they are, the more extreme right-wing are their beliefs. Besides anti-feminist and anti-Muslim attitudes, what is also now gaining traction are authoritarian attitudes and a social dominance orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). This is not surprising, since right-wing extremism clearly has inherent devaluation structures, such as a convinced racism. It is clear that many AfD voters have extreme right-wing beliefs. In other words, they should by no means be seen as merely somewhat strident conservatives, since they often already have a right-wing ideological perspective that is directed against plural, liberal democracy *per se* (Pearson's r correlation between voting for the AfD and extreme right-wing beliefs $= +0.35$) (also Pickel 2019).

Not surprisingly, the position most strongly directed *against* right-wing extremist ideas is found amongst those who vote for the Greens (Pearson's r correlation with right-wing extremist attitudes $= -0.27$). What certainly plays a role when it comes to people's openness to voting for the AfD and to having right-wing beliefs

16 The AfD's campaign aimed at the fact that the actual reunification at eye level had not even been completed yet. The central goal was to exploit an East-West polarization and win over East German citizens who felt disadvantaged by West Germany.

are *fears* and their rejection already mentioned of changes to traditional power structures, such as between men and women (hegemonic masculinity; Connell 1995), between 'real men' and homosexuals, and between 'Germans' and migrants or those with a migratory background. These ideological, even affective, positions thus form the basis for a polarization that reaches into the population (Levendusky 2009).

5 Democratic Political Culture and Polarization

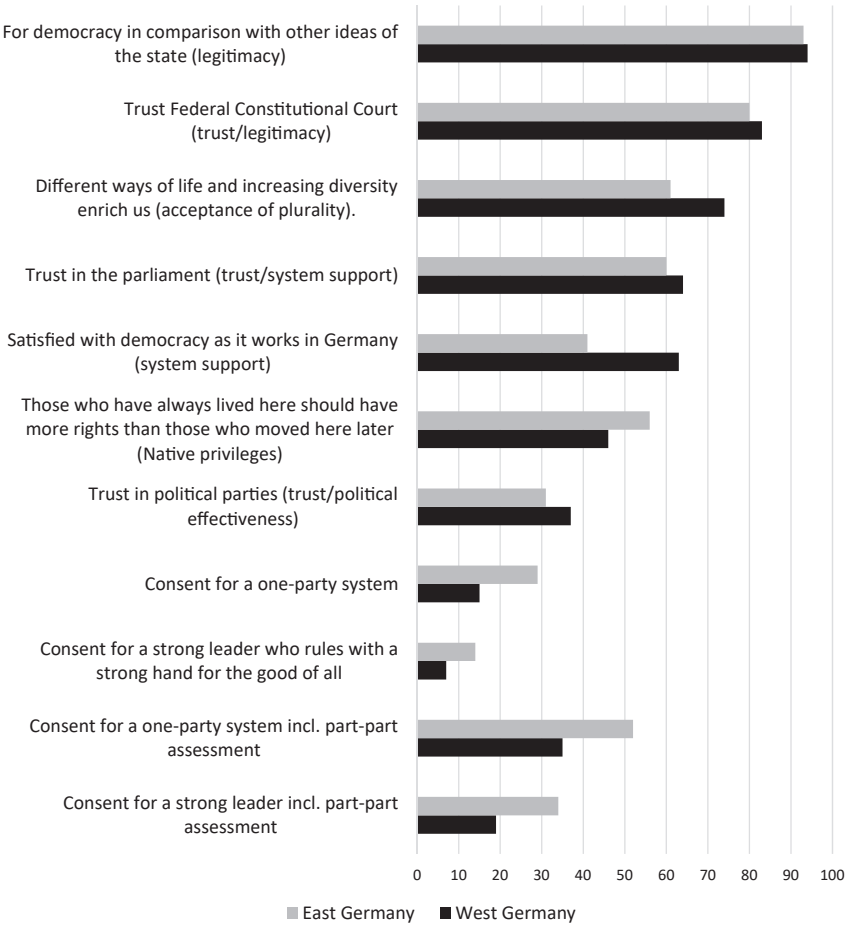
The final point is the relevance of polarization for political culture. Strictly speaking, it is the attitude towards democracy that makes polarization clear and its dangers evident. Although the right-wing populist camp often calls for referendums and seeks to present itself as conservative, it also harbours anti-democratic positions (Priester 2007; Steiner and Landwehr 2018). Right-wing populists and those on the extreme right claim that they represent the opinion of the 'silent' majority, and that they only want to protect the 'little man' from the oppression of the aloof elites (also Müller 2016).

On closer inspection, however, it becomes empirically apparent that right-wing populists are not concerned with deliberation. This is obvious in other countries (Brazil, India, the USA under Donald Trump, but also Hungary and to some extent Poland; Gottschlich 2021; Palonen 2009). When right-wing populists come to power, they only use referendums to undermine constitutional hurdles and any rights of protection for minorities that may still be enshrined in the constitution (de Moraes Bennech et al. 2021; Öztürk and Pickel 2021; Pytlas 2021; Svolik 2019: 22). In general, the goal of right-wing populist parties is to mobilize people against the democratic political system and specifically against representative democracy (Priester 2007); it is not to increase popular participation. In other words, the aim is simply to shift power towards an authoritarian leadership that uses populist measures to win approval. This movement often stems from the desire to secure one's own power and to counter the fear of having to resign after potential defeats. However, this negates a central rule of democracy (Anderson et al. 2005).

This is also clear from the attitudes that its supporters have towards democracy. Like other studies, the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020 on political culture in Germany confirms the high level of legitimacy that the principle and form of democratic government has amongst the German population (for many such studies, see Pickel, Pickel, and Yendell 2020, 98; Decker et al. 2020a, 60–62). If, however, we add components of effectiveness (such as the question about satisfaction with democracy as it functions in Germany), then the level of approval falls noticeably (which,

as Section 2 shows, is in line with theory) to what is nonetheless still a relatively high level.

The same is true for trust in key democratic institutions. The most painful decline from the viewpoint of representative democracy concerns trust in parliament (Figure 5). There are repeated differences between West and East Germany, the greatest difference being with regard to satisfaction with democracy as it functions currently (20 percentage points; Fuchs and Roller 2019, 149–158; Pickel 2019, 112–118). The closer political institutions come to the all-day politics, the less people trust them (Figure 5). While democracy has a high level of legitimacy and trust



Source: LAS + KMPK 2020; values shown represent the percentage of those strongly agreeing or somewhat agreeing with the statement, on a scale with four response options.

Figure 5: Political support in Germany.

in the system is relatively widespread, we should not underestimate the fact that people are less confident when it comes to how democracy actually functions. This lack of confidence is then taken up by the extreme right and used for the purposes of polarization, which it usually does by emphasizing its own support for democracy. However, it is not uncommon for the extreme right to show anti-democratic traits, which is seen in the high levels of approval for a one-party system and a strong leader. Strong agreement with such ideas still remains relatively low, although the fact that more than 25 % of East Germans are in favour of a one-party system should certainly give us pause for thought.

Adding the group of those who do not consistently reject the idea of a strong leader makes the situation problematic, however, since this increases the proportion of those who support a strong leader and who are no longer completely convinced of democracy to one-third of East Germans and one-fifth of West Germans. In other words, quite a few people favour a democracy and a strong leader, in the sense of a guided democracy, and especially if it abolishes so called 'gender-chairs' at universities, what means researchers dealing with issues of sexuality and gender, and restricts Muslim immigration.

Thus, although German political culture shows itself to be rooted predominantly in democracy, not everyone can always distinguish non-democratic alternatives from democracy, with some people imagining democracy to be something different from what currently exists or from what the normative core of democracy is Lauth (2004) and Pickel and Pickel (2022). This can even go so far as so-called forms of democracy that are no longer democracy at all. However, despite what they may sometimes want to believe, such people are clearly in the minority. This is apparent when we also take into account the group of respondents who answered 'partly/partly' to the questions about a strong leader and a one-party system. They are either unsure whether they reject both anti-democratic alternatives, or avoid giving clear approval to the anti-democratic alternative for reasons of social desirability.

Another opportunity for polarization lies in the belief shared by half of Germans that people 'native' to Germany should have advantages over migrants, with notions of equality and human rights receding into the background. There are echoes here of nativist thinking, which distinguishes between 'natives' and as foreigner marked citizens and bestows different rights upon them. Elements of racism are inherent in such thinking (Benedict 2019, 65–70). As with almost all other indicators, we find significant differences here between West and East Germany. For example, East Germans are much more likely than their West German counterparts to insist that longer-established sections of the population should have advantages. Thus, they are less likely than West Germans to see increasing pluralization as

something positive, although the majority still do. Certainly, important here is their collective perception already mentioned that they are disadvantaged.

Figure 6 shows the strong correlation between anti-democratic attitudes and voting for the AfD, as well as the two central bridging ideologies (anti-Muslim racism, anti-feminism). Both voting for the AfD and a higher position on the right-wing extremism scale are correlated with a lower level of trust in political institutions and a greater distance from democracy as it currently works, as well as from democracy in general (also Küpper et al. 2021, 62–65). It is striking that the consistently anti-democratic correlations between voting for the AfD and a higher level of right-wing extremism differ only at one point: namely, when it comes to the legitimacy of democracy.

Unlike Germans with stronger right-wing extremist beliefs, many AfD voters still see themselves as supporting the constitution. However, this does not prevent them from increasingly rejecting the basic institutions of democracy, such as the Bundestag and the Federal Constitutional Court. That anti-Muslim and anti-feminist attitudes are in tension with the constitutional values of freedom and equality is also clear, and they can be understood as conduits to the right, and sometimes to the extreme right. Neither attitude is therefore trivial, since each can pave the way to right-wing authoritarian and extreme right-wing attitudes. Other issues that lend themselves to polarization also undoubtedly gain relevance over time (Bieber, Rossteutscher, and Scherer 2018; Pickel 2019), such as opposition to Covid-19 measures, to the idea that climate change is caused by human beings, and to support for Ukraine following Russia's war of aggression, with these positions sometimes overlapping (Decker et al. 2022a, 112–120; Decker et al. 2022b; Jungkunz 2021, 4–6; Quent, Richter, and Salheiser 2022; Schießler et al. 2020, 301).

What becomes clear here is that there are certain ideologies that are central to polarization, and that the far right (successfully) promotes these ideologies. This is

	Voting for the AfD	Right-wing extremism scale	Anti-Muslim racism (scale)	Anti-feminism (scale)
Legitimacy of democracy	-.14**	-.35**	-.22**	-.19**
Confidence in the Federal Constitutional Court	-.27**	-.27**	-.27**	-.26**
Confidence in the parliament	-.32**	-.30**	-.32**	-.20**
Satisfaction with democracy as it works	-.31**	-.31**	-.28**	-.20**

Source: Own calculations based on the Leipzig Authoritarianism Study 2020 and the Church Membership and Political Culture Study; with Pearson's *r* product-moment correlations; significant** p =.01.

Figure 6: Attitudes towards democracy as an indication of anti-democratic polarization.

echoed by the fact that these ideologies are present more strongly or more weakly in the population. There is a growing symbiosis between those who are fundamentally critical of the German state and those who are critical of representative democracy. Such people are always opposed to the positions of parliament, see themselves as oppressed, and consider themselves to represent a silent majority of the country.

6 Conclusion: Polarization as a Construct of Value-Based and Affective Prejudices and Right-Wing Populist Strategy

What is important when talking about social polarization today is communication breakdown between people. This is the result of sharply diverging ideas about what society should look like, combined with a rejection of compromise and the construction of friend-foe schemas. The strategic behavior of right-wing populist forces, or forces of the extreme right, contributes significantly to this polarization. Reinforcing polarization and division in society serves to mobilize and stabilize their constituencies, with campaigns against Muslim migrants and against sexual and gender diversity having already been quite successful means to this end. But these forces tend to be flexible in how they pick up current debates (Covid-19 measures, human-made climate change, support for Ukraine), usually putting forward a position that runs counter to the decisions of the majority parties and parliament. This strategy has already propelled these forces into government in some countries (see Brazil, India, Hungary, the USA and Poland), while other countries are not far behind (e.g. France). Polarization against the established democratic parties is therefore a useful strategy, since it mobilizes prejudices that already exist in the population. Thus, fear or rejection of Muslims did not begin with the first wave of migration in 2015, and nor is the devaluation of feminists or homosexuals new. They are value-based prejudice and rejection, combined with a desire to keep everything as it is, including customary power relations with regard to minorities.

This leads to a broad rejection of growing pluralization and binds backward-thinking people in particular to parties that paint a picture of 'Germany, but normal' (AfD 2021), these parties also claiming that they are simply acting on behalf of a silent majority.[17] Added to this are the fears that people have of fundamental change

17 The term 'Germany, but normal' was a core campaign in the 2021 federal election, which was intended to identify the AfD in classic right-wing populist terms as the representative of an alleged

and of losing their own position in shifting power hierarchies. They find the loss of their apparent superiority over migrants, women and Muslims depressing, and the AfD, like other right-wing populists, offers a solution. As this form of radicalization comes easily and boosts people's self-confidence, they move ever closer to right-wing actors and ever further from liberal-minded people (Pickel et al. 2023). This then develops into a polarization with two ends by focusing on an opposition between right-wing populists and democrats, which ties other formations of polarization back together.

Although the attitudinal polarizations may well generate more than one anatagonism (see Mau, Lux, and Gülzau 2020), through the political formation of the landscape and the antagonistic position of the right-wing populists, the political polarization then refocuses in a dichotomy of directions. Citizens can place themselves there on a continuum, but this continuum is partially dissolved by the decision-making pressure of an election. A reduced level of cognitive dissonance then leads people to turn differences with those who think differently into confrontations, with conspiracy narratives helping people maintain their own position. Polarization at the level of attitudes represents one form of polarization, and is the precursor to behavioral polarization. This means that people then take up new issues that lead them into confrontation with others, whom they accuse of not seeing the truth or even of working in league with the deceitful elites. It is impossible to talk or exchange ideas, or even compromise, with such people, and it is perhaps obvious that such attitudes are a threat to democracies and democratic political culture (Levitsky and Zibladt 2018). "Once again, the survival of democracies may depend on their ability to reverse polarization" (Somer and McCoy 2018, 12).[18]

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normality of the German. At the same time, it implicitly expressed opposition to migrants, Muslims, and people with non-binary gender identities (https://www.afd.de/joerg-meuthen-und-tino-chrupalla-zur-bundestagswahlkampagne-der-afd-2021/).

18 This text was written within the framework of the BMBF project network 'Radical Islam versus Radical Anti-Islam' led by Prof. Dr. Susanne Pickel at the University of Duisburg-Essen and within the BMBF-funded research project 'Political Cultural Change? Legitimacy of Democracy and Social Cohesion in Times of Increased Populism and Rising Islam Rejection' at the Research Institute for Social Cohesion (LEI_F_08). The BMBF is to be thanked for the financial support.

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