

POLARIZATION BAROMETER

POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN GERMANY 2025

HANS VORLÄNDER
MAIK HEROLD
FELIX HORMIG
CYRILL OTTENI

Citation:

Vorländer, Hans / Herold, Maik / Hormig, Felix / Otteni, Cyrill 2025: Political Polarization in Germany 2025. Polarization Barometer. Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM), Dresden.

MERCATOR FORUM MIGRATION AND DEMOCRACY

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POLARIZATION BAROMETER



FOREWORD

Hardly a day passes without warnings of a growing divide in society and rising political polarization. These concerns are typically accompanied by fears that democracy and social cohesion are under threat. Such anxieties are not unfounded, but they tend to oversimplify the current situation.

At the same time, voices in politics and academia are either denying that polarization exists or insisting that democracy necessarily depends on it. These arguments are not entirely wrong, yet they leave key questions unresolved: What kind of polarization are we talking about when we assess the state of society and democracy? And when does polarization begin to endanger democracy – when do political opponents turn into enemies?

Polarization itself is nothing new. In the United States, the antagonism between the two main parties has long appeared so entrenched that society has fractured along social and cultural lines. In West Germany, too, party-political polarization was evident – most notably in the 1970s, when two seemingly irreconcilable camps faced off: one reformist, the other conservative.

Since then, the political landscape has shifted, as have the public sphere and, above all, the forms of political communication. Parties have lost much of their ability to structure and stabilize politics, which now operates under the pressure of instantly articulated interests and preferences. Political debate is shaped by emotionally charged interventions across digital media and social networks. Outrage cycles have become routine.

Affective polarization – along with increasingly emotionalized modes of discourse, decision-making and opinion formation – has come to define political conflict. Polarization in public debate has turned into a struggle over who controls the political narrative.

Against this background, the social sciences have begun to examine the forms and effects of polarization more closely – initially with a focus on the United States, and more recently also with regard to Europe. Increasing attention has turned to affective polarization in particular, where emotions, outrage, and indignation drive divisions within society.

Building on the first report on Polarization in Germany and Europe, which analyzed social divides across ten European countries and was published two years ago, MIDEM now presents a new assessment of ideological and affective polarization in Germany. The analysis draws on data from a survey conducted in spring 2025 across eight EU member states. It paints a detailed picture of the lines of conflict and fragmentation in German society. At the same time, it marks the start of a long-term research effort: additional studies will follow through 2027, allowing comparisons over time. Together, these will form what MIDEM calls the Polarization Barometer.

Any discussion of polarization requires nuance. The study rests on two main assumptions. First, a clear distinction between ideological and affective polarization is crucial – both in how they are described and how they are studied. Second, both dynamics do not pervade democratic society as a whole but arise selectively and contextually – around specific issues, debates or topics. This leads to the idea that political polarization should not, as is commonly done, be analyzed through broad ideological categories such as left-right self-identifications or party preferences. Instead, it makes more sense to look at concrete policy debates and individual points of contention to assess where and how polarization actually occurs.

The results show that some issues are characterized by limited ideological but pronounced affective polarization, while others exhibit the opposite pattern. Where strong ideological divides overlap with high emotional intensity, the risk of societal fragmentation around contentious, emotionally charged issues becomes real. These findings help identify typical “zones of discourse” where political conflicts unfold within the interplay between ideological and affective polarization.

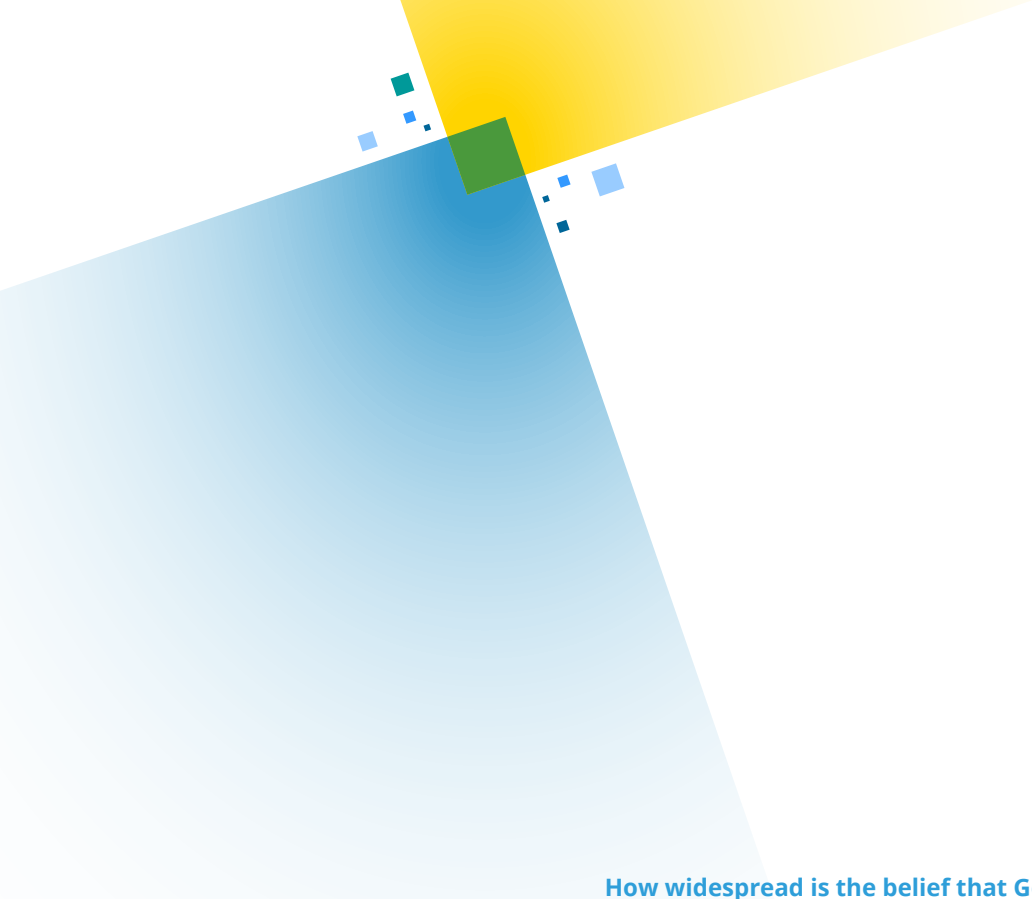
I would like to thank Dr. Maik Herold, Felix Hormig, and Cyrill Otteni for their committed collaboration, as well as the editorial team for their dedicated work. Special thanks go to Janine Joachim for her contribution to the questionnaire design. The study once again benefited from close cooperation with YouGov and was made possible through the generous support of Stiftung Mercator, to whom heartfelt thanks are extended.



Prof. Dr. Hans Vorländer
Director
Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM)
TU Dresden

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KEY FINDINGS

How widespread is the belief that German society is divided?

A large majority perceives German society as divided: More than 81% of people in Germany believe that society is currently divided, and roughly one in four even sees a “very strong divide.” This perception is especially common among people in mid-life, those with moderate levels of education, lower incomes, residents of rural areas, East Germans and supporters of the AfD.

Immigration, social inequality and climate change are seen as the most divisive issues: Among specific policy areas, immigration is viewed as the strongest source of division. Social inequality, climate change and the war in Europe follow at some distance.

What are people’s positions on key policy issues in Germany?

Immigration: Broad support for restricting immigration overall, but openness to easing entry for skilled workers. Public opinion on migration in Germany is highly asymmetrical. Roughly two-thirds favor further restricting “immigration opportunities for foreigners.” However, when it comes to the immigration of skilled workers, this pattern almost reverses: 61% support easing entry requirements for this group.

Security: Strong majorities favor higher defense spending and distancing from Russia and other authoritarian regimes. On questions of peace and security, a clear majority believes that “spending on defense and weapons should be increased.” Around two-thirds also support the view that “Germany should deepen its economic and political cooperation primarily with other democracies and distance itself more strongly from dictatorships.”

Climate change: Divided views on climate policy; most prioritize economic growth over climate protection. Opinions on climate protection measures are sharply split. Similar shares of the population believe current measures are either insufficient or already excessive. At the same time, a clear majority thinks economic growth should take precedence over climate protection. Yet a majority also believes that address-

ing the climate crisis requires changes in lifestyles rather than relying solely on technological innovation.

Economy and social policy: Majorities support redistribution and stronger protections for domestic firms. Views are evenly divided on whether prosperity in Germany is best secured through freer markets or greater state intervention. At the same time, a solid majority favors more policies aimed at redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor.

Values: Narrow majorities favor individual self-expression, support stronger anti-discrimination measures, but are less enthusiastic about public displays of 'pride symbolism'. Preferences are balanced when it comes to striking the right equilibrium between individual self-realization and collective norms. A narrow majority argues that personal freedoms should take precedence over traditional values when the two come into conflict. Regarding sexual minorities, most support additional political measures to combat discrimination. However, only a minority expresses approval for rainbow and Pride flags at public sites.

Which issues show the highest levels of ideological polarization in Germany?

Climate policy and support for Ukraine drive the strongest ideological divides: The formation of two opposing and entrenched opinion camps is most pronounced in Germany on climate protection measures, support for Ukraine, and the integration of immigrants. These issues exhibit a high concentration of opinions at opposite ends of the spectrum and thus show the strongest tendency toward antagonistic ideological blocs.

By contrast, ideological polarization is relatively low on topics such as immigration in general, international cooperation, and the balance between markets and the state.

Which issues show the highest levels of affective polarization in Germany?

Immigration overall, support for Ukraine, and climate policy generate the strongest emotional divides: The greatest emotional intensity between opposing opinion groups arises over general immigration policy, continued support for Ukraine, and measures to combat climate change. On issues such as the balance between markets and the state, the integration of immigrants, and international trade relations, affective polarization is less pronounced.

Which groups in Germany are most strongly affected by affective polarization?

Older people, men, and those with lower incomes show higher levels of affective polarization: Across all 15 issues examined, respondents aged 60 and older exhibit significantly stronger emotional responses than younger cohorts. Above-average rejection of differing viewpoints is also found among men, individuals in lower income groups, and those who do not identify with any religious community. By contrast, there are no notable differences in affective polarization by educational level, place of residence (urban–rural), or between East and West Germany.

Supporters of the AfD and the Greens show the highest affective polarization; individuals who position themselves clearly on the political right or left also score above average: People who strongly identify as politically “left” or “right” exhibit higher-than-average levels of affective polarization, with those on the right showing even stronger reactions than those on the left. Affective polarization is particularly pronounced among supporters of the AfD and the Greens, who show the strongest tendency to evaluate people with opposing opinions negatively. Lower levels of affective polarization are observed among those who align with the CDU/CSU, SPD, or FDP.

Issue-specific affective polarization: in some cases, clear deviations from the overall pattern: On value conflicts, affective polarization is highest among those under 30, highly educated individuals, and supporters of Die Linke. On questions of peace and security, above-average emotional intensity is found among older respondents, members of religious communities, and supporters of the AfD and the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). Regarding climate policy, affective polarization is strongest among supporters of the Greens and the AfD.

Which issues have the greatest political potential for division in Germany in 2025?

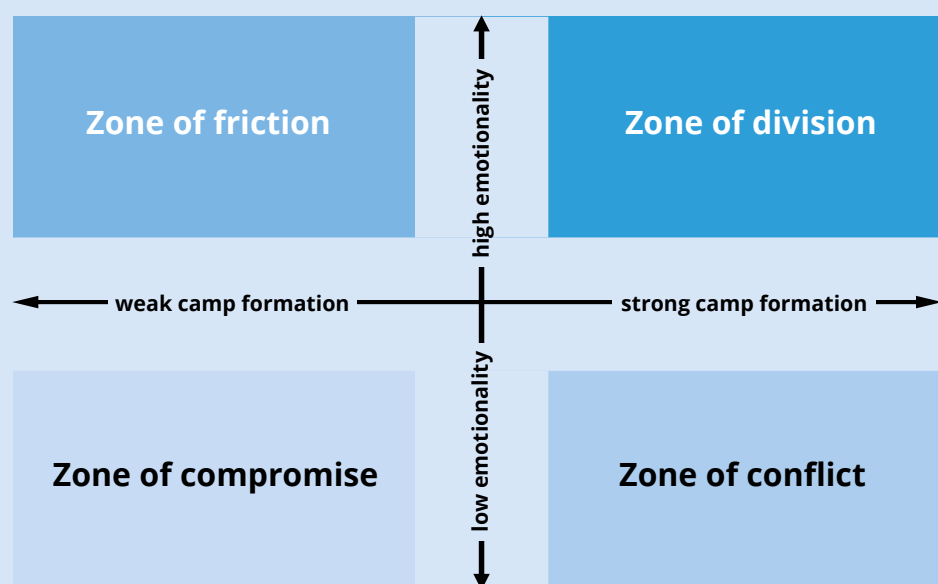
Issues with both high ideological and high affective polarization include climate policy and support for Ukraine, as well as peace and security policy, and questions related to sexual minorities and the display of 'pride symbols' in public spaces. Among all topics examined, debates over how best to combat climate change, how to respond appropriately to Russia’s military threat, and how to ensure fair treatment of people whose sexual orientation or gender identity differs from the heterosexual norm exhibit the greatest overall potential to generate political conflict and societal division.

What constellations emerge from the interaction of ideological and affective polarization?

Combining high or low levels of ideological and affective polarization produces four ideal-typical constellations. These categories describe the different conditions under which specific public issues are debated and translated into political action (see Fig. A):

- Zone of compromise: Both ideological and affective polarization are low; opinions are either closely aligned or broadly accepted – for example, on international trade relations.
- Zone of conflict: Ideological polarization is high, while affective polarization remains limited; sizable opposing camps exist but with relatively low emotional intensity – for example, on the requirements for integrating immigrants.
- Zone of friction: Ideological polarization is low, but affective polarization is high; positions are not clearly organized into opposing blocs yet debates are highly emotional – for example, on immigration in general.
- Zone of division: Both ideological and affective polarization are strongly pronounced; opposing camps are reinforced by high levels of emotional arousal and indignation – for example, on climate policy measures.

Fig. A: Political zones of action and discourse



Source: Own survey



INTRODUCTION

This study continues a broader research effort on political polarization dynamics in Germany and Europe, the findings of which were published in three earlier reports in 2023 and 2024 (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024). The aim is to update these insights and evaluate the measurement instruments used thus far. In addition, the study seeks to integrate new approaches for assessing polarization beyond traditional party alignments.

Conceptually, the analysis distinguishes between two forms of polarization: ideological and affective polarization.

TWO TYPES OF POLARIZATION

Ideological polarization refers to what is commonly meant when the term “polarization” is used in everyday language: a – potentially growing – distance between opposing political opinions, attitudes, and orientations. For measuring ideological polarization, the political positions people hold are decisive. Where many individuals gravitate toward extreme viewpoints and there is little room left for centrist or mediating perspectives, society and politics can be described as “ideologically polarized.”

Affective polarization by contrast, goes beyond the observation of divergent opinions. What matters here is not the positions themselves – or their deeper causes and motivations – but rather the emotional orientation or “affects” toward those who hold them. Affective polarization therefore captures the emotional dynamics of solidarity with like-minded individuals and hostility or rejection toward those with opposing views.

Political science research initially focused on both forms of polarization primarily through the lens of parties and their supporters. The United States, with its two-party system, is often cited as a prime example of how social life becomes aligned with political fault lines, and how the fusion of partisanship and social identity can undermine democratic processes of negotiation and compromise (Mason 2015; 2018). In recent years, similar trends have been observed in European multiparty democracies (Reiljan 2020; Wagner 2021).

Yet developments and political crises across Europe have shown that processes of group formation and identity construction are closely tied to attitudes toward specific issues (Hobolt/Leeper/Tilley 2021). At a time when party attachments have weakened significantly as a basis for political

preference formation, concrete issues, problem perceptions, and their media representation often serve as the main structuring forces behind ideological and affective polarization – also in Germany.

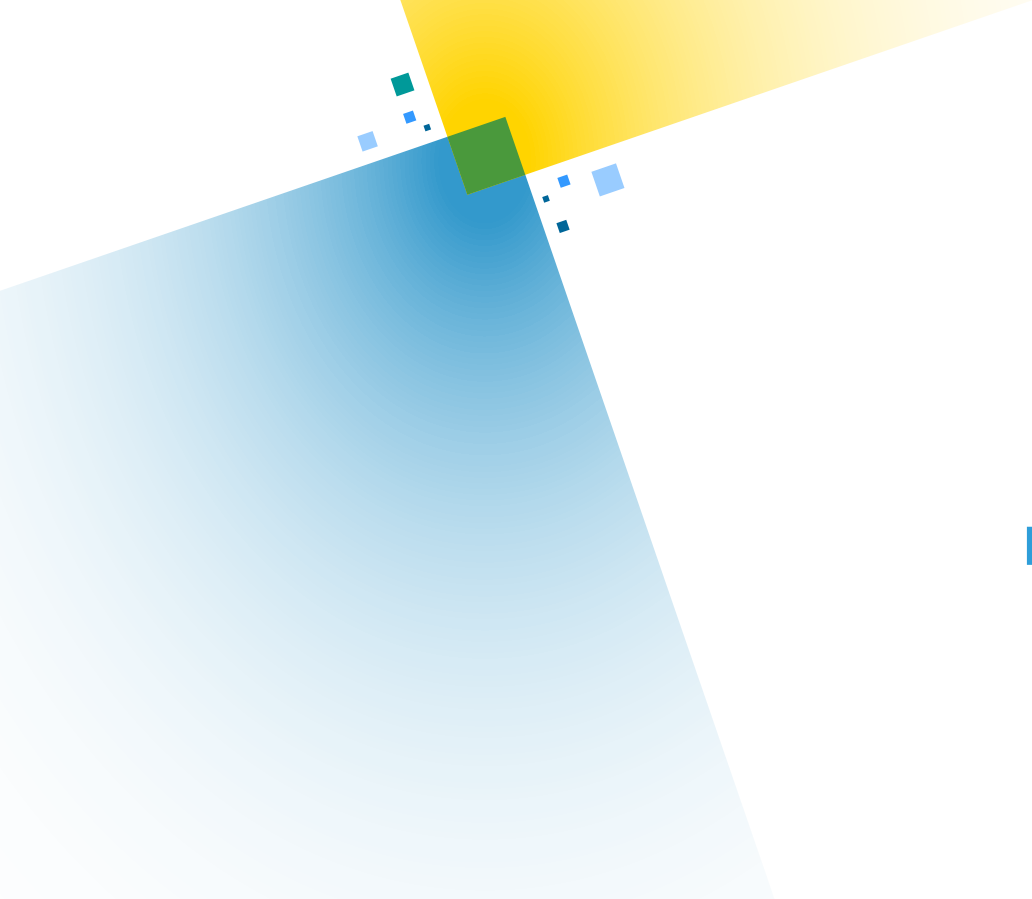
Nevertheless, research on polarization remains heavily shaped by the party-centered perspective, largely because only limited empirical data exist that allow for the direct and comparative study of ideological and affective forms of polarization with an explicit focus on issue-based conflicts.

THE STUDY

This study takes up precisely this challenge. Building on our previous research, its goal is to assess the extent of ideological and affective polarization present in Germany in 2025 in comparison with other European countries – specifically beyond feelings of sympathy or antipathy toward political parties.

By examining how opinions on concrete policy issues are distributed, the study identifies the ideological polarization associated with these issues and evaluates the conflict potential they generate for different segments of society. Moreover, by operationalizing issue-specific affective polarization – understood as the sympathy or antipathy expressed between groups defined exclusively by their stance on particular policy questions – the study offers crucial insight into the emotional intensities and sensitivities that shape how political issues are debated. Taken together, these perspectives make it possible to gauge which topics in Germany are most likely to see political disagreements escalate – when mutual intransigence and hostility risk shifting from disagreement into action, such as verbal attacks, public outrage, or even violence.

STUDY OBJECTIVE



METHODOLOGY

DATA SOURCE

The empirical findings presented here are based on a representative survey conducted by MIDEM in cooperation with YouGov. Between February 11 and March 3, 2025, a total of 33,873 individuals aged 18 and older were surveyed.

COUNTRY CASES

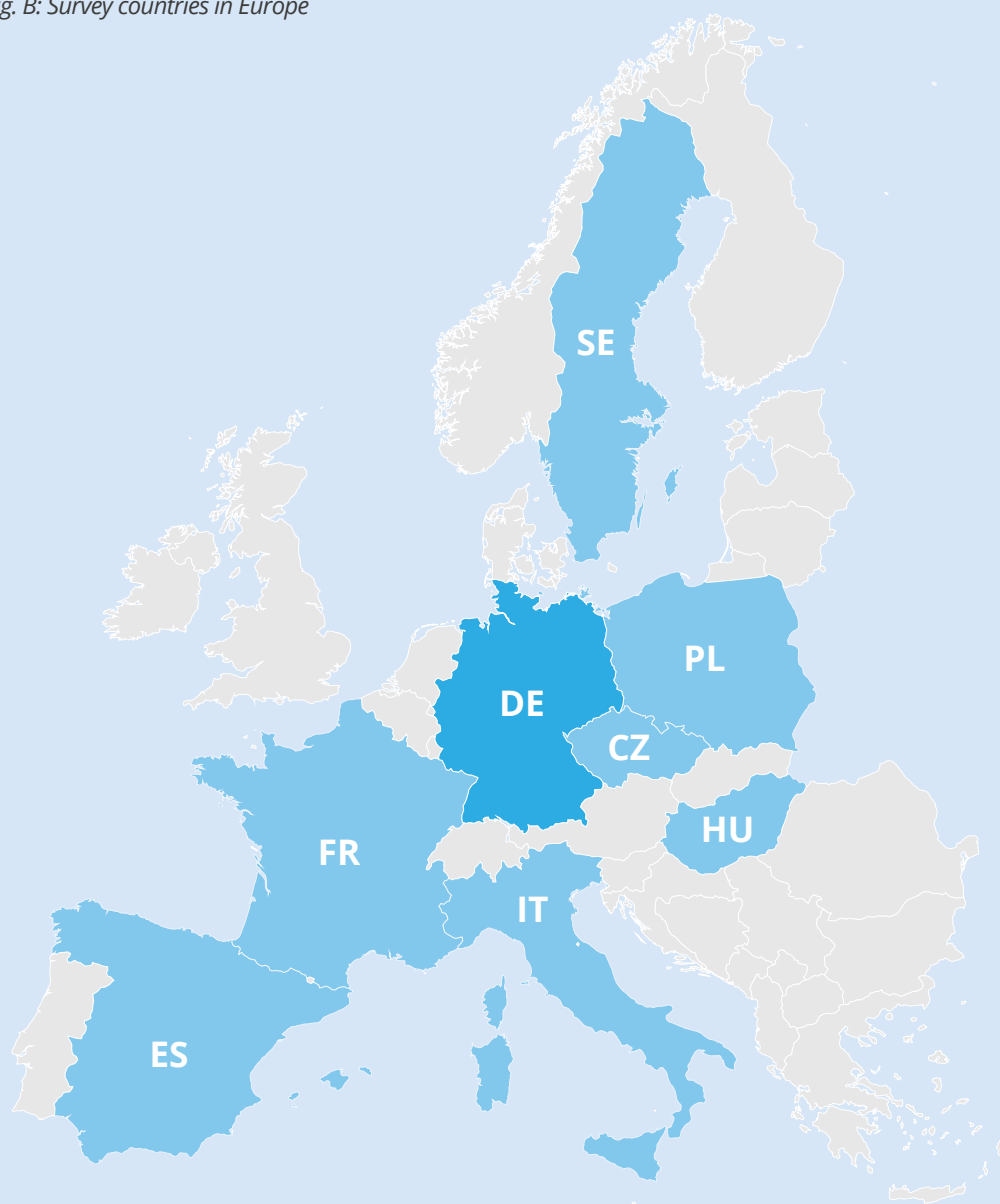
The survey was administered concurrently in eight EU member states: Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Hungary (see Fig. B). These countries were selected to capture the socio-spatial and political-cultural diversity of the European Union while covering as large a share of its population as possible. In total, the sample accounts for nearly three-quarters (73%) of the EU population, with roughly 4,200 respondents per country on average. The survey represents the first wave of a three-year panel study in which the same individuals will be interviewed three times at annual intervals.

DATA COLLECTION

Country samples were drawn from online access panels. To reflect the socio-demographic structure of each national population, quotas were applied for age, gender, region, and education. In addition, the results of the most recent national elections were used as a further quota to prevent political distortions in the sampling frame. The data were subsequently weighted to correct for any deviations between the sample and the broader population. The results are therefore representative of the population aged 18 and over.

To further ensure data quality, two attention checks were included to assess whether respondents were completing the survey attentively. Individuals who failed at least one of these checks were excluded from the analyses presented here. The survey relied on a standardized questionnaire that incorporated established items from previous studies, adapted them to national contexts, and supplemented them with newly developed questions. The focus of the present analysis is Germany, where a total of 4,384 respondents participated in the survey between February 12 and 27, 2025.

Fig. B: Survey countries in Europe



Note: This study is based on data from Germany, where a total of 4,384 people were surveyed.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

METHODOLOGY

SUBJECT AREAS AND ISSUES

This study examines both ideological and affective forms of polarization across five major issue areas: immigration, security, climate change, the economy and social policy, and values. These topics have been the focus of intense public debate in recent years – not only in Germany but across Europe – shaping election campaigns, protest movements, and political initiatives. What they share is a heightened sense of urgency, often framed as “crisis,” which contributes to the widespread belief that these issues have strong potential to divide society.

In our empirical analysis, each issue area is addressed using three survey items. The first item typically targets a more general dimension of the issue, while the other two probe more specific aspects (see Fig. C). The general items were answered by all approximately 4,400 participants in Germany. The more specific questions were each presented to only one-fifth of the sample. However, each of these subsamples constitutes a quota-based, representative sample in its own right, allowing valid inferences about the German population.

STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study is organized into four main sections. The first section presents the findings for Germany regarding issue areas and the distribution of public positions. It addresses the following questions: What stances do people in Germany take on the issues examined? How are these views distributed? Which topics are perceived as particularly important, and where do people expect the greatest potential for societal division? The second section focuses on ideological polarization. It examines the distribution of positions across specific issues in Germany and identifies where the strongest tendencies toward the formation of two opposing opinion camps emerge. The third section analyzes affective polarization. The central questions are: In which issue areas, and among which segments of the population, is a particularly high degree of mutual rejection and emotional intensity observed? The fourth and final section summarizes the results and identifies four ideal-typical constellations illustrating how ideological and affective polarization interact to shape political arenas and public debate in Germany.

Fig. C: Questions and sample size (n) for Germany by specific topics

IMMIGRATION	SECURITY	CLIMATE CHANGE	ECONOMY AND SOCIAL POLICIES	VALUES
Immigration in general	Peace and Armament	Climate Protection Measures	Market and Government	Conflict of Values
Immigration of Skilled Workers	International Cooperation	Climate Protection: Technology and Lifestyle	Redistribution of Wealth	Discrimination of Sexual Minorities
Integration of Immigrants	Support for Ukraine	Climate Protection and Economic Growth	International Trade	Rainbow and Pride Flags in Public Spaces

Source: Own survey

Fig. D: Questions and sample size (n) for Germany by specific topics

ISSUE	n	RESPONSE SCALE
Immigration in general	3,678	0 – Immigration for foreigners should be made easier. 10 – Immigration for foreigners should be restricted.
Immigration of Skilled Workers	735	0 – Immigration for foreign skilled workers should be made easier. 10 – Immigration for foreign skilled workers should be restricted.
Integration of Immigrants	741	0 – Successful integration into [COUNTRY] only requires immigrants to learn the national language and adhere to the laws. 10 – Successful integration into [COUNTRY] also requires immigrants to adopt the [NATIONAL] culture and way of life.
Peace and Armament	3,559	0 – To secure peace in Europe, spending on armaments and weapons should be increased. 10 – To secure peace in Europe, spending on armaments and weapons should be reduced.
International Cooperation	710	0 – [COUNTRY] should prioritise economic and political cooperation with other democracies, and distinguish itself more clearly from dictatorships. 10 – [COUNTRY] should cooperate economically and politically not only with other democracies but also with dictatorships.
Support for Ukraine	713	0 – [COUNTRY] should continue to support Ukraine and distance itself more from Russia. 10 – [COUNTRY] should no longer support Ukraine and instead approach Russia.
Climate Protection Measures	3,658	0 – The political measures to combat climate change do not go far enough. 10 – The political measures to combat climate change are already going too far.
Climate Protection: Technology and Lifestyle	721	0 – Significant lifestyle changes are necessary for people in [COUNTRY] to tackle the challenges of climate change, as technological progress alone will not suffice. 10 – Technological progress will address the challenges of climate change without imposing significant lifestyle restrictions on people in [COUNTRY].
Climate Protection and Economic Growth	732	0 – Combating climate change should always be the top priority, even if it comes at the expense of economic growth. 10 – Economic growth should always be the top priority, even if it comes at the expense of combating climate change.
Market and Government	3,462	0 – To ensure our prosperity, extensive government intervention in the economy is required, as market forces alone are not enough. 10 – To ensure our prosperity, there should be less government intervention in the economy, with greater reliance on market forces.
Redistribution of Wealth	691	0 – The political measures to address social inequalities through wealth redistribution in [COUNTRY] from the rich to the poor are still not far enough. 10 – The political measures to address social inequalities through wealth redistribution in [COUNTRY] from the rich to the poor are already going too far.
International Trade	675	0 – To strengthen the [NATIONAL] economy, the government should place greater emphasis on promoting free trade. 10 – To strengthen the [NATIONAL] economy, the government should place greater emphasis on protecting domestic businesses from foreign competition.
Conflict of Values	3,554	0 – The government should ensure that all individuals and social groups have the freedom to express and develop themselves, even if this goes against certain traditional values. 10 – The government should align more with traditional values, even if this restricts the opportunities for self-expression and development of individuals and social groups.
Discrimination of Sexual Minorities	703	0 – Much more needs to be done to combat the discrimination of sexual minorities (such as homosexuals or transgender individuals). 10 – Measures to combat the discrimination of sexual minorities (such as homosexuals or transgender individuals) are already going too far.
Rainbow and Pride Flags in Public Spaces	691	0 – The government should advocate for the display of rainbow and pride flags in public spaces, as they send a powerful message of tolerance and acceptance of diverse identities and lifestyles. Die Politik sollte stärker gegen Regenbogen- und Pride-Flaggen an öffentlichen Orten vorgehen, weil 10 – The government should take stronger action against rainbow and pride flags in public spaces, as they give undue attention to the specific interests and demands of a minority social group.

Note: The table presents various political issue areas, each represented by a specific question. Each question could be answered on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with the two endpoints indicating opposing political positions.

Example of interpretation: "Immigration of skilled workers" refers to the question of whether opportunities for foreign skilled workers to immigrate to Germany should be facilitated or restricted. Respondents were able to indicate their position freely along the scale between the two poles: "0 – Opportunities for foreign skilled workers to immigrate should be made easier" and "10 – Opportunities for foreign skilled workers to immigrate should be made more restricted." In total, 735 people answered this question.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

1

TOPICS AND POSITIONS: SALIENCE AND PERCEIVED POTENTIAL FOR DIVISION

To assess the extent of issue-based political polarization in Germany, it is useful to begin with an overview of how individuals evaluate the importance and divisive potential of specific policy areas: Which issues matter most to people in Germany in 2025? How do they assess these issues in terms of their potential to divide society? What positions do they take on the issues examined, and how are these positions distributed?

GERMANS' TOP CONCERNS: ECONOMY, WAR IN EUROPE, IMMIGRATION

The first question concerns the perceived relevance of specific issues in Germany. In spring 2025 – as in much of Europe – the economic situation in Germany tops the list of public concerns, followed by the war in Europe and immigration. Notably, Germans assign greater importance to the latter two issues than is the case in the European average. By contrast, values and traditions, climate change, and discrimination against social groups are viewed as less pressing. Their salience is markedly below the European average (see Fig. 1.1).

IMMIGRATION SEEN AS THE MAIN DIVIDING ISSUE

Which issues are believed to pose the greatest risk of dividing society? As shown in Fig. 1.2, many point to immigration as the most divisive topic, followed by climate change, social inequality, and the war in Europe. Although ratings for all issues generally lean toward the higher end of the scale, the economic situation, discrimination against social groups, and matters of values and traditions are associated with comparatively lower risks of division – also relative to European benchmarks.

Beyond differences in the evaluation of specific issues, a broader question is whether the perception of a divided society is widespread in Germany.

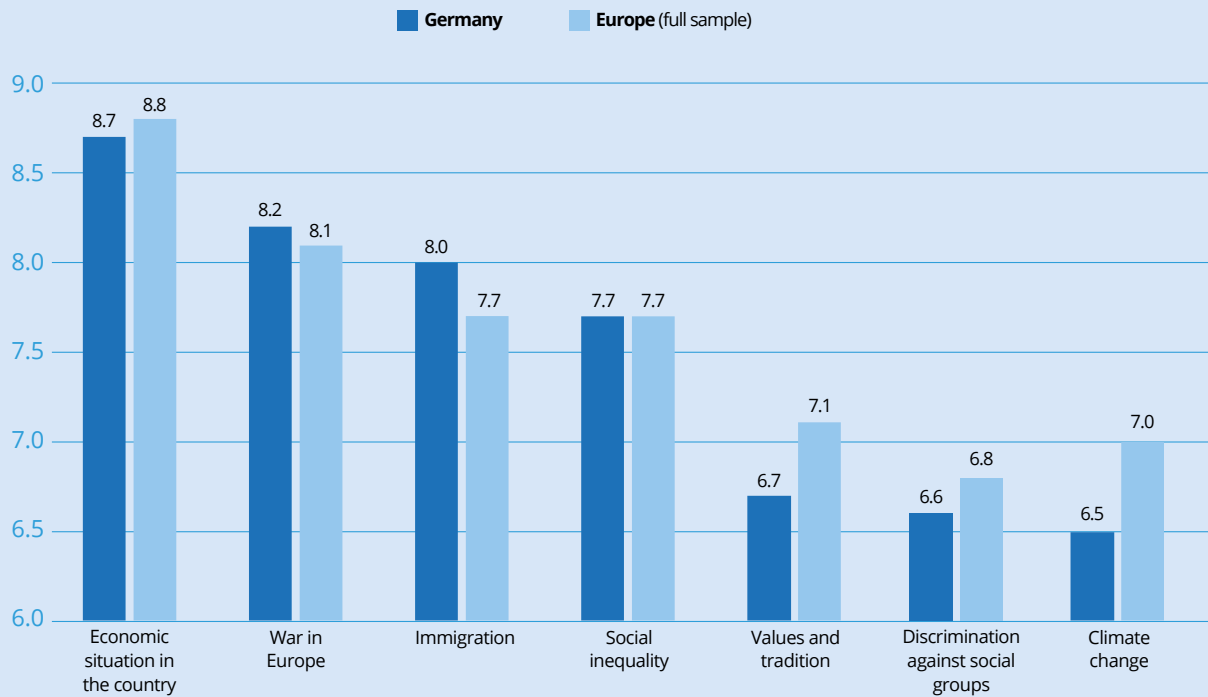
CLEAR MAJORITY SEES GERMANY AS DIVIDED

Fig. 1.3 illustrates the distribution of responses to this general question. It shows that the perception is indeed common: more than 81% of respondents selected a value between 6 and 10 on the scale, indicating that they tend to view German society as “divided.” Nearly one-quarter of all respondents (24.5%) reported a perception of a “very strong division” (response categories 9 and 10). Fewer than seven percent assigned a value below 5, indicating little or no perceived societal divide.

PERCEPTION OF A DIVIDED SOCIETY PEAKS AMONG 40–60-YEAR-OLDS

Is this perception equally strong across different segments of society? Fig. 1.4 offers an answer. Women perceive societal division slightly more strongly on average (7.5) than men (7.1). Differences across age groups are more pronounced: individuals between 40 and 60 years old are most likely

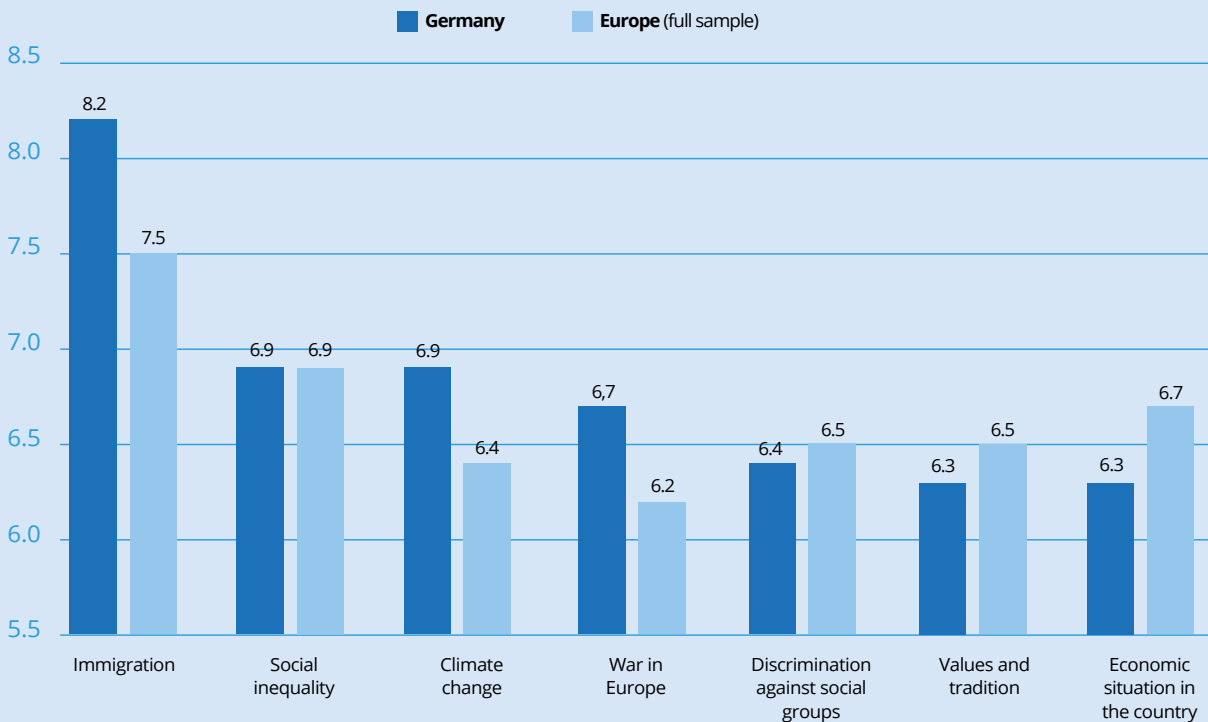
Fig 1.1: Salience of individual issues in Germany and Europe (mean values)



Note: The figure shows mean values for salience of different topics. Question: 'How important are the following issues to you personally?' Respondents could position themselves between '0 - not important at all' to '10 - very important.' Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the 'Methodology' section. n = at least 3,705 for Germany and at least 23,705 for Europe; for better readability, the y-axis does not start at 0.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 1.2: Subjective perception of division on individual issues in Germany and Europe (mean values)



Note: The figure shows mean values of the subjective perception of division by topic. Question: 'For which of the political issues mentioned do you see a division in society? Please indicate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division).' Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the 'Methodology' section. n = at least 3,637 for Germany and at least 23,073 for Europe; missing values = 'don't know' / no response. For better readability, the y-axis does not start at 0.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

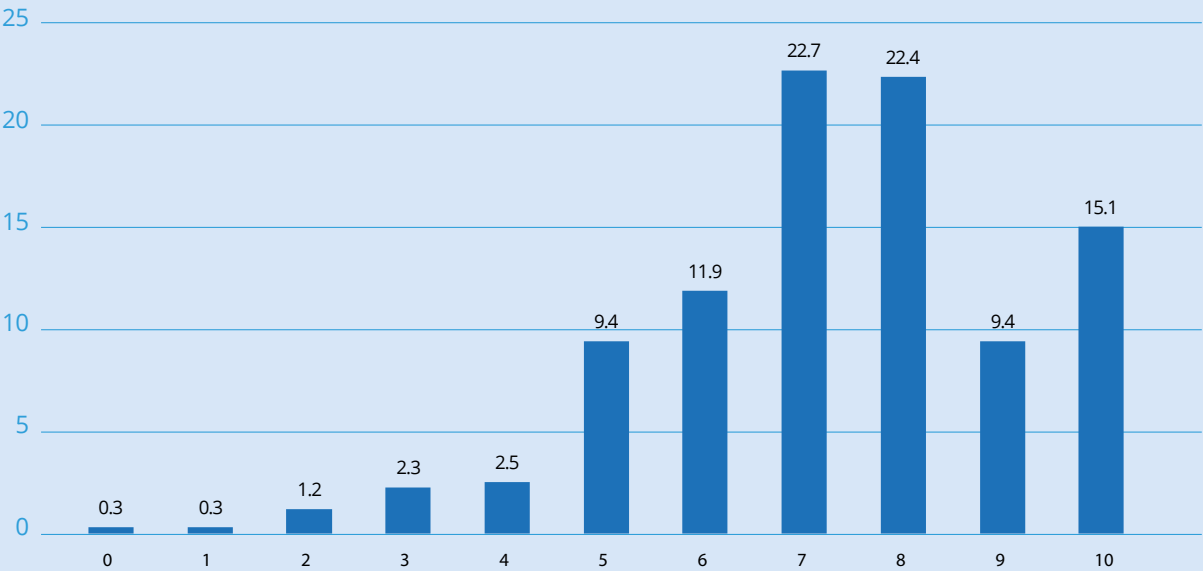
SOCIAL DIVIDE FELT MORE BY
LOW-INCOME, RURAL, AND
EASTERN GERMANS

to perceive German society as divided, whereas this perception is less common among younger respondents (under 30) and older respondents (70 and above).

Clear differences also emerge by income and socialization. People in lower income groups more frequently believe that society is divided (7.7), compared with those in higher income groups (6.9). Respondents with an East German background likewise show stronger agreement (7.6) than those with a West German background (7.2).

Finally, when examining political self-placement and party alignment, the perception of societal division is especially widespread among those who identify as politically “right” and among supporters of the AfD. It is least common among supporters of the SPD, CDU/CSU, and the Greens.

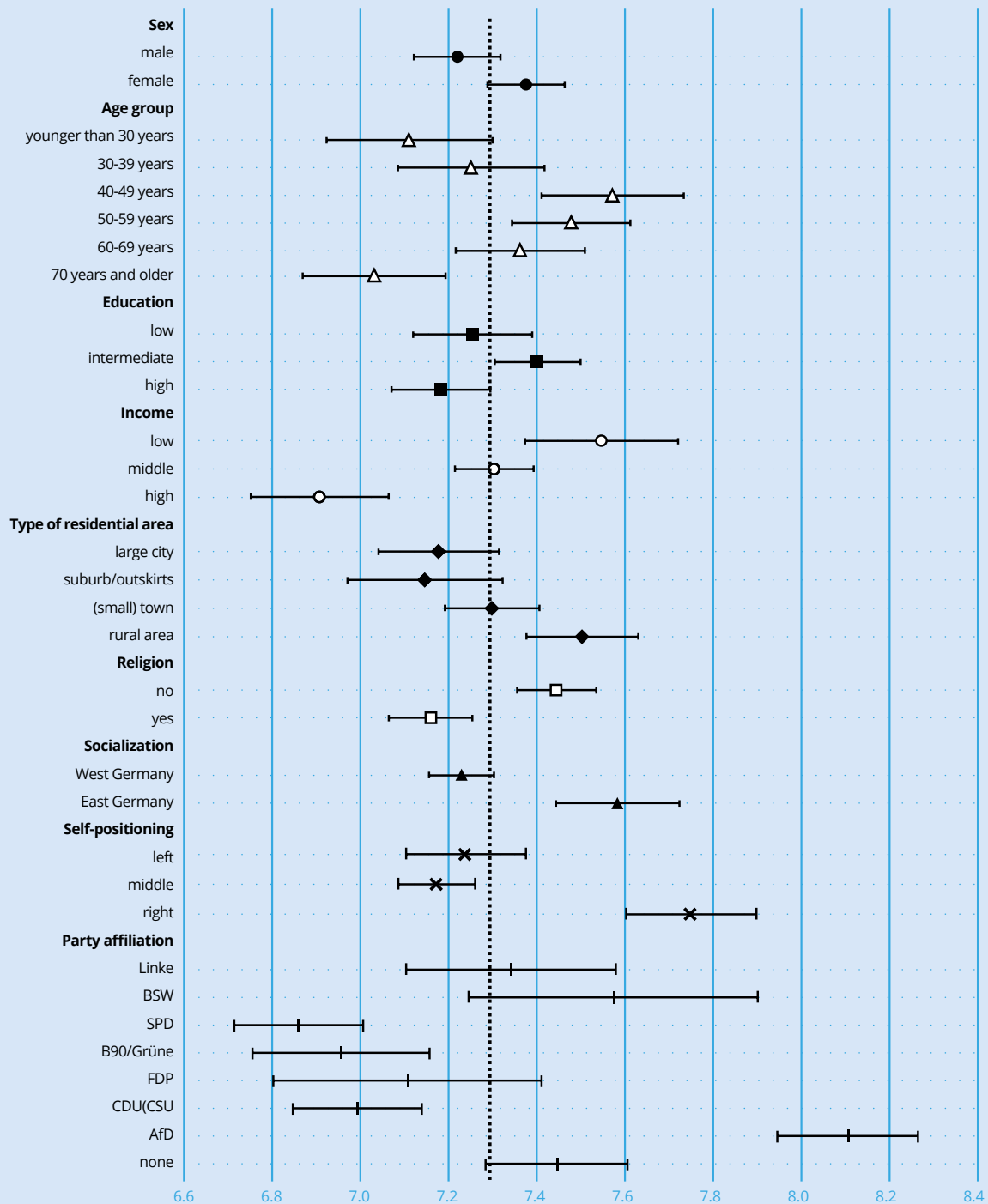
Fig. 1.3: Perception of a division in society in Germany (in percent)



Note: Distribution of responses to the question: ‘To what extent do you currently see a division in society in Germany? Please indicate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division).’ Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the ‘Methodology’ section (n = 3,676).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 1.4: Perception of a division in society in Germany by social subgroups (mean values with 95% confidence intervals)



Note: The dots show the mean values of the perception of a division in German society with corresponding 95% confidence intervals in different groups of the German population. The higher the value, the stronger the perceived division. The line marks the mean value of the entire sample for Germany. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the 'Methodology' section ($n =$ at least 3,122; missing values = 'don't know' / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov



2

POLITICAL ISSUES BETWEEN IDEOLOGICAL AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION: OPINION CAMPS AND EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS IN GERMAN POLITICS

DEMOCRACY RELIES ON A COMPATIBLE POLITICAL CULTURE

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Ideological and affective polarization exert significant influence on a country's democratic culture. Like legal and institutional frameworks, they structure the environment in which political debates unfold, concrete policy questions are negotiated, and compromises can be reached. Such dynamics shape not only the vertical relationship between citizens and the state, but also the horizontal relations among citizens themselves.

A functioning democracy relies on a supportive political culture. It generates legitimacy, recognition, and acceptance of democratic institutions, actors, and decision-making processes. This includes a social fabric characterized by trust, tolerance, and a sense of cohesion among citizens. Only under these conditions can a climate of reciprocity and mutual expectation of support take hold – the foundation for active civic participation. Citizens must therefore acknowledge and respect one another as free and equal members of the political community.

Political polarization becomes a threat to democratic culture when legitimate – and necessary – conflicts over policy positions, interests, and preferences are replaced by a struggle between “friends” and “enemies.” In such situations, the views and orientations of those who think differently are no longer tolerated or respected; instead, political opponents are confronted with hatred, agitation, and defamation. Strongly emotionalized forms of polarization between opposing camps can fracture politics and society, endangering not only democracy as a system for making binding decisions, but also democracy as a civic way of life.

FOUR FORMS OF IDEOLOGICAL AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

The findings of this study on issue-based ideological and affective polarization in Germany shed light on how the interaction of these two dimensions structures the political field and shapes the conditions under which democratic negotiation and problem-solving can occur. By combining high or low levels of ideological and affective polarization, four ideal-typical constellations emerge. Each describes a different context in which political issues are debated and translated into policy.

In the zone of compromise, neither ideological nor affective polarization is strongly pronounced. Positions do not differ substantially, and there is broad agreement in the assessment of the issues at hand. Emotional intensity is also low. Discussions tend to be fact-based, diverging views are assessed dispassionately, and differing positions are broadly accepted.

ZONE OF COMPROMISE

When an issue falls within this zone, the preferred direction of policy is generally clear from the public's perspective, which allows for quicker compromise and more targeted policymaking. If positions cluster around the center, this may also indicate limited public interest or uncertainty. Public attention to such issues is often low. Outside the dynamics of media attention and scandalization, compromise can be calibrated and tailored solutions developed.

The zone of conflict is characterized by strong ideological but relatively weak affective polarization. Clear and opposing opinion camps exist, reflecting marked differences between segments of the population. Yet the emotional charge of these divisions remains moderate. As in the zone of compromise, divergent views are judged more soberly and with mutual acknowledgment.

ZONE OF CONFLICT

However, policymaking under these conditions is considerably more difficult than in the compromise zone. Effective solutions cannot be developed as readily, and viable compromises require substantial negotiation. Political action is shaped by a constant need to bridge ideological divides. Still, debates in this zone generally remain constructive and rational. At the same time, there is a greater risk that negotiated outcomes will not be equally accepted by all but instead dismissed as undesirable "compromises of convenience."

The zone of friction features low ideological but high affective polarization. As in the compromise zone, the range of policy positions is limited, and strongly opposed ideologically grounded camps are largely absent. A large majority shares similar views. Yet these issues have become heavily emotionalized. Public sensitivity is high, and interactions between opposing viewpoints can escalate quickly, resulting in recurring cycles of agitation and outrage – particularly in media and online environments.

ZONE OF FRICTION

Issues located in the zone of contention would, in principle, be relatively easy to negotiate: existing differences in opinion could be bridged without great difficulty, and the direction of desired solutions is often clear to a majority of citizens. However, strong emotionalization impedes swift and targeted efforts to address problems. As a result, counterarguments are often not debated on their merits but dismissed as illegitimate – or even perceived as personal attacks on one's identity. Unlike in the zone of compromise, the room for successful problem-solving is therefore significantly constrained. Even with considerable effort, there is a persistent risk that sensitive trigger points are activated, leading to renewed waves of public outrage. Whereas success in the compromise zone depends on balance, understanding, concessions, and the practical skill of brokering workable agreements, the zone of friction requires efforts to de-escalate, depersonalize, and reduce political adversarialism.

In the zone of division, strong ideological divides coincide with high levels of affective polarization: clearly defined and often similarly sized opinion camps face one another in entrenched opposition. At the same time, the general level of emotional sensitivity is extremely elevated.

ZONE OF DIVISION

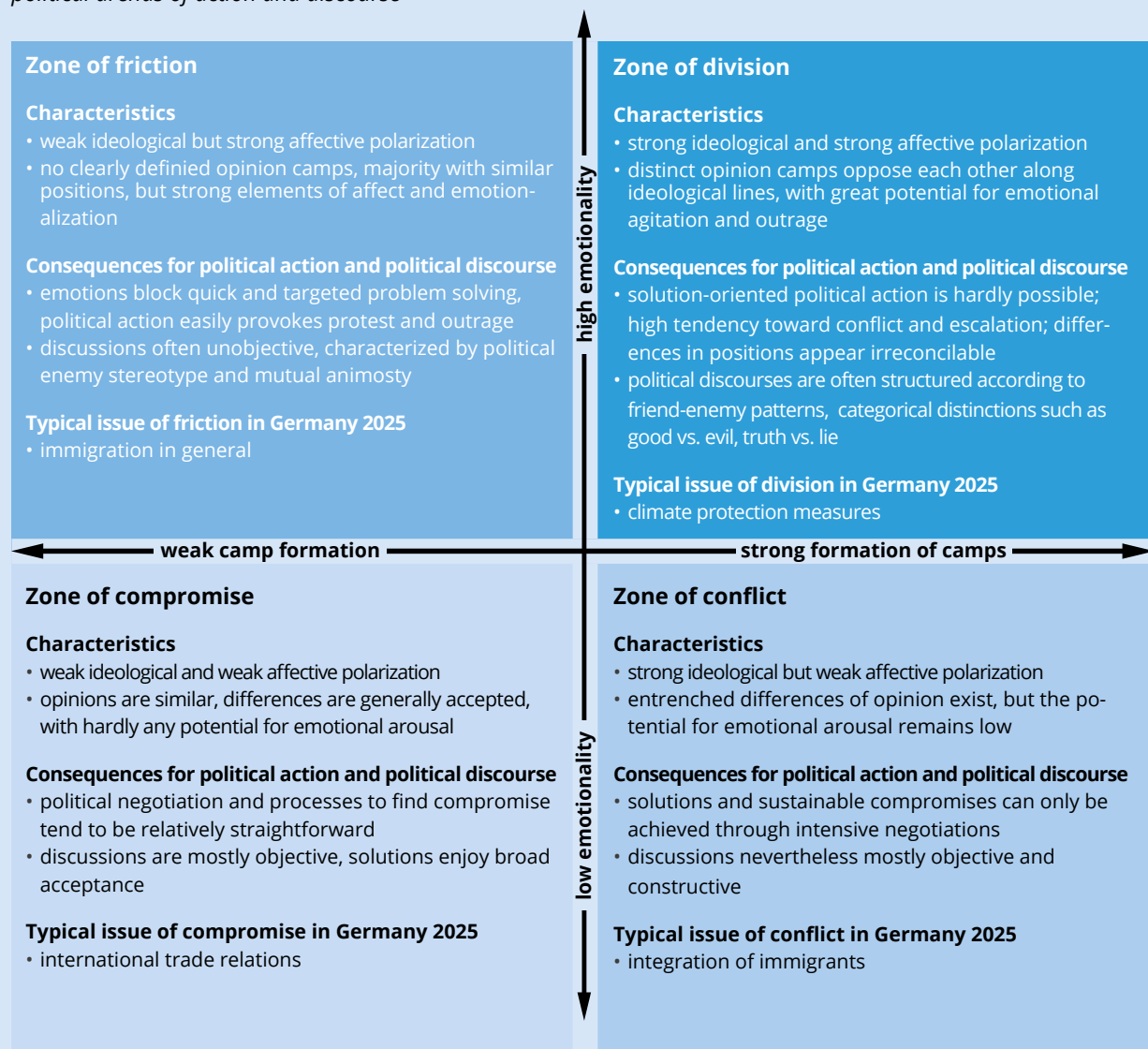
Issues situated in this zone thus carry an even greater risk of conflict and escalation than those in the zone of friction or the zone of conflict. Because

ideological distances are substantial, related controversies tend to be highly present in both public and private debate – and can negatively affect interpersonal relationships among citizens.

In the zone of division, the willingness to cooperate and compromise – essential elements of a functioning democracy – is overshadowed by mutual distrust and animosity. People across opposing camps tend to be deeply convinced of the correctness of their own worldview and show little willingness to acknowledge alternative perspectives. Consequently, personal convictions are quickly linked to absolute claims to truth, political disagreements become moralized, and those who think differently are judged through a friend-versus-enemy lens. Public debates become dominated by stark dichotomies such as good vs. evil, truth vs. lies, or facts vs. fake news.

Under such conditions, rational discourse, solutions-focused strategies, and targeted policy implementation become exceedingly difficult. Political

Fig. 2.1: Ideal-typical constellations of the interaction between ideological and affective polarization in structuring political arenas of action and discourse



Source: Own survey / YouGov

decisions – regardless of direction – are likely to be met by some sectors of society with rejection, anger, and outrage.

ISSUE-BASED POLARIZATION POTENTIALS IN GERMANY 2025

Against the backdrop of the four ideal-typical constellations describing the interaction between ideological and affective polarization, the 15 issues examined in this study can now be positioned within the corresponding zones. As shown in Fig. 2.2, all areas of the conceptual two-dimensional space are populated.

However, when assigning and evaluating individual issues, it is important to note that the typology in Fig. 2.1 functions primarily as a heuristic. Clear categorical distinctions are difficult in the central region of the coordinate system shown in Fig. 2.2. Moreover, the empirical findings presented here reflect only a snapshot from 2025. Developments and shifts in ideological or affective polarization over time – both past and future – cannot be captured here. Finally, the media representation of issues plays a crucial role in shaping their polarization potential.

Which issues in Germany in 2025 fall into the four zones – zones of compromise, conflict, friction, and division – and can thus be characterized as issues of compromise, issues of conflict, issues of friction, or issues of division?

In the zone of **compromise** – marked by comparatively low levels of both ideological and affective polarization – we find the issues of international trade relations and the balance between markets and the state (see Fig. 2.2). In particular, the question of whether policy should focus more on removing trade barriers or on protecting domestic companies from foreign competition appears unlikely to split the German public into mutually antagonistic camps. At the same time, respondents rate the economic situation as highly important overall (see Fig. 1.1), while perceiving its divisive potential as low. This suggests that on these issues, fact-based debate and targeted problem-solving are comparatively achievable.

Issues **located in the zone of conflict** exhibit relatively strong ideological polarization – meaning a pronounced tendency toward bimodal opinion formation, with positions clustering at opposite ends of the continuum – while affective polarization remains limited. The issue of immigrant integration is a prime example of this pattern in the 2025 data. On the question of whether it is sufficient for immigrants “to learn the German language and comply with laws” or whether they should “also adopt German culture and ways of life as fully as possible,” two relatively fixed and roughly equal-sized opinion camps can be observed in Germany. However, emotional rejection between these camps remains low – or, viewed inversely, mutual acceptance remains relatively high. While this makes compromise politically demanding and resource-intensive, such issues appear less likely to be exploited for mobilization or outrage campaigns by political actors or polarization entrepreneurs.

For the **issues of friction**, the pattern is essentially reversed. These topics exhibit high levels of affective polarization but only limited ideological polarization. Immigration in general and international cooperation are exemplary cases of this constellation. Because public opinion in Germany is highly skewed on both issues, there is little indication of two clearly opposed ideological camps. Nonetheless, emotional intensity and general irritability are high. Across the opinion spectrum, there is a pronounced tendency to regard those holding different views with incomprehension or outright disapproval. Particularly for general immigration, this may help

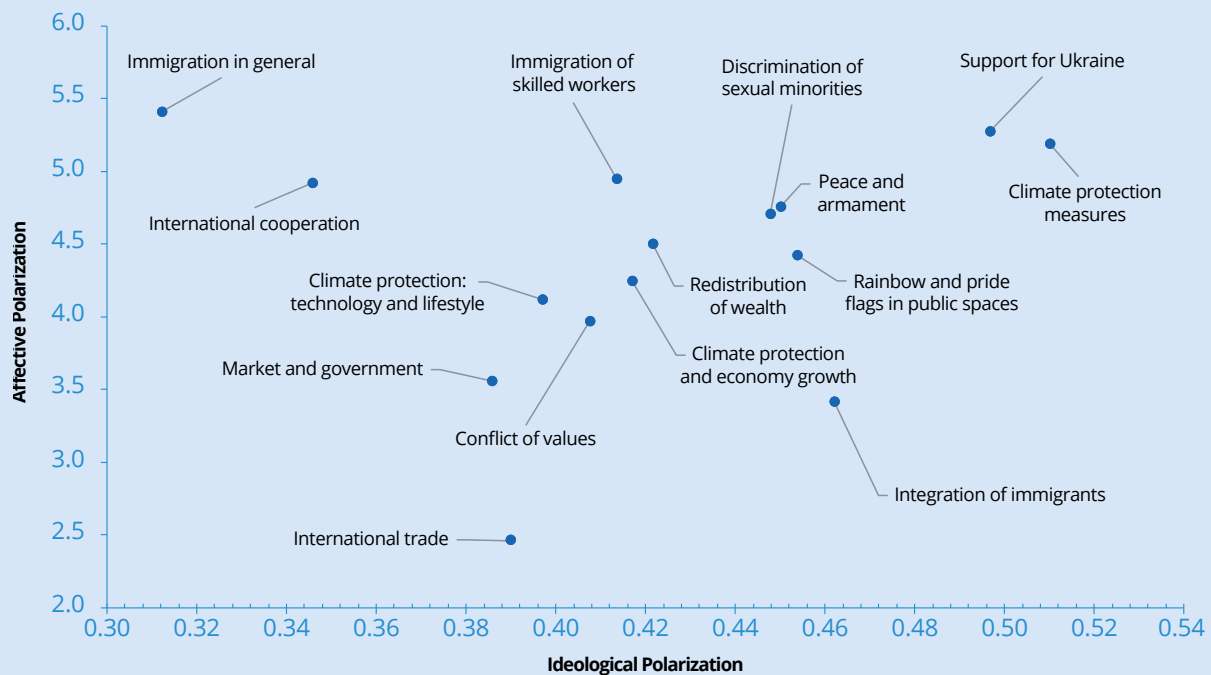
ISSUES BY POLARIZATION POTENTIAL

ISSUE OF COMPROMISE: INTERNATIONAL TRADE

ISSUE OF CONFLICT: INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANTS

ISSUES OF FRICTION: IMMIGRATION IN GENERAL AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Fig. 2.2: Individual issues according to ideological and affective polarization in Germany, 2025



Note: The points represent the mean values of each individual issue with respect to ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index, x-axis) and affective polarization (y-axis).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

ISSUES OF DIVISION: CLIMATE PROTECTION MEASURES AND SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

explain why debates surrounding the issue continue to be rarely conducted in a factual or solution-oriented manner in 2025.

Finally, **issues of division** can be defined as factual issues that exhibit above-average levels of both ideological and affective polarization. In the 2025 dataset, this applies in particular to climate policy measures and support for Ukraine, and – with some qualifications – to peace and security policy and to issues involving sexual minorities. Across all of these topics, there is clear evidence of pronounced ideological camp formation combined with strong emotional intensity (see Fig. 4b). As a result, constructive debate and viable compromise are difficult to achieve. Instead, political discourse tends to be shaped by absolute claims to truth and friend vs. enemy distinctions.

A further differentiation can be drawn based on how opinions are distributed: While views on support for Ukraine and on peace and security policy are skewed toward one side of the scale, public opinion on climate policy, the treatment of sexual minorities, and the display of Pride symbols in public spaces is divided into two nearly equal camps (see Fig. 1.3a). Although the implications of these majority and minority dynamics for political conflict potential cannot be determined conclusively, the media debates of recent years suggest that issues with two similarly strong opinion blocs are particularly prone to intense struggles over political interpretation and direction – and to periods of openly hostile debate.

Taken together, these findings indicate that among the issues examined in this study, the debates most likely to drive political division in Germany in 2025 concern: (1) how to address climate change, (2) how to respond to Russia's military threat, and (3) how to ensure fair treatment of people whose sexual orientation or gender identity diverges from heterosexual norms.

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AUTHORS

Dr. Maik Herold

Maik Herold is a research associate at the Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) at TU Dresden. His research focuses on populism, protest and political polarization in Central and Eastern Europe.

Felix Hormig

Felix Hormig is a research associate at the Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) at TU Dresden. His research focuses on the labor market integration of immigrants, populism, and the societal causes of conspiracy thinking.

Cyrill Otteni

Cyrill Otteni is a research associate at the Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) at TU Dresden. His research interests include processes of political representation, populism, and the influence of crises on political attitudes and participatory behavior.

Prof. Dr. Hans Vorländer

Hans Vorländer is the director of the Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) and the Center for the Study of Constitutionalism and Democracy (ZVD) at TU Dresden.

PROFILE

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) examines the impact of migration on democratic institutions, policies and cultures and looks into political decision making processes in the field of migration policies - in individual countries and in a comparative view of Europe. A spotlight is put on the relation between migration and populism.

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IMPRINT

ISSN: 2628-9830

Editor:

Prof. Dr. Hans Vorländer, Director
Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy (MIDEM)

TU Dresden
Institute of Political Science
Centre for the Study of Constitutionalism and
Democracy
01062 Dresden
Germany

Phone.: +49 351 463 35811
midem@mailbox.tu-dresden.de
www.forum-midem.de

Editorial Staff:

Johanna Haupt
Mathilde Rave

Collaboration and assistance:

Barbara Zippelius

Translation:

Barbara Serfozo

Design:

VOLLBLUT GmbH & Co. KG

© MIDEM 2025

*MIDEM is a research centre at the Technische Universität
Dresden (TUD), funded by Stiftung Mercator.*

