POLARIZATION BAROMETER

POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN GERMANY 2025

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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 Polarization in Germany and Europe study, 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.

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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 government.

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 the 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 B90/Grüne and the AfD.

Which issues have the greatest political potential for division in Germany in 2025?
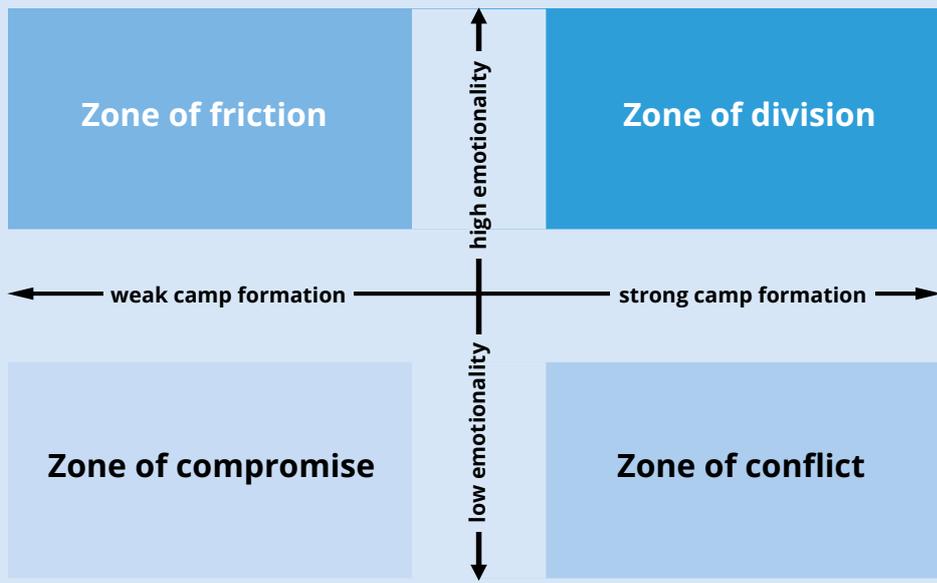
Issues with both high ideological and high affective polarization include climate policy and support for Ukraine, as well as peace and security policy, and questions related to sexual minorities and the display of Pride symbols in public spaces. Among all topics examined, debates over how best to combat 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

	high emotionality	
Zone of friction		**Zone of division**

← weak camp formation — strong camp formation →

	low emotionality	
Zone of compromise		**Zone of conflict**

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.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

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.

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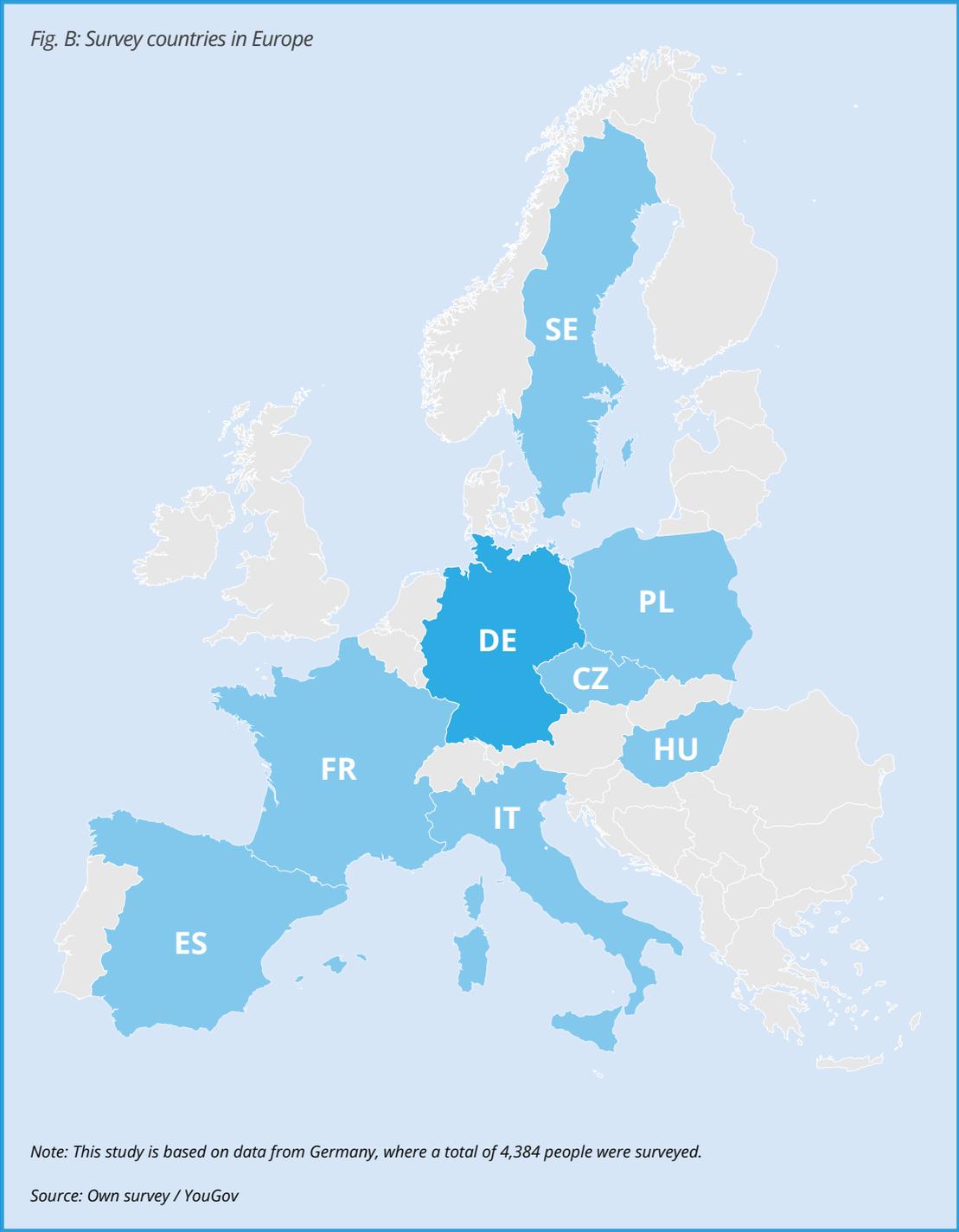
Note: This study is based on data from Germany, where a total of 4,384 people were surveyed.

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 policies, 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: Issue areas

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 Economy 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 Economy 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. 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

TOPICS AND POSITIONS

1.1

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. 1.1a).

IMMIGRATION SEEN AS THE MAIN DIVIDING ISSUE

Which issues are believed to pose the greatest risk of dividing society? As shown in Fig. 1.1b, 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. 1.1c 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. 1.1d 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 to perceive German society as divided, whereas this perception is less

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

Germany **Europe** (full sample)
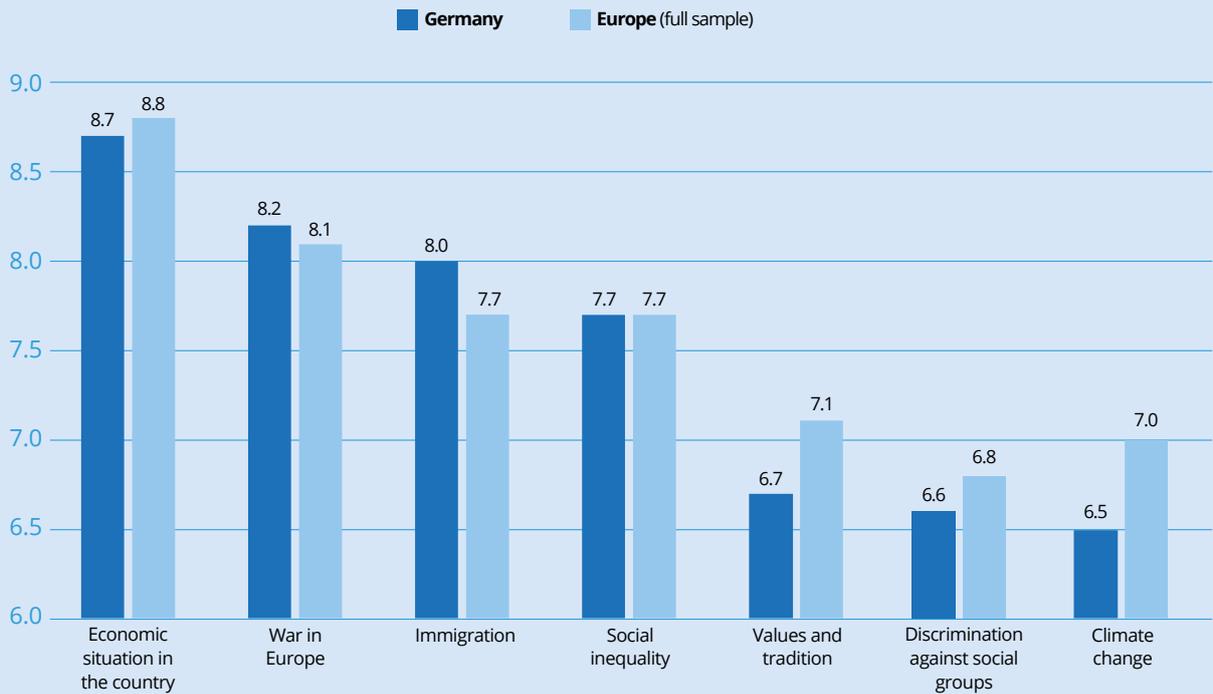
Note: The figure shows mean values for salience of different topics. Question: ‚How important are the following issues to you personally?' Respondents could position themselves between ‚0 - not important at all' to ‚10 - very important.' Information on quotas and weighting can be found the ‚Methodology' 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. 1.1b: Subjective perception of division on individual issues in Germany and Europe (mean values)

Germany **Europe** (full sample)
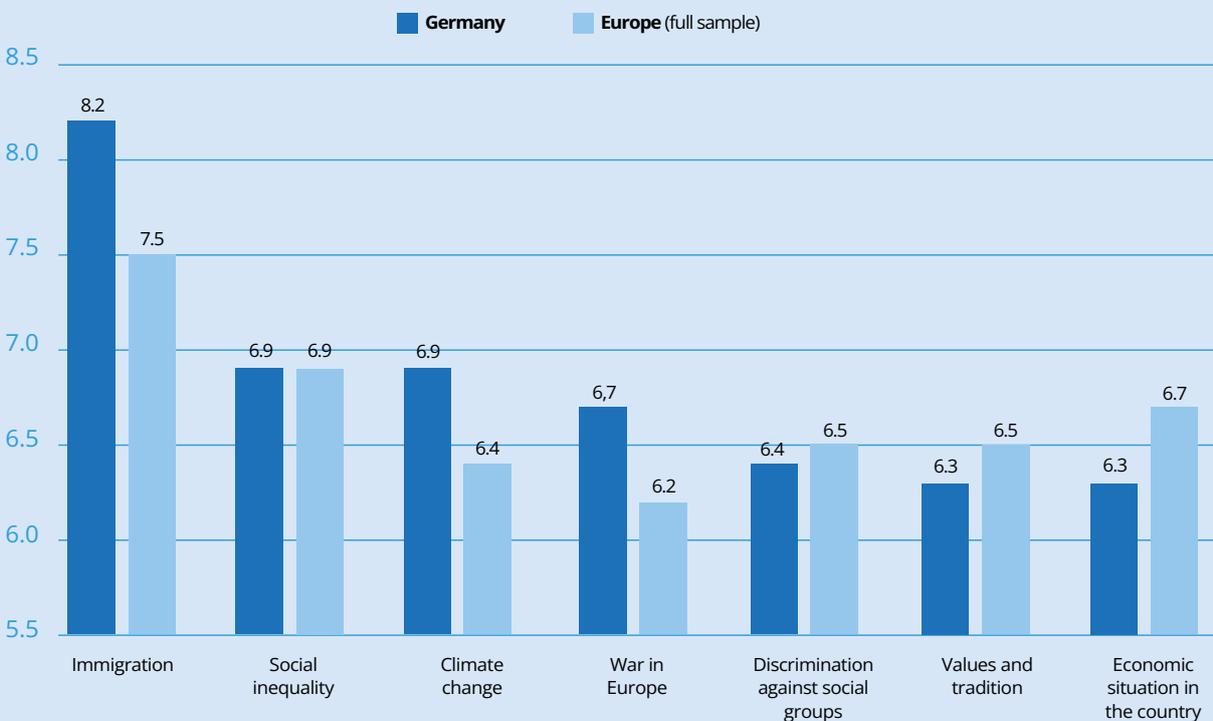
Note: The figure shows mean values of the subjective perception of division by topic. Question: ‚For which of the political issues mentioned do you see a division in society? Please indicate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division).' Information on quotas and weighting 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

common among younger respondents (under 30) and older respondents (70 and above).

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

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 B90/Grüne.

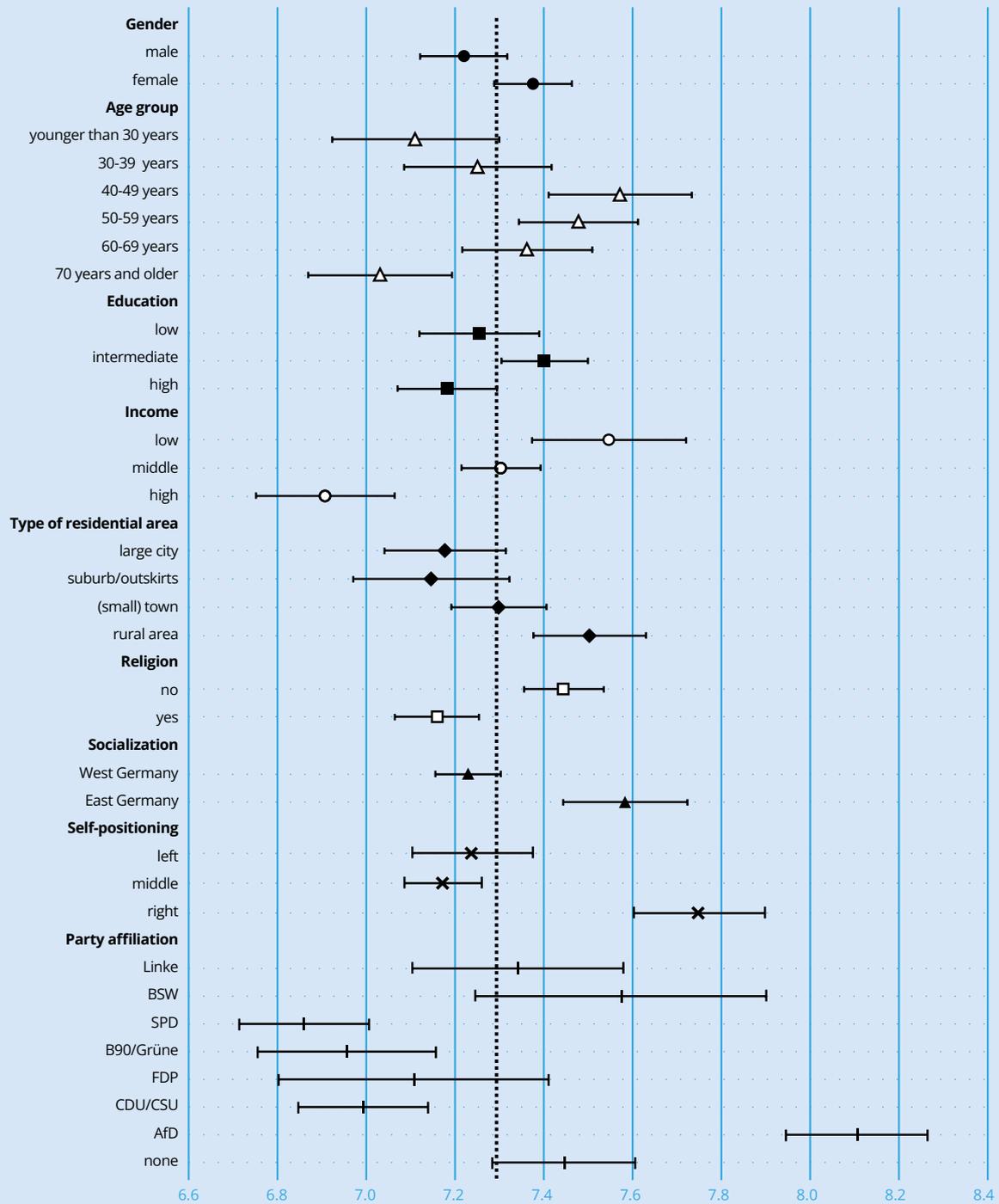*Fig. 1.1c: Perception of a division in society in Germany (in %)*
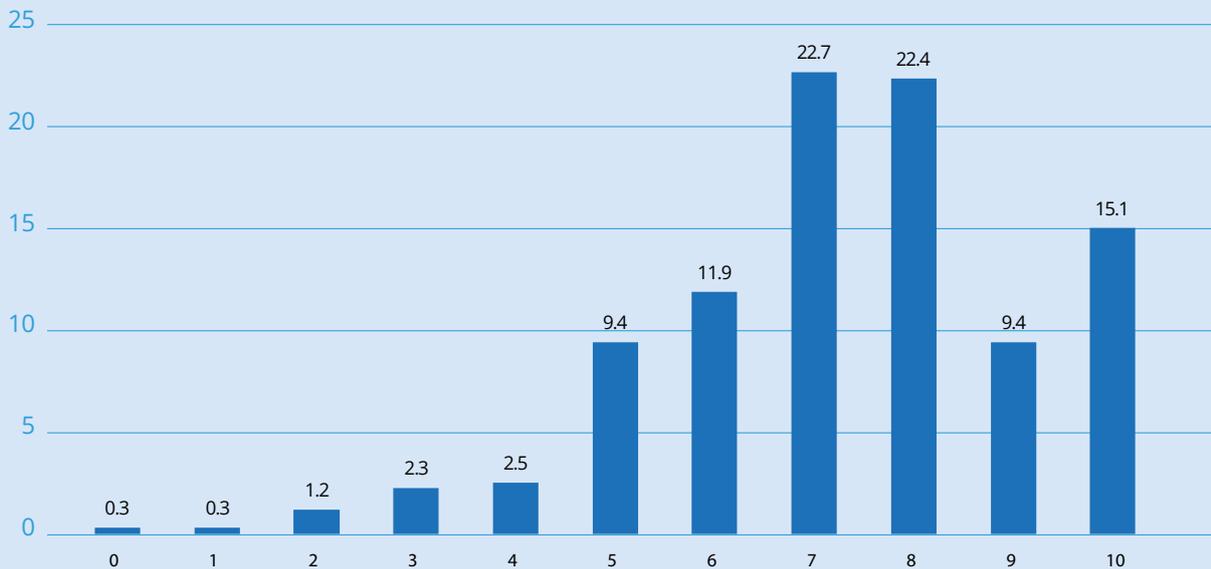
Note: Distribution of responses to the question: ‚To what extent do you currently see a division in society in Germany? Please indicate your answer on a scale from 0 (no division at all) to 10 (very strong division).‘ Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the ‚Methodology‘ section (n = 3,676).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. 1.1d: 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

1.2

PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN GERMANY

What views do Germans hold across the five policy areas examined in this study, each captured through three concrete issues? A first answer emerges from the weighted response distributions (see Figs. 1.2a–1.2e).

IMMIGRATION

For decades, immigration has been a major driver of emotionally charged political conflict and societal polarization (Angeli/Niederberger/Vorländer 2024; Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024; MIDEM 2019; 2022). Since the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, this conflict has also crystallized in Germany into two diametrically opposed camps: one that favors more liberal approaches to asylum and migration policy and is broadly open to immigration, and another that seeks to curb immigration through restrictive measures, making the fight against "irregular" migration a central concern. As our 2022 survey already demonstrated, positions on immigration are frequently emotionally charged, and engagement with opposing views is often framed as a conflict over fundamental patterns of identity and core values.

CLEAR MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF RESTRICTING IMMIGRATION OPPORTUNITIES

Our data from spring 2025 show that views on **immigration in general** are strongly skewed both in Germany and in the other countries surveyed. Around two-thirds of all respondents favor further restricting "immigration opportunities for foreigners"; in Germany, roughly one-third of respondents express this view with particular vehemence by selecting the maximum value on the scale (10). Only around 16% tend toward the opposing position (see Fig. 1.2a).

CLEAR MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF EASING THE IMMIGRATION OF SKILLED WORKERS

A strikingly different pattern emerges, however, when it comes to the **immigration of skilled workers**. Here, 61% of Germans favor easing entry opportunities, while only 23% argue for more restrictive policies. This divergence is not new (Vorländer/Herold/Hormig/Joachim/Otteni 2024; SVR 2024). Rather, it highlights how different groups of migrants and potential migrants are perceived – and framed in public debate – in markedly different ways in Germany.

Fig. 1.2a: Attitudes toward immigration issues in Germany (in %)

Immigration in general

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	3,1	1,9	3,3	4,9	3,1	14,1	6,3	8,6	11,6	7,9	32,3
Europe	3,6	2,1	3,5	4,8	4,4	15,4	6,3	9,0	11,8	8,0	28,0

← Ease   Restrict →

Immigration of skilled workers

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	17,1	11,9	14,9	11,3	5,6	13,5	3,5	3,4	4,7	1,8	9,5
Europe	11,2	7,6	12,8	12,0	7,1	20,5	4,8	4,9	4,9	2,7	7,7

← Ease   Restrict →

Integration of immigrants

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	14,9	6,0	10,4	8,4	7,7	9,7	6,5	9,4	9,1	6,4	9,0
Europe	10,8	4,7	7,9	7,2	5,4	13,0	6,2	9,6	8,9	9,2	13,8

← Language acquisition/adherence to laws enough   Must also adopt culture/way of life →

■ **Germany** ■ **Europe**

Note: Response distributions for the immigration issue area (immigration in general, immigration of skilled workers and integration of immigrants). The figure shows distributions for Germany (red) and Europe (shaded gray). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

The term "skilled workers" is commonly used as a shorthand for individuals who meet the needs of the national labor market, support domestic businesses and make an indispensable contribution to the provision of essential public services. By contrast, terms such as "immigrants," "refugees" or "foreigners" tend to carry negative connotations, which are often associated with perceived strains on the welfare state, the fiscal costs of housing and integration, and even higher crime rates.

DIVIDED OPINIONS ON INTEGRATION

When it comes to the **integration of immigrants**, opinions in Germany are more evenly split. About 47% of respondents lean toward the view that successful integration requires little more than that immigrants learn the German language and comply with the law. A narrow minority of 40%, by contrast, believes that successful integration also entails the most extensive possible adoption of "German culture and way of life".

SECURITY

In February 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine, Europe's security architecture was fundamentally shaken. Since then, political debate in Germany has been dominated not only by questions of how to support Ukraine and deal with Russia, but also by intense arguments over the future course of peace, arms and defense policy. The Zeitenwende (watershed moment) declared by former Chancellor Olaf Scholz is being carried forward in 2025 by the successor government under Friedrich Merz and reinforced by renewed financial commitments, including a special fund. At the same time, the steadily intensifying systemic rivalry between Western democracies and autocratic regimes has reopened the question of how international cooperation should be structured. Against this backdrop, the present study also addresses the tension between cooperation and confrontation in international affairs through three distinct issue items.

CLEAR MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF INCREASING DEFENSE SPENDING

Looking at the distribution of responses to the question on peace **and armaments**, a clear majority agrees that "to secure peace in Europe, spending on arms and weapons should be increased" (53.6% vs. 26.2%). Support for higher defense spending is thus more pronounced in Germany than the European average.

CLEAR MAJORITY FAVORS SHARPER DISTANCING FROM DICTATORSHIPS

Majorities are also clear on **international cooperation**. Some 61.3% of Germans say the country should "cooperate economically and politically primarily with other democracies and distance itself more strongly from dictatorships." At the same time, 19.1% consider cooperation with dictatorships to be desirable.

MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF FURTHER SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

Views are more divided on **support for Ukraine**. While a majority of 51.3% calls for continued support for Ukraine and a further distancing from Russia, there is also a group of 13.7% that rejects this position outright and instead favors renewed rapprochement with Russia. In European comparison, the German public is, overall, somewhat more skeptical about support for Ukraine than the average across all countries included in the study (see Fig. 1.2b).

Fig. 1.2b: Attitudes toward security issues in Germany (in %)

Peace and armaments

←— Peace through increased defense spending   Peace through reduced defense spending —→

International cooperation

←— Prioritize democracies   Cooperate with autocracies —→

Support for Ukraine

←— Support Ukraine   Approach Russia —→

Germany   Europe

Note: Response distributions for the security issue area (peace and armaments, international cooperation and support for Ukraine). The figure shows distributions for Germany (yellow) and Europe (shaded gray). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

CLIMATE CHANGE

In recent years, the issue of climate change has acquired enormous social and political salience. Protest movements such as Fridays for Future and die Letzte Generation (the Last Generation) have pushed the issue to the center of public attention, with their tactics often attracting controversy. While some warn that existing policy measures to combat climate change fall far short of what is needed, others already view current steps as excessive and economically damaging. This range of views is also evident in debates over the appropriate path to emissions reduction: Can climate change be tackled primarily through technological progress, without imposing major constraints on people's lifestyles? Or are far-reaching lifestyle restrictions unavoidable? Should effective climate action take precedence over economic interests, economic stability and international competitiveness? The study presented here tests these questions for their polarizing potential.

DIVIDED OPINIONS ON CLIMATE PROTECTION MEASURES

On **climate change measures**, the picture is divided. German respondents are almost evenly split, with views clustering toward the extremes: 12.9% select the extreme value "0," while 14.9% choose the opposite pole "10." Overall, 41.6% lean toward the view that current policies "do not go nearly far enough," compared with 39.6% who believe the measures already "go much too far." Only about one in six respondents places themselves in the middle (see Fig. 1.2c).

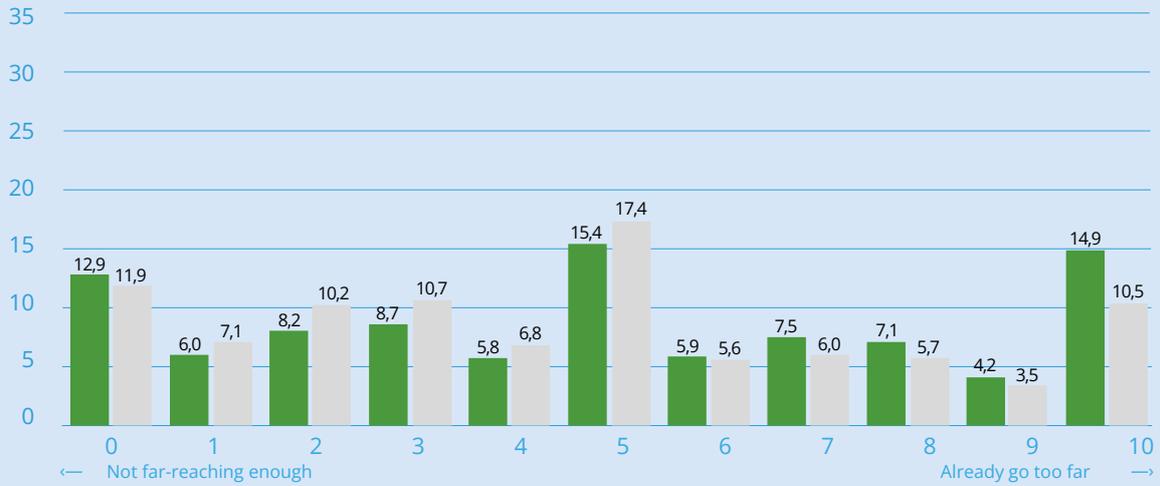**PERSONAL SACRIFICE AS THE KEY TO COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE**

A different pattern emerges on **climate protection framed as technology vs. lifestyle restrictions**. Asked about the "right path" to reducing emissions, a relative majority of respondents assumes that substantial constraints on people's lifestyles are necessary to meet the challenges of climate change. By contrast, only one in three Germans believes that technological progress alone will suffice.

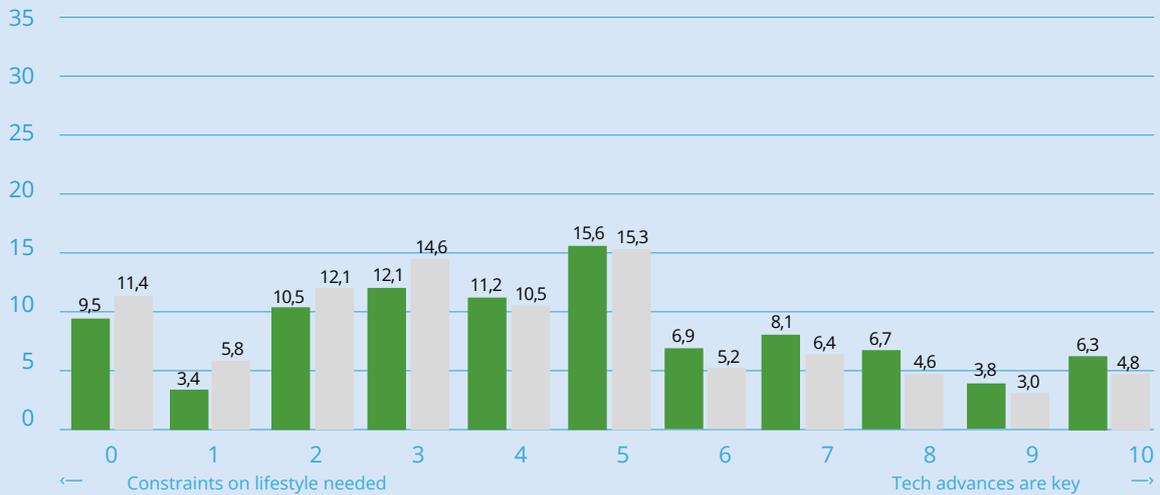**MAJORITY SAYS THE ECONOMY MATTERS MORE THAN CLIMATE ACTION**

When it comes to the potential trade-off between **climate protection and economy**, Germany shows a clear tendency to give priority to economic considerations: 48.4% prioritize economic growth over climate protection. Compared to other European countries, Germany thus stands out as being particularly economically oriented. Across the other EU member states included in the study only 37.1% prioritize growth. Especially striking is that in Germany almost one in six respondents fully agrees that "economic growth should always be the top priority, even if this comes at the expense of combating climate change" (see Fig. 1.2c).

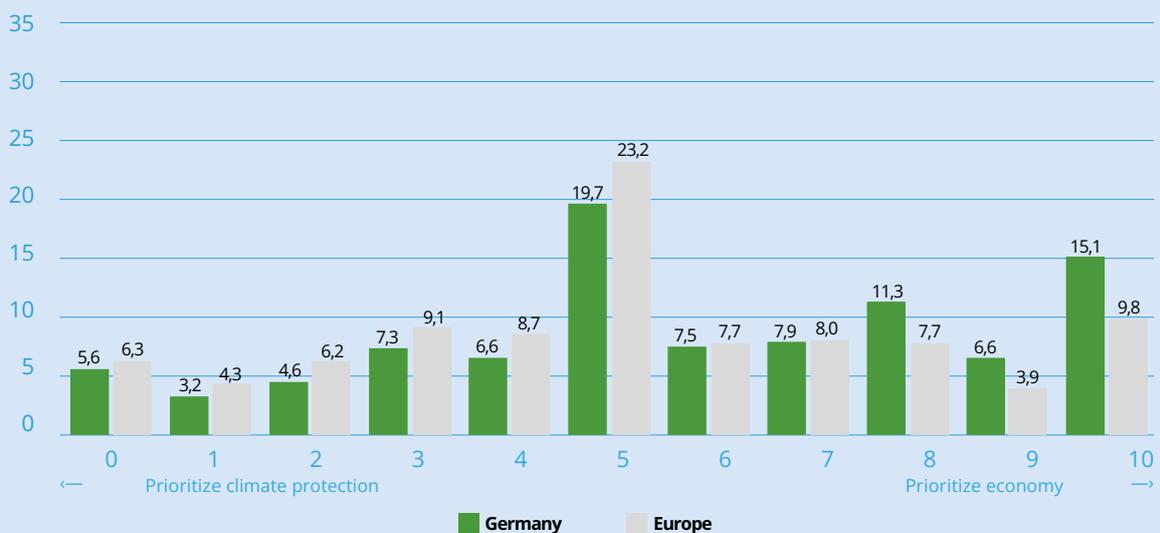*Fig. 1.2c: Attitudes toward climate change issues in Germany (in %)*

Climate change measures

Scale	Germany	Europe
0	12,9	11,9
1	6,0	7,1
2	8,2	10,2
3	8,7	10,7
4	5,8	6,8
5	15,4	17,4
6	5,9	5,6
7	7,5	6,0
8	7,1	5,7
9	4,2	3,5
10	14,9	10,5

←— Not far-reaching enough / Already go too far —→

Climate protection framed as tech vs. lifestyle restrictions

Scale	Germany	Europe
0	9,5	11,4
1	3,4	5,8
2	10,5	12,1
3	12,1	14,6
4	11,2	10,5
5	15,6	15,3
6	6,9	5,2
7	8,1	6,4
8	6,7	4,6
9	3,8	3,0
10	6,3	4,8

←— Constraints on lifestyle needed / Tech advances are key —→

Climate protection and economy

Scale	Germany	Europe
0	5,6	6,3
1	3,2	4,3
2	4,6	6,2
3	7,3	9,1
4	6,6	8,7
5	19,7	23,2
6	7,5	7,7
7	7,9	8,0
8	11,3	7,7
9	6,6	3,9
10	15,1	9,8

←— Prioritize climate protection / Prioritize economy —→

■ Germany　■ Europe

Note: Response distribution on the topic of climate change (climate protection measures, climate protection: technology vs. lifestyle restrictions, climate protection and economy). The figure shows distributions for Germany (green) and Europe (shaded gray). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

ECONOMY AND SOCIAL POLICY

Questions of how to secure and distribute economic prosperity have long ranked among the central fault lines of political conflict. Whether the issue is the role of the government in the market, the fair distribution of income and wealth, or the orientation of international trade relations, views on which economic policy measures are appropriate and just often diverge sharply. While some call for a strong government that uses targeted interventions to combat social inequality and protect domestic firms, others place their faith in the self-regulating forces of the market and free international competition as engines of prosperity and innovation. These fundamental debates are reflected in controversies over tax policy, welfare systems, globalization and national economic strategies. Using three illustrative items, this study examines how strongly these issues polarize opinion, which priorities different social groups set and where particularly clear camps emerge.

MODERATE VIEWS ON THE MARKET AND GOVERNMENT

On the issue of a balance between **market and government**, Germany shows a clear concentration in the middle response categories. Nearly one in five respondents (19.9%) appears undecided. Most of the remainder also lean toward moderate positions in either direction, with very little clustering at the extremes of the scale. In European comparison, the distributions look similar (see Fig. 1.2d).

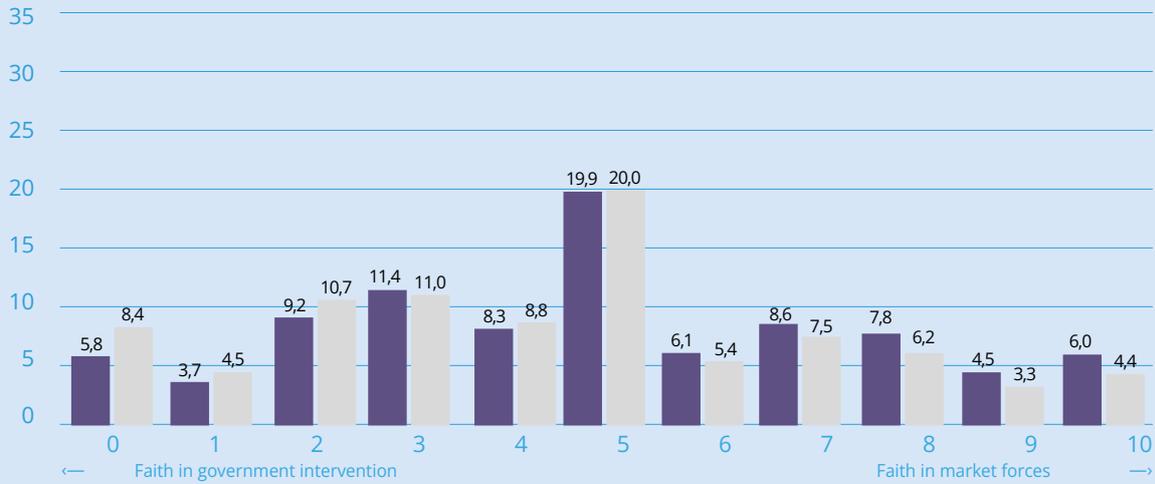**CLEAR MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF MORE REDISTRIBUTION**

Views are less balanced when it comes to **redistribution of wealth**. Here, 53.5% – a solid majority – favor more policies aimed at redistributing wealth from the rich to the poor. Only about one in four respondents takes a decidedly opposing stance. Unlike on the market and government item, the extreme categories also play a larger role in this case (13.8% vs. 7.8%).

MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF STRONGER PROTECTION FOR DOMESTIC COMPANIES AGAINST FOREIGN COMPETITION

As for **international trade** relations, 48.2% of Germans believe policymakers should do more to protect domestic businesses from foreign competition. By contrast, only one in four thinks that free trade is the best way to strengthen the national economy. Similar patterns can be observed across Europe, although Germany stands out as slightly more liberal on this issue.

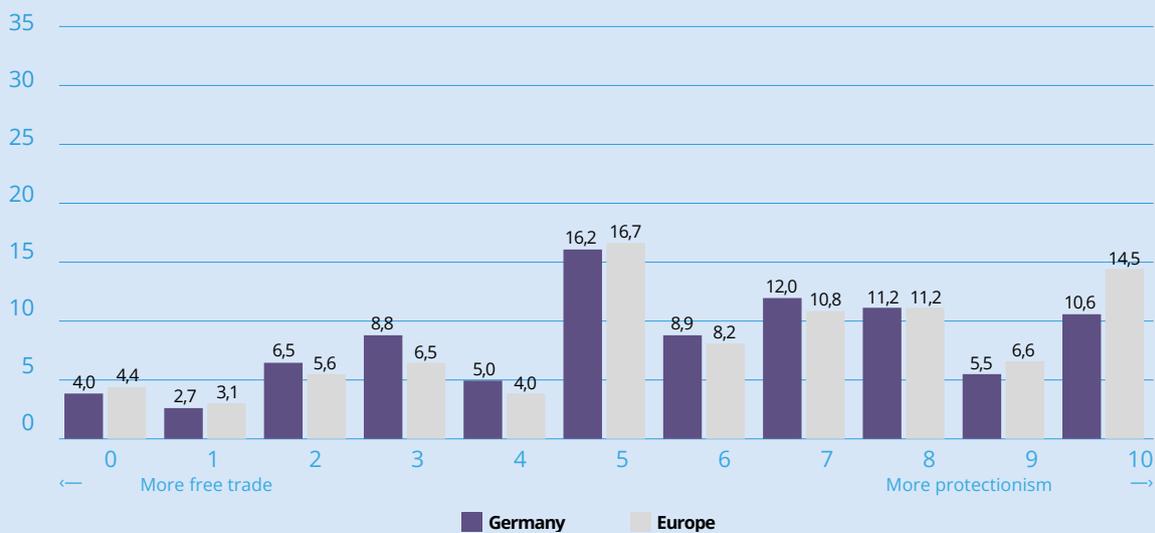*Fig. 1.2d: Attitudes toward economy and social policies issues in Germany (in %)*

Market and government

← Faith in government intervention   Faith in market forces →

Redistribution of wealth

← Do not go far enough   Already go too far →

International trade

← More free trade   More protectionism →

■ Germany   ■ Europe

Note: Distribution of answers on the topic of economy and social policies (market and government, redistribution of wealth, international trade). The figure shows distributions for Germany (violet) and Europe (shaded gray). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

VALUES

Where economic and social policy revolve around material trade-offs, the values domain is defined by cultural contestation. It centers on the basic relationship between the individual and the community, and on the appropriate balance between self-realization and self-restraint, emancipation and obligation, equal treatment and differentiation. Two ideal-typical positions confront each other here: liberal views that emphasize individual freedom and the social diversity that flows from it, and conservative perspectives that stress the importance of collective bonds, community-based obligations and traditional values. Within this tension, especially heated debates often ignite over seemingly minor questions of form – such as symbols, language rules, conventions, works of art or modes of representation. Challenges to, and defenses of, such symbols are frequently described as part of a "culture war." One side sees itself as fighting for the social recognition and political empowerment of disadvantaged groups. The other, by contrast, views these efforts as undermining the principle of collective equality, disturbing social peace and threatening social cohesion – a cohesion understood to rest, not least, on the willingness of individual groups to subordinate their particular interests to the broader claims of the community.

VIEWS ON TRADITIONAL VALUES VS. INDIVIDUAL SELF-EXPRESSION CLUSTER AROUND THE CENTER

On the item **conflict of values**, contrasting traditional values with individual self-expression, survey responses initially suggest a clear pull toward the center. Even so, 40.4% of Germans place greater importance on opportunities for individual self-realization, while 34% give priority to a community-oriented perspective rooted in collectively transmitted values (see Fig. 1.2e).

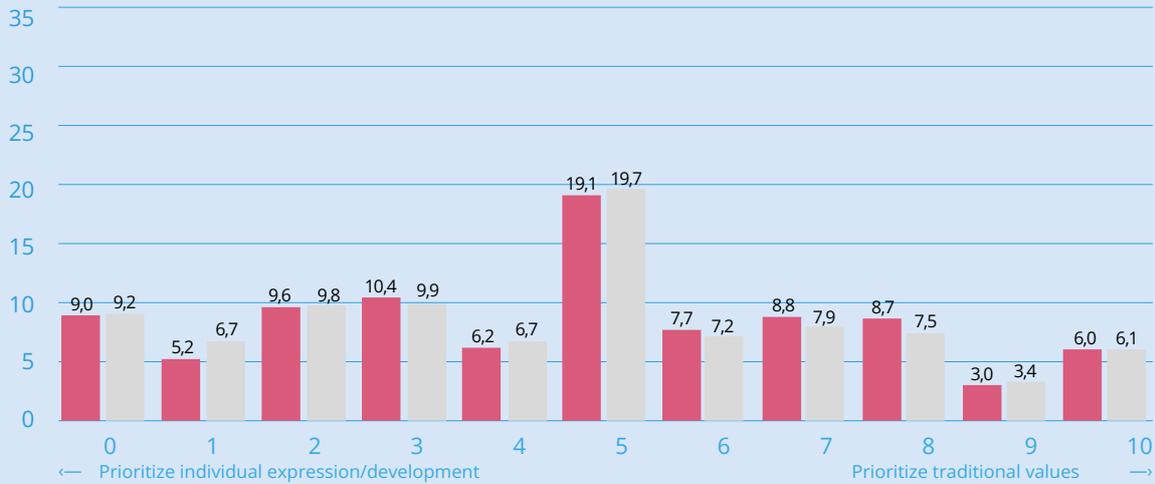**MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF EXPANDING ANTI-DISCRIMINATION MEASURES**

A similar pattern emerges on the question of how to deal with **discrimination of sexual minorities**. Alongside the tendency toward the middle, 40.4% of respondents agree that "much more needs to be done to combat discrimination against sexual minorities." Just under one-third, by contrast, believe that existing measures "already go much too far." Unlike the traditional values vs. individual self-expression item, extreme positions are more common on both sides here. In comparison, German opinion leans somewhat more toward the liberal camp than is the case across Europe as a whole.

RELATIVE MAJORITY OPPOSES RAINBOW FLAGS IN PUBLIC PLACES

A comparable pattern, though with the leanings reversed, appears on the issue of **rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces**. A relative plurality of 38% of Germans believes that policymakers should "take stronger action against rainbow and Pride flags in public places, because they give undue attention to the specific interests and claims of a minority social group." About one-third favors a stronger presence of rainbow flags in public spaces as a symbol of tolerance and acceptance. Once again, views cluster more strongly at the extremes, and in European comparison Germany displays a slightly more liberal distribution of opinion (see Fig. 1.2e).

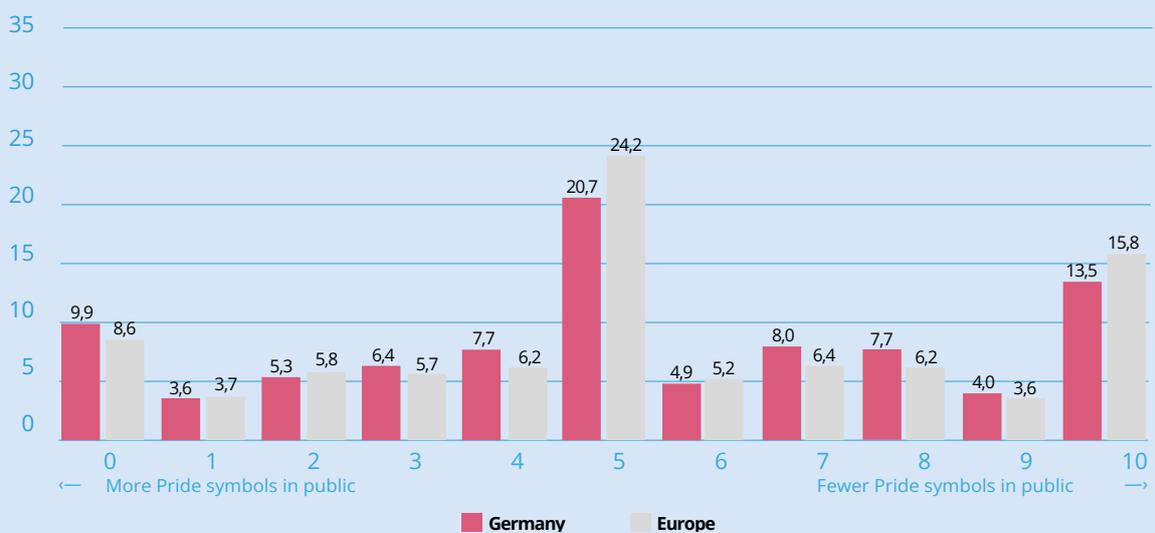Fig. 1.2e: Attitudes toward values issues in Germany (in %)

Conflict of values

← Prioritize individual expression/development   Prioritize traditional values →

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	9,0	5,2	9,6	10,4	6,2	19,1	7,7	8,8	8,7	3,0	6,0
Europe	9,2	6,7	9,8	9,9	6,7	19,7	7,2	7,9	7,5	3,4	6,1

Discrimination of sexual minorities

← More anti-discrimination measures needed   Anti-discrimiination measures go too far →

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	12,6	5,5	7,7	9,1	5,5	21,6	4,9	4,6	7,8	3,7	9,5
Europe	12,2	6,5	7,4	8,5	6,1	18,8	5,5	5,7	7,1	4,2	12,3

Rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces

← More Pride symbols in public   Fewer Pride symbols in public →

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Germany	9,9	3,6	5,3	6,4	7,7	20,7	4,9	8,0	7,7	4,0	13,5
Europe	8,6	3,7	5,8	5,7	6,2	24,2	5,2	6,4	6,2	3,6	15,8

■ Germany   ■ Europe

Note: Distribution of responses on the topic of values (conflict of values, discrimination of sexual minorities, rainbow and Pride flags in public spa-ces). The figure shows distributions for Germany (pink) and Europe (shaded gray). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Quelle: Eigene Erhebung / YouGov

1.3

COMPARING THE DISTRIBUTION OF POSITIONS

In addition to this description of the response distributions shown in Figs. 1.2a–1.2e, statistical measures such as means or dispersion values can be used to summarize the structure of individual position distributions and to **compare topics with one another.**

SKEWNESS OF OPINION DISTRIBUTIONS

For the questions examined here, one particularly informative indicator is the **skewness of each opinion distribution**, which quantifies the balance between opposing positions. Skewness indicates how strongly a distribution of positions tilts away from its mean – that is, whether opinions are symmetrically clustered around the center (low skewness) or whether extreme views are overrepresented on one side. A high skewness value therefore points to a pronounced imbalance in the distribution of positions. Figure 1.3 illustrates this using a bar chart.

PARTICULARLY ONE-SIDED DISTRIBUTIONS ON IMMIGRATION IN GENERAL, IMMIGRATION OF SKILLED WORKERS AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Across the five policy areas and their respective items, the most pronounced imbalances emerge on immigration in general, the immigration of skilled workers and international cooperation. On immigration overall, the camp favoring tighter restrictions clearly dominates. On the immigration of skilled workers, by contrast, it is those who support easing entry who prevail. On international cooperation, a large majority of the German public believes the country should "cooperate economically and politically primarily with other democracies and distance itself more strongly from dictatorships." On redistribution, peace and armaments, and support for Ukraine, a clear majority also leans in one direction: most respondents favor a further redistribution of wealth, higher spending on arms and weapons, and continued support for Ukraine against Russia. Many other items, by contrast, show only weak tendencies in either direction (see Fig. 1.3).

CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF OPINION DISTRIBUTIONS

A comparison of the distributions of positions on the issues examined in this study, as they appear in Germany and in the other countries included, reveals in some cases substantial differences (see Figs. IIa–e in the appendix).

On the issue of **immigration**, respondents in countries such as Czechia and Hungary tend to hold more restrictive views than those in Spain. In Italy, opinions on immigration are more liberal than those on the immigration of skilled workers. In Germany, the opposite is true. Regarding integration, respondents in Sweden and Czechia most strongly endorse the view that immigrants should "adopt the national culture and way of life as fully as possible," while respondents in Germany and Italy take more liberal positions on average (see Fig. IIa).

Fig. 1.3: Skewness of opinion distributions in the German population by issue

Immigration in general
restrict

Immigration of skilled workers
make easier

Integration of immigrants
Language acquisition/
adherence to laws enough

Peace and armaments
Peace through increased
defense spending

International cooperation
prioritize democracies

Support for Ukraine
Support Ukraine

Climate change measures
not far-reaching
enough

**Climate protection framed as
tech vs lifestyle restrictions**
Constraints on lifestyle

Climate protection and economy
prioritize economy

Markets and government
Faith in
government intervention

Redistribution efforts
do not go far enough

International trade relations
more protectionism

Conflict of values
prioritize individual
expression/
development

Discrimination of sexual minorities
More anti-discrimination
measures needed

Symbols of Pride in public spaces
fewer Pride symbols
in public

Note: Political positions in the German population: skewness of the opinion distribution (Fisher-Pearson skewness) by topic. Rightward deviations (low skewness values) indicate an overrepresentation of response options associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the introductory section). Leftward deviations (high skewness values) indicate that a majority tends toward the views linked to lower scale values.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

On **security**, Sweden stands out: respondents there most clearly support increased defense spending, strongly oppose cooperation with dictatorships, and express the highest level of support for Ukraine. Italy, by contrast, is the most critical of higher defense outlays, followed by Hungary, Spain and Czechia. Germany presents a mixed picture: respondents are comparatively more supportive of increased defense spending, yet more inclined to oppose continued support for Ukraine (see Fig. IIb).

On **climate change**, a surprising pattern emerges. While respondents in Hungary and Italy are, by European standards, especially likely to call for stronger measures to combat climate change, those in Germany, Czechia and Poland are noticeably more restrained. These three countries also display distributions on climate action framed as technology vs. lifestyle restrictions and on climate action vs. the economy that tilt more strongly in the same direction, placing above-average emphasis on economic growth and technological progress (see Fig. IIc).

Regarding the **economy and social policies** issue area, Italy stands out again. Compared with the rest of Europe, public support for a stronger government role in the economy is particularly high there. At the same time, Italians are more likely than average to support the redistribution of income and wealth. Beyond that, the picture in Europe is rather mixed: a reduced role for the government is most strongly favored in Germany, Spain and Czechia. However, when it comes to redistribution, Poland, Czechia and Sweden are especially hesitant. A very different picture emerges on free trade and international commerce: France positions itself as the most protectionist country, whereas Sweden is the strongest advocate of open and liberal trade relations (see Fig. IId).

When it comes to **values**, a clear East-West and North-South divide emerges. Attitudes are most restrictive in Central and Eastern Europe: Czechia, Poland and Hungary take the hardest lines on issues concerning sexual minorities and the visibility of rainbow flags in public spaces. At the other end of the spectrum is a North-South axis, with Italy, Spain and Sweden showing the strongest support for the rights of sexual minorities and their visibility in public spaces. Germany and France occupy a middle position on these issues, placing them close to the European average (see Fig. IIe).
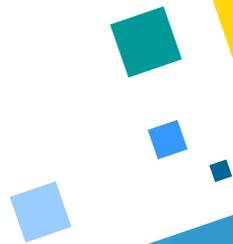
IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN GERMANY

2.1

WHAT IS IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION?

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

Ideological polarization concerns the way political positions – for example, attitudes toward parties, specific policy issues or broader political topics – are distributed within a group. Where these positions cluster closely together, ideological polarization is low. Where two clearly distinguishable camps emerge, polarization is higher.

This is especially true when these camps are far apart – that is, when views, mindsets and attitudes accumulate at opposite ends of the opinion spectrum. In such a situation, two groups with sharply divergent positions confront each other, while there are only a few people left in the theoretically possible "center."

When a society fragments in this way into two or more large camps with strongly differing political views, it can be described as ideologically polarized. If these political differences also coincide with social-structural divides – such as young vs. old, rich vs. poor, higher vs. lower education, or urban vs. rural residence – terms like social cleavage or societal division are often used.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN GERMANY

In this sense, Germany has for many years debated whether its society is marked by rising ideological polarization and an associated risk of deepening division. The empirical evidence available so far, however, offers little support for the claim that ideological polarization in Germany is increasing. While some studies do point in this direction, most scholars regard such conclusions as unfounded (Adams/Green/Milazzo 2012; Dalton 2021; Kaube/Kieserling 2022; Mau/Lux/Westheuser 2023; Munzert/Bauer 2013).

HOW SHOULD IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION BE ASSESSED?

Assessments of ideological polarization are far from unambiguous. On the one hand, it can be seen as a desirable form of social differentiation and a prerequisite for democratic contestation. Pluralized – and even polarized – distributions of political positions can help clarify alternative problem framings, policy proposals and courses of action. This ensures the substantive distinctiveness required for rational negotiation and compromise.

On the other hand, a certain degree of consensus – on core values and democratic principles, as well as on basic notions of social coexistence – is also a precondition for a stable democracy. An excess of entrenched, diametrically opposed views, worldviews or belief systems can therefore make democratic bargaining and compromise far more difficult, if not impossible. A society in which extreme positions harden into antagonistic camps to the point that people no longer seem to speak the same language even on everyday policy questions thus risks sliding into a dynamic of social disintegration.

2.2
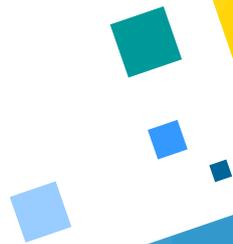
IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION BY ISSUE

How pronounced is issue-specific ideological polarization in Germany in 2025? A first answer can be drawn from the distributions of positions themselves (see Figs. 1.2a–1.2e). These figures point most clearly to climate change measures as the topic displaying two pronounced clusters at the extreme ends of the response scale, whereas responses on the role of market forces versus government intervention, as well as on value conflicts, tend to concentrate in the middle range. When it comes to immigration in general, however, there is a clear trend toward more restrictive measures.

These initial impressions can be further refined using statistical indicators. Even where no distinct clusters are visible to the naked eye, it is possible to calculate the extent to which opinion distributions nevertheless tend toward the formation of opposing camps.

MEASURING IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

To do so, we use the **Van der Eijk polarization index** (see Appendix I: Measurement instruments) – a statistical measure that captures both the degree to which opinions aggregate into two camps and the distance between these camps, that is, their proximity to the opposing ends of the scale. Higher Van der Eijk values therefore indicate stronger ideological polarization, while lower values point to a more homogeneous distribution of views (Van der Eijk 2001; Mau/Lux/Westheuser 2023).

In addition to the Van der Eijk index, the **skewness of the distribution** (FisherPearson skewness) can again be used to interpret our findings. It makes it possible to identify and take into account imbalances between opposing camps. As in Fig. 1.3, this imbalance is depicted in Fig. 2.2 by a bar: if it points to the right, this indicates an overrepresentation of the response option associated in our survey with a high scale value (see Fig. D), often the more conservative of the two positions offered. Conversely, leftward deviations signal a majority for the views linked to lower scale values, which in many cases correspond to more liberal or left-leaning positions.

CLIMATE CHANGE MEASURES AND SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE DRIVE THE STRONGEST IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDES

As shown in Fig. 2.2, the two indicators reveal distinct constellations across issues in Germany. The highest levels of ideological polarization – measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 1 – are found on climate change measures (0.51), followed by support for Ukraine (0.50) and the integration of immigrants (0.46). These issues display an above-average concentration of opinions at the opposing ends of the scale and thus show the strongest tendency toward the formation of antagonistic camps. A similar pattern emerges on issues such as rainbow flags in public spaces, peace and

Fig. 2.2: Ideological polarization and skewness of opinion distributions by issue in Germany (Van der Eijk polarization and Fisher-Pearson skewness)

Ideological polarization   **Distributional skewness**

Issue	Ideological polarization
Immigration in general	0,51
Immigration of skilled workers	0,50
Integration of immigrants	0,46
Peace and armaments	0,45
International cooperation	0,45
Support for Ukraine	0,45
Climate protection measures	0,42
Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle	0,42
Climate protection and economy growth	0,41
Market and government	0,41
Redistribution of wealth	0,40
International trade	0,39
Conflict of values	0,39
Discrimination of sexual minorities	0,35
Symbols of Pride in public spaces	0,31

Note: The figure shows Van der Eijk values (ideological polarization) and Fisher-Pearson skewness values (distributional tendency) for opinion distributions on individual issues in Germany. Higher Van der Eijk values indicate stronger ideological polarization. For skewness, rightward deviations indicate an overrepresentation of response options associated with higher scale values, while leftward deviations indicate that a majority tends toward the views linked to lower scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section and Fig. 1.3). Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

armaments, and the treatment of sexual minorities, whose comparatively high Van der Eijk values (each around 0.45) likewise point to a divided public.

By contrast, the lowest levels of ideological polarization are observed on the issues of the balance between market forces and government intervention (0.39), international cooperation (0.35) and immigration in general (0.31). International cooperation and immigration in general also exhibit an exceptionally strong skew in their distributions (see section 1.3), a tilt that is likely to affect the measured level of ideological polarization. In these cases, it is difficult to speak of two equally strong, diametrically opposed camps.

The opposite pattern can be seen on climate change measures, the integration of immigrants and rainbow flags in public spaces. Here, opinions in Germany are distributed more symmetrically around the mean, while at the same time clustering toward the ends of the scale. Because these issues pit camps of roughly equal strength with extreme but opposing views against one another, their potential for political conflict appears particularly high.

LOWEST LEVELS OF IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION ON IMMIGRATION OVERALL, INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND MARKET AND GOVERNMENT

HIGH CONFLICT POTENTIAL AROUND CLIMATE PROTECTION MEASURES AND INTEGRATION REQUIREMENTS

2.3

IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Ideological polarization in Germany (see Fig. 2.2) is far from uniform; it varies markedly by issue and by social group.

GROUP-SPECIFIC PATTERNS OF IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION

The largest differences in Van der Eijk values across social groups emerge on immigration overall. West Germans are more strongly split into opposing camps than East Germans, as are younger respondents, people with higher levels of education and residents of large cities. A similar pattern is found among those who self-identify as "on the left" and among voters of the SPD, Greens and the Left Party. In these groups in particular, **immigration** appears to have a high potential for political division, fostering the formation of distinct ideological camps. Among older respondents, people with lower educational attainment and supporters of the AfD, by contrast, positions on immigration overall are more homogeneous, and no comparable camp formation can be observed.

On the issues of **peace and armaments** as well as on **conflict of values**, the tendency to split into two ideological camps is more pronounced among women than among men. It is also above average among low-income respondents and among supporters of the AfD and the BSW.

Opinion profiles on **climate change** measures point to somewhat different fault lines. Because positions on this topic are relatively homogeneous among supporters of the AfD and the B90/Grüne, Van der Eijk values are comparatively low within each of these groups. By contrast, particularly high levels of ideological polarization are observed among supporters of the CDU/CSU, FDP and BSW, as well as among respondents who place themselves at the center of the political spectrum.

On the role of **market and government**, finally, there are hardly any notable differences in polarization across social subgroups. The clearest tendency toward the formation of two ideological camps appears among supporters of the CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD and BSW, as well as among middleaged respondents, when it comes to the question of whether extensive government intervention in economic life is needed to rein in market forces.

GERMANY IN CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

Comparing ideological polarization in Germany with that observed in the other countries included in the study reveals, in some cases, substantial differences (see Figs. IIIa–e in the appendix).

On **immigration** overall, respondents in countries such as Spain and Italy display a markedly stronger tendency to form entrenched opinion camps than those in Czechia, where polarization is comparatively moderate. By contrast, polarization on the immigration of skilled workers is more evenly distributed across countries, with only France showing slightly elevated values. Differences across countries are also moderate on the integration of immigrants, with Sweden and Hungary recording the lowest levels of polarization (see Fig. IIIa).

On **security**, cross-national differences are pronounced. The polarization index reaches particularly high values in Germany, Spain and Czechia on the role of arms and weapons in securing peace, pointing to sharply opposed positions. On the question of whether one's own country should cooperate with authoritarian states, opinion distributions are especially balanced in Spain and Sweden. With regard to support for Ukraine, Germany and Czechia stand out for their ideologically polarized distributions (see Fig. IIIb).

Country differences also surface clearly on **climate change.** Respondents in Hungary are especially unified on whether more or fewer climate measures are needed, giving Hungary the lowest polarization value in the country comparison. In Germany, by contrast, ideological front lines appear to be particularly hardened. A similar pattern can be observed on the two other climate-related items as well (see Fig. IIIc).

In the **economy and social policies** domain, and specifically on the extent of government intervention in the market, Germany, Spain and Hungary show high levels of ideological polarization. Italy's particularly low Van der Eijk value on redistribution, by contrast, points to a highly one-sided distribution of views. On international trade, however, there are hardly any significant differences between the countries under study (see Fig. IIId).

The same is true for **values**: compared with other policy fields, countryspecific differences in ideological polarization are strikingly small. Only on the question of whether policy should be guided more by traditional values or by individual self-expression do Czechia, Spain and Sweden show belowaverage tendencies toward ideological camp formation (see Fig. IIIe).

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN GERMANY

3.1

WHAT IS AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION?

Unlike ideological polarization, affective polarization is not about the divergence of opinions, attitudes or political beliefs, but about how individuals – and groups – deal with these differences. The focus is not on the distribution of positions as such, but on people's attitudes toward those who hold particular views, especially when those views differ from their own. Affective polarization thus manifests itself in everyday social and political interactions – in how, and with what emotions, different opinion groups encounter one another. Individuals are therefore considered highly affectively polarized when they form very positive perceptions of like-minded people while holding very negative views of those with opposing positions (Iyengar/Sood/Lelkes 2012; Torcal/Harteveld 2025).

MEASURING AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Research on affective polarization originated in the United States and initially centered on patterns of party identification and rejection. In the U.S. case, it has been shown how supporters of Republicans and Democrats increasingly confront one another in irreconcilable ways in daily life, while bipartisan cooperation in politics has become ever more difficult (Druckman/Levendusky 2019; Mason 2015, 2018). Similar trends have since been observed in the multiparty systems of European democracies as well (Reiljan 2020; Röllicke 2023; Wagner 2021).

At the same time, it has become clear that political polarization often unfolds beyond party lines. The crises of recent years, in particular, have shown that deep disagreements over specific topics can generate strong political mobilization, conflict and division even in the absence of entrenched party loyalties (Hobolt/Leeper/Tilley 2021; Schieferdecker/Joly/Faas 2024).

In Germany, these dynamics of affective polarization have so far received little systematic attention. More recent social science research has addressed the issue only in passing (Mau/Lux/Westheuser 2023; Teichler et al. 2023; Roose 2021; Haerter/Filsinger/Freitag 2025). Interest in affective polarization has, however, grown markedly in recent years. Both psychological (Lubbers/Bukowski/Christ/Jaspers/van Zalk 2025) and political science research has taken up the topic (Berlin Polarization Monitor/ZEIT 2025).

ISSUE-BASED AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

The predecessor studies to the present report were the first to provide systematic evidence on issue-based affective polarization in Germany and Europe. They found the highest levels of affective polarization on immigration, climate change and COVID-19 among older respondents as well as among voters of the AfD and the B90/Grüne (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024).

As for its effects, affective polarization is widely suspected of harming democracy because it undermines its social and political-cultural foundations: social cohesion and citizens' willingness to cooperate. When positions on specific issues become strongly emotionally charged and political preferences are understood as part of one's identity, those who do not share these views are easily perceived as a threat. Challenges from people who think differently are then interpreted as personal attacks and met with suspicion, defensiveness and exclusion.

In such a climate, emotionally charged truth claims tend to replace substantive argument, while hatred, agitation and outrage crowd out efforts to reconcile competing interests. This erodes the culture of democratic contestation, reinforces friend-enemy thinking and deepens social divisions. When the emotional loading of political differences turns agonism into antagonism, a dynamic of political and social disintegration can easily take hold.

At the same time, any assessment of affective polarization must allow for a wide range of possible interpretations. Negative attitudes toward those who disagree may be shaped by current public discourse, media moods and the projection surfaces they create. High levels of affective polarization can also reflect strong political interest, self-confidence and conviction – often accompanied by trust in the correctness of one's worldview and the determination to defend and advance it against competing positions.

Finally, high affective polarization also indicates that people experience their views on an issue as part of their identity. The negative reactions to those who hold opposite views reveal the effects of processes of social association and dissociation described in social identity theory as the construction of in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel 1982; Tajfel/Turner 1979). A high level of affective polarization can therefore also indicate certain ideological rigidities, a limited understanding of dissenting views, low tolerance of difference and an inability to live with ambiguity. This tendency is especially pronounced when one's own position is justified through absolutist formulas such as "nature," "reason," "rationality" or "science," and is therefore presented as "self-evident," "the only reasonable option" and thus "without any alternative."

WHAT DO HIGH LEVELS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION INDICATE?

ASSESSING AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION DYNAMICS

3.2 AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION BY ISSUE

IMMIGRATION IN GENERAL, SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE AND CLIMATE CHANGE GENERATE THE STRONGEST AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

On which issues is affective polarization in Germany most pronounced? As in our 2022 survey, the highest levels in 2025 are found on immigration overall, support for Ukraine and climate change measures. On questions of whether immigration should be restricted or expanded, whether climate action should be intensified or scaled back, and whether arms deliveries to Ukraine should be maintained or reduced, Germans on average are most likely to rate people who share their views as very "warm and positive," while judging those with opposing views as very "cool and negative" on the feeling thermometer. On issues such as the balance between market forces and government interventions, the integration of immigrants or international trade, by contrast, this pattern is far less evident. Here, Germans appear much more willing to accept divergent positions (see Fig. 3.2a).

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION BY OPINION CAMP

Which of the two opinion camps is primarily responsible for affective polarization on each issue? As Fig. 3.2b shows, the balance between the two camps is rarely even. In many cases, it is one specific camp that reacts most negatively toward those holding the opposing view. This is particularly evident on the issue of international cooperation. Respondents who believe the country should "cooperate economically and politically primarily with other democracies and distance itself more strongly from dictatorships" display very little understanding for those who disagree. Among those who think "Germany should cooperate economically and politically not only with other democracies but also with dictatorships," by contrast, only a low level of rejection of the opposing camp can be observed. This asymmetry in affective polarization – albeit less pronounced – can also be seen on climate action vs. the economy, climate action framed as technology vs. lifestyle restrictions, and the treatment of sexual minorities.

On topics such as immigration in general, climate protection measures and support for Ukraine – the three issues that display the highest overall levels of affective polarization (see Fig. 3.2a) – both camps are united in their strong mutual rejection.

HIGHER LEVEL THAN 2022

Compared with 2022 – when the questions on immigration overall and climate protection measures were already posed in identical form and measured using the same instrument – the 2025 values are, on the whole, somewhat higher. In 2022, the overall level of affective polarization in Germany was estimated at 4.4 for immigration overall and 4.5 for climate protection measures (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023b). Although both issues already topped the ranking of affective polarization at the time, the 2025 values of 5.4 and 5.2 suggest that the emotions and mobilizing potential associated with these

Fig. 3.2a: Affective polarization by issue in Germany

Issue	Value
Immigration in general	5,41
Immigration of skilled workers	5,28
Integration of immigrants	5,19
Peace and armaments	4,95
International cooperation	4,92
Support for Ukraine	4,76
Climate protection measures	4,71
Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle	4,50
Climate protection and economy growth	4,42
Market and government	4,25
Redistribution of wealth	4,12
International trade	3,97
Conflict of values	3,56
Discrimination of sexual minorities	3,42
Symbols of Pride in public spaces	2,47

Note: The figure shows weighted mean levels of affective polarization by issue. Respondents rated their feelings toward the respective groups on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." Each respondent's score is calculated as the absolute difference between their ratings of the two groups on a given issue. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization. Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

topics have intensified further in recent years, a development to which the 2025 federal election campaign has likely contributed.

On issues such as market and government, the integration of immigrants or international trade, by contrast, Germans are least inclined to feel especially positive toward people who share their views and especially negative toward those who disagree. Here, respondents appear much more willing to accept divergent positions (see Fig. 3.2a).

LOWEST LEVELS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION ON MARKET AND GOVERNMENT, INTEGRATION AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Fig. 3.2b: Affective polarization according to self-positioning within the respective subject area

Affective polarization

Immigration in general
Ease
Restrict

Immigration of skilled workers
Ease
Restrict

Integration of immigrants
Language acquisition/adherence to laws enough
Must also adopt culture/way of life

Peace and armaments
Peace through increased defense spending
Peace through reduced defense spending

International cooperation
Prioritize democracies
Cooperate with autocracies

Support for Ukraine
Support Ukraine
Approach Russia

Climate change measures
Not far-reaching enough
Already go too far

Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle
Constraints on lifestyle needed
Tech advances are key

Climate protection and economy growth
Prioritize climate protection
Prioritize economy

Market and government
Faith in government intervention
Faith in market forces

Redistribution of wealth
Do not go far enough
Already go too far

International trade
More free trade
More protectionism

Conflict of values
Prioritize individual expression/development
Prioritize traditional values

Discrimination of sexual minorities
More anti-discrimination measures needed
Anti-discrimiination measures go too far

Symbols of Pride in public spaces
More Pride symbols in public
Fewer Pride symbols in public

2   3   4   5   6   7

Note: The points show mean levels of affective polarization for each issue with associated 95% confidence intervals across opinion camps. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization. Groups are formed on the basis of respondents' self-placement: For each issue, all respondents who expressed a preference for one of the two opposing statements were assigned to the respective group (sum of response options 0–4 or 6–10). The group of respondents who placed themselves exactly in the middle is not shown. Details on question wording, sample sizes, quotas, and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov
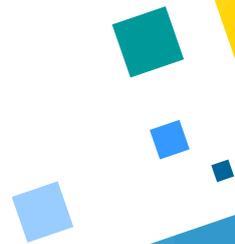
AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

GROUP-SPECIFIC PATTERNS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

The distribution of issue-based affective polarization in Germany can be examined more closely by looking at specific social groups. Which segments of German society exhibit particularly high levels of affective polarization?

To answer this question, all issues are first considered jointly. We compute an overall score (factor score), a weighted measure that aggregates affective polarization across all topics, using confirmatory factor analysis in a multi-group framework (multi-group CFA). Appropriate estimation procedures are applied to account for the fact that, in our split-sample design, respondents were not required to answer all 15 issue items. The result is a weighted indicator that captures, across all policy fields, a general propensity to evaluate like-minded individuals very positively and those with opposing views very negatively.

STRONGER AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AMONG MEN, OLDER PEOPLE AND LOW-INCOME EARNERS

On this basis, latent mean estimates can be used to assess and compare the level of affective polarization across different segments of German society (see Fig. 3.3a). The results show that men, on average, are more likely than women to dismiss those with dissenting views. The same is true for older respondents (ages 60 and over), those in the lowest income group, and people with no religious affiliation. By contrast, no differences are observed with respect to education, place of residence (urban vs. rural) or East vs. West German socialization.

HIGHER LEVELS OF AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION AMONG SUPPORTERS OF THE AFD AND THE GREEN PARTY

With regard to political attitudes, above-average levels of affective polarization are found on both the right and the left of the political spectrum. This is already evident from respondents' self-positioning. As Fig. 3.3a indicates, supporters of the AfD – and also those of the B90/Grünen – display clearly above-average tendencies to reject opposing views across all issues examined. Among supporters of the CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP, by contrast, the measured level of affective polarization is markedly lower.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION BY SPECIFIC ISSUES

Looking at specific issues allows these general patterns to be specified in greater detail. The following analysis therefore focuses on the five topics that were presented to all respondents and for which sufficiently large sample sizes permit robust conclusions about different segments of the German population. The results are shown in Figs. 3.3b–f.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OLD AND YOUNG

Men display significantly higher levels of affective polarization than women only on the issues of peace and armaments and the balance between market forces and government intervention. Comparisons across **age groups** also reveal a pronounced gradient for most issues: older respondents are

generally more affectively polarized than younger ones. However, when it comes to the topics of climate protection measures and market forces vs. government intervention, the youngest group (under 30) also shows higher levels of affective polarization than the next age group (30–39). On values-related conflicts, the youngest cohort even records the highest level of affective polarization overall.

With regard to **educational attainment and income**, a common assumption is that rejection of dissent is most prevalent among people with lower levels of education and income. In Germany, however, this pattern is evident only on immigration in general, for education on peace and armaments, and for income on climate protection measures. Elsewhere, there are hardly any significant differences between groups. On values-related conflicts, it is in fact the better educated who display higher levels of affective polarization than those with lower educational attainment.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION DIFFERS DEPENDING ON ISSUE

It is also noteworthy that on the issue of values-related conflicts – individual self-expression vs. traditional values – respondents in **rural areas** show a markedly lower potential for emotional intensity than residents of large cities. On the other issues, no differences by place of residence are observed, even though on immigration overall our sample tends toward the opposite pattern, with city dwellers exhibiting below-average levels of affective polarization.

NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES – EXCEPT ON TRADITIONAL VALUES VS. INDIVIDUAL SELF-EXPRESSION

Significant differences by **religious affiliation** are found only on the issues of peace and armaments and on values-related conflicts. On the former, respondents who identify with a religious community show higher levels of affective polarization; on the latter, it is those with no religious affiliation who are more inclined to reject opposing views.

DIFFERENCES IN PEACE AND ARMAMENTS ISSUE

With respect to **political characteristics**, elevated affective polarization is most often observed among those who describe themselves as being "on the right" or who are close to the AfD – especially on immigration overall, where affective polarization reaches its highest level. On other issues, however, the pattern is more differentiated. On climate change measures, supporters of the B90/Grüne display levels of emotional intensity comparable to those of the AfD; on market and government, the same is true of FDP supporters. On values-related conflicts, by contrast, it is respondents who self-identify as "on the left" and those close to parties such as the Linke or the B90/Grüne who are most likely to reject people with opposing views.

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION POTENTIALS VARY DEPENDING ON THE ISSUE

Fig. 3.3a: Overall level of affective polarization by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
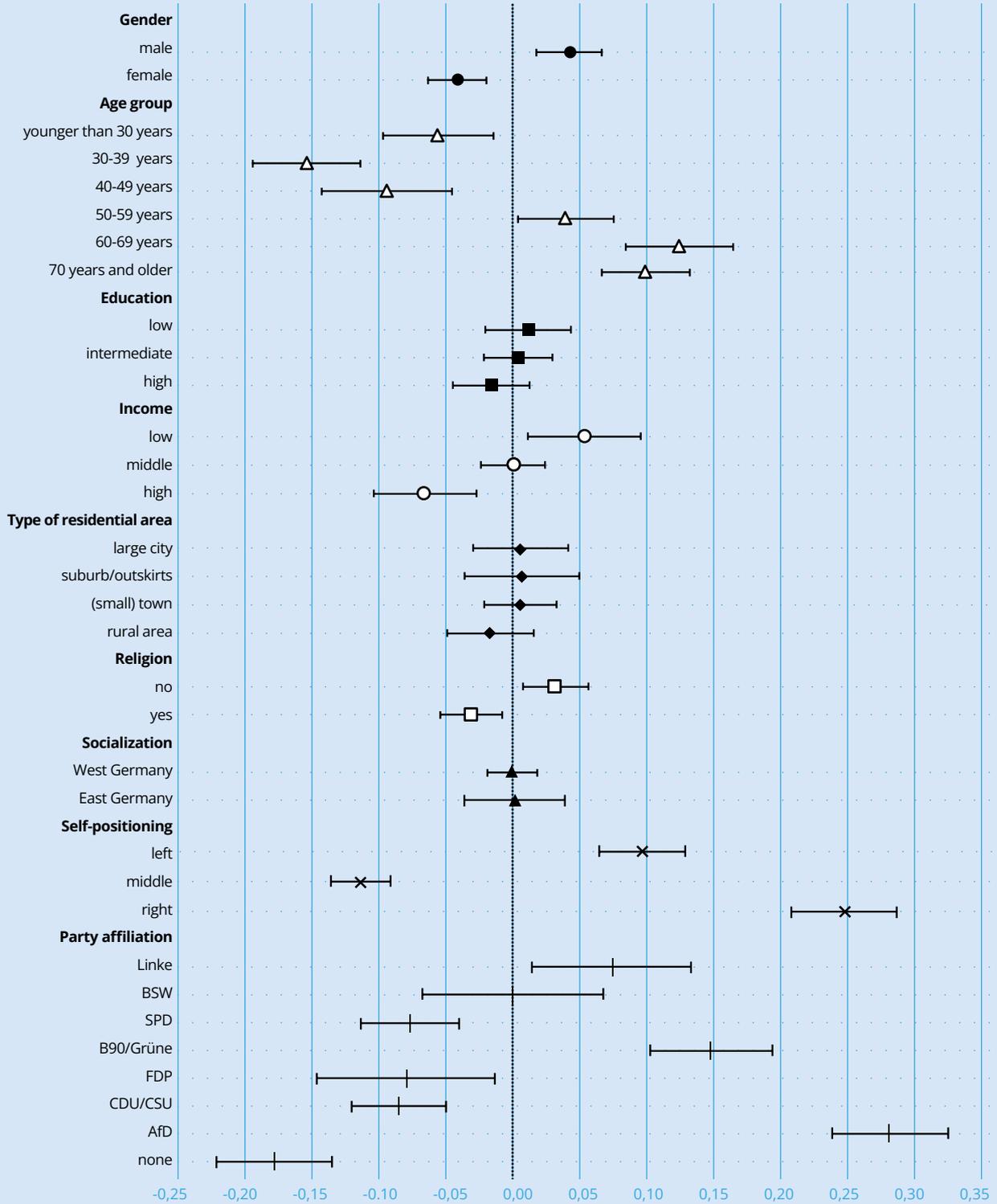
Note: The points show mean values of an issue-spanning overall measure (factor score) of affective polarization with associated 95% confidence intervals across different segments of the German population. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization. The measure is based on weighted mean estimates derived from confirmatory factor analyses in a multi-group framework, including tests of measurement invariance and robust estimation procedures suitable for split samples (full information maximum likelihood). The vertical line marks the mean for Germany as a whole. Because all variables were z-standardized, this overall mean is zero; the points therefore represent deviations of latent group means from the national average. Results are weighted by population characteristics (see Data section) (n = at least 3,161); missing values = "don't know" / no response.

Source: Own survey / YouGov

IMMIGRATION

Fig. 3.3b: Affective polarization on immigration in general by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
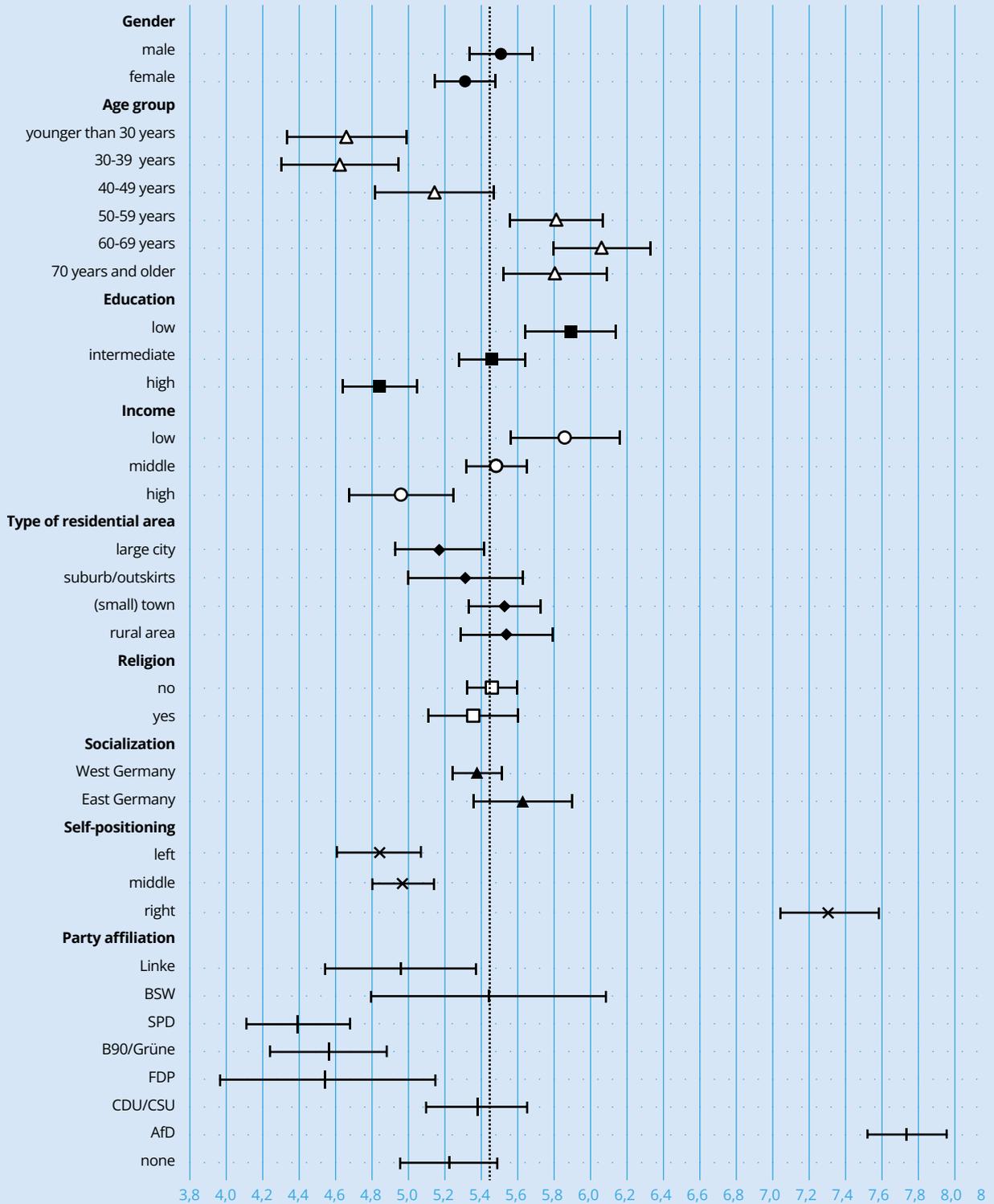
Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups: "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased" and "People who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be restricted." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. The vertical line marks the mean value for the overall German sample. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 3,097; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

PEACE AND ARMAMENTS

Fig. 3.3c: Affective polarization on the issue of peace and armaments by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
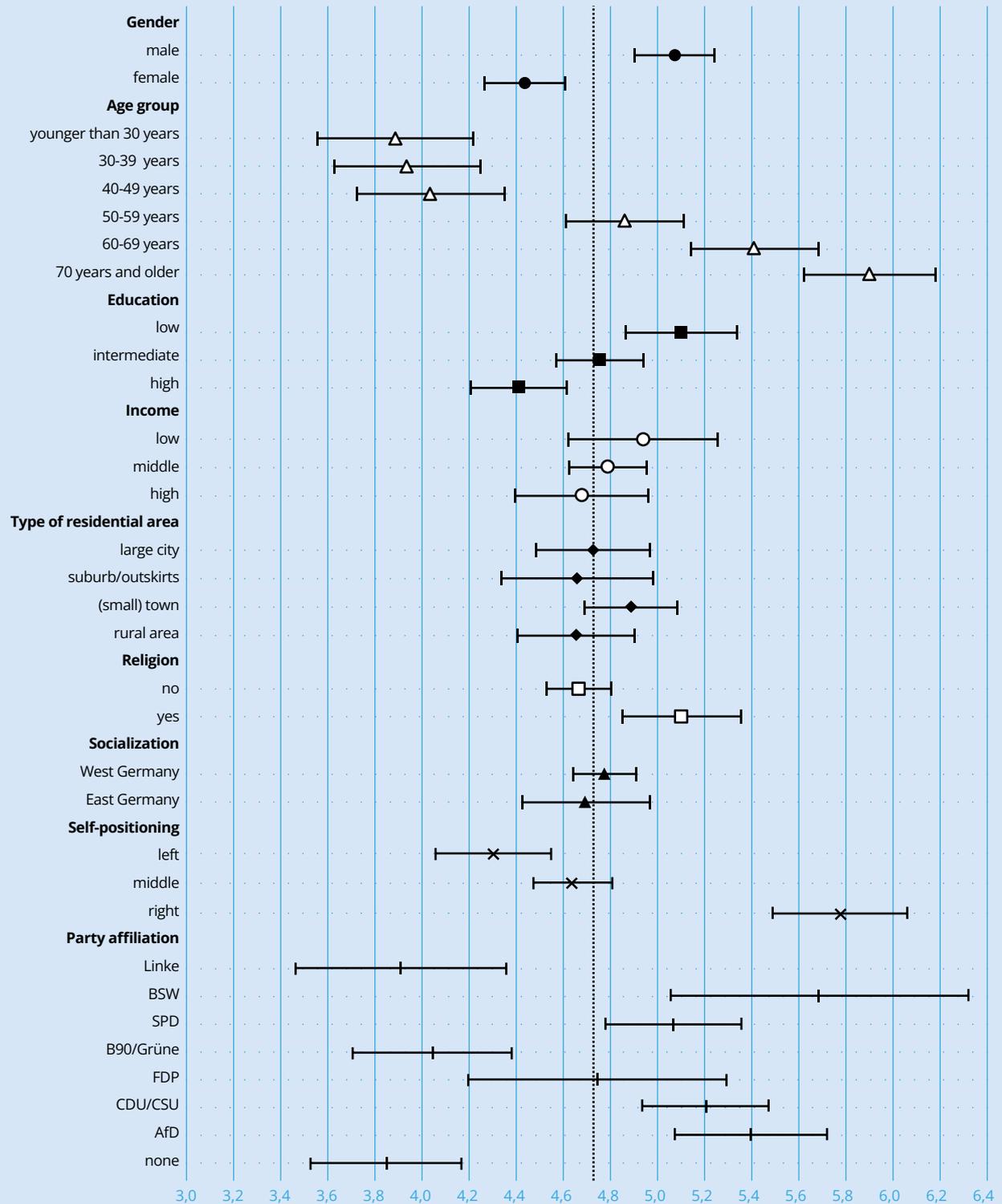
Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups: "People who believe that, to secure peace in Europe, spending on arms and weapons should be increased" and "People who believe that, to secure peace in Europe, spending on arms and weapons should be reduced." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. The vertical line marks the mean value for the overall German sample. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 3,045; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

CLIMATE PROTECTION MEASURES

Fig. 3.3d: Affective polarization on the issue of climate protection measures by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
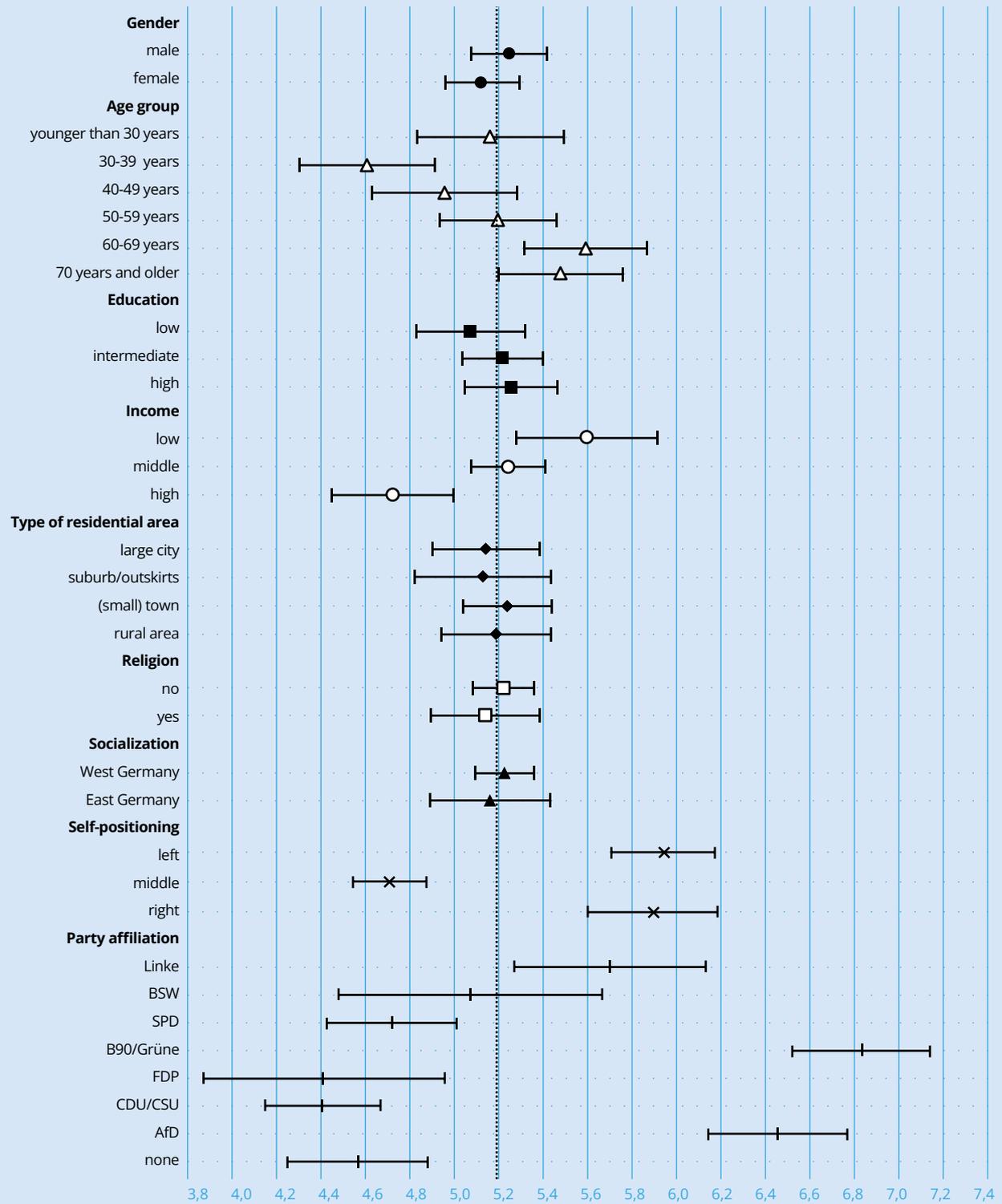
Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups: "People for whom policies to address climate change still do not go far enough" and "People for whom policies to address climate change already go much too far." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. The vertical line marks the mean value for the overall German sample. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 3,087; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

MARKET AND GOVERNMENT

Fig. 3.3e: Affective polarization on the issue of market and government by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
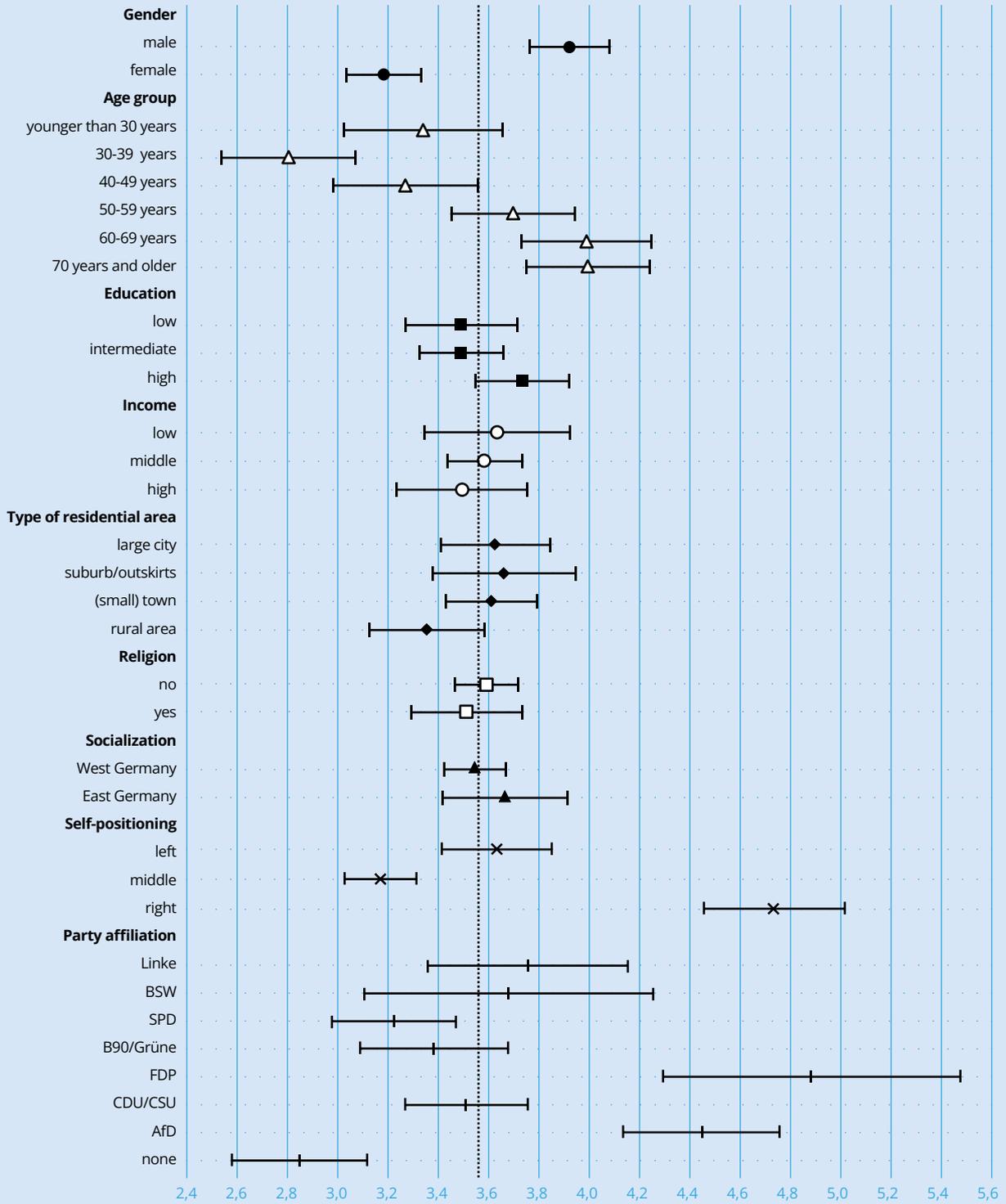
Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups: "People who believe that, to safeguard prosperity, the economy should rely more on market forces and less on government intervention" and "People who believe that, to safeguard prosperity, extensive government intervention in the economy is necessary because market forces are insufficient." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. The vertical line marks the mean value for the overall German sample. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 2,976; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

VALUES CONFLICT

Fig. 3.3f: Affective polarization on the issue of values conflicts by population group in Germany (means with 95% confidence intervals)
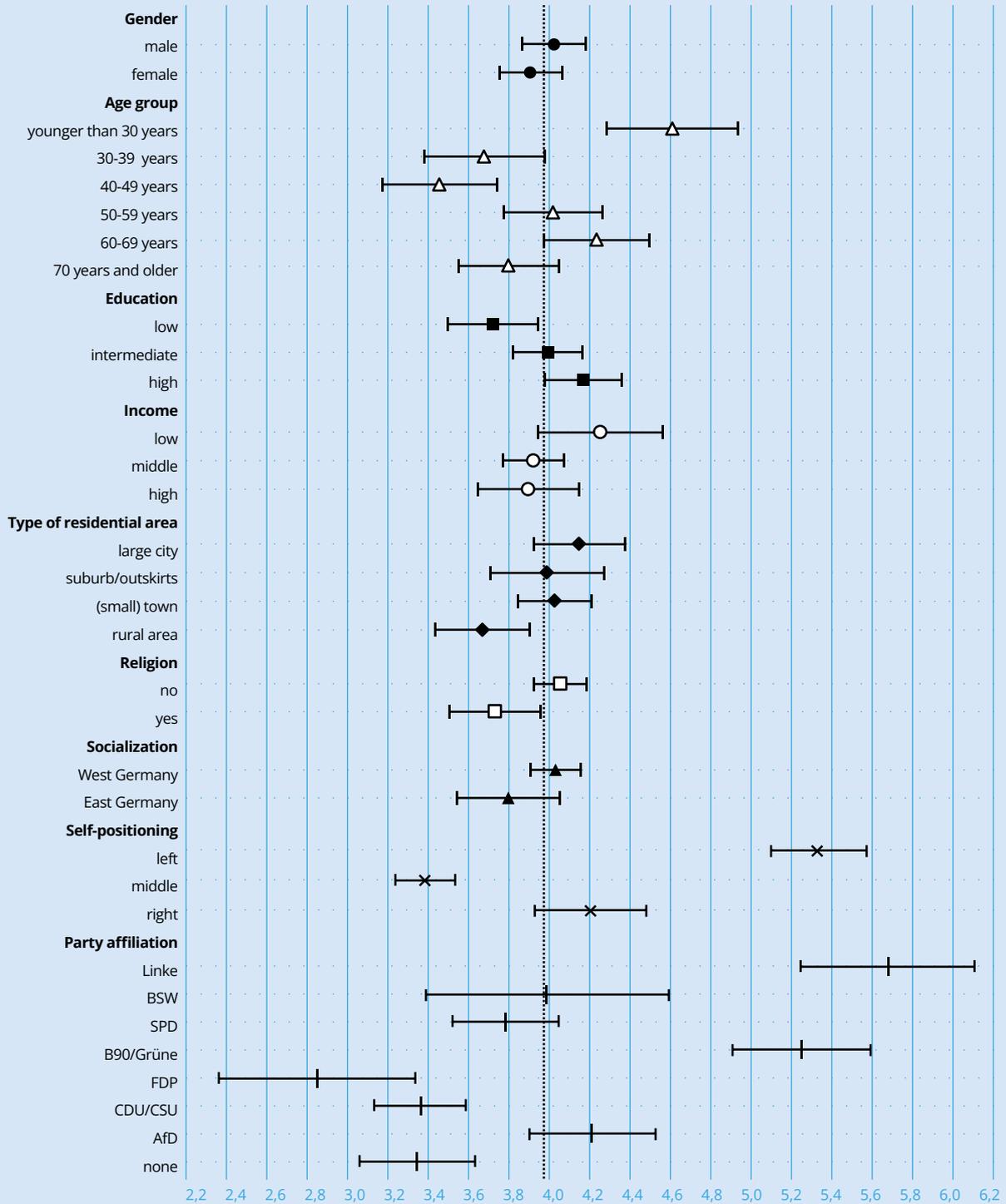
Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups: "People who believe that the government should guarantee all individuals and social groups opportunities for free self-expression, even if this conflicts with certain traditional values" and "People who believe that the government should align more strongly with traditional values, even if this restricts the opportunities for self-expression of individuals and social groups." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. The vertical line marks the mean value for the overall German sample. Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 3,037; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

GERMANY IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Comparing affective polarization across the issues examined in Germany and the other countries reveals, in some cases, substantial differences (see Figs. IVa–e in the appendix).

This is evident, for example, on **immigration**. When it comes to the question of whether entry opportunities should be restricted or expanded, France shows by far the strongest tendency to reject opposing views. Spain presents a very different picture: although its value of 5.0 is still high in absolute terms, it is the lowest among the countries compared. On the immigration of skilled workers, by contrast, Spain and Germany display the highest propensity for emotionally charged reactions, unlike Hungary and Czechia. Attitudes toward dissent also vary widely across countries on integration. Germany stands out for particularly low levels of affective polarization, while Sweden, Spain, Italy and France exhibit above-average rejection of people with opposing views (see Fig. IVa).

Significant cross-national differences also emerge on **security**. On the role of armaments and weapons in securing peace in Europe, respondents in Poland in particular show strong emotional rejection of dissenters, whereas Hungary records the lowest level of affective polarization. More nuanced dynamics appear on international cooperation: respondents in France are strikingly tolerant of opposing positions, while results for Spain point to a greater hardening of views. On support for Ukraine, Sweden stands out, registering the highest level of affective polarization in the country comparison; people holding different views are rejected to an above-average degree. In the remaining countries, polarization on this issue is more moderate (see Fig. IVb).

Clear differences are also visible on **climate change**. On climate change measures, emotional rejection of dissent is especially pronounced in Germany, Italy and Spain, while affective polarization is substantially lower in Hungary, Czechia and Poland. Large cross-national differences are also found on the question of whether individual lifestyle restrictions are necessary to combat climate change or whether technological progress alone is sufficient: while Sweden records the highest levels of affective polarization, it is particularly low in Czechia and Hungary. A similar pattern emerges on the tension between economic growth and climate policy. While Czechia, Hungary and France exhibit high levels tolerance for opposing views, affective polarization on this issue is particularly strong in Germany, Poland and Spain (see Fig. IVc).

In the **economy and social policies** domain, Spain stands out on the issue of market vs. government as the country where the issue is debated in the most emotionally charged terms, with the highest levels of affective polarization. Czechia, by contrast, records the lowest level of rejection of dissenters on this topic. Across Europe, the question of redistribution is associated with substantially higher levels of affective polarization, particularly in France, Italy and Spain. By contrast, views on international trade tend to evoke relatively little emotional intensity, and differences across countries are correspondingly small (see Fig. IVd).

On **values**, country-specific differences again follow discernible patterns. Across all three items, Hungary and Czechia show the lowest levels of affective polarization, whereas Spain exhibits the highest. In Poland, the values conflict and the visibility of rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces are debated with particular emotional intensity, while in Italy this is also the case for the treatment of sexual minorities. Overall, an above-average degree of affective polarization can be observed for the entire topic area in Europe (see Fig. IVe).
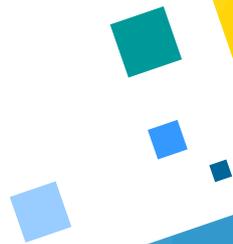
POLITICAL ISSUES BETWEEN IDEOLOGICAL AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

4. POLITICAL ISSUES BETWEEN IDEOLOGICAL AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND DEMOCRATIC CULTUR

DEMOCRACY RELIES ON A COMPATIBLE POLITICAL CULTURE

Ideological and affective polarization processes 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 government, 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 lived 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.

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.

ZONE OF COMPROMISE

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.

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."

ZONE OF CONFLICT

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.

Issues located in the zone of friction 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.

ZONE OF FRICTION

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.

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

ZONE OF DIVISION

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

Fig. 4a: Ideal-typical constellations of the interaction between ideological and affective polarization in structuring political arenas of action and discourse

Zone of friction

Characteristics
• weak ideological but strong affective polarization
• no clearly defined opinion camps, majority with similar positions, but strong elements of affect and emotionalization

Consequences for political action and political discourse
• emotions block quick and targeted problem solving, political action easily provokes protest and outrage
• discussions often unobjective, characterized by political enemy stereotype and mutual animosty

Typical issue of friction in Germany 2025
• immigration in general

Zone of division

Characteristics
• strong ideological and strong affective polarization
• distinct opinion camps oppose each other along ideological lines, with great potential for emotional agitation and outrage

Consequences for political action and political discourse
• solution-oriented political action is hardly possible; high tendency toward conflict and escalation; differences in positions appear irreconcilable
• political discourses are often structured according to friend-enemy patterns, categorical distinctions such as good vs. evil, truth vs. lie

Typical issue of division in Germany 2025
• climate protection measures

high emotionality

weak camp formation — strong camp formation

Zone of compromise

Characteristics
• weak ideological and weak affective polarization
• opinions are similar, differences are generally accepted, with hardly any potential for emotional arousal

Consequences for political action and political discourse
• political negotiation and processes to find compromise tend to be relatively straightforward
• discussions are mostly objective, solutions enjoy broad acceptance

Typical issue of compromise in Germany 2025
• international trade

Zone of conflict

Characteristics
• strong ideological but weak affective polarization
• entrenched differences of opinion exist, but the potential for emotional arousal remains low

Consequences for political action and political discourse
• solutions and sustainable compromises can only be achieved through intensive negotiations
• discussions nevertheless mostly objective and constructive

Typical issue of conflict in Germany 2025
• integration of immigrants

low emotionality

Source: Own survey / YouGov

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. 4b, 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. 4a functions primarily as a heuristic. Clear categorical distinctions are difficult in the central region of the coordinate system shown in Fig. 4b. 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 government (see Fig. 4b). 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. 1.1a), while perceiving its divisive potential as low (see Fig. 1.1b). 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 explain why debates surrounding the issue continue to be rarely conducted in a factual or solution-oriented manner in 2025.

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. 4b: Individual issues according to ideological and affective polarization in Germany, 2025
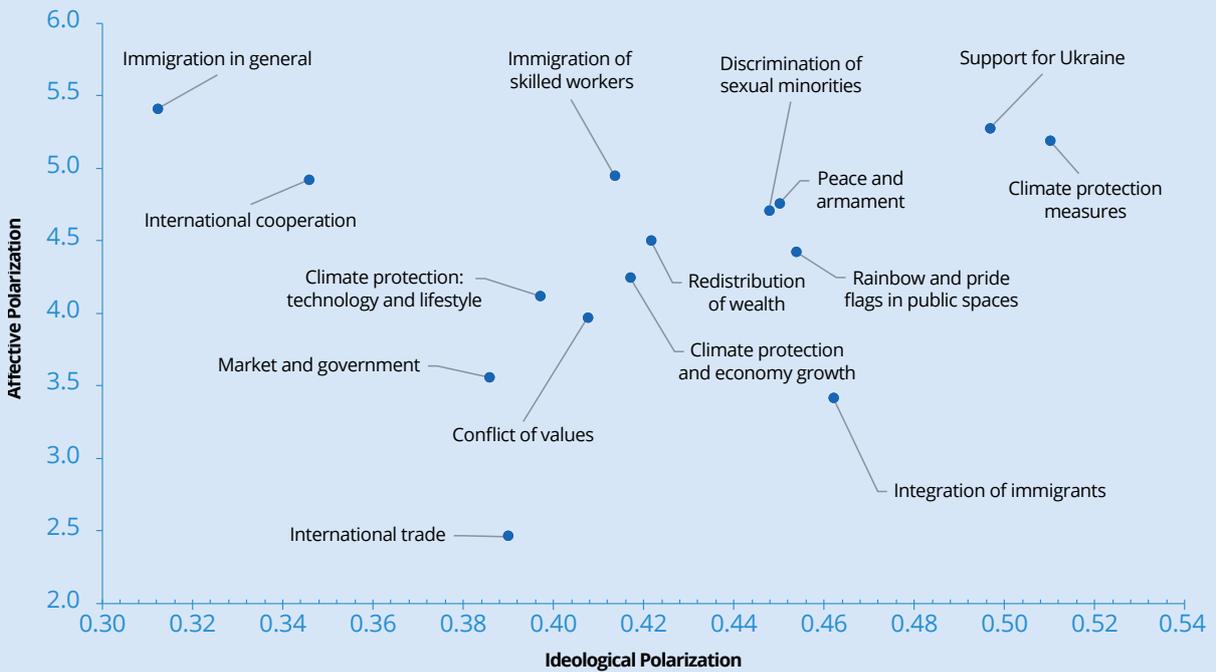
Note: The points represent the mean values of each individual issue with respect to ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index, x-axis) and affective polarization (y-axis).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

ISSUES OF DIVISION: CLIMATE PROTECTION MEASURES AND SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

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 protection 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.
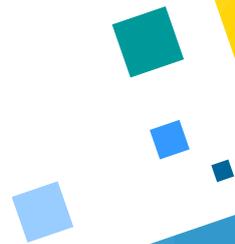
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ANNEX I: MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS

The present study approaches the measurement of polarization at three different levels:

1. Salience and perceived societal division: the perceived importance of an issue and the degree to which it is seen as dividing society.

2. Ideological polarization: the distribution of positions on an issue.

3. Affective polarization: differences in how people evaluate groups that hold two opposing extreme positions on an issue.

1. Perceived societal division

To contextualize our polarization measures and facilitate interpretation of the findings, we first captured respondents' individually perceived importance of each issue area. Participants rated the personal relevance of different topics on a scale from 0 ("not at all important") to 10 ("very important"), allowing us to determine the subjective salience of each topic. We also measured perceived societal conflict potential. Respondents were first asked whether they currently perceive a division in their country's society. They recorded their assessment on a scale from 0 ("no division at all") to 10 ("very strong division"). This question was then repeated for each issue area. Combining these assessments makes it possible to examine discrepancies between the polarization effects respondents subjectively attribute to issues and their actual affective reactions.

2. Ideological polarization

The analysis of ideological polarization centers on respondents' own positions. For each of the 15 issues, we used an 11-point scale with opposing positions at each pole. Using immigration in general as an example, the scale ranged from "0 = Immigration for foreigners should be made easier" to "10 = Immigration for foreigners should be restricted." Respondents were asked to place their own view on this scale. This approach allows us

to depict how opinions are distributed across the population: what share tends toward either extreme position, how many locate themselves in the political middle, and to what extent particular response options attract clusters of answers. These distributions form the basis for the subsequent measurement of affective polarization and allow for a differentiated assessment of the opinion landscape on each issue.

3. Affective polarization

In the third step, we measured affective polarization. Unlike ideological positioning, this does not concern respondents' own views on a policy issue, but rather their evaluations of people who hold similar or opposing positions.

To capture this affective component, we employed a so-called feeling thermometer. Respondents were asked to rate their attitudes toward supporters of two opposing positions on a scale from –5 ("cool and negative") to +5 ("warm and positive"). One group consisted of people who held views similar to the respondent's own; the other consisted of people who held completely opposite views. The greater the difference between these ratings for the two antagonistic groups, the higher the measured level of affective polarization on that issue.

In line with this classic like–dislike difference, the level of affective polarization in a group is calculated as the mean of the rating differences among its members, using the following formula:

$$AP_j = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{n=1}^{N} \left(|Feeling_{ijGroup1} - Feeling_{ijGroup2}| \right)$$

Measurement validity and alternative approaches

The use of feeling thermometers has become well established in the social sciences as a method for measuring affective polarization (see, among others, Iyengar et al. 2012; Druckman/Levendusky 2019; RAPIDCOVID 2021). At the same time, the approach is not without controversy.

One recurring observation is that the difference in evaluations of antagonistic opinion groups obtained with this method is correlated with the radicalism of respondents' own positions (see Fig. Id). In other words, people who place themselves toward the extremes of the opinion spectrum tend, on average, to rate those with opposing views more negatively, and thus often exhibit higher levels of affective polarization.

In recent scholarly debates, this relationship has occasionally been cited as a reason to question the suitability of feeling thermometers for measuring affective polarization. Critics suggest that differences in ratings of opposing opinion groups may simply capture an additional measure of a person's "opinion strength" and propensity toward clear-cut or radical political alignment. Accordingly, feeling thermometers are suspected of overstating polarization, conflating feelings toward political elites and voters (horizontal vs. vertical polarization), and failing to distinguish discrete emotions such as fear or anger (Tyler/Iyengar 2024; Areal/Harteveld 2024; Druckman/Levendusky 2019; Berntzen/Kelsall/Harteveld 2024).

Despite these criticisms, feeling thermometers have for decades been regarded in psychological and social science research as a reliable indicator of emotional orientation. Numerous studies show that their scores correlate robustly with social distance and discriminatory behavior, making them particularly well suited for large-scale and comparative research (Gidron/Sheffer/Mor 2022; McMurtrie/Philipp/Hebden/Williams 2024). From this perspective, the link between radical positions and the devaluation of opposing groups is best understood as evidence that strong issue alignment is usually rooted in emotion and reinforced by intense affective attachments.

Moreover, this relationship is rarely uniform. Its strength varies by issue area and by the specific position taken on an issue (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024), suggesting that beyond a general association between "opinion strength" and "devaluation of opposing views," some positions are far more emotionally charged than others.

In our sample, the correlation (Kendall's tau) between the "radicalism of one's own position" on an issue – calculated as the absolute difference between an individual's position and the scale midpoint – and affective polarization ranged from 0.30 to 0.58 across issues, indicating mostly moderate relationships.

Nevertheless, in addition to feeling thermometers, we integrated two alternative instruments to measure issue-based affective polarization: various measures of social distance and a survey experiment (dictator game). These instruments served to validate our results, but they are not discussed in detail in the present study.

Fig. Ia: Attitudes toward immigration in Germany (in %)
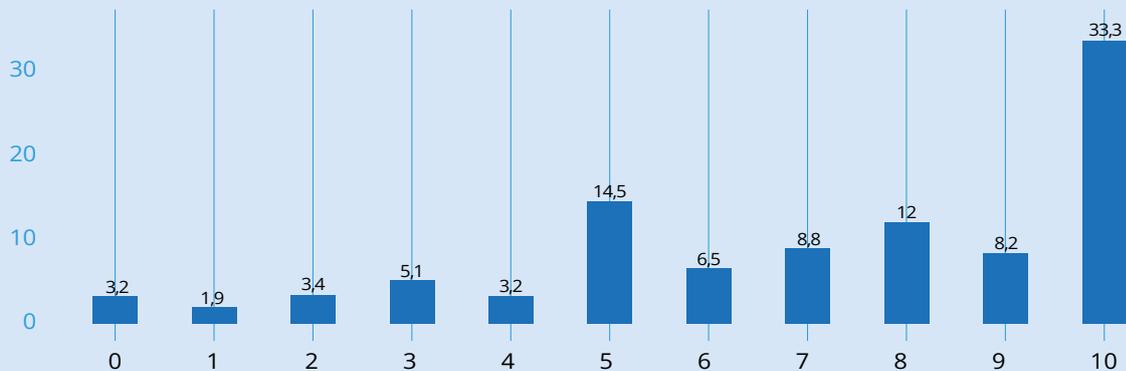
Note: Distribution of responses to the question: "There are different opinions on the subject of immigration. Where would you place your personal opinion?" Respondents could position themselves between "0 – Immigration for foreigners should be made easier" and "10 – Immigration for foreigners should be restricted." Information on quotas and weighting can be found in the "Methodology" section (n = at least 3,678; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

MEASURING POLARIZATION IN PRACTICE

What does this approach to measuring ideological and affective polarization mean for a specific issue? How are our values generated? The following section explains the procedure in detail using immigration overall as an example.

In this study, immigration in general was measured using a question that juxtaposed two diametrically opposed demands: a more liberal versus a more restrictive immigration policy. As in our 2022 survey, respondents in 2025 were asked to indicate their personal position on an 11-point scale ranging from "0 – Immigration for foreigners should be made easier" and "10 – Immigration for foreigners should be restricted." (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024).

In this first step, respondents' positions on the issue and the distribution of those positions were identified. As Fig. Ia shows, there is a clear preference in the German population for restricting immigration.

To further analyze this distribution, we use the Van der Eijk Polarization Index (2001). This statistic captures the extent to which a distribution exhibits a bimodal pattern – that is, a tendency to form two opposing camps – and the degree to which these camps cluster at the ends of the scale. High Van der Eijk values therefore indicate strong ideological polarization. The index can take values between +1 and –1: values close to zero point to an even distribution of opinions, while negative values indicate consensus, such as a concentration of responses around the midpoint of the scale.

In a second step, respondents were asked to evaluate two groups holding diametrically opposed positions on immigration: on the one hand, "people who think that immigration opportunities for foreigners should be eased," and on the other, those who favor restricting such entry. Both groups were rated using a so-called feeling thermometer, which captures emotional closeness or rejection on a scale ranging from –5 ("cool and negative") to +5 ("warm and positive").

For immigration overall, the distributions of these group ratings are shown in Fig. Ib. The pattern both mirrors the underlying distribution of respondents' own positions and reveals differences in how individuals evaluate people who think differently. This general pattern was already evident in our first survey in fall 2022 (see Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a).

In a third step, affective polarization is calculated as the absolute difference between the ratings of the two groups. This measure also ranges from 0 to 10. A value of 0 indicates that both groups were rated equally positively or negatively and thus that no affective polarization is present. A value of 10 means that one group was rated maximally positively and the other maximally negatively, indicating the highest possible level of affective polarization.

In the present example, about 23% of respondents reach the maximum value of 10. That is, they rate the two groups very differently and can therefore be considered maximally affectively polarized on immigration overall. They express extremely positive feelings toward those who share their own view and extremely negative feelings toward those who hold the opposing view – regardless of which of the two camps they personally favor. Conversely, about 16% of respondents show no affective polarization at all, rating both groups exactly the same (see Fig. Ic).

Fig. Ib: Attitudes toward groups of people with different opinions on the issue of immigration (in %)

Opinion: immigration opportunities should be eased

**Opinion: immigration opportunities should be restricted**
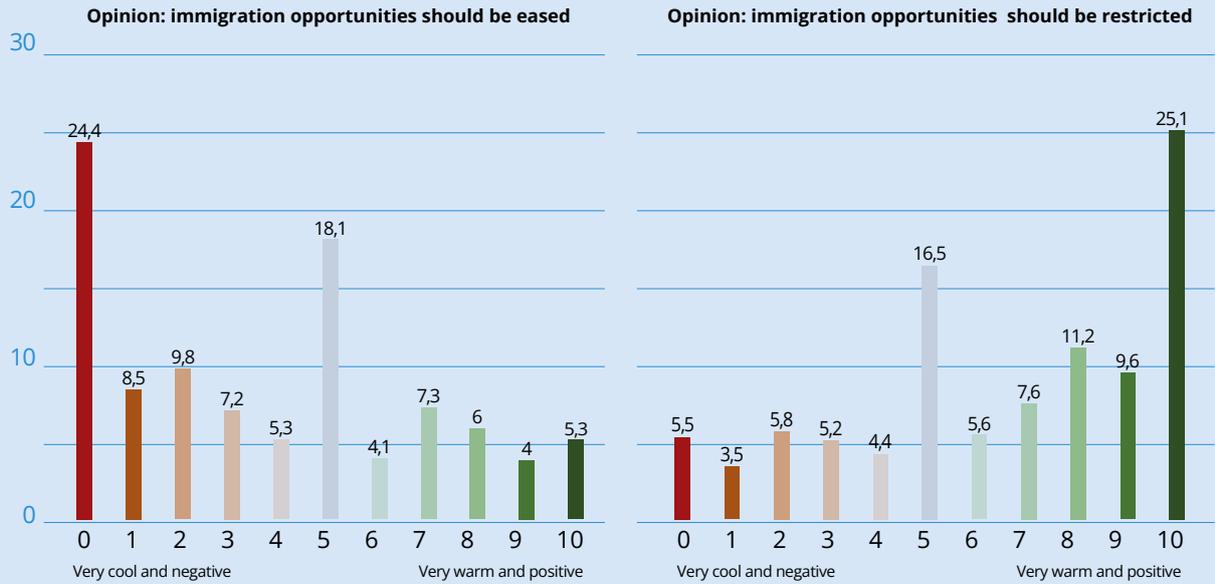
Note: Distribution of responses to the question: "When you think about other people in [country] with their differing views on immigration, how do you feel about each of the following groups?" Respondents could rate each group on a scale from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = at least 3,665; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Comparing respondents' own positions on immigration overall with the rating difference used to measure affective polarization reveals a U- or V-shaped relationship. In other words, the more clearly respondents align themselves with one side of the issue, the more likely they are to express negative emotions toward those who hold the opposing view (see Fig. Id).

This V-shaped relationship between self-placement on an issue and the difference in evaluations of the opposing camps can be observed – with varying strength and form – across all issue areas. It indicates that strong positions on a given question are usually affectively grounded. Moreover, our 2022 findings already showed that this relationship is not uniform, but varies by issue area and by the specific position taken (Herold/Joachim/Otteni/Vorländer 2023a; 2023b; 2024). This means that beyond a general link between "opinion strength" and the "devaluation of opposing views," some positions are far more emotionally charged than others.

Fig. Ic: Distribution of distances (affective polarization) on the issue of immigration (in %)
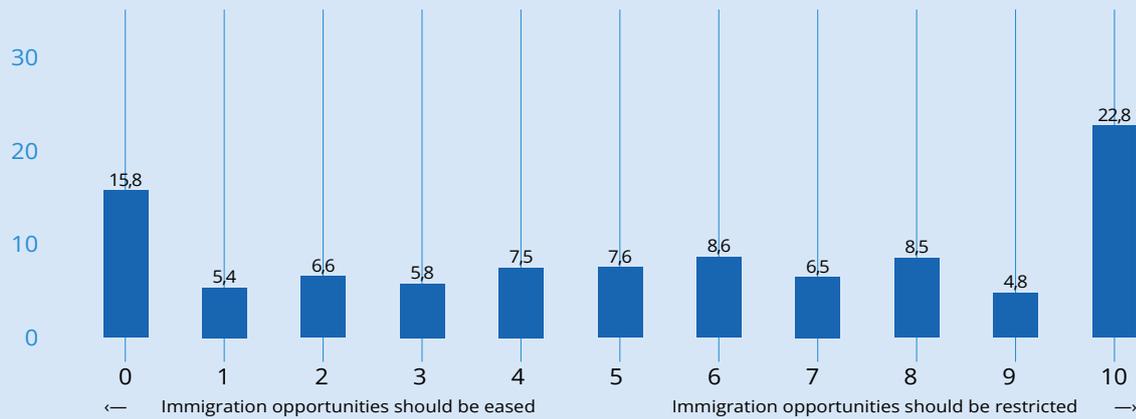
←— Immigration opportunities should be eased   Immigration opportunities should be restricted —→

Note: Calculations are based on the evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that immigration for foreigners should be made easier" and "People who think that immigration for foreigners should be restricted." Respondents rated their feelings toward each group on an 11-point scale ranging from "–5 = very cool and negative" to "+5 = very warm and positive." The affective polarization score ranges from "0 = no affective polarization" to "10 = maximum affective polarization" and is calculated as the absolute difference between the two ratings. Results are weighted by age, gender, education and region (n = 3,649, missing values = "don't know"/no answer).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. Id: Average level of affective polarization according to self-positioning on the issue of immigration in general (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Self-positioning on the issue of immigration in general
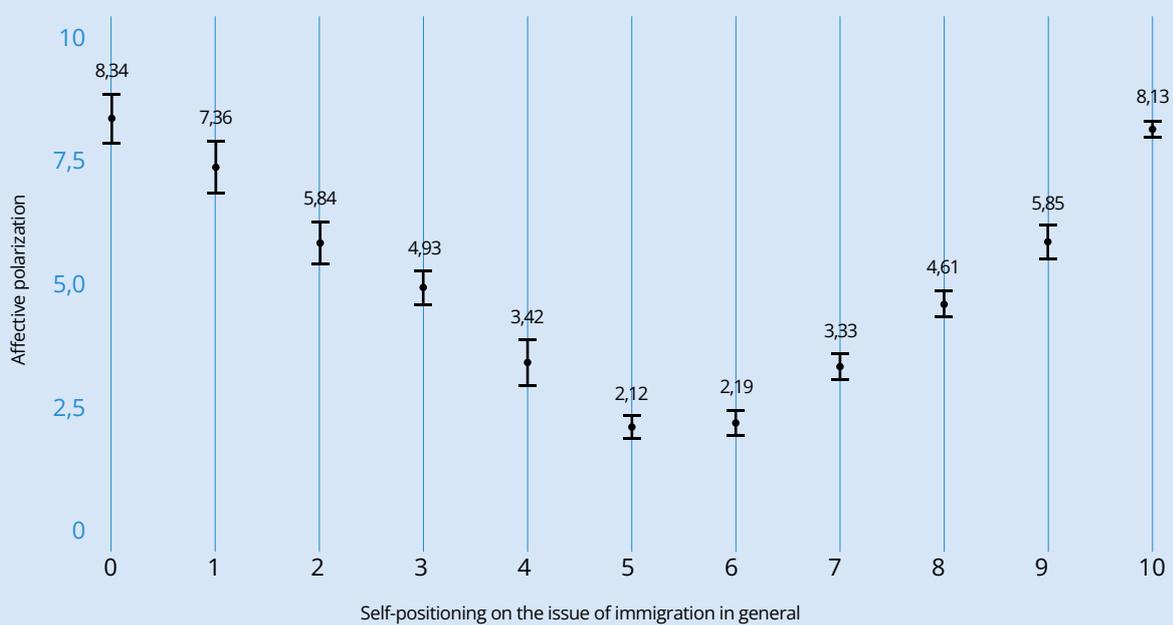
Note: Y-axis: Affective polarization on the issue of immigration based on evaluations of the following two groups of people: "People who think that immigration for foreigners should be made easier" and "People who think that immigration for foreigners should be restricted." The figure shows the mean distance (with associated 95% confidence interval) between the ratings of the two groups. X-axis: Self-positioning on immigration in general (question wording as in Fig. Ic). Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 3,649; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

To describe levels of ideological and affective polarization across different segments of the German population, the following variables are also used:[1]

Gender: Respondents' self-reported gender, categorized as men (n = 1,862) and women (n = 1,912).

Age groups: Respondents' age, categorized into six groups: under 30 (n = 481), 30–39 (n = 559), 40–49 (n = 554), 50–59 (n = 798), 60–69 (n = 689) and 70 or older (n = 693).

Education: Respondents' highest level of schooling. Response options were: "1 = still in school," "2 = lower secondary certificate (Hauptschule/Volksschule)," "3 = intermediate secondary certificate (Realschule or equivalent)," "4 = Abitur or university entrance qualification," and "5 = no school certificate." For clarity, three categories were constructed: "low" (1, 2 and 5; n = 1,000), "intermediate" (3; n = 1,642) and "high" (4; n = 1,132).

Household income: This variable is based on equivalized income, which captures the economic resources of the respondent's household while taking household size and composition into account. Three categories were constructed: the bottom 20% of the overall distribution were assigned to the "low" income group (n = 624), the 60% to "middle" (n = 1,924) and the top 20% to "high" (n = 639).

Type of residential area: A measure of the size and urban character of respondents' place of residence, distinguishing between "large city" (n = 942), "suburb or outer district of a large city" (n = 558), "town or small city" (n = 1,377), and "village" or "farm or house in a rural area," combined into the category "rural area" (n = 888).

Religion: Respondents were asked whether they are members of a church or religious community. The answers were recoded into a dichotomous variable with the categories "yes, member of a religious community" (n = 848) and "no, not a member" (n = 2,829).

Socialization East/West: This variable draws on the question, "Where did you mainly live during your childhood and youth: in eastern Germany, western Germany or abroad?" Respondents who reported having lived mainly abroad (n = 133) are excluded due to the heterogeneity of this group. The analysis therefore focuses on differences between those socialized in Eastern and Western Germany, comprising a total of 3,584 cases (west: n = 2,831; east: n = 753).

Self-positioning: Respondents were asked to locate their political position on a left–right scale ranging from "0 = left" to "10 = right." Based on this, three categories were constructed: "left" (0–3; n = 888), "middle" (4–6; n = 2,012) and "right" (7–10; n = 701).

Party affiliation: Respondents were asked about their partisan leanings using the following question: "In Germany, many people feel close to a particular political party over a long period, even if they occasionally vote for a different one. How is it for you — do you generally lean toward a specific party, and if so, which one?" Response options included CDU/CSU, AfD, SPD, B90/Grüne, Die Linke, BSW, FDP, other, and none.
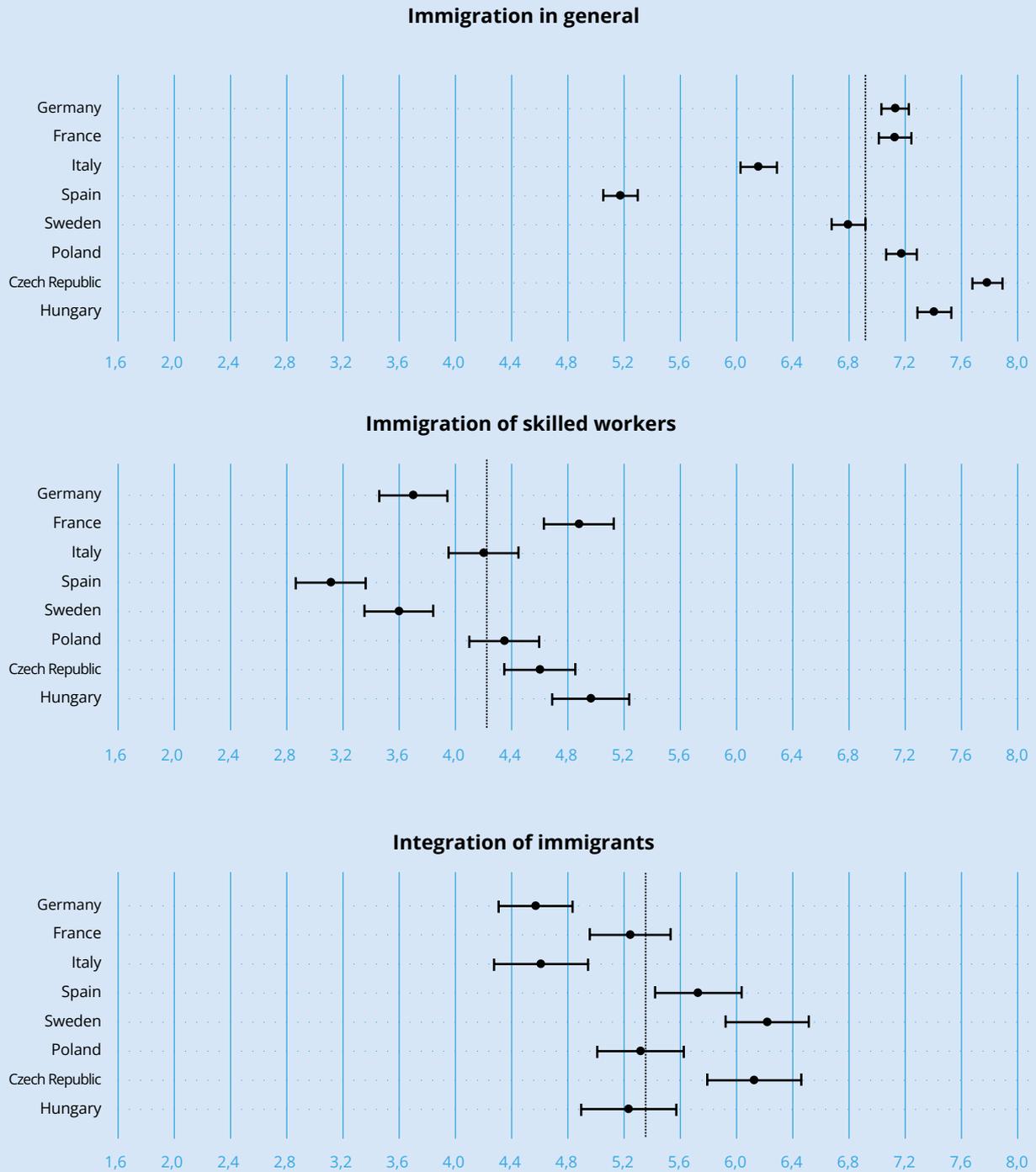
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1 All n-values in this section already exclude respondents who failed at least one attention check and were therefore omitted from the analyses.
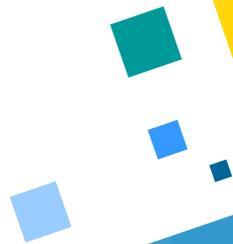
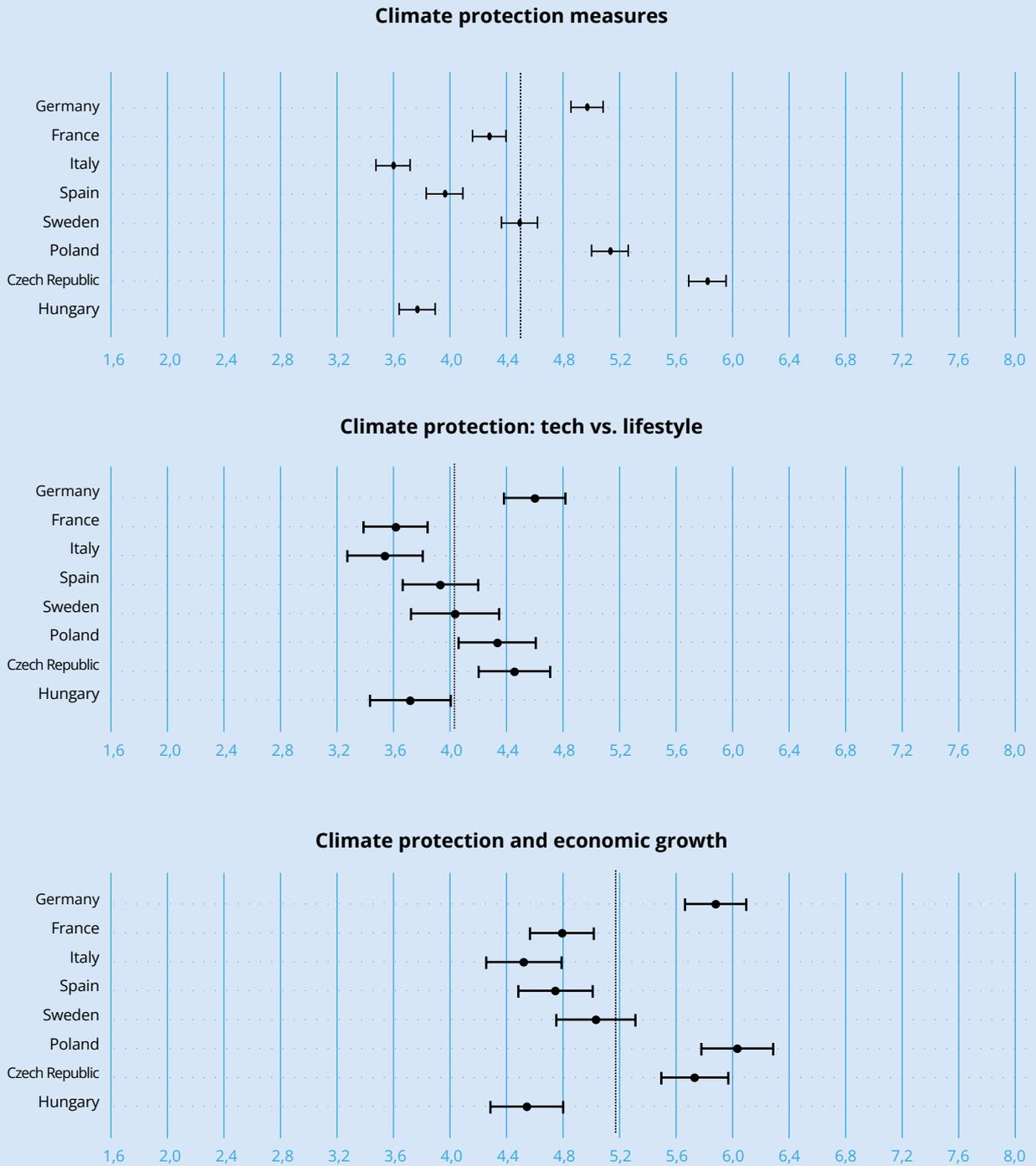# ANNEX II: CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON OF OPINIONS

Fig. IIa: Positions on the three immigration items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Immigration in general

Immigration of skilled workers

Integration of immigrants

Note: The points show group means of the position distributions for three issues, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate a greater predominance of the response option associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section). The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing-values = "don't know" / no response).
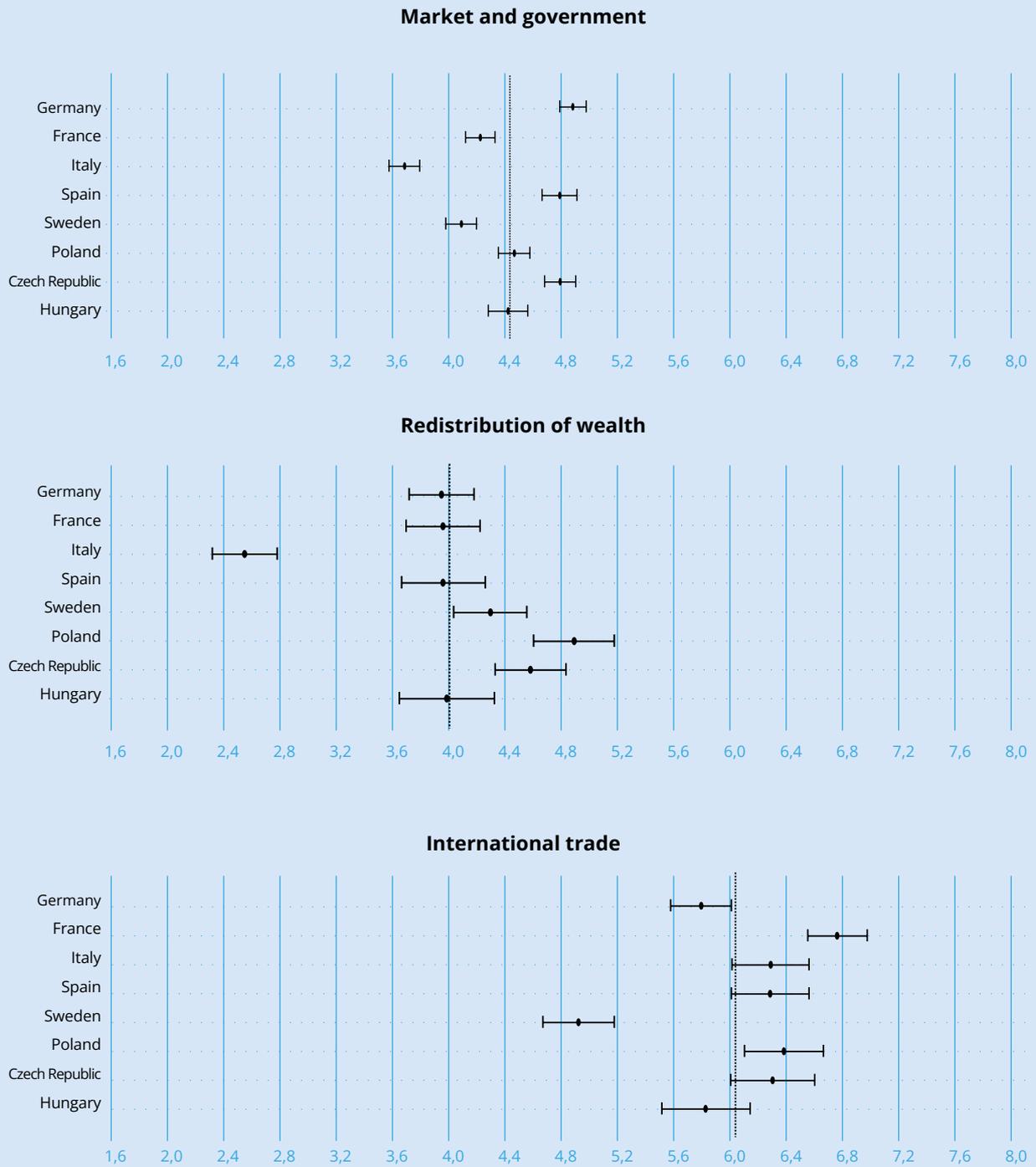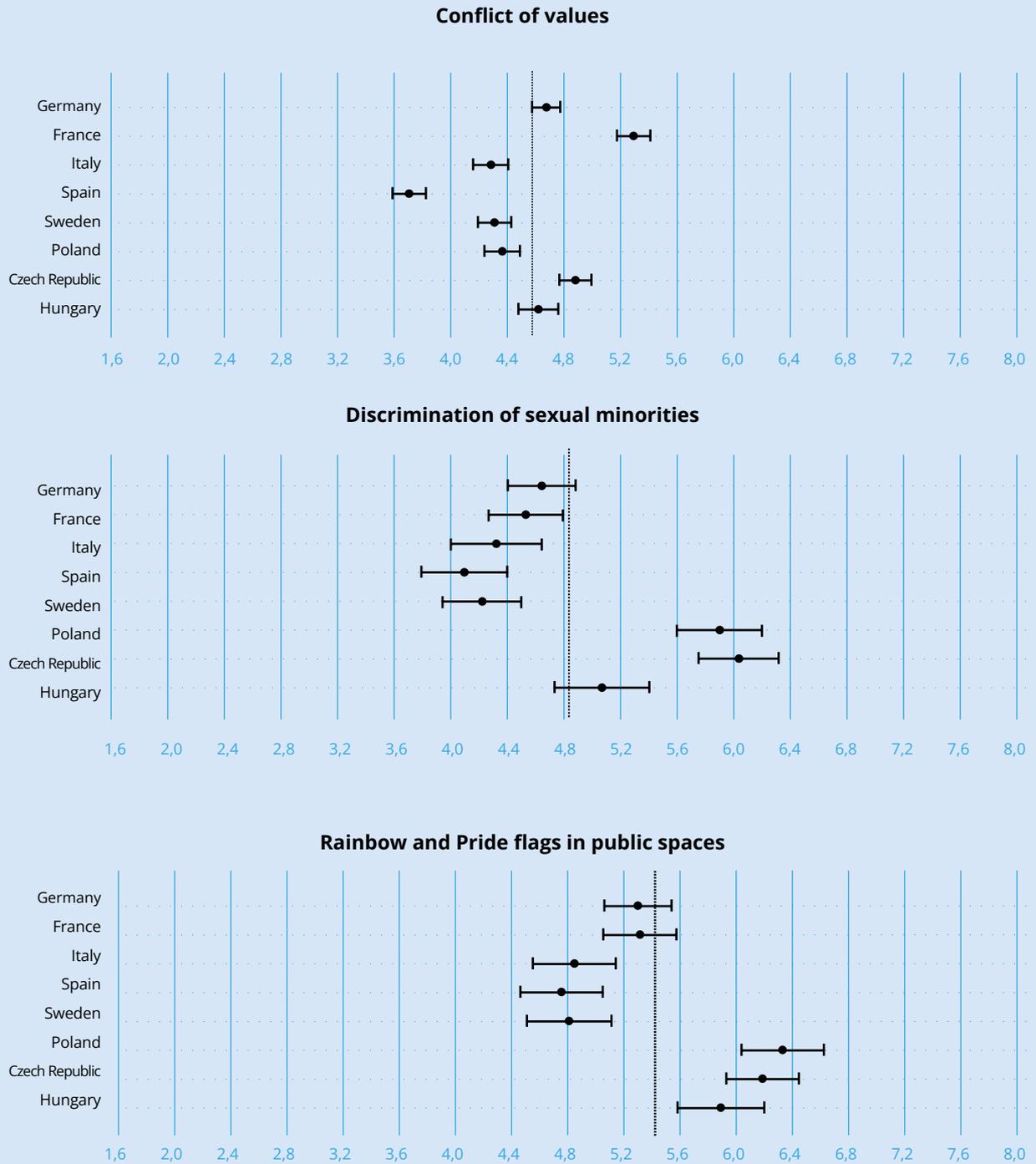
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIb: Positions on the three security items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)
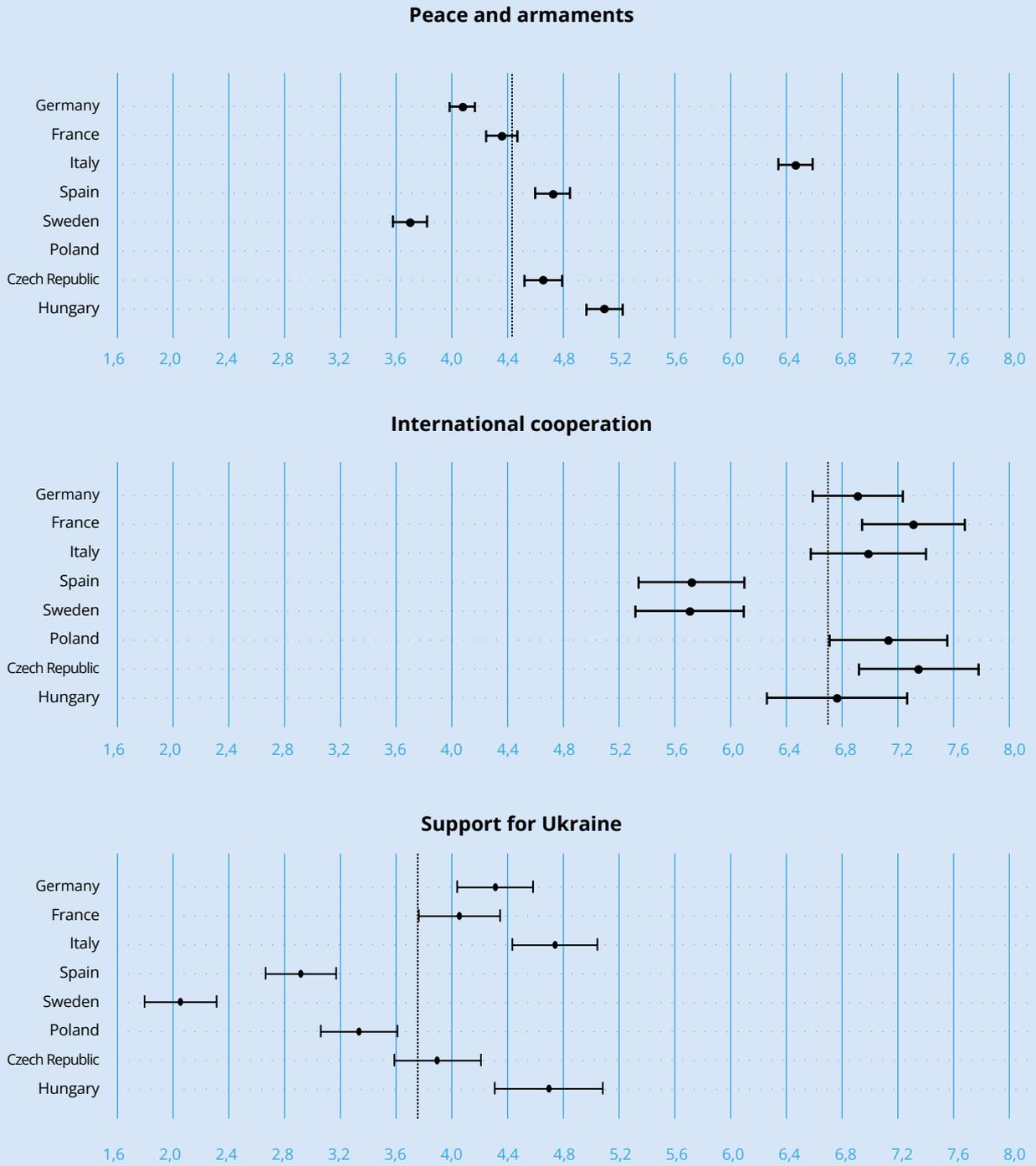
Peace and armaments

International cooperation

Support for Ukraine

Note: The points show group means of the position distributions for three issues, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate a greater predominance of the response option associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section). The line marks the mean value for the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIc: Positions on the three climate change items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Climate protection measures

Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle

Climate protection and economic growth

Note: The points show group means of the position distributions for three issues, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate a greater predominance of the response option associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section). The line marks the mean value for the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IId: Positions on the three economy and social policies items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Market and government

Redistribution of wealth

International trade

Note: The points show group means of the position distributions for three issues, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate a greater predominance of the response option associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section). The line marks the mean value for the overall sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).
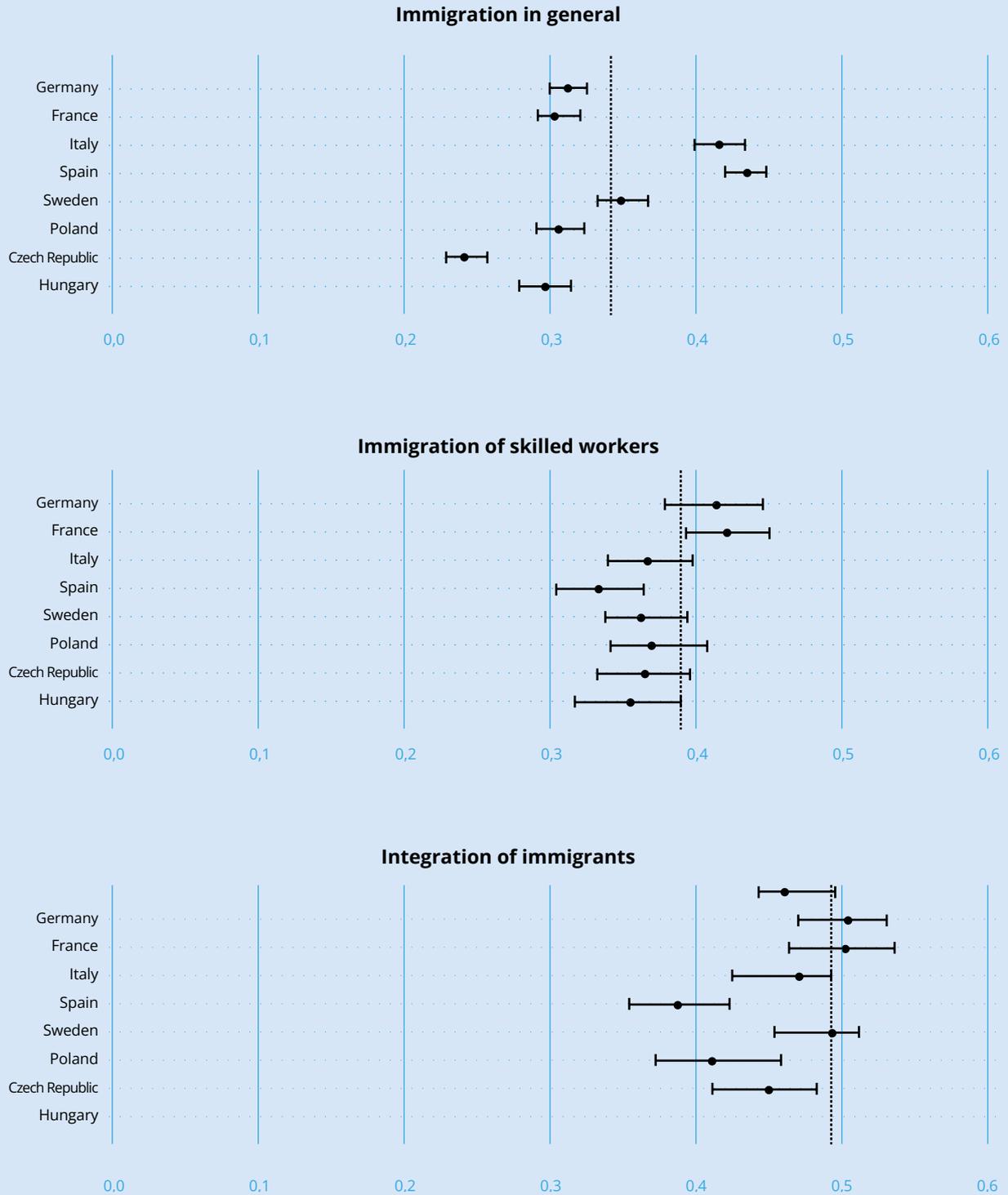
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIe: Positions on the three values items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Conflict of values

Discrimination of sexual minorities

Rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces

Note: The points show group means of the position distributions for three issues, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate a greater predominance of the response option associated with higher scale values (see Fig. D in the Methodology section). The line marks the mean value for the overall sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).
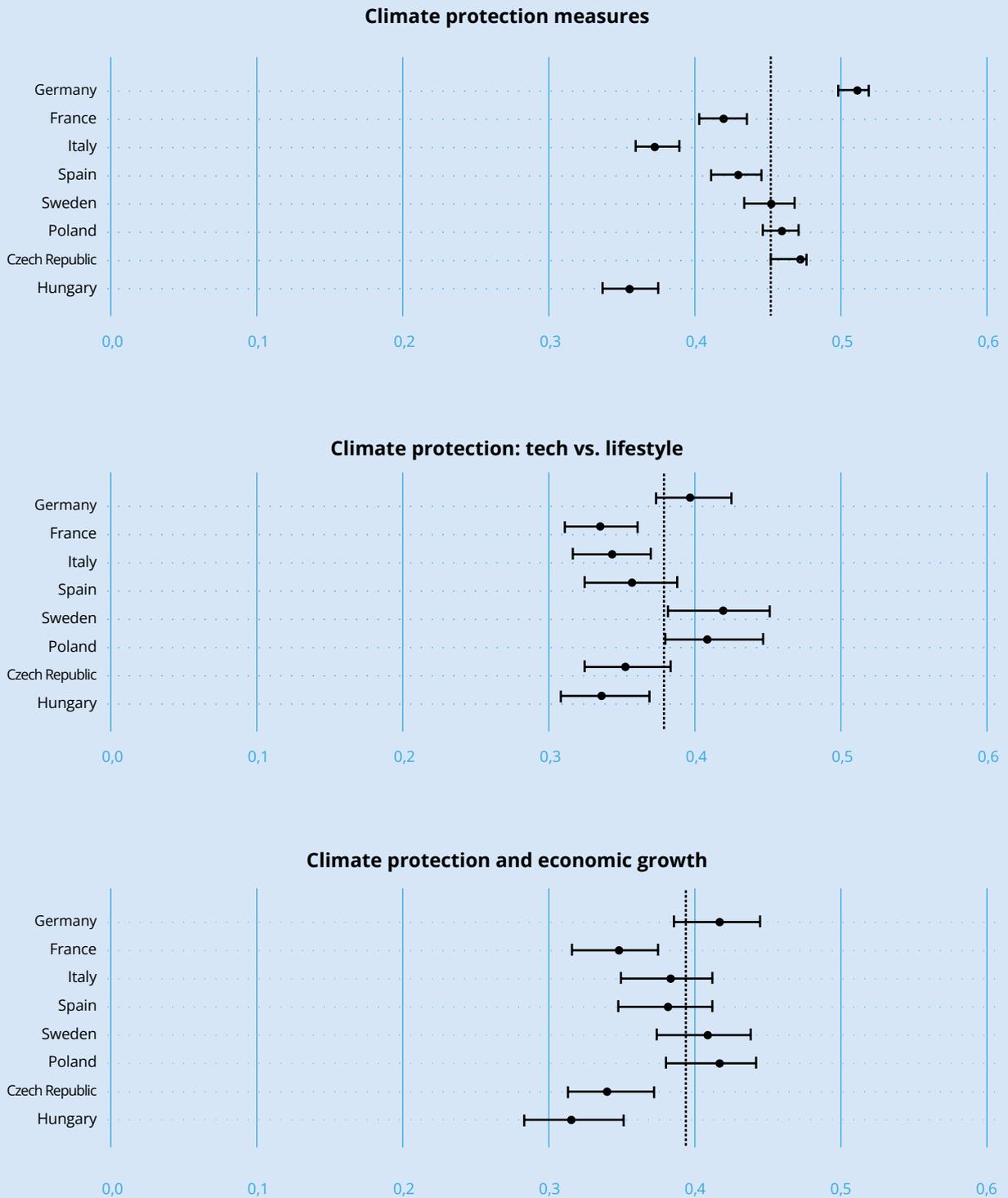
Source: Own survey / YouGov
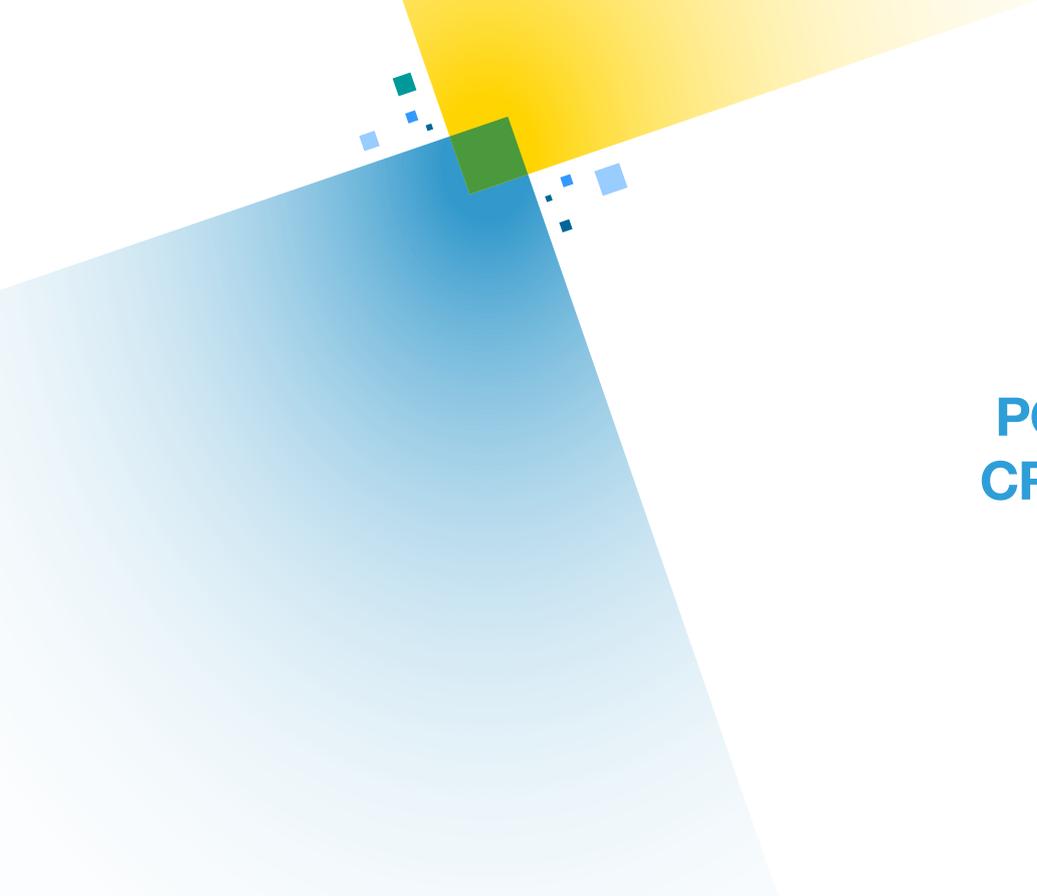
ANNEX III: IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

The Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable. Accordingly, the overall sample value (dashed vertical line) is not the arithmetic mean of the country values, but is calculated from the combined distribution of all individual responses As a result, the Van der Eijk value for the full sample may lie outside the range of the individual country values. Moreover, because confidence intervals are estimated using bootstrapping, the point estimates in the figures are not always centered within their intervals.

Fig. IIIa: Ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) on the three immigration items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Immigration in general

Immigration of skilled workers

Integration of immigrants

Note: The points show the mean levels of ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger ideological polarization on the respective issue in a given country. Confidence intervals were estimated using bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The line marks the level of ideological polarization for the full sample. Because the Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable, this line does not necessarily lie at the center of the country values. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIIb: Ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) on the three security items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Peace and armaments

International cooperation

Support for Ukraine

Note: The points show the mean levels of ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger ideological polarization on the respective issue in a given country. Confidence intervals were estimated using bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The line marks the level of ideological polarization for the full sample. Because the Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable, this line does not necessarily lie at the center of the country values. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

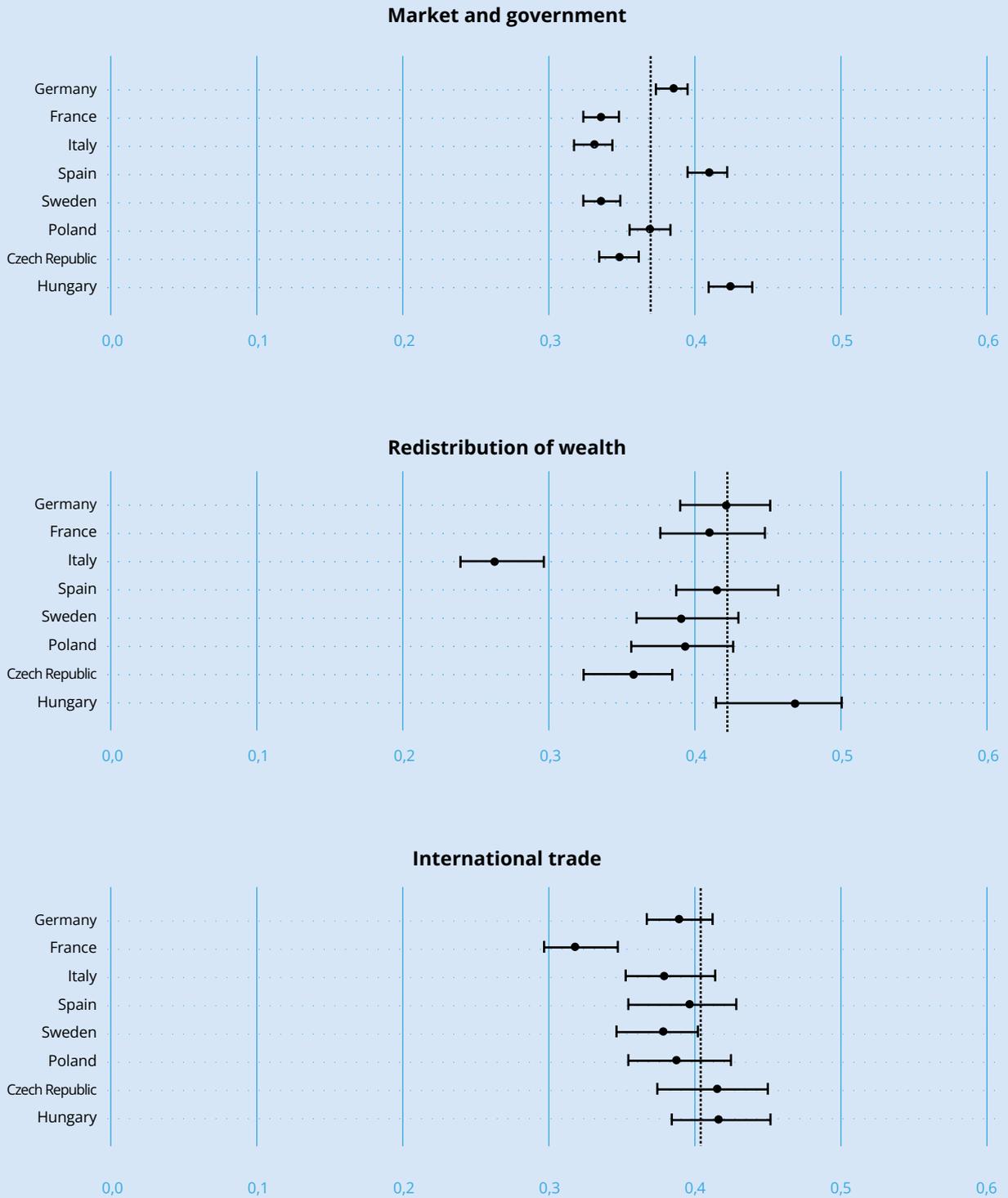*Source: Own survey / YouGov*

Fig. IIIc: Ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) on the three climate change items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Climate protection measures

Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle

Climate protection and economic growth

Note: The points show the mean levels of ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger ideological polarization on the respective issue in a given country. Confidence intervals were estimated using bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The line marks the level of ideological polarization for the full sample. Because the Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable, this line does not necessarily lie at the center of the country values. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).
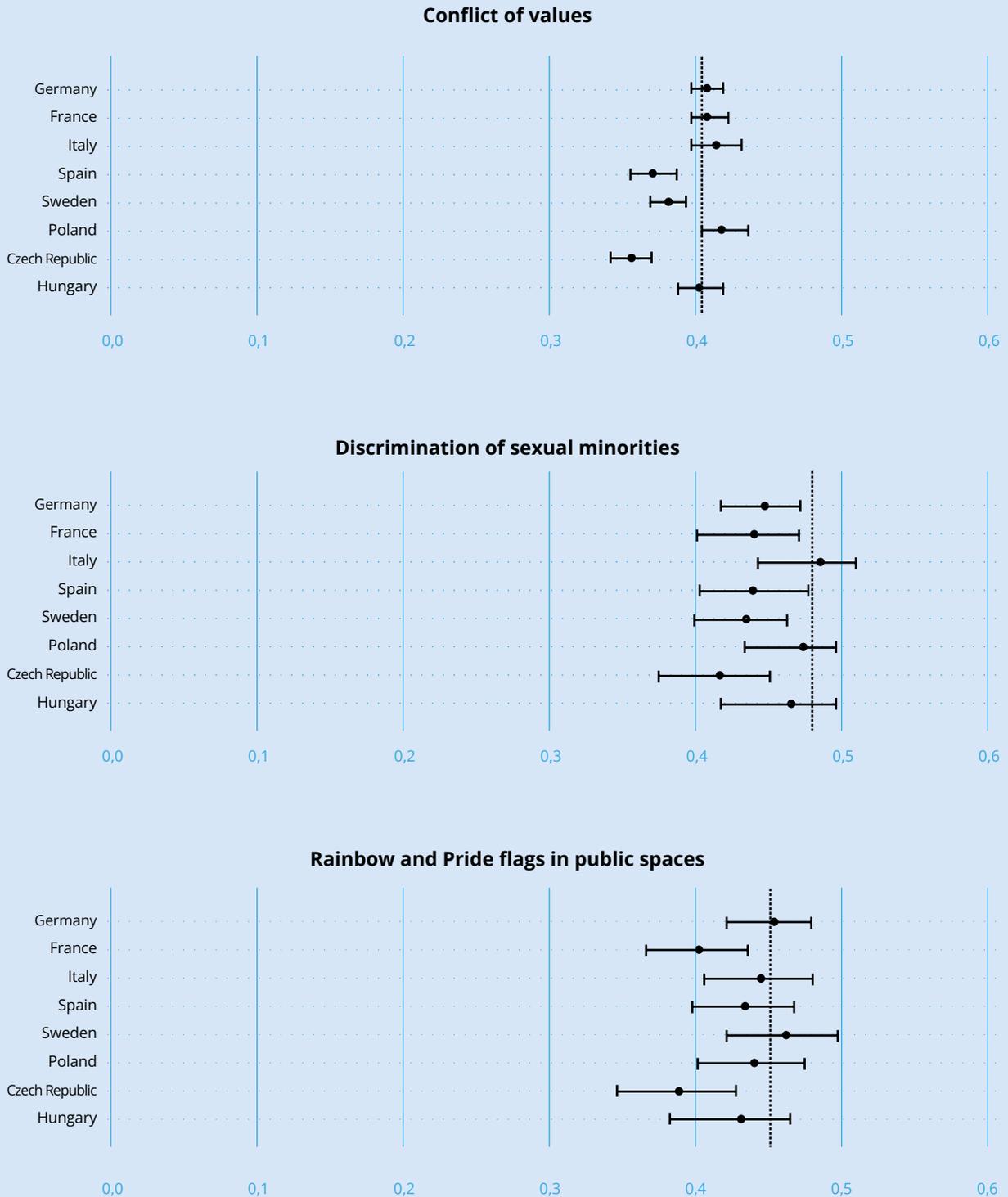
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIId: Ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) on the three economy and social policies items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Market and government

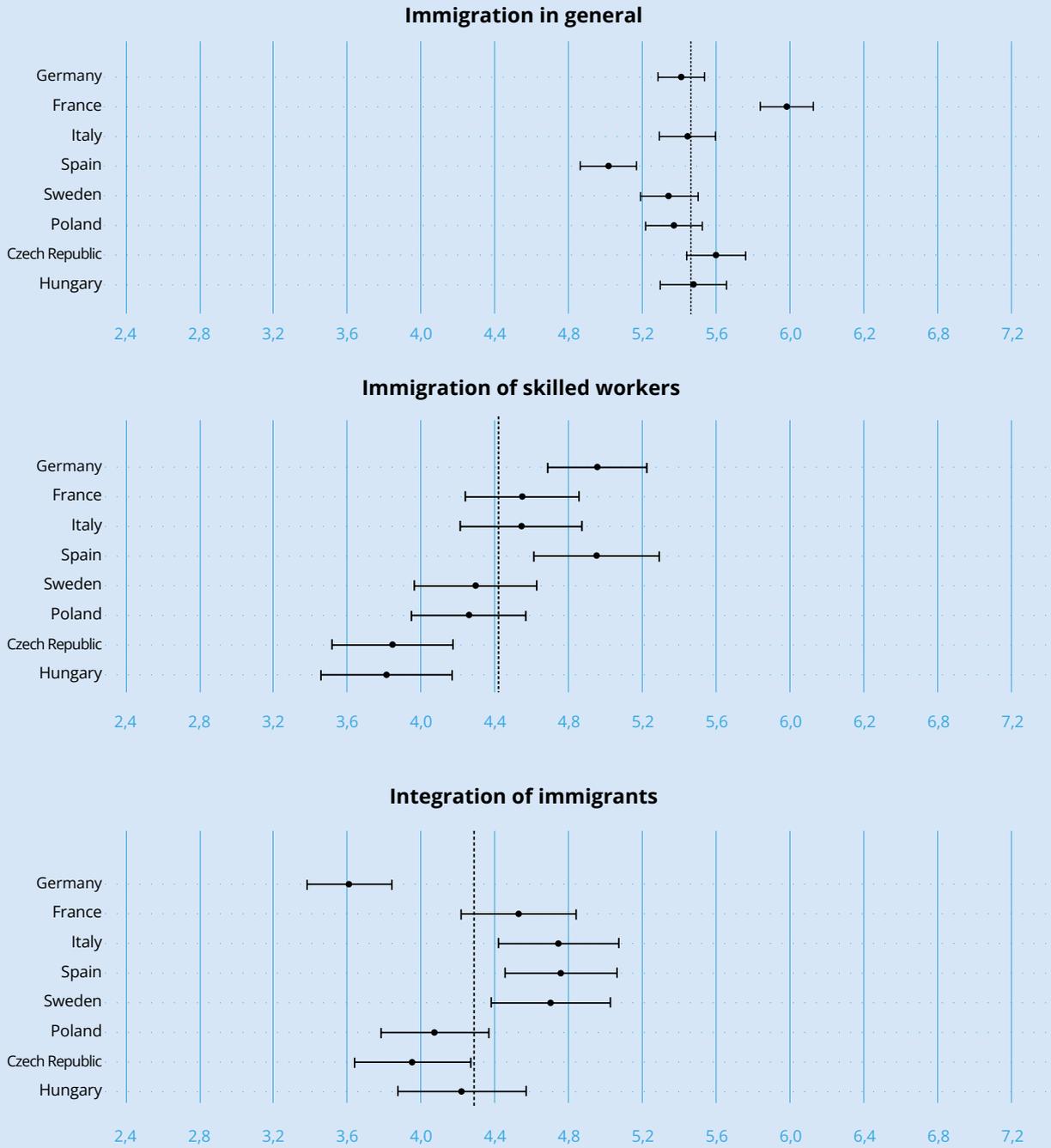## Redistribution of wealth

International trade

Note: The points show the mean levels of ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger ideological polarization on the respective issue in a given country. Confidence intervals were estimated using bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The line marks the level of ideological polarization for the full sample. Because the Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable, this line does not necessarily lie at the center of the country values. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IIIe: Ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) on the three values items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Conflict of values

Discrimination of sexual minorities

Rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces

Note: The points show the mean levels of ideological polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger ideological polarization on the respective issue in a given country. Confidence intervals were estimated using bootstrapping (1,000 replications). The line marks the level of ideological polarization for the full sample. Because the Van der Eijk Polarization Index is not linearly aggregable, this line does not necessarily lie at the center of the country values. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

ANNEX IV:
AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION
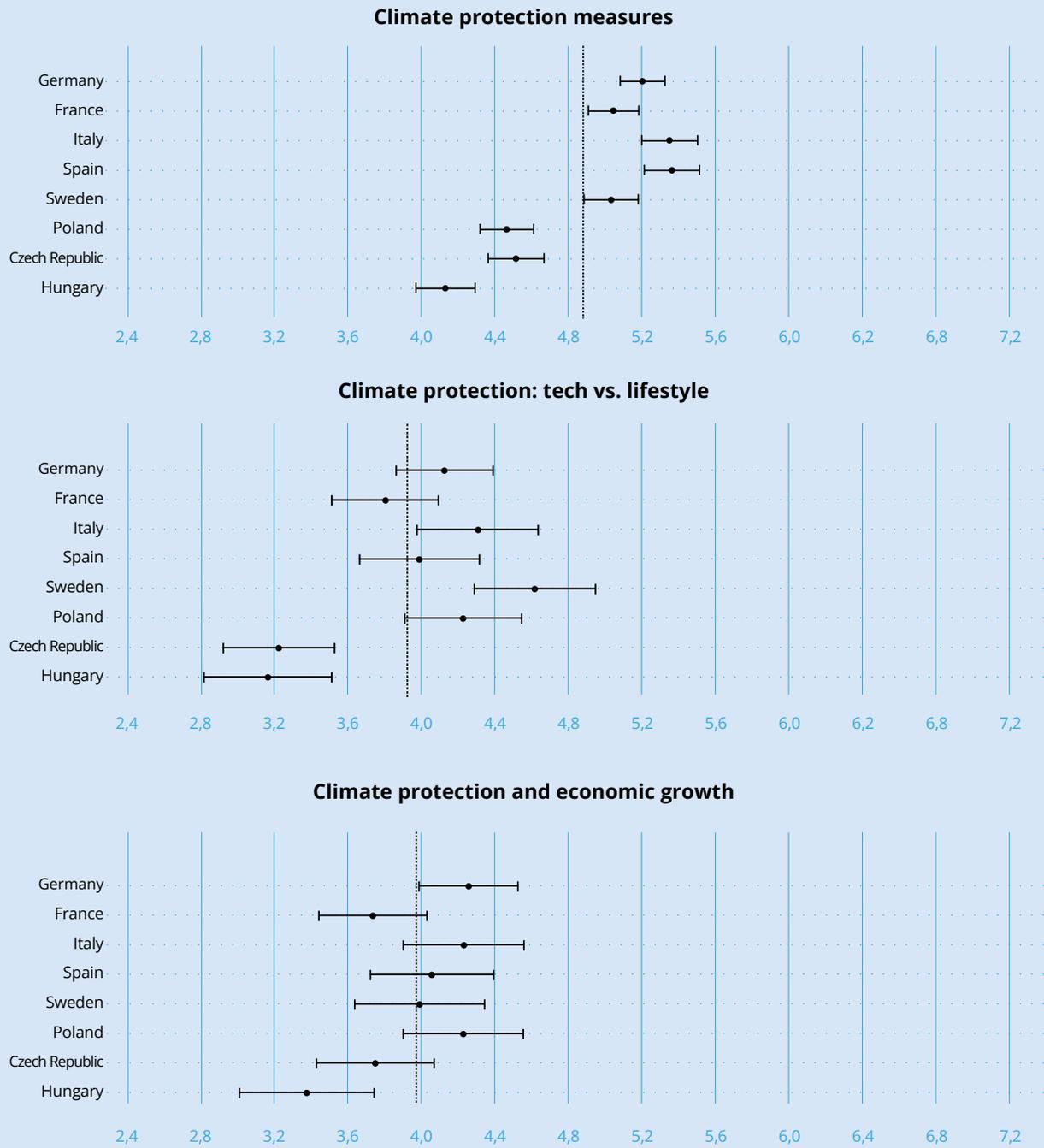# IN CROSS-NATIONAL
COMPARISON

Fig. IVa: Affective polarization on the three immigration items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Immigration in general

Immigration of skilled workers

Integration of immigrants

Note: The points show the mean levels of affective polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization on the respective issue in a given country. The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).
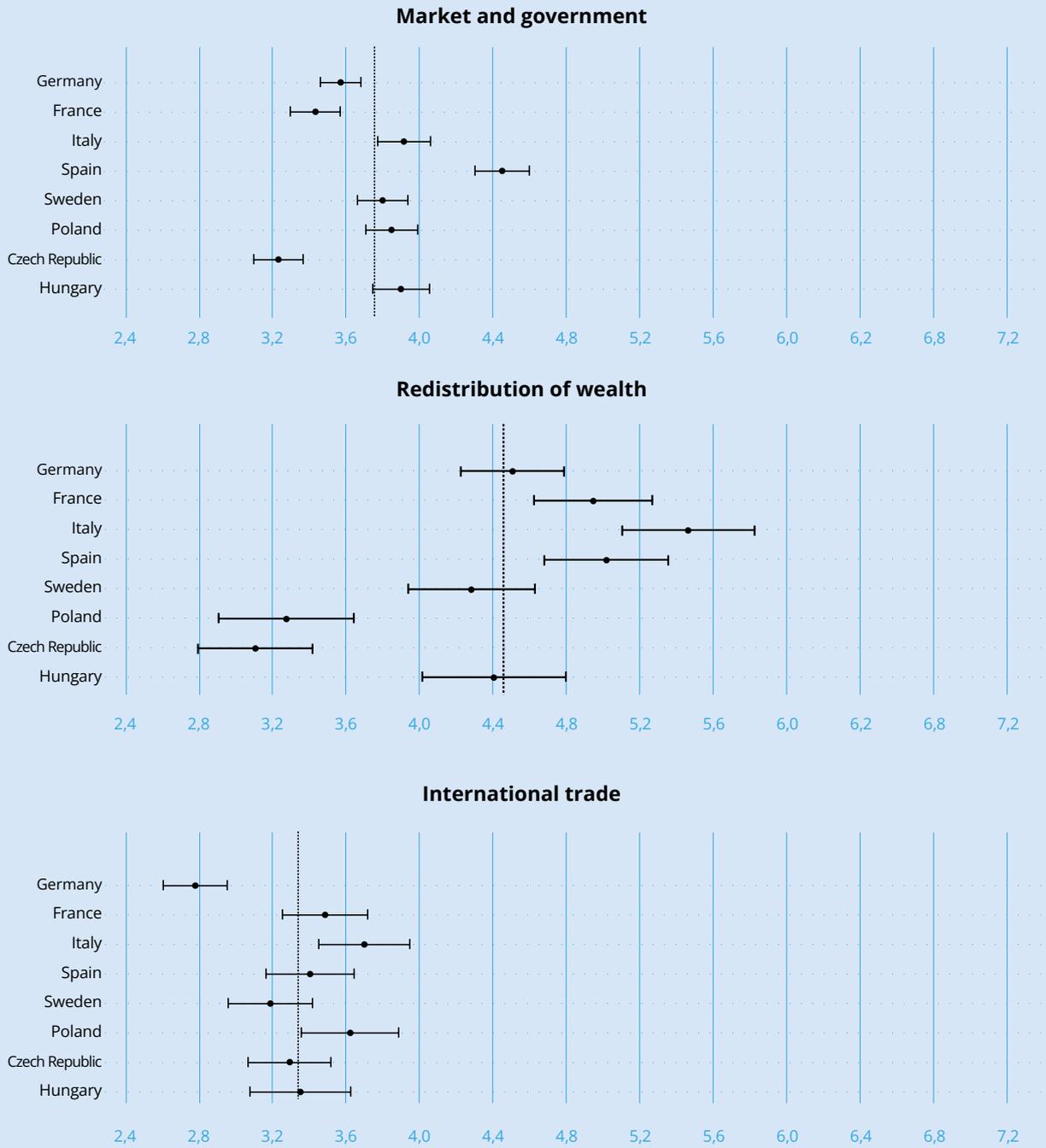
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IVb: Affective polarization on the three security items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)
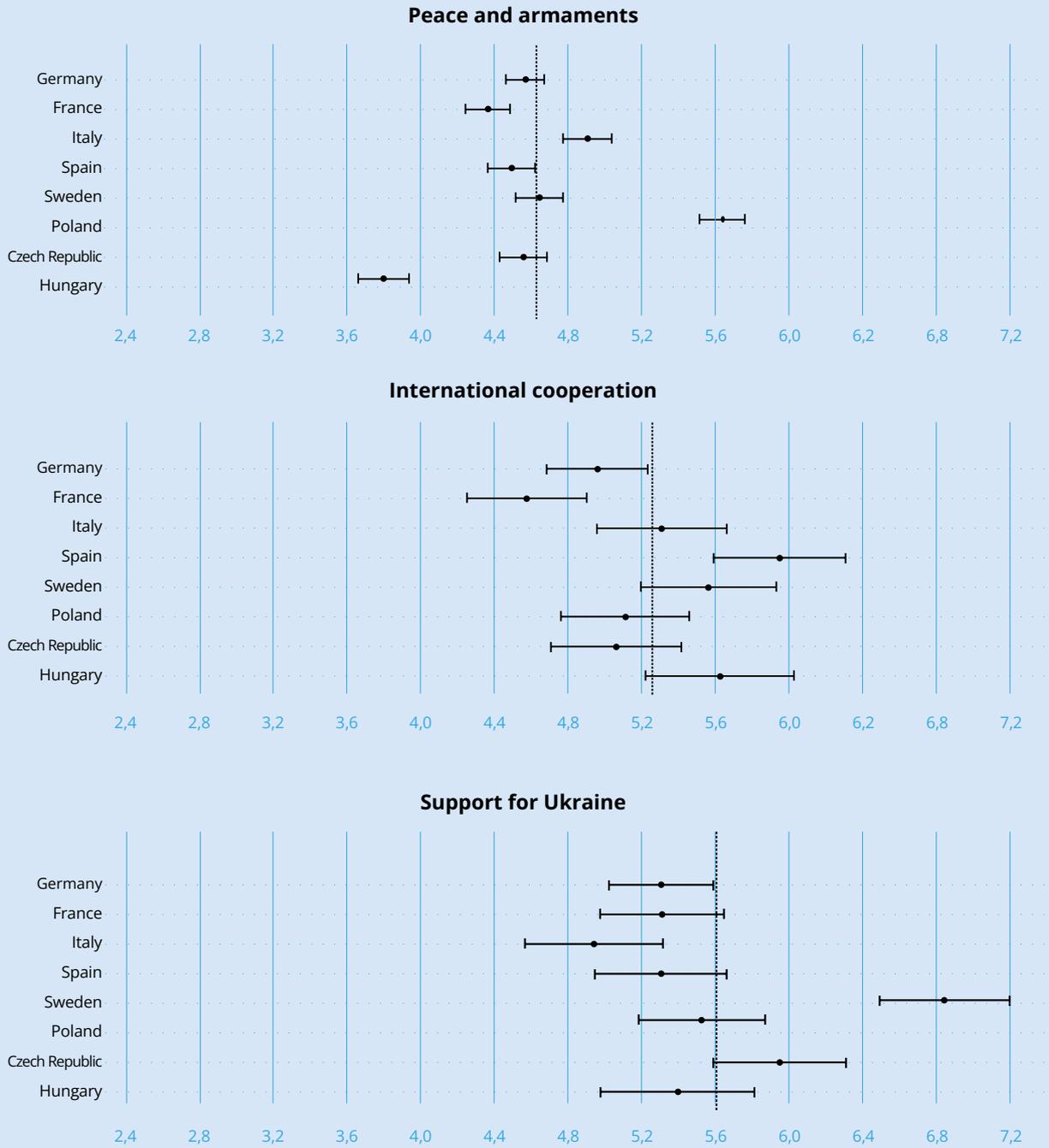
Peace and armaments

International cooperation

Support for Ukraine

Note: The points show the mean levels of affective polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization on the respective issue in a given country. The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).
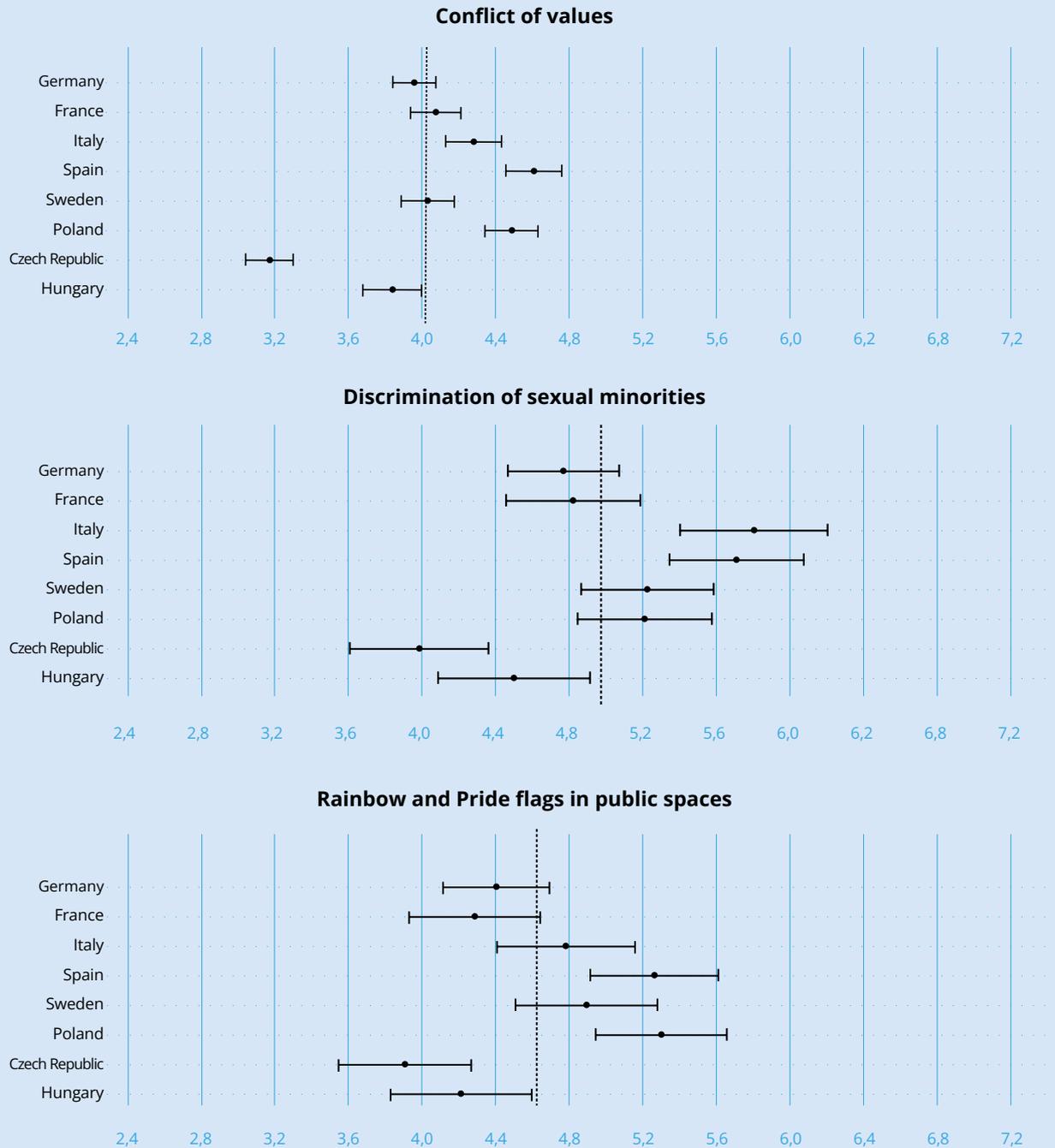
Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IVc: Affective polarization on the three climate change items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Climate protection measures

Climate protection: tech vs. lifestyle

Climate protection and economic growth

Note: The points show the mean levels of affective polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization on the respective issue in a given country. The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IVd: Affective polarization on the three economy and social policies items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Market and government

Redistribution of wealth

International trade

Note: The points show the mean levels of affective polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization on the respective issue in a given country. The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

Fig. IVe: Affective polarization on the three values items by country (means with 95% confidence intervals)

Conflict of values

Discrimination of sexual minorities

Rainbow and Pride flags in public spaces

Note: The points show the mean levels of affective polarization (Van der Eijk Polarization Index) for three items, with corresponding 95% confidence intervals, across European countries. Higher values indicate stronger affective polarization on the respective issue in a given country. The line marks the mean of the full sample. Details on quotas and weighting are provided in the Methodology section (n = 24,199; missing values = "don't know" / no response).

Source: Own survey / YouGov

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PROFILE

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) examines about 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.

MIDEM examines:
- Belonging, identity, and cohesion
- Political and social polarization
- National governance of migration
- Local governance of migration

MIDEM's objectives:
- Practice-oriented research
- Advising policy-makers and civil society
- Establishing international networks
- Providing a forum for public debates

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