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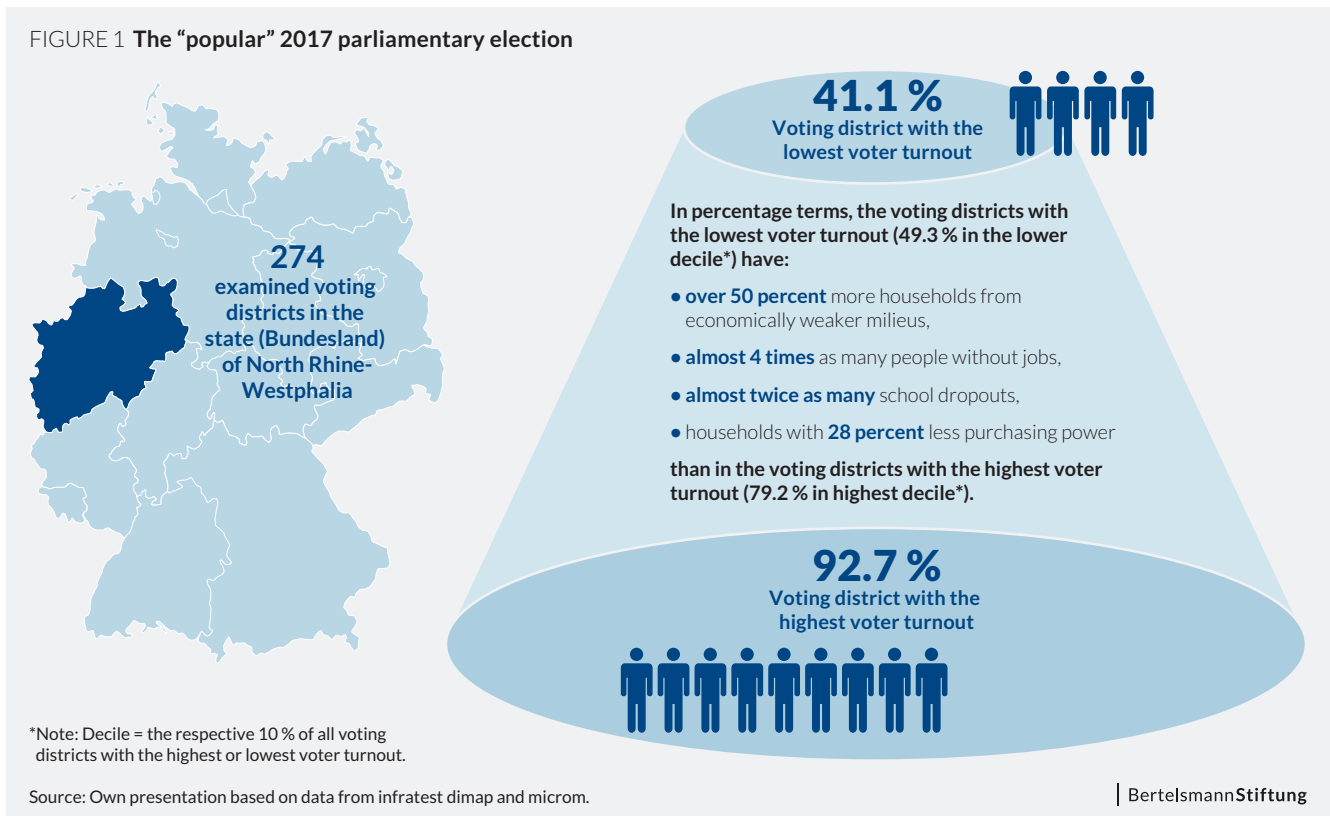
Executive Summary

The “Popular” NRW Parliamentary Election of 2017

Executive Summary: The “Popular” NRW Parliamentary Election of 2017

Eight times in a row, voter turnout has now risen for state parliamentary elections across Germany. The most recent election in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) reached a voter turnout of 65.2 percent of all eligible voters, marking an increase of 5.6 percentage points. Voter turnout in Germany’s most populous state (Bundesland) has thus reached its highest level in more than two decades. Nevertheless, the social stratification in voter participation in NRW did not diminish. On the contrary, the social divide between voters and non-voters has again slightly intensified. Thus, even though voter turnout rose, the following still holds true for the 2017 state parliamentary elections in NRW: The more socially precarious the milieu structure in a voting district, the lower the voter turnout; and the higher the share of economically strong milieus from the middle and upper social strata, the higher the voter turnout. As a result, voter participation in North Rhine-Westphalia remains deeply socially divided despite the overall higher turnout.

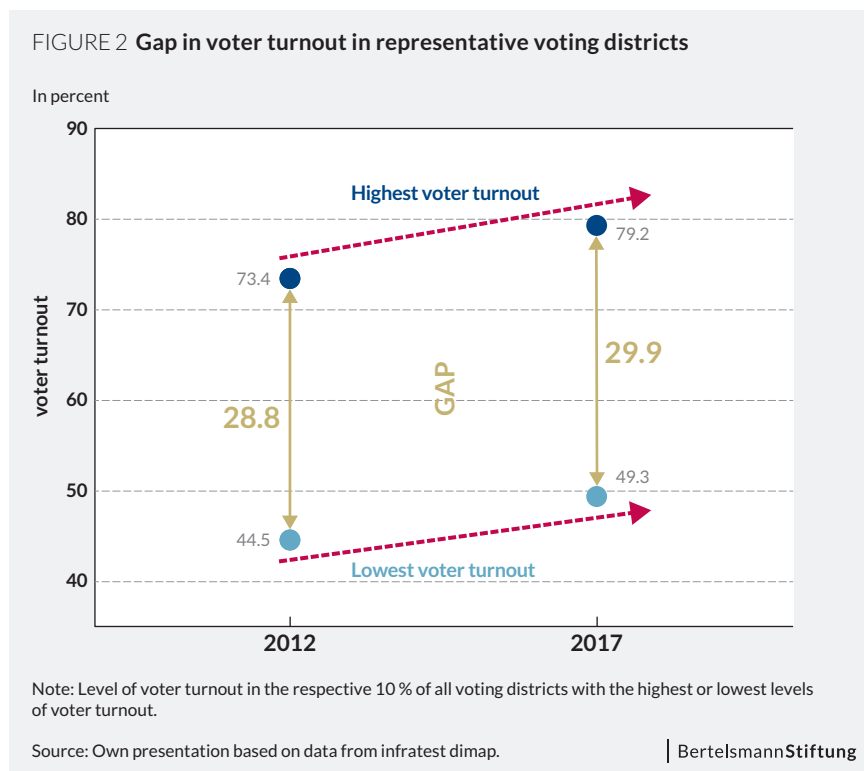
FIGURE 1 The “popular” 2017 parliamentary election



Why is that? A crucial factor is the social profile of mobilized non-voters. If they primarily come from the typical voter milieus which tend to be economically stronger, it leads to an intensification of the social divide in voter turnout. On the other hand, if mobilized non-voters come from typical non-voter milieus which tend to be socially precarious, it leads to a reduction in the social divide. The results of this study show that, in all likelihood, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) successfully mobilized non-voters primarily in the middle and upper social strata, while the increase in voter turnout in the typical non-voter milieus that are socially precarious remained below-average. As a result, the already strongly pronounced social divide in voter turnout slightly intensified once again. Thus, even the "popular" NRW parliamentary election of 2017 remains a "socially precarious" election.

Rising voter turnout intensifies the social divide

The large gap in voter turnout, which slightly increased during the 2017 state parliamentary election in NRW, becomes apparent when comparing voter turnout in the voting districts with the highest and lowest turnout levels (Figure 2).



While the overall level of voter turnout increased (to 65.2 percent), the gap in voter turnout between the voting districts with the lowest and highest levels of voter participation also increased, albeit slightly, from 28.8 percentage points for the state parliamentary election in 2012 to 29.9 percentage points for the election in 2017. The reason for this increase is that voter turnout in the voting

districts with the lowest level of voter turnout went up less than it did in the voting districts with the highest level of voter turnout. In the voter strongholds with the highest level of voter turnout, participation rose at the slightly above-average level of 5.8 percentage points (compared to the average increase in overall voter turnout of 5.2 percentage points). In contrast, in the non-voter strongholds with the lowest level of voter turnout, the increase was slightly below-average, at only 4.8 percentage points. At an overall clearly higher level, this led to a slight increase in the gap in voter participation.

An interesting correlation between the level and the gap in voter turnout emerges here. Although the rule of thumb holding that "the lower the voter turnout, the more unequal it is" is empirically well documented, the opposite is not necessarily true. In other words, a renewed increase in voter turnout from an already low level with a pronounced gap does not automatically lead to a further reduction of the gap. On the contrary, as long as the level of voter turnout is very low, a renewed increase in voter turnout can also be very easily associated with an additional increase in its gap. This was precisely the case with the 2017 state parliamentary election in NRW.

What accounts for this gap in voter turnout? And why did a significant increase in overall voter turnout in NRW further intensify the gap?

The reasons can be found in the social pattern of voter participation and in the social pattern on non-voter mobilization. As is demonstrated in the following study, the gap in voter turnout is primarily a social divide in NRW. The social profile of a voting district determines the level of its voter participation. The more dissimilar the social profiles of the voting districts, the more clearly the divide in voter turnout reflects their social stratification.

But how can the social divide in voter turnout be changed?

In the long term, it is primarily shifts in societal and social structures that are reflected in these kinds of changes. However, in the short term where long-term factors are held constant, changes in the social divide of voter turnout will primarily be determined by the social profile of mobilized non-voters. Voter migrations between demobilized voters and mobilized non-voters will then also determine the changes in the social divide of voter turnout.

This is precisely the correlation that is examined in this study. What are the social patterns of voter participation and its change during the 2017 state parliamentary elections in NRW? And how does the social pattern of non-voter mobilization across all parties impact the social divide in voter turnout? Chapter I focuses on answering these questions in purely socioeconomic terms for households of varying economic strength. Then, in Chapter II, the same correlations are analyzed with the social Sinus-Geo-Milieus®, which are more strongly defined by one's social environment

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The long version of this study is available in German, titled „Populäre Wahlen – NRW. Mobilisierung und Gegenmobilisierung der sozialen Milieus bei der Landtagswahl Nordrhein-Westfalen 2017.“

To access it, please visit:

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