



The full study  
is available  
only in German:  
Gerechtigkeits-  
empfinden in  
Deutschland

# Perception of Fairness in Germany

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## STUDY BACKGROUND

The Bertelsmann Stiftung has been researching the issue of social cohesion for more than 10 years. To do so, it employs an empirical model consisting of nine dimensions measuring the quality of social cooperation and togetherness within communities. One of these nine dimensions is the perception of fairness in society. Past studies have consistently shown scores within this dimension to be particularly weak. The perceived lack of fairness – as well as the perception of injustice – constitutes a risk factor with regard to social cohesion. This study therefore focuses on perceived fairness, examining it in greater detail.

## ABOUT THE SURVEY

To this end, the Bertelsmann Stiftung commissioned market research firm Bilendi & respondi to conduct an online survey of 4,900 people in Germany between the ages of 18 and 69. Respondents were asked about their perceptions of fairness. The survey was conducted between October 25 and November 11, 2021. The survey sample was constituted so as to be representative of Germany's population as a whole with regard to income, age, education level, gender, state of residence, and residence in the former East or West Germany. A follow-up survey that included 4,004 of the first survey's original 4,900 respondents was conducted between November 16 and 25, 2021. On average, the main survey lasted 21 minutes and the follow-up survey eight minutes. The subsequent evaluation was carried out by a team of ifo Institute researchers in close cooperation with the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **As a whole, perception of fairness scores in Germany are low.**

The study examined three different aspects of perceived fairness: the general assessment of distributive justice in Germany, the specific perception of fairness with regard to the respondent's own income and wealth, and the evaluation of intergenerational justice. The results show that scores are low within all three aspects of perceived fairness. On average, respondents disagreed with all statements used to elicit their perceptions of fairness. A total of 79% said they did not believe the distribution of resources in their communities to be fair, 66% offered a negative assessment of intergenerational justice, and only 39% perceived their own level of income and wealth to be fair. Some variance can be seen in the details, however. For example, men had a significantly stronger

perception that the world around them was fair. Overall, people with comparatively higher incomes, with higher levels of formal education, or who had exceeded their parents' level of education perceived their own levels of income and wealth – as well as differences between generations – as fairer. Respondents who classified themselves as being on the right of the political spectrum were more likely to regard the general distribution of resources within society as being fair than those who situated themselves at the political left or in the center. Perceived levels of intergenerational equity increased with respondents' ages, while conversely, the perception that resources within society were distributed equitably weakened as respondents' ages rose.

### **The principles of justice underlying the social market economy are widely accepted.**

Fundamental ideas about what counts as just and unjust are central to perceptions of fairness. For this reason, the survey also examined the degree to which respondents endorsed four principles of justice. The largest share of respondents, or around 95% of the survey's participants, approved of the principle of need (average score 8.3 on a scale of 0 to 10). This was followed by 85% percent approval of the equity principle (average score 7.1) and 54% for the equality principle (average score 5.6). The entitlement principle, which is of dubious democratic value, was on average overwhelmingly rejected (average score 2.4). Only 9% of the respondents endorsed this latter principle. Thus, the two principles that are essential to the social market economy ("Soziale Marktwirtschaft") received the highest level of support. A comparison of these answers with respondents' own socioeconomic characteristics shows that survey participants were more likely to endorse those principles that would improve their own financial situation. Thus, people with lower incomes and education levels gave preference to the principle of need and the principle of equality more often than their wealthier counterparts did. Conversely, high-income respondents more often leaned toward the equity and entitlement principles. However, men also weighted these latter two principles significantly higher than the women did. Among respondents who have exceeded their parents' level of education, a disproportionately low share endorsed the principle of equality.

The way respondents weighted the principles tended to be related to their individual perceptions of fairness. For example, those tending to support the principles of need or equality also tended to regard society as more unfair. By contrast, those who regarded society as fair were more likely to favor the equity or entitlement principles.

### **A strong perception that society is fair is associated with greater trust in institutions.**

Trust in political and societal institutions such as politicians, the police or the public broadcasting services was clearly associated with the perception of fairness. The more respondents perceived society as a whole, their own income and wealth, and the differences between generations to be fair, the more likely they were to trust these institutions. In contrast, older respondents, those who had not attained a higher level of education than their own parents, residents of rural areas, and people who had voted for the AfD or had not voted at all in the last federal elections disproportionately indicated that they did not feel well represented by politicians and policymakers.

Furthermore, COVID-19 vaccination rates can also serve as an indicator of trust in institutions, as individuals with lower levels of trust in science and research tend to be less willing to be vaccinated. In fact, the study showed a positive correlation between the willingness to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and the overall perception of fairness.

**While respondents attributed their own personal successes to hard work, they gave greater weight to external circumstances in determining life outcomes at a societal level.**

A total of 62% of respondents believed personal wealth in Germany generally depends on luck or a person's family background. However, the same respondents assessed the origin of their own wealth differently. Here, 75% said this was the result of hard work. The older the respondent, the more diametrically opposed these two perceptual perspectives, the general and the personal, tended to be. Furthermore, those who in fact had comparatively high incomes and high levels of education were both more likely to believe that their own success was due to hard work and less likely to believe that personal wealth in Germany depends on luck and familial wealth. The same was true of those who had higher levels of education than their parents, and of respondents who described themselves as being on the political right or in the political center. The results also showed a clear correlation with the three dimensions that constitute the perception of fairness. The more respondents attributed their wealth to their own hard work rather than to luck and their family background, the stronger their perception that society was fair.

**Those who perceive society as being more unfair are more likely to support redistributive measures.**

In general, respondents showed significant support for redistributive measures. A total of 77% of survey participants were in favor of introducing a wealth tax (average score 7.4 on a scale of 0 to 10), 75% percent were in favor of reducing the gap between rich and poor (average score 7.3), and 70% were in favor of a higher income tax for those with high incomes (average score 6.9). In addition, 67% saw a need for more redistribution from rich to poor (average score 6.78). However, respondents showed little willingness to pay more taxes themselves in order to enable more financial support for the poor. Just 37% indicated they would be willing to do so (average score 4.48). The less fair respondents perceived society to be, the greater was their approval of redistributive measures. However, when it came to their own willingness to pay more taxes, this was true only of their overall sense of fairness in society, and not of their perceptions of intergenerational justice or their perception of fairness with regard to their own income and wealth.

**Respondents express little support for enhancing intergenerational justice.**

A total of 72% of respondents believed that policymakers had neglected the interests of children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic (average score 7.03). However, respondents also generally rejected most of the proposed measures for enhancing intergenerational justice. For example, less

than 20% of respondents favored adjustments in the pension system. There was also little support for changing voting rights to favor younger generations, or for imposing restrictions on the accumulation of new government debt. The only such proposition supported by a majority was a proposal to commit more strongly to achieving climate targets. A total of 69% of respondents endorsed this position. However, there were significant differences between the population groups. For example, younger respondents were more likely to support reforming the pension and electoral systems. On the other hand, older respondents and those with high incomes were more likely than their younger and low-income peers to agree that the state should not take on new debt – even if that meant cutting welfare benefits or increasing tax and contribution rates. Contrary to our expectations, a stronger overall perception of fairness in society was positively associated with a greater willingness to support reforms relating to intergenerational justice. One relationship in particular stands out: Those who perceived their own income and wealth to be just were also more likely to feel that the state should do more to achieve climate goals.

**Those who perceived more injustice in society are more likely to cast their votes on the left of the political spectrum. Moreover, there are signs of a shift on the issue of climate protection.**

Those who perceive society as being comparatively unjust are more likely to vote for left-leaning parties with a stronger focus on redistribution. However, those who regard society as being more unjust are also more likely to vote for protest parties, or to refrain from voting altogether. Respondents who perceive society to be fairer tend to vote more often than others for parties that strongly support free-market principles. The study's findings provide evidence both of existing tensions and an ongoing shift with regard to climate protection. Up to this point in time, this issue has tended to be assigned to the left of the political spectrum, being closely associated with the Green party. However, as noted above, measures to enhance intergenerational justice and thus climate protection are more likely to be supported by those who experience society as fair, and who thus tend not to vote for parties that advocate redistribution.

**Charitable donation behavior reflects perceived gaps in fairness – but also reflects individuals' perceptions that society is fair for them.**

The study examined the relationship between perceptions of fairness and charitable donation behavior by using an incentivized question on the subject of charitable giving. Respondents were told they could divide €50 at their own discretion between three specified charitable organizations while also retaining a portion for themselves. A subsequent lottery created a certain probability that the money would actually be used as specified. Where respondents applied their donations depended on their perception of social problems. Those who observe a lack of distributive justice in Germany were more likely to donate to the food bank. Participants who perceived a lack of intergenerational justice were more likely to donate to the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations. Wealthier, older and more educated people had a higher overall propensity to make donations. In contrast, those who perceived their own financial circumstances to be unjust retained a comparatively larger

amount of the money for themselves. Moreover, this retained share was significantly greater among respondents who were politically right-leaning than among those who defined themselves as politically left-leaning or in the center. Young respondents, those with high incomes or a high level of education, and respondents who described themselves as politically left-leaning were more likely than average to donate to the Foundation for the Rights of Future Generations. However, this organization received the least amount of donations overall, while the German Bone Marrow Donor Center, which was perceived as being non-political, on average received the most (Bone Marrow Donor Center: average of € 13.83; Food Bank: € 10.86; Future Generations Foundation: € 4.25).

### **Political views influence how information on distributional issues is handled.**

The study also included a survey experiment in which a portion of the participants was provided with information on the actual distribution of wealth in Germany and the actual age structure of the electorate. Here, we found that respondents initially underestimated both the degree of existing inequality in the distribution of wealth and the preponderance of older population groups relative to younger ones in the electorate. After receiving the information, they then adjusted their estimates accordingly. However, the information provided in the course of this experiment produced paradoxical effects on perceptions of fairness. Among respondents who described themselves as being on the political left or in the political center, the additional information had no statistically significant effect on views of fairness. They assessed the issues of general distributive justice and intergenerational justice in exactly the same way as did the corresponding respondents from the control group who had received no such information. This was not the case for those who classified themselves as politically on the right. Although they too initially underestimated the inequality of the distributions, and adjusted their beliefs based on the information given, they were subsequently more likely than their counterparts in the control group to assess society as being fair. This finding shows that simply providing information may not prove convincing in certain cases, or it may convince people to take on an opposite view. This has consequences for media and political communication.

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