



FIVE QUESTIONS

ABOUT PROTEST VOTING

FOR ARMIN SCHÄFER

Professor Schäfer, your subject is the fascinating question of political inequality. What conclusions have you drawn?

82 ARMIN SCHÄFER My research team and I have found that political decisions made in the Bundestag are biased against less well-educated people with lower incomes. This in turn can deter people from voting, because when they feel like they are no longer being represented, they turn away from politics and stay at home on election day. We observed this pattern during the last three parliamentary elections, i.e. in 2009, 2013 and 2017. In all the German cities for which this data is available, it was clear that the poorer the district and the lower the average income of its residents, the lower the voter turnout.

Does the rise of populism have anything to do with political inequality?

The AfD mobilized some former non-voters, but the majority stayed home as before. All the same, stronger polarization is causing more people to become involved. Some of them want to issue a warning, while others want to prevent populists from being successful in the elections. This makes the picture a bit more complicated. However, a higher percentage of protest votes shows us that there are population groups who feel that they are not yet properly represented. They don't feel that the esta-

blished parties are appealing to them or offering them something that could change their circumstances.

Why do people decide not to vote?

One thing we know is that voting and abstaining from voting is "contagious". People don't decide all by themselves whether or not to go and vote. The decision also has something to do with their family, their friends, perhaps even the area they live in. Another aspect is that when politicians treat different groups unequally, this can trigger a vicious circle. People who feel like they are not being represented don't vote – and people who don't vote are represented less successfully. As a result, the interactions involved in making political decisions become biased in favor of those who take part and whose circumstances are better in any case.

Does that mean that the parties and parliaments are becoming less and less representative of a cross-section of the population?

More than 80 percent of the members of the Bundestag went to university compared to less than 20 percent of the general population. There is also a far higher proportion of civil servants, entrepreneurs and lawyers in the parliaments than there is among the general population. This shows that there are significant differences between those who

make the political decisions and those who are affected by them. Over the last thirty years, the Bundestag's decisions have coincided much more frequently with the preferences of people who have high incomes or whose circumstances are generally better. This discrepancy is particularly significant when the rich and the poor want different things.

How can we break out of this vicious circle?

We know that people don't spontaneously become involved in politics and are more likely to do so when they are actively addressed and encouraged to become party members. The parties need to take a closer look at who they are appealing to. This is already happening to some extent in the case of women, and to a lesser degree in the case of immigrants. Parties should not encourage only people with university degrees to stand for election. Democracy encompasses the promise that diverse groups will at least have the opportunity to voice their concerns when political decisions are being made. I believe that a systemic failure to give this opportunity puts democracy at risk.

Interview: Jürgen Zurheide

Professor Armin Schäfer was the Scholar in Residence at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne during the winter semester 2019/20.