

Kroh, Martin; Wittenberg, Erich

Article

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Prof. Dr. Martin Kroh, Deputy Head of the Socio-Economic Panel Study at DIW Berlin

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO MARTIN KROH

»The Poor and Unemployed Show Less Political Interest«

1. Professor Kroh, you have studied the inequality of political participation in Germany. Which groups are more and which are less politically engaged? Our focus was on people in economically precarious circumstances. So we therefore compared those affected by poverty with those in employment or above the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. We discovered that the unemployed and people affected by poverty are less interested and active in politics than the rest of the population. This is consistent with findings from many western countries in previous decades.
2. How big is this effect? If one assumes that, according to our measurement of political participation, an average of ten percent of the population participates in political parties, civic initiatives, or local politics, the corresponding figure among the unemployed and those affected by poverty is approximately six percent. At least a third of the population is very interested in politics. Among the unemployed and those affected by poverty, it is roughly one-quarter.
3. How can this be explained? There are a number of theoretical explanatory approaches to explain this correlation. Some consider the causes to be limited economic resources and accessibility of political participation or recruitment networks, for example, from which unemployed people tend to be excluded. Of course, if you are unemployed you are less likely to encounter works councils and trade unions. Another group of explanatory approaches focuses more on the socio-psychological consequences. The theory is that people who are affected by unemployment withdraw from social networks.
4. Is this lack of political interest a direct result of poverty or unemployment, or is it rather due to social background? According to our findings, there is some doubt about the theories and explanatory approaches I mentioned previously because they all imply that engagement should decrease as soon as people become unemployed or poor. However, if you base the analysis on repeated surveys, you find that the level of political participation among these individuals is very consistent. They do not reduce their political engagement when they become unemployed. That, in turn, suggests that the reasons for this statistical correlation may be found in causes dating from before these events, such as social background, for example.
5. How has the degree of inequality of political participation developed in recent years? There has been no linear trend. It has increased slightly since reunification, but stagnated somewhat in the last two or three years.
6. How does Germany compare to other countries? Germany is mid-table compared to other European countries. However, if we compare Germany with its direct neighbors, such as the Netherlands or France, the level of inequality in Germany is relatively high.
7. What steps could be taken to increase political participation among the unemployed or those on low incomes? If one argues, based on our results, that the main reason for this statistical correlation is social background, then of course it makes sense to implement measures that take effect in families and in school education. The education gap should be reduced so that people who are affected by poverty or unemployment do not withdraw from society, but actively participate in the political process.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg.

**DIW Berlin—Deutsches Institut
für Wirtschaftsforschung e.V.**
Mohrenstraße 58, 10117 Berlin
T +49 30 897 89 -0
F +49 30 897 89 -200

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