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Let's talk about politics!

**Results of a Representative Survey on
Political Communication in the Personal Milieu**

Dominik Hirndorf

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Imprint

At a Glance

› An individual's life partner has a significant influence on the probability of their voting in elections. If couples never talk about politics or if the partner does not vote, the proportion of non-voters is over a third instead of about 9 percent.

› Harmony in the partnership: In discussions about political subjects, couples are usually in agreement and often vote for the same party.

› In discussions with friends, colleagues and neighbours, eligible voters also prefer an interlocutor who, based on their own estimate, has the same party preference. In addition, the more frequently two people have discussions with one another and the more rarely they disagree in these discussions, the more likely they are to vote for the same political party.

› AfD voters stand out. They talk about politics especially often, are more often in agreement both within the partnership and with other interlocutors, and to a large extent only discuss political subjects with other AfD voters.

› The reach of online political content is limited: Only half of the voting-eligible population reads political content on the Internet. In contrast, almost a third of eligible voters never use the Internet for the political domain and 18 percent say they do not use the Internet at all.

› Those who frequently discuss politics in real life are also more present in social networks by "liking", commenting on or sharing political posts. AfD voters and Left party voters do this particularly often.

Contents

1 Introduction

Human beings are essentially social. People's daily communication in their personal milieu is often political and has an impact on their own views. Research studies on electoral behaviour demonstrate the influence of partners, friends and relatives on individual political choices (cf., for example, Schmitt-Beck 2000). At the same time, we know from social-psychological research that people tend to get into relationships with partners who are similar to them (including in terms of their social attitudes) (e. g., Park and McDonald 2019). Since homogeneous attitudes are also present when friends, neighbours, colleagues, and relatives first get to know one another on account of social structures, the influence of interpersonal political communication is still disputed. Citing algorithms, observers often speak of so-called filter bubbles or echo chambers in the online world of social networks.[1] What is meant here is a form of isolation from contrary opinions and attitudes, since users' own preferences automatically lead them to other users with similar opinions. Transferred to the real world, this gives rise to the question of whether eligible voters, by virtue of their personal milieu, live in social spaces that are highly similar in terms of political attitudes.

A representative study by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung[2] addresses this topic. The focus is the question of whether voters talk to like-minded people only, or whether they are also subject to cross pressure: i. e., to highly heterogeneous political influences. In addition, the general propensity to engage in political communication and the use of the Internet as medium of communication are also tested.

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1   For more on this subject, see Spohr (2017), Flaxman et al. (2016) and Walter et al. (2018).

2   A total of 4,022 phone interviews were conducted by Emnid Kantar Deutschland from 9 September 2019 to 6 November 2019. A "dual-frame" approach was used, such that 1,461 interviews (36 percent) were conducted via cell phone and 2,561 interviews via landline (64 percent). The results are representative for the population of eligible voters resident in Germany aged 18 and over.

2 Voting in Elections and Political Conversations in the Partnership

Like in earlier studies (Schmitt-Beck 2000, Pokorny 2018), the survey examined whether or not respondents themselves voting in elections was a function of whether or not their partner votes. A total of 4 percent of respondents who have a life partner say that their partner did not vote. However, over a fifth of respondents are not able to provide any information about their partner's vote in the last Bundestag elections. Since it is also unclear here whether the partner voted at all, only respondents who gave a valid response will be taken into account in what follows. The proportion of respondents with a non-voting partner rises to a total of 9 percent when we exclude the invalid cases (don't know/no response).

This study also confirms the suspected relationship between the respondent's voting in an election as a function of their partner's voting in an election: Among respondents who say that their partner voted, only 6 percent actively abstained from voting themselves. If, however, by the respondent's account, the partner did not vote, the number of respondents who also did not vote is six times higher at 36 percent.[3] This is consistent with the findings of a post-election study by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on the 2017 Bundestag elections (Pokorny 2018).

Figure 1: Proportion of Respondents Who Vote as a Function of Partner's Voting or Not Voting
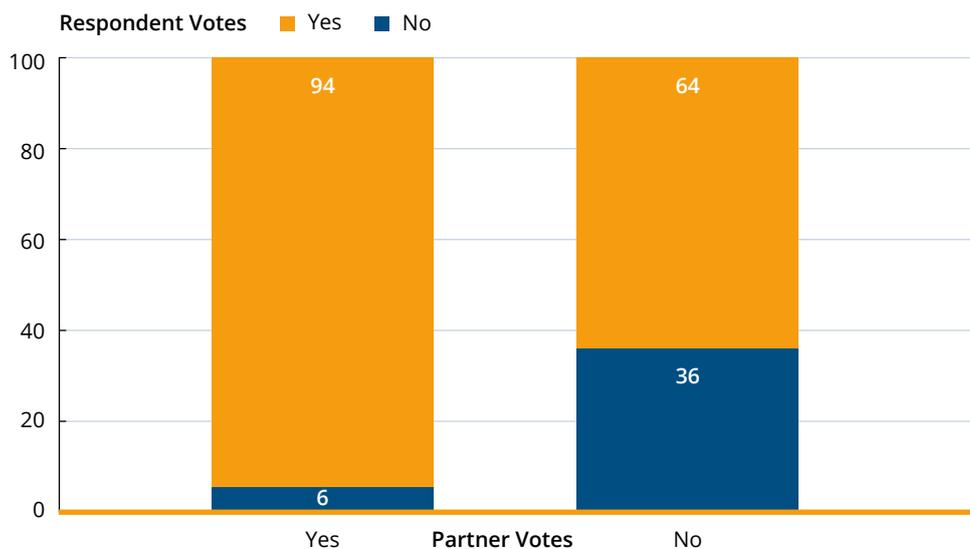

Source: Survey 2019-00 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. "Don't know"/ "no response" data omitted.

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All cases were taken into account again in the analysis of political communication with the partner. In response to the question of how often they talk to their partner about politics, 45 percent of respondents answered that they discuss political subjects "very often" or "often". Only 20 percent talk about politics "rarely" in their partnership and only 6 percent "never" do. On average, the frequency of discussion increases with age and level of education. People in partnerships living separately in single-person households discuss politics considerably less often than respondents living in a shared household. Having said that, the more people the household contains, the less couples living in households speak about politics.

Figure 2: Frequency of Discussions About Political Subjects in the Partnership
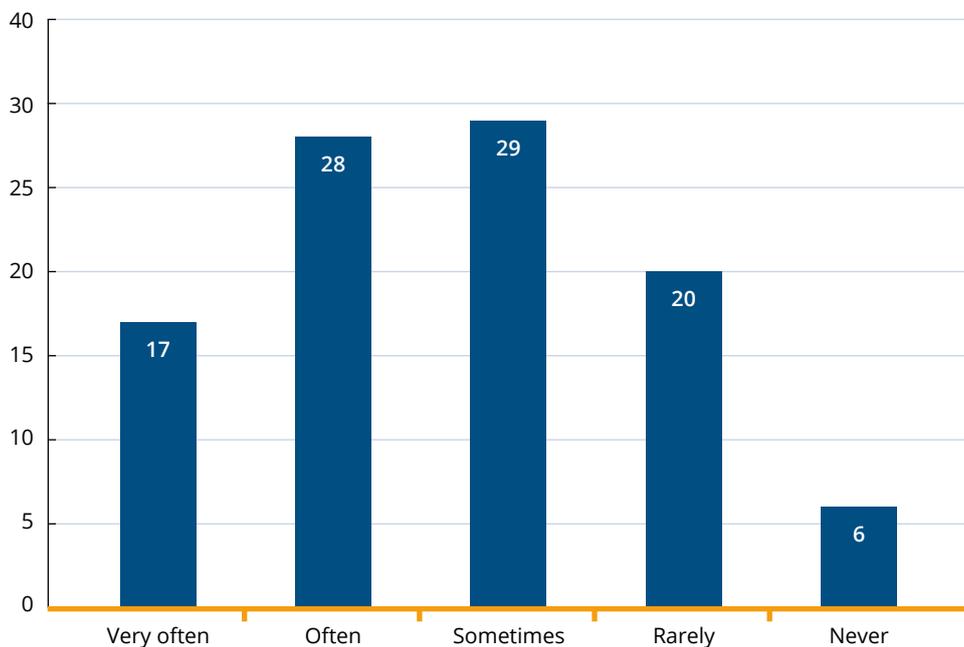
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

In terms of respondents' party preference, it is noticeable that AfD voters[4] talk to their partners about politics most frequently: 61 percent discuss political subjects "often" or "very often" in their partnership. While most Green supporters (59 percent) and Left party supporters (54 percent) likewise talk about politics more often, CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP voters have political discussions in their partnership more rarely.

Figure 3: Frequency of Discussion with Partner by Party Preference
Here: "Often/very often"

Respondent party preference
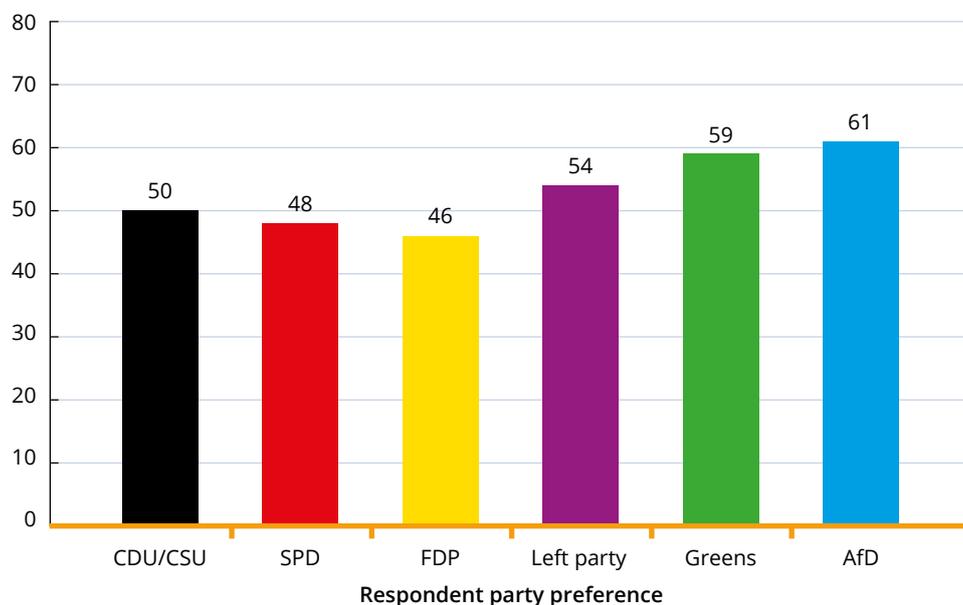
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

If we exclude respondents who do not answer the question about party preference or are undecided ("don't know"), a possible connection between frequency of discussion and voting in elections is apparent. Over half of the respondents who never talk to their partner about politics do not vote either. If, however, discussions about politics take place at least rarely or more often, only 7 to 14 percent of such respondents are, by their own account, non-voters. On the one hand, this may be explained by their having little interest in politics; on the other hand, there are research findings that demonstrate a connection between spouses' voting in elections (Schmitt-Beck et al. 2008, 2012). If partners talk about politics often, they exchange information, which reduces the information-related cost of voting as political act.

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Figure 4: Proportion of Respondents Who Vote by Frequency of Discussion with Partner
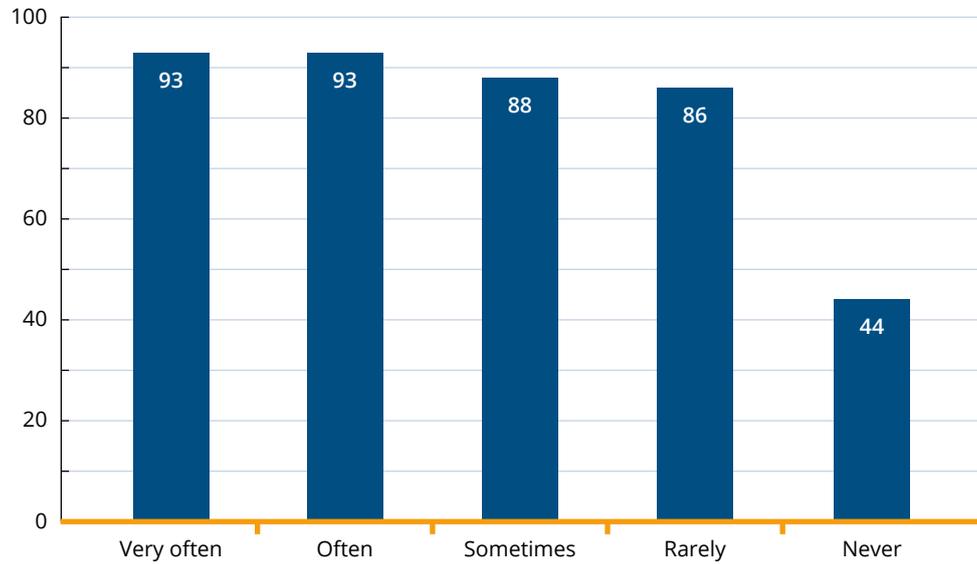
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

3   Only valid responses were taken into account: i. e., "don't know" responses and non-responses were not
    included. One of the reasons why the high rate of abstention is notable is because the proportion of
    non-voters is frequently lower in polling than in reality (cf., for example, Selb and Munzert 2013).

4   In what follows, respondents who indicated an intention to vote for a particular party in response to
    the "Sunday question" are treated synonymously as voters or supporters of that party.

3 Disagreements and Party Preferences in the Partnership

Respondents were also asked how often they have disagreements with their partner about political subjects. Overall, a relatively harmonious picture is apparent here. Around half of respondents "rarely" or "never" argue about politics (48 percent); nearly a third (31 percent) only do so "sometimes". Only a good 21 percent of respondents say that they have disagreements with their partner "often" or "very often". It is already striking that respondents who support the AfD disagree with their partner especially rarely in political discussions (66 percent), whereas this figure is considerably lower for voters of all the other parties represented in the Bundestag (SPD: 41 percent, CDU/CSU: 43 percent, Greens: 46 percent, FDP: 53 percent, Left party: 54 percent). This trend will receive further confirmation in the course of the analysis.

Figure 5: Disagreements in Discussions on Political Subjects with Partner by Party Preference*
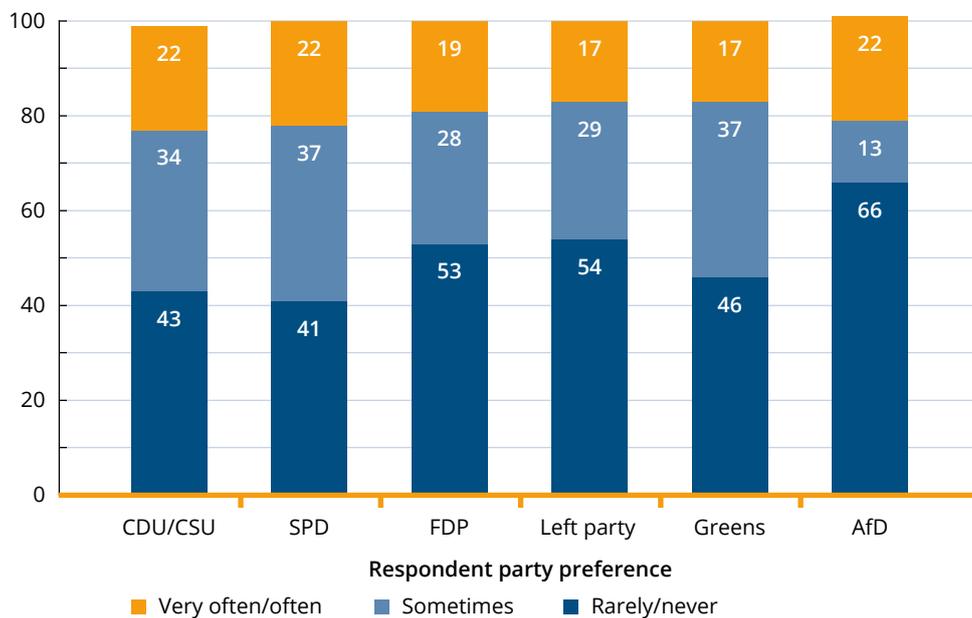
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

** Due to rounding, the figures in the graphs sometimes add up to more or less than 100 percent. This applies to all the graphs in this publication.*

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Disagreements and Party
Preferences in the Partnership

At the same time, the participants in the study were also asked about their partner's presumed vote. Here too, a fundamental homogeneity between the partners is shown. For example, two thirds of all CDU/CSU voters in partnerships say that their partner is likewise a CDU/CSU voter. Most supporters of all the other parties also presume that their partners belong to their own respective political camp. However, this share is considerably smaller in some cases (SPD: 59 percent, Greens: 54 percent, AfD: 53 percent, Left party: 43 percent, FDP: 33 percent). Among respondents who indicate that they vote for the FDP, a quarter presume that their partner votes for the CDU/CSU. In contrast, AfD voters show a conspicuously high proportion of partners who are presumed not to vote (15 percent).

Figure 6: Agreement Between Respondent's Party Preference and Presumed Vote of Partner by Party Preference
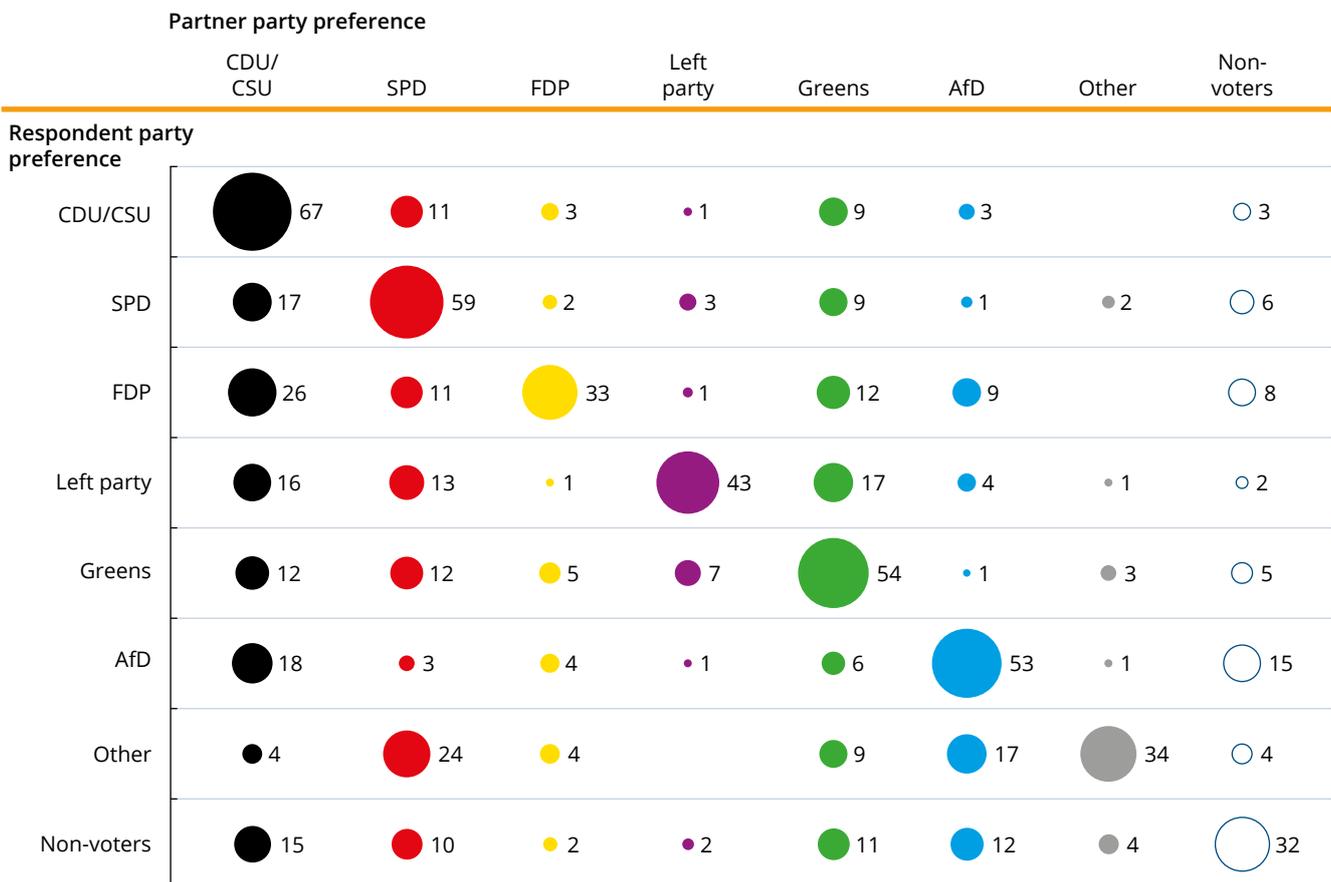
Partner party preference

Respondent party preference	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Left party	Greens	AfD	Other	Non-voters
CDU/CSU	67	11	3	1	9	3		3
SPD	17	59	2	3	9	1	2	6
FDP	26	11	33	1	12	9		8
Left party	16	13	1	43	17	4	1	2
Greens	12	12	5	7	54	1	3	5
AfD	18	3	4	1	6	53	1	15
Other	4	24	4		9	17	34	4
Non-voters	15	10	2	2	11	12	4	32

Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
Missing numbers to add up to 100 percent: Partner under 18 years of age. "Don't know"/ "no response" data omitted.

Tip on how to read the chart: Reading the line from left to right: 67 percent of CDU/CSU supporters say that their partner also votes for the CDU/CSU. 11 percent presume that their partner votes for the SPD.

Looking back at the numbers on disagreements, it is striking that although a majority of CDU/CSU and SPD supporters have the same party preference as their partners (67 and 59 percent respectively), they say relatively often that they disagree with their partner in discussions on political subjects. This might be a reflection of the thematic breadth of the two largest parties, which, given the larger number of political topics covered, also leads to a greater variety of opinions. In contrast, there is less potential for conflict among those who vote for the AfD, which exhibits a very narrow orientation in terms of topics.

An individual's life partner thus has a major influence on his or her own political choices. In-depth analyses of the data show that the more discussions partners have about political subjects, the more frequently they have the same party preference. In addition, an overlap is more likely if the couple tends to agree in their discussions. The findings suggest that the partner has an influence. This is because research shows that voters are more easily influenced when they have the feeling that they generally agree with an interlocutor in political terms (cf., for example, Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995, Schmitt-Beck 2000). The importance of the frequency of discussion can also be explained theoretically. The more frequently political subjects are discussed, the more often an individual receives information with a particular political orientation, such that ultimately a convergence of political preferences takes place (Johnston/ Pattie 2006). Nonetheless, it remains an open question whether, in causal terms, people selectively seek out a partner who shares their own political ideas and values or whether partners converge over time on account of their relationship and exchange with one another. Recently, however, there are more and more observers in the social sciences who consider choice of a partner based primarily on political views unlikely and find evidence of partners influencing each other (Schmitt-Beck 2000, Lazer et al. 2010). It remains unclear, however, from whom the process of influencing originates in each case.

Political Communication Outside of the Partnership

All respondents, including single people, were asked to identify one person to whom they talk about politics outside of the partnership. Whereas 12 percent of respondents indicated that they do not talk to anyone about politics outside of the partnership, one third identified a friend as additional interlocutor, followed by relatives (26 percent), colleagues (18 percent) and neighbours (4 percent). The average frequency of discussion increases with a higher level of formal education and profession. Moreover, respondents from single-person households discuss political subjects more frequently than respondents from multi-person households.

Once again, AfD supporters are top of the ranking in terms of frequency of discussion. The proportion of this group that talk to the specified interlocutor from their circle of acquaintances about politics "often" or even "very often" is 58 percent, followed by Left party voters at around 56 percent. The voters of the two parties with the largest membership, the CDU/CSU and the SPD, are somewhat more reserved and, for the most part, discuss politics with acquaintances only occasionally or even less.

Figure 7: Frequency of Discussion with First Acquaintance by Party Preference
Here: "Often/very often"
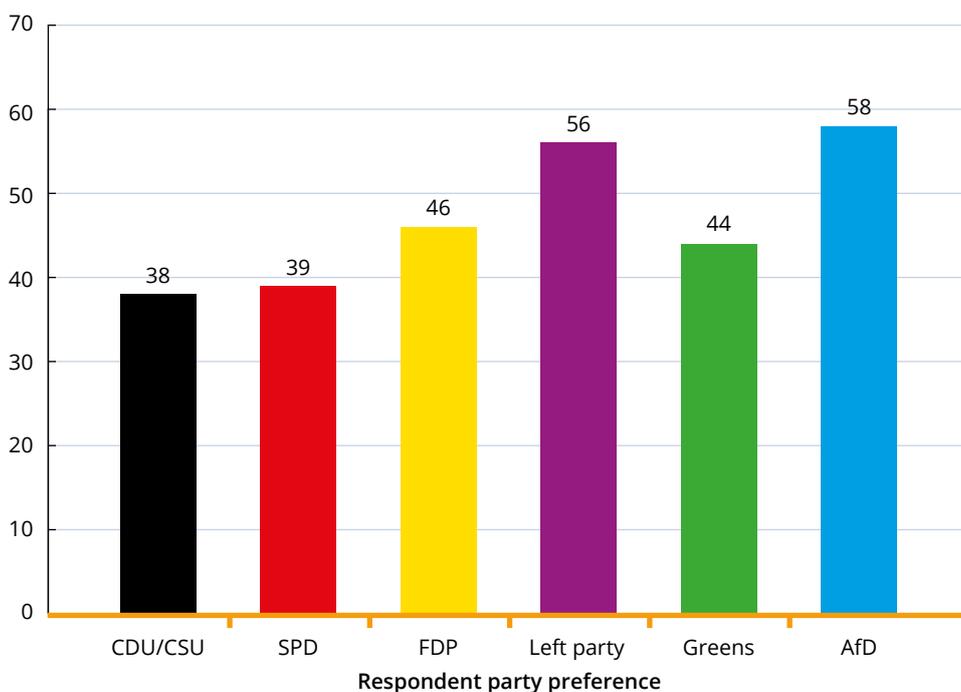
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

In comparison to the partnership, there is greater contrast in the discussions about politics with an additional acquaintance. Disagreement occurs "often" or "very often" for 29 percent, "sometimes" for 35 percent, while 36 percent experience dissonance with their interlocutor on political subjects only "rarely" or "never". A similar distribution is apparent for the voters of almost all parties. Respondents who indicate that they vote for the AfD represent the clear exception. Similar to the partnership, in discussions with friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbours, around two thirds are only "rarely" or "never" in disagreement with their counterpart.

Figure 8: Disagreements in Discussions on Political Subjects with First Acquaintance by Party Preference
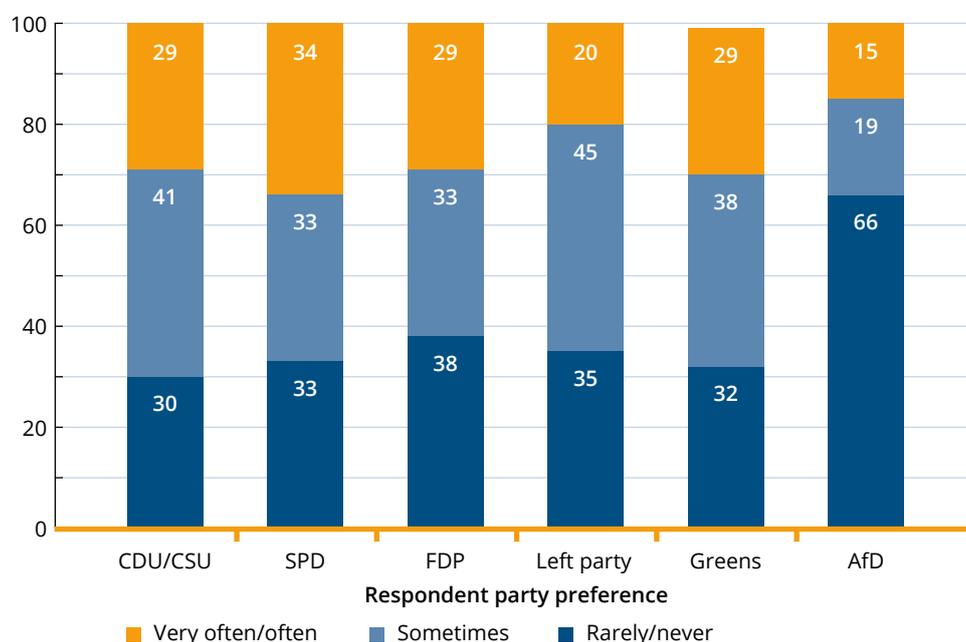
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

This trend toward increasing heterogeneity continues when participants are asked about political communication with a second person outside the partnership. While the shares of the categories on general disagreement in political topics shift only slightly, clear differences are apparent depending on party preferences. Thus, most Left party voters and CDU/CSU voters disagree with their second political interlocutor "often" or "very often" (45 percent and 38 percent respectively). In contrast, AfD voters indicate that they only "rarely" (16 percent) have political arguments with this person as well and are mostly of the same opinion (55 percent).

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Figure 9: Disagreements in Discussions on Political Subjects with Second Acquaintance by Party Preference
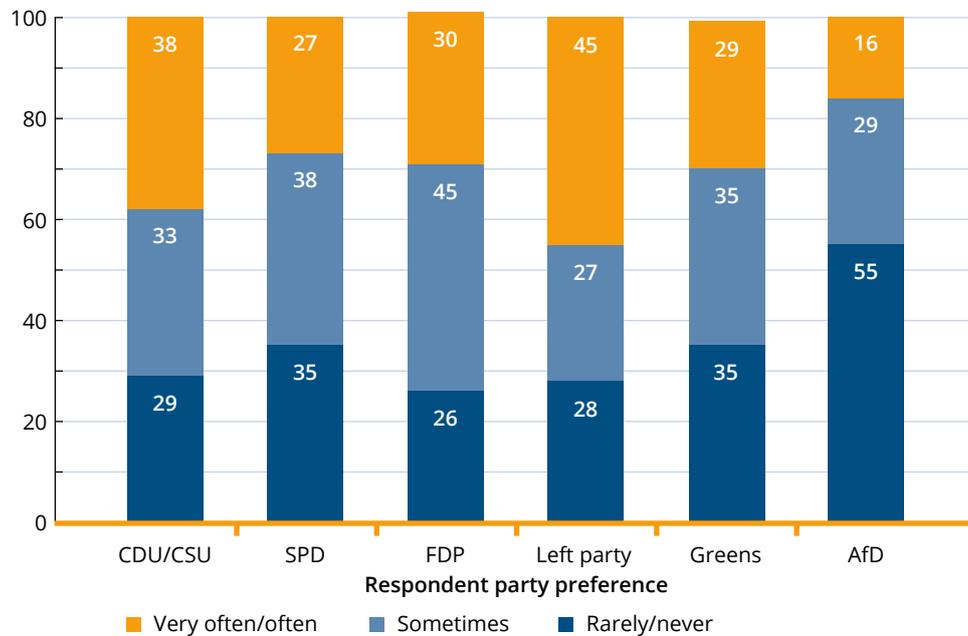
*Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.*

The differences observed in terms of divergent opinions are also reflected in the congruence of party preferences. Two thirds of all respondents who vote for the AfD themselves indicate that their acquaintance also votes for the AfD. The area of intersection is (significantly) less than half for the CDU/CSU (44 percent), the SPD (33 percent), the FDP (32 percent), the Greens (29 percent) and the Left party (21 percent).

Moreover, a skewed perception becomes apparent here: While a double-digit percentage of AfD voters have the feeling that they are speaking with supporters of another party only in the case of presumed CDU/CSU voters (15 percent), 9 to 17 percent of the supporters of all the other parties say that they also talk to people who they presume vote for the AfD. Therefore, AfD supporters are not fundamentally avoided by everyone else, but they themselves have the feeling that they talk mainly to their own people and only to a small extent to CDU/CSU voters. It is also striking that AfD voters and non-voters appear to be close. An above-average proportion of AfD voters say that they talk to a non-voter (5 percent), and among non-voters, AfD voters are even the largest group (21 percent, along with CDU/CSU and SPD voters).

Figure 10: Agreement Between Respondent's Party Preference and Presumed Vote of First Acquaintance
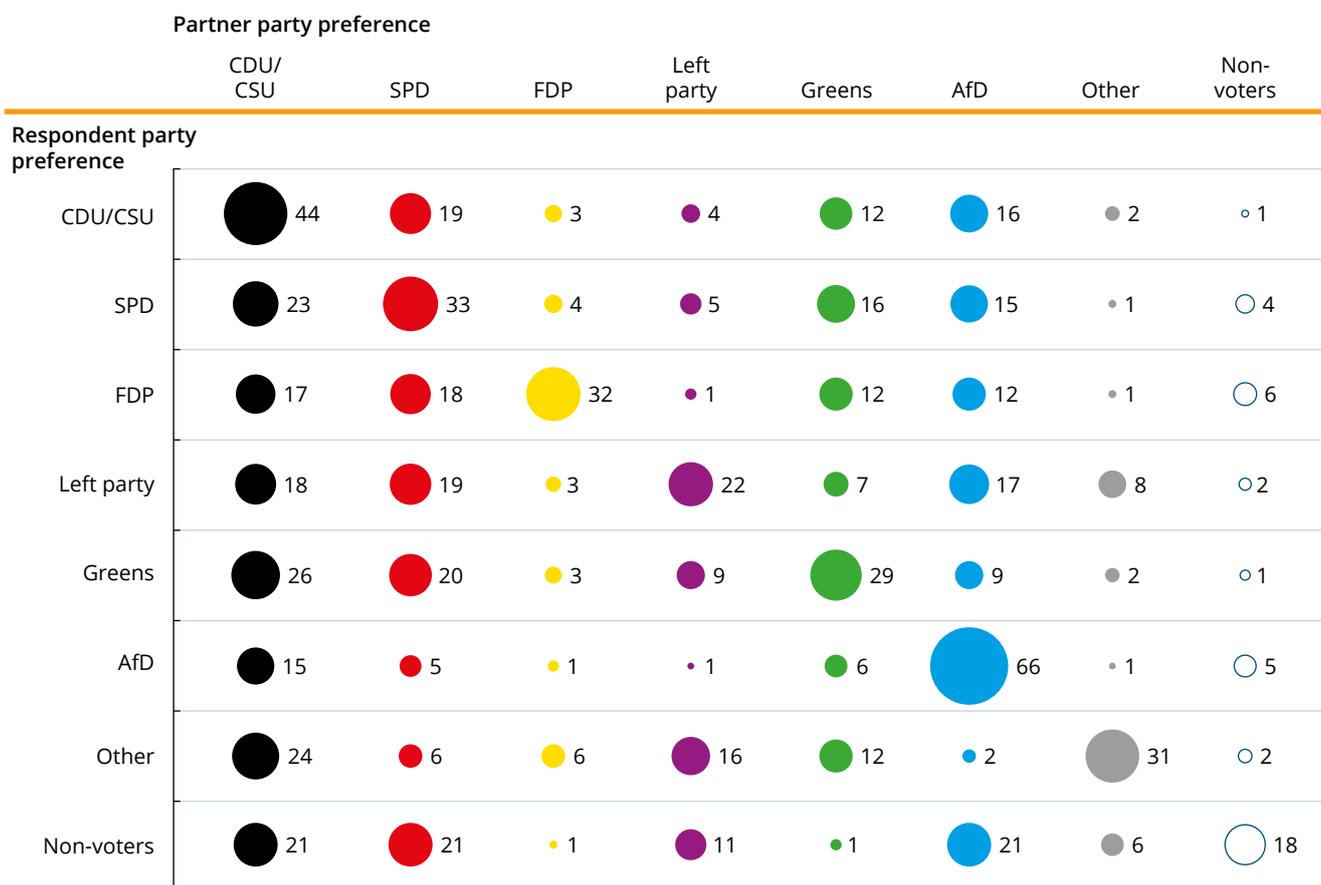
Partner party preference

Respondent party preference	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Left party	Greens	AfD	Other	Non-voters
CDU/CSU	44	19	3	4	12	16	2	1
SPD	23	33	4	5	16	15	1	4
FDP	17	18	32	1	12	12	1	6
Left party	18	19	3	22	7	17	8	2
Greens	26	20	3	9	29	9	2	1
AfD	15	5	1	1	6	66	1	5
Other	24	6	6	16	12	2	31	2
Non-voters	21	21	1	11	1	21	6	18

*Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.*
Missing numbers to add up to 100 percent: Acquaintance under 18 years of age. "Don't know"/ "no response" data omitted.

Tip on how to read the chart: Reading the line from left to right: 44 percent of CDU/CSU supporters answer that their first interlocutor on political subjects also votes for the CDU/CSU. 19 percent presume that the latter votes for the SPD.

Comparing respondents and the second person to whom they talk about politics shows that the differences between the first and the second interlocutors are minimal. Apart from FDP voters, the results for agreement in party preference between respondent and second interlocutor are very similar: CDU/CSU supporters presume that 43 percent of their second interlocutors likewise vote for the CDU/CSU. SPD voters (33 percent), Left party voters (21 percent), Green voters (32 percent) and AfD voters (59 percent) likewise presume that the largest proportion belong to their own political camp. FDP voters identify possible CDU/CSU supporters as the largest group among the second interlocutors (35 percent) and only 18 percent of them presume that their counterpart also votes for the FDP. The average of the responses on both first and second interlocutors outside the partnership is shown below.

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Figure 11: Agreement Between Respondent's Party Preference and Presumed Vote of First and Second Acquaintances
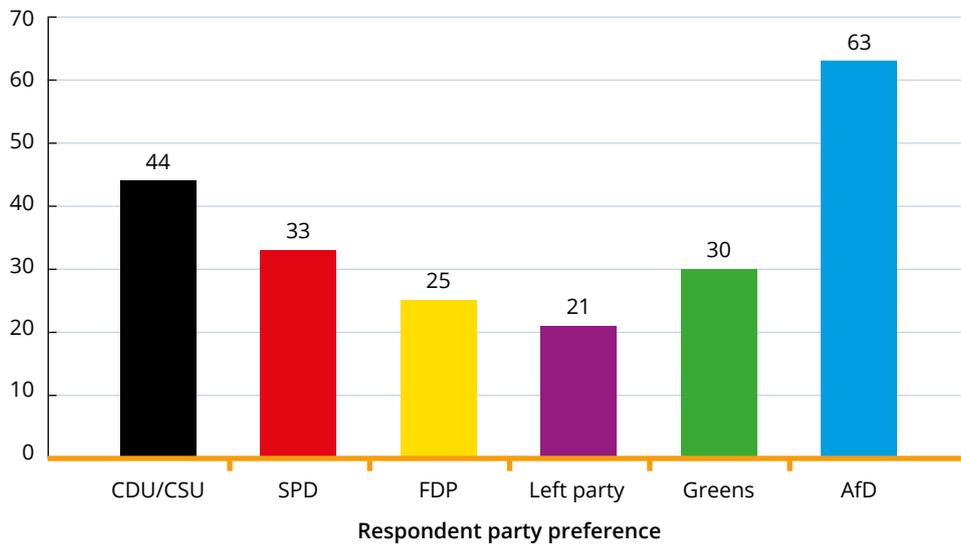
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. "Don't know"/ "no response" data omitted.

The distribution of support for the parties within the population should also be taken into consideration. Thus, with a fundamentally higher proportion of CDU/CSU voters in the population, two CDU/CSU voters are more likely to get together than two voters of a smaller party. The "homogeneity coefficient" determines the preference for interlocutors from the same party, while taking into account the relative strength of the political parties (Gärtner and Wuttke 2019). For this purpose, the average percentage of like-minded people (see Figure 11) is divided by the parties' potential share of the votes at the time of the survey.[5]

Figure 12: Homogeneity of Respondents with First and Second Interlocutors in Political Communication by Party Preference
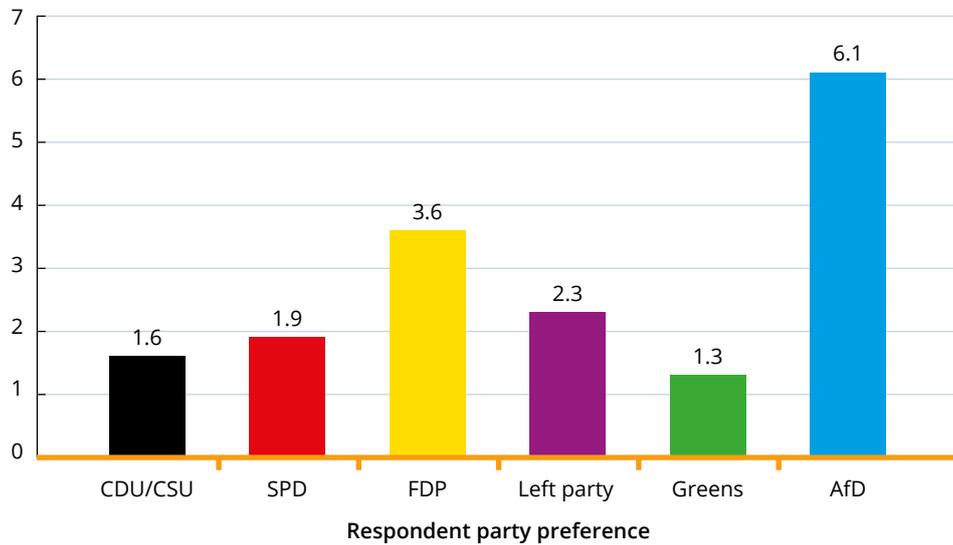
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Note: The homogeneity coefficient indicates the factor by which the proportion of respondents whose interlocutor intends to vote for the same party rises as compared to a random distribution of interlocutors.

Tip on how to read the chart: At a value of 1.9, an SPD voter is around twice as likely to talk to another SPD voter than would be expected in the case of a random distribution.

The table shows that respondents from all parties prefer political communication with like-minded people. This is to say, the proportion of respondents with an interlocutor who presumably votes for the same party is greater than the party's average voter share in each case. Otherwise, the homogeneity coefficient would have to be one or less. Nonetheless, major differences between the parties are apparent. Green and CDU/CSU voters take part in discussions outside the partnership in relatively heterogeneous networks. In contrast, an AfD voter is around six times more likely to have an interlocutor who likewise prefers the AfD compared to a random distribution. On the basis of the homogeneity coefficient, there are, in general, arguments for the existence of socially segregated spaces. These are especially highly pronounced in the case of AfD voters, but they are also highly pronounced in the case of Left party and FDP voters. Simply put, these voters hear the views of people who think differently than they do more rarely in the context of political discussions. Having said that, if we look at the previous diagram on political homogeneity from the opposite perspective, we also find that most supporters of all parties (apart from the AfD) talk to an acquaintance who, the respondent assumes, votes for a different political party.

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To sum up, similar, if albeit somewhat weaker, effects can be found for the influence of other primary (friends, relatives) and secondary relationships (neighbours, colleagues) as in the partnership. Once again, the frequency of discussion and the frequency of disagreements are explanatory factors for presumably identical party preferences. The more often the respondent talks to the specified interlocutor about politics and the more frequently the two of them agree in such discussions, the greater the likelihood that their favoured parties presumably match. As was already the case for the results in the partnership, questions of causality again arise here. However, long-term observations of social networks suggest that political conformity does not determine the choice of discussion partners, rather that it is formed through convergence during processes of social exchange (Zuckerman 2007). The circle of acquaintances with whom politics is discussed would therefore have a decisive influence on an individual's own political preferences.

Then again, the findings of recent studies show that this explanation is inadequate, above all, for AfD voters. Observations from a qualitative study[6] by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung show that while AfD supporters are more rarely open to discussion in a heterogeneous group, they suddenly engage in especially intensive political discussions if they are in a homogeneous group consisting of like-minded people. This is also consistent with individual comments from the interviews and group discussions that were conducted in the framework of the study.

"They [the circle of friends] mostly also have a similar opinion to your own. So there are actually no opposing attitudes. Then you also say what you think."[7]
(male, 43, *Abitur*[8], AfD)

"Outside, you've picked up so much from the news and that sort of thing, you can't let your own opinion be known, you only do that in your circle of friends, with those you're closest to. [...] We are pretty much in agreement, we have the same opinion in our circle of friends. [...] We're all singing from the same hymn sheet."
(male, 44, *Mittlere Reife*[9], AfD)

"I think most of the time you look, when you're discussing this sort of thing or because you're a little bit wary, you look for the people who you know have the same opinion. And not somebody who sees it totally differently, who I have to convince, then it becomes confrontational. You do it more because you know we're on the same wavelength anyway. [...] This is also how you choose your friends."
(female, 50, college degree, AfD)

AfD supporters seem to use political attitudes to choose who they talk to about politics more often than supporters of other parties. The phenomenon of cognitive dissonance is well-known from psychology (Festinger 1978 [2012]). In general, people try to avoid being confronted by contradictory opinions and instead seek confirmation of their own opinion *(confirmation bias)*. This is especially true of the political positions of the AfD, since they are irreconcilably opposed to the positions of all the other parties on contentious issues like migration and climate, for instance. Therefore, contrary to the convergence thesis, it seems entirely plausible that the social milieu of AfD supporters is constructed according to criteria of similarity – also in terms of political views.

In addition, the homogeneous political milieu of AfD supporters can also be depicted as a consequence of social isolation processes. According to a representative survey, 57 percent of eligible voters want nothing to do with AfD voters.[10] In interviews some AfD voters furthermore mention instances of acquaintances breaking off contact with them, taking distance or reducing contact with them due to insurmountable political differences.

"Two people have already stopped being friends with me, I have to say, because I openly said that I voted for the AfD."
(female, 44, *Mittlere Reife*, AfD)

"My circle mostly reacted by breaking off contact. Somehow, you're directly put in a corner where you always thought, I don't actually belong there, I don't come from there, and I also don't want to go there at all. It's just been a taboo subject. If you had a different opinion in whatever way, then it definitely became very difficult. At the moment, I don't have any real circle of friends anymore anyway; for the most part, it really finished off all that too."
(male, 28, *Abitur*, AfD)

This impression is also confirmed when we look at the comments made by interviewees from other parties.

"Five years ago, my father started to turn toward a party [the AfD] that is unacceptable in Germany as far as I am concerned. [...] Since then, in terms of our personal relationship, my father and I are just hello and goodbye, nothing more."
(male, 39, *Abitur*, CDU)

"The only ones I don't talk to are the AfD."
(female, 76, unknown, the Greens)

"It would in fact be out of the question for me to have an AfD supporter in my circle of acquaintances, then I would just say, you don't need to get any closer to me."
(female, 35, *Mittlere Reife*, the Left party)

AfD supporters often complain here about (what they feel are) restrictions on freedom of expression, as well as a form of stigmatisation that places them indiscriminately on the "far right".

"It used to be possible to express your opinion more. The majority here has confirmed that if you're for the AfD, you're immediately pigeon-holed as right-wing."
(female, 60, *Abitur*, AfD)

"If, for example, you simply formulate the well-known topic of refugees wrongly or in a way that is too emotional, bang, you're a Nazi."
(male, 33, college degree, AfD)

"You somehow have a kind of inhibition, so you say ... So you simply don't dare, since, as has been said, it often happens, you're a Nazi."
(female, 36, *Hauptschulabschluss*[11], AfD)

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As a result, a conflict-avoidance strategy can be observed: The supporters of other parties are reluctant to talk to AfD supporters because they fear unpleasant, conflictual situations, or they categorically rule out any contact. In contrast, AfD voters feel marginalized or stigmatised and withdraw into homogeneous groups, in which they talk to each other actively.

5   In the present data set, the potential vote share was determined on the basis of valid responses, i. e., not including "don't know" responses and non-responses (CDU/CSU: 27 percent, SPD: 18 percent, FDP: 7 percent, Left party: 9 percent, Greens: 24 percent, AfD: 10 percent).

6   On behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, in December 2019, Mauss Research carried out a qualitative study involving 68 one-hour, guided interviews and 24 two-hour group discussions with different groups of eligible voters.

7   The speaker's gender, age, highest level of education obtained and party preference are provided for each quotation.

8   High school diploma/college entrance qualification.

9   School leaving certificate typically obtained after completion of year ten.

10   Infratest dimap carried out 3,250 telephone interviews regarding tendencies to polarisation in German society. The interviews were conducted on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung from 9 October 2019 to 27 February 2020. The study was carried out using the dual-frame approach with a 37 percent share of cell-phone interviews and a corresponding 63 percent landline share. The results are representative for the population of eligible voters resident in Germany aged 18 and over.

11   School-leaving certificate typically obtained after completion of year nine.

5 Political Communication on the Internet

The Internet has become an important platform for political communication in the 21st century. Besides discussions about online filter bubbles, the question that, in particular, arises is the extent to which groups of politically active online users overlap with the "frequent discussers" of politics in the offline world. Moreover, user behaviour on the Internet allows us to draw conclusions on peoples' willingness to participate in politics. However, the Internet has not yet reached every household in Germany as a source of political information. Far from it. Thus, according to the respondents' answers, 18 percent do not use the Internet at all. A clear age effect can be seen here. Whereas almost everyone in the age groups from 18 to 49 years old uses the Internet (98 or 97 percent), the share of non-users increases gradually with age: 12 percent of 50 to 59 year olds, 30 percent of 60 to 69 year olds and half of 70 to 79 year olds say that they do not use the Internet at all. In the over-79 group, the figure is already 71 percent.

**Figure 13: Agreement With the Statement "I do not use the internet at all" by Age Groups**

Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
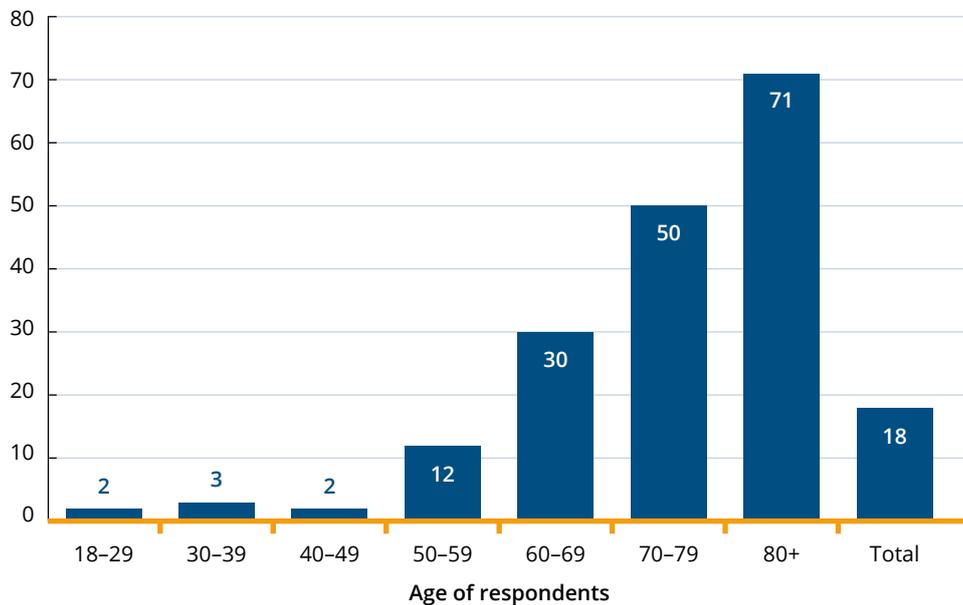
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Furthermore, 30 percent of all respondents say they use the Internet, but not for the political domain. Political messages communicated online therefore do not reach almost half of the voting-eligible population, combined with the non-users, at all. For comparison, according to a GESIS[12] study (Roßteutscher et al. 2019), a good 81 percent of respondents noticed election posters before the 2017 Bundestag elections and after the elections fully 94 percent said that they have noticed them. Therefore, the parties' digital competition for voters' support cannot replace the analogue election campaign. On the contrary, ultimately only around half of respondents say they consume political content on the Internet.

In addition, similar education effects can be observed as in offline discussion culture. On average, use of the Internet for political purposes expands with an increasing level of formal education. With a decreasing level of formal education, on the other hand, non-use or a non-political use becomes more likely. Moreover, an unsurprising age effect can be found: 78 percent of 18 to 29 year olds and 73 percent of 30 to 39 year olds read political content on the Internet. In contrast, only 34 percent of 60 to 69 year olds and 23 percent of 70 to 79 year olds do so.

**Figure 14: Use of the Internet for Political Communication**
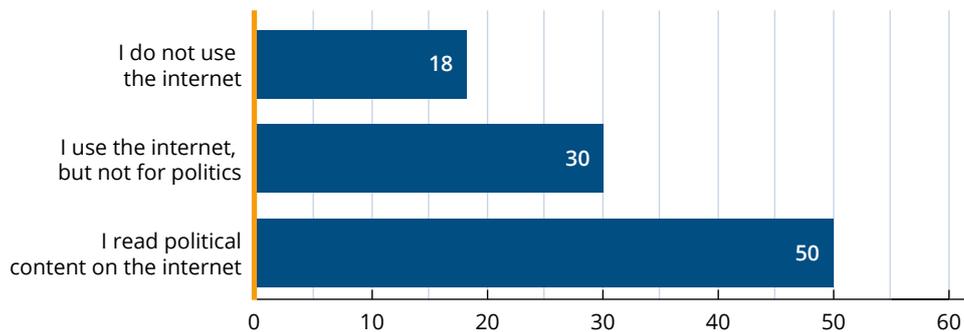
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
Missing data to add up to 100 percent: "don't know"/"no response".

The supporters of the various parties represented in the Bundestag show significant differences in terms of their use of the Internet for political purposes. An above-average number of CDU/CSU voters and SPD voters are non-users (26 and 28 percent respectively) or do not use the Internet for the political domain (30 and 28 percent respectively). Far less than half the supporters of both parties (42 percent) consume political content online at all. In contrast, most voters of all other parties use the Internet to read political posts, among other things. The proportion is especially high among FDP supporters (75 percent) and Green voters (70 percent).

Figure 15: Political Internet Use by Party Preference
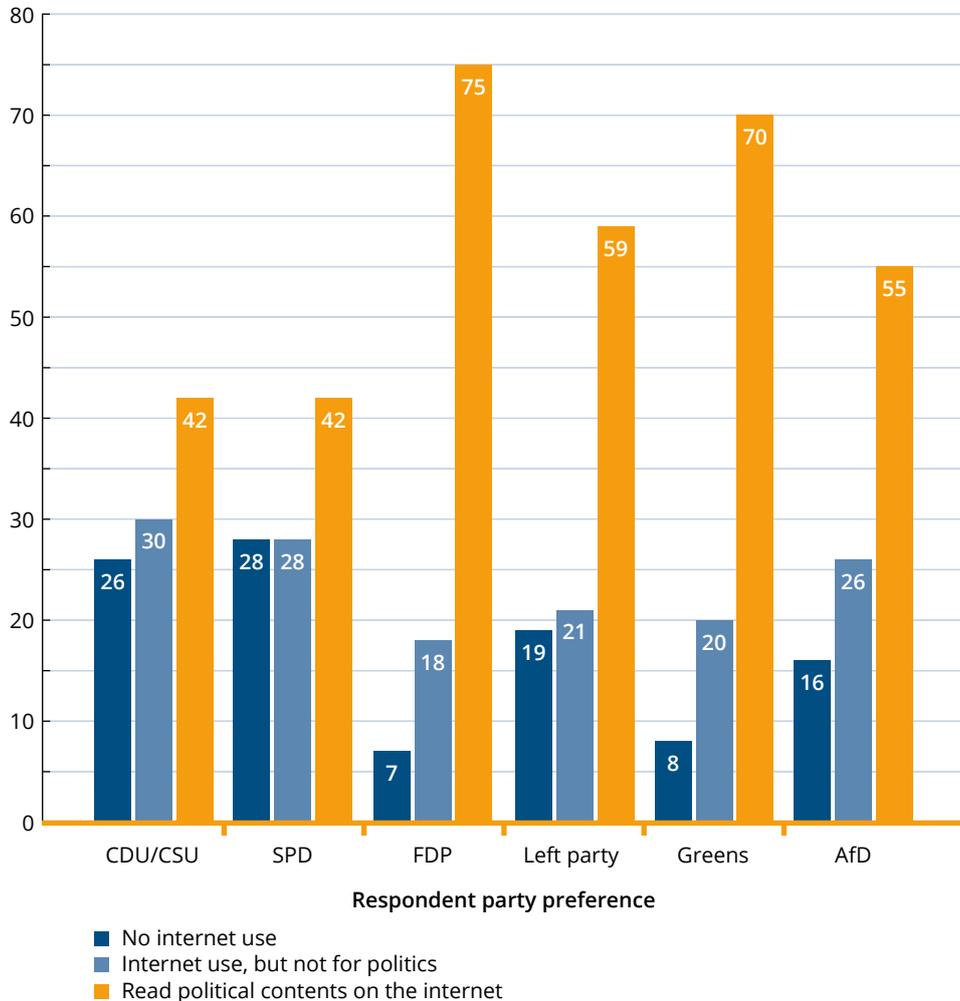
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
*Missing numbers to add up to 100 percent: "don't know"/"no response".*

If we consider the respondents who read political content on the Internet only, a total of almost one third of them avail of the interactive possibilities in social networks (e. g., Facebook). This is to say that they comment on, share with other users or "like" political content. Nonetheless, the degrees of inhibition around using the different functions appear to vary. Nearly a quarter of online readers also "like" some of the political posts, whereas only a fifth additionally decide to share political content with acquaintances. Just 12 percent say that they comment on political posts. Since formulating a political comment is more time-consuming and demanding than simply "liking" a post or using the "share" function, this graduated order of frequencies makes sense.

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The aforementioned age effect shows up again here. Younger cohorts use interactive functions more often, on average, than older age groups, although the presumed retiree group between 65 and 79 years old is more active than the 50 to 64 year olds. Differences in terms of education levels are also apparent. Respondents with a college degree share, "like" and comment less often, on average, than all the others. In contrast, the interactive functions are used more frequently by respondents with the *Mittlere Reife* diploma (as opposed to the *Abitur*, a *Haupt-* or *Volksschule* diploma or a college degree). Respondents with the *Abitur*, in turn, share and "like" political content more frequently, on average, than respondents with a *Hauptschule* diploma. It is notable that precisely in the case of the most visible form of interactivity, i. e. commenting, the respondents with a lower level of formal education have a higher proportion of users than the respondents who have an *Abitur* or a college degree, i. e. the highest levels of formal education.

Figure 16: Users of Interactive Functions in Social Networks
Here: Only respondents who read political content on the internet
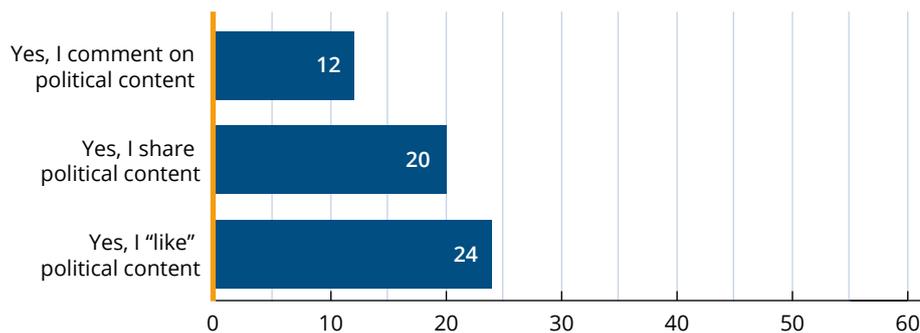
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

Among the readers of political content, supporters of the CDU/CSU (18 percent) and the FDP (17 percent) are especially unlikely to be interactive. Among SPD voters and Green voters, nearly a third (30 percent) are interactive with political content. The supporters of the AfD and the Left party stand out: More than one in two voters of each of these parties also uses the interactive functions of political posts in social networks. AfD supporters are therefore especially active here too. Like Left party voters, they are avid users. However, respondents were not asked about the circles in which this online political communication takes place.

Figure 17: Users of Interactive Functions of Political Contents in Social Networks by Party Preference

Here: Only respondents who read political content on the internet
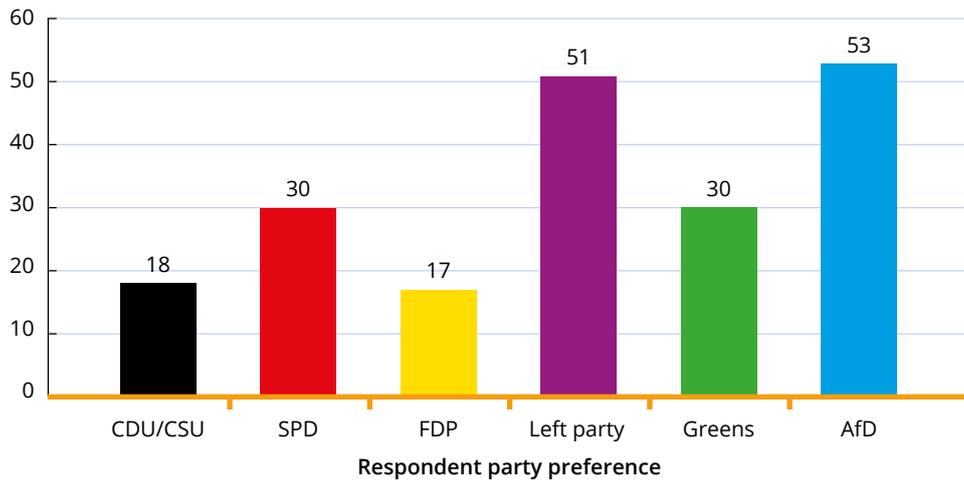

Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

The distribution among the individual functions, however, was again highly varied. Among supporters of all the parties, political posts on social networks are "liked" more often than shared and, in turn, shared more often than commented on. Among CDU/ CSU voters and FDP voters, the infrequent use is reflected in all forms of interaction. Among Green supporters, it is striking that among nearly a third of those who are active (see Fig. 17), their activity is almost exclusively due to the "liking" of political posts and they only comment on posts very rarely (3 percent). Among SPD voters, nearly a third of whom also use interactive functions, the distribution is more balanced. Not only are an above-average number of Left party voters and AfD voters active, but around a third of online readers even use the most demanding as well as the most visible form of inter-action, i. e., commenting, in each case. At 36 percent, AfD supporters have as much as three times as many respondents as the average for the online readers of political con-tent (12 percent, see Fig. 16).

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Figure 18: Use of Interactive Functions of Political Content in Social Networks by Party Preference
Here: Only respondents who read political content on the internet
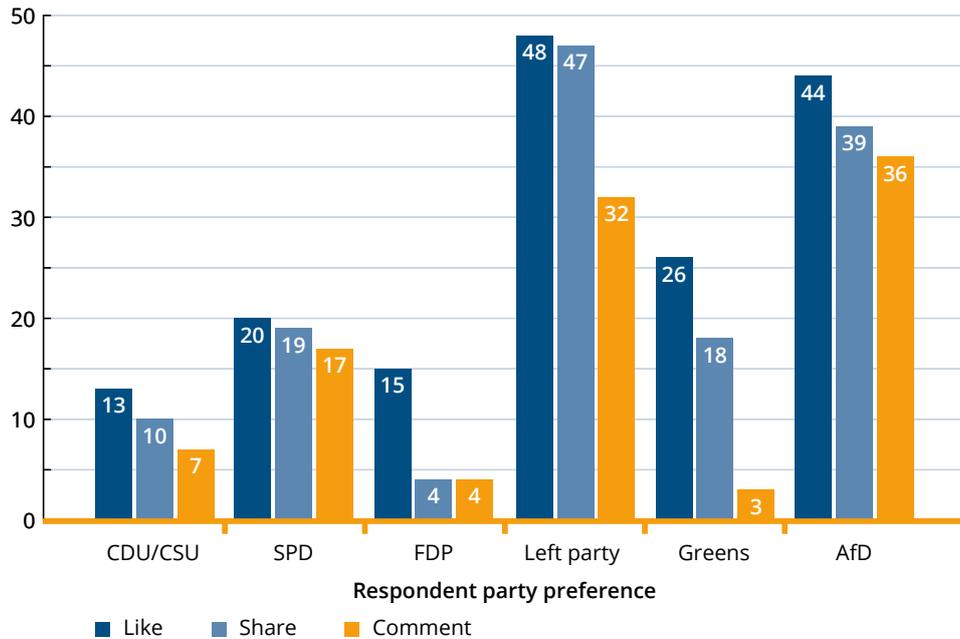
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

The data does not provide any insight into the place where and the political context in which the comments were written. Nonetheless, the results confirm the sense of AfD voters' visibility and audibility in social networks. Measured by the number of users, an extremely small minority manages to gain attention and thus to distort the perceived image of current discussions. The fact that the supposed political opposite (here: the Left party) is also particularly active at the same time could help explain the felt sense of polarisation.

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12   The Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (GESIS).

6 Political Communication Online and Offline

How do the active online users behave in the real world? In terms of frequency of discussion outside the partnership, it is striking that the groups of active participants do indeed overlap. Almost half of the readers of political posts online (47 percent) also have discussions about politics with an acquaintance offline often or very often. For comparison, the average figure of those who do this is just 35 percent. If we refer to users of interactive functions in social networks, this picture is reinforced: An above-average number of those who follow and "like" posts online also discuss politics (41 percent). The percentages of those respondents who say they share or comment on posts is even far above the average (60 and 68 percent respectively). Thus, not only do they engage intensively with political content online, they also discuss political subjects with acquaintances offline very often.

Figure 19: Offline Frequency of Discussion by Online Activities
Here: Proportion of respondents who talk to an acquaintance about politics "often/very often"
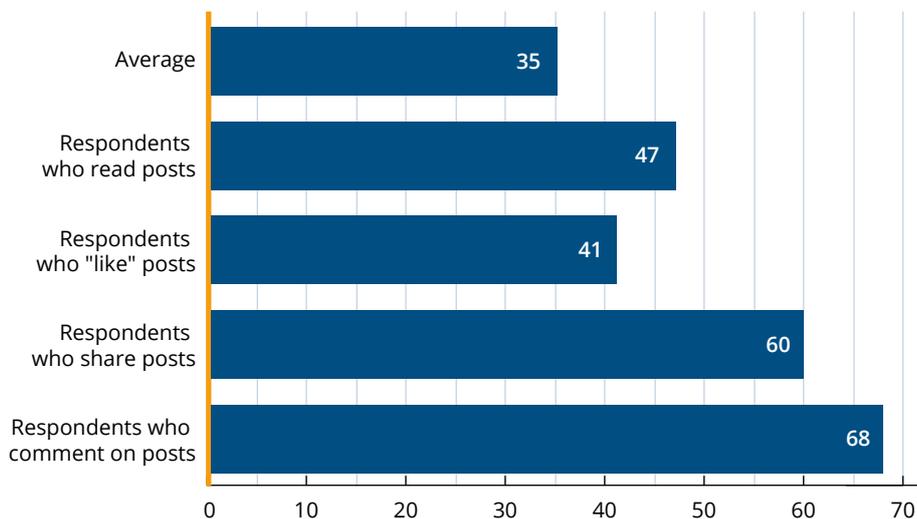
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

Conversely, non-users and the respondents with a lesser tendency to discuss politics also correspond. Eligible voters who do not read any political content on the Internet also talk about politics less. About 63 percent of those who only rarely talk to an acquaintance about politics do not read about political subject on the Internet either. Moreover, those who do not use the Internet as a source of information for political content include 16 percent who are non-voters, whereas only 8 percent of readers of political information on the Internet are non-voters.[13]

These results provide an insight into the composition of groups in the online and offline worlds of political communication. It is very clear that online users of political content also communicate about politics in the real world. They discuss politics with their acquaintances far more frequently than the average. In contrast, most people who tend to talk about politics rarely in their everyday lives also do not use the Internet in connection with the political domain. For broadcasters of political messages and news, this means that it is hardly possible to significantly expand one's target group by increasing one's online presence. The reason is that anyone who consumes political content online can also be easily reached by way of political discussions in everyday life. Added to this, the majority of the largest population group in terms of age, the over-65s, is not represented online. Nonetheless, in light of the intensive Internet use of the younger cohorts, there are also opportunities for reaching people.

Moreover, with regard to the frequency of disagreement with acquaintances and the use of interactive functions, some conclusions can be drawn with regard to the online spaces of interaction. This is because, remarkably, a below-average number of the respondents who "like", share and comment say they disagree with an acquaintance "often" or "very often". Since political discussions between acquaintances can also take place online, this tends to point more to homogeneous online spaces. Either the differences between friends are not aired online via comments and shared articles, or the interactions take place precisely between friends, who are known to often have the same party preference.

Figure 20: Disagreement in Political Discussions by Online Activities
Here: "Often/very often" disagree
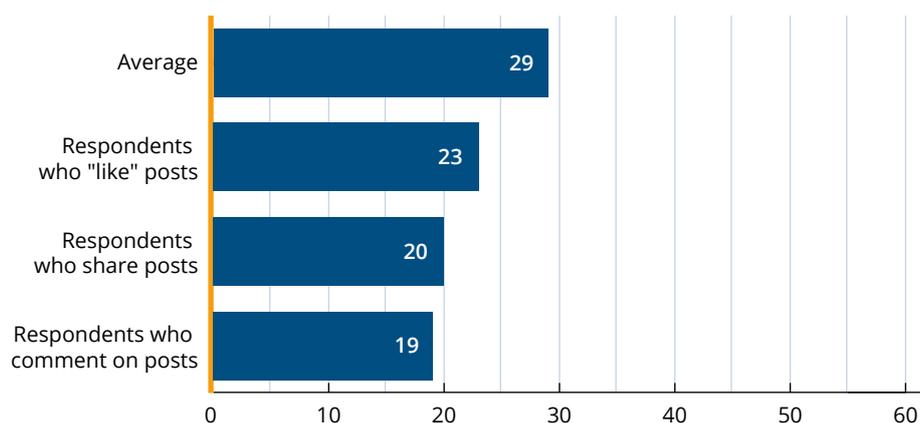
Source: Survey 2019-06 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

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13   Again, only valid responses were taken into account: i. e., not including "don't know" responses and non-responses.

7 **Summary**

People's social milieu can have an influence on political choices such as their decision to vote in general and their specific party preference. The closer and more intimate the relationship, the stronger the potential influence. Life partners therefore have the greatest effect, but other close acquaintances, like, for example, relatives or friends, also have a reciprocal impact on political views.

Based on over 4,000 interviews, this representative study provides an insight into the political communication behaviour of the voting-eligible population in Germany and examines the influence and composition of the immediate milieu of individuals with whom politics is discussed in everyday life.

The analysis shows clear indications of the life partner's influence. If couples never talk about politics or if their partner does not vote, the proportion of non-voters is over a third instead of around 9 percent. The partner thus influences the likelihood of voting in elections.

Most couples talk about politics on a regular basis. In partnerships in which the respondent says that he or she votes for the AfD, the Greens or the Left party, politics is discussed especially often. These couples rarely disagree in their discussions about political topics. Both partners frequently vote for the same party: 67 percent of the respondents who are CDU/CSU supporters say that their partner is also a CDU/CSU voter.

There is greater contrast in political discussions outside the partnership: i. e., with friends, colleagues, or neighbours. Disagreements occur more frequently with these interlocutors than with the partner. This does not apply to AfD supporters, however. Although they again talk about politics the most often compared to supporters of other parties, they are (almost) always in agreement with the first acquaintance in two thirds of the cases. AfD supporters already reached this figure for discussions in the partnership, which stands out among all the different groups of supporters when the findings are considered by party.

In discussions with acquaintances, eligible voters also frequently have an interlocutor who, based on their own estimate, has the same party preference. In the question about the party preference of the first acquaintance, one's own party constitutes the largest group in each case. Moreover, the more frequently two people have discussions with one another and the more rarely they disagree in these discussions, the more likely they are to vote for the same political party.

Overall, however, most supporters of all parties talk to an acquaintance who does not vote for the same party. With one clear exception: 63 percent of AfD supporters talk to other AfD voters. This figure applies to both the first and the second acquaintances with whom political subjects are discussed.

In an attempt to find the reasons for the conspicuous homogeneity of this group, the results of a qualitative study were analysed. The study was carried out on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and involved individual interviews and group discussions. It shows that AfD voters feel stigmatised and are only comfortable expressing their opinion openly in small, homogeneous groups. They mention, moreover, that acquaintances have broken off contact with them on account of their support for the AfD. At least this perception of acquaintances ceasing to have contact with them is confirmed from the perspective of voters of other parties. Moreover, in a representative survey that was recently conducted on behalf of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 57 percent of eligible voters said that they want nothing to do with AfD voters. The homogenisation of the interlocutors seems to be a logical consequence of these tendencies.

The second part of the present study is devoted to the Internet as an important communication platform in the 21st century. The reach of online political content is limited, however: Only half of the voting-eligible population reads political content on the Internet. In contrast, almost a third of eligible voters never use the Internet for the political domain and 18 percent say they do not use the Internet at all. Unsurprisingly, an age effect is discernible here: Whereas almost all 18 to 49 year olds use the Internet, only half of the 70 to 79 year olds do so and only 29 percent of the over-79s. The proportion of readers of online political content is especially high among FDP voters (75 percent) and Green voters (70 percent). In contrast, it is lowest among supporters of the CDU/CSU and the SPD (42 percent).

In contrast, interactive functions of online content, i. e., "liking", sharing and commenting, are used by far most often by AfD voters and Left voters. The frequency with which they use the different forms of interaction varies, however. Comments are the most infrequent form and "likes" the most frequent form of user participation. Younger cohorts are more likely to use the functions than older ones, and respondents with the *Mittlere Reife* diploma are, on average, more often active than other groups in terms of educational level. Respondents with a college degree are especially reserved about using interactive functions online. It is notable that precisely in the case of the most visible form of interactivity, i. e. commenting, the respondents with a lower level of formal education have a significantly higher proportion of users than the respondents with the *Abitur* or a college degree.

The question of the correspondence between online and offline spaces of communication is what connects the two branches of the study. The study makes clear that online users of political content also communicate politically in the real world. Almost half of the readers of political content online (47 percent) also have discussions about politics with an acquaintance offline "often" or "very often". By comparison, just 35 percent of eligible voters, on average, do this. At the same time, those who discuss politics frequently in real life are also more present in social networks by "liking", commenting on or sharing political posts. Having said that, most people who tend to talk about politics rarely in their everyday lives do not use the Internet in connection with the political domain either. In terms of political communication, there is therefore an overlap between groups who are active online and active offline, as well as between those whose behaviour is passive online and passive offline.

Concluding Observation

At the outset, we posed the question as to whether the social milieu resembles a digital echo chamber. The answer is nuanced. Overall, the probability that attitudes will converge, including toward an identical party preference, increases with the frequency of discussions and less disagreement. Moreover, a preference for like-minded interlocutors is apparent across all parties. Most supporters of all parties, however, have discussions with a person whose party preference is situated outside their own party. AfD voters are the special case. Although they discuss politics more than the supporters of other parties, they are also more likely to agree both in the partnership and with other interlocutors. This is evidently connected to the choice of interlocutors with whom political subjects are discussed. Two thirds of them are other AfD supporters. Therefore, AfD voters talk about politics especially frequently, but preferably to people who are of the same opinion as them. As a result, this group is not only difficult to reach, but also not very willing to take part in an open discussion across political divides.

However, if we understand democracy as a place where compromises between different camps are indispensable and political arguments are a sign of vitality, dialogue about political subjects is needed outside people's own social spaces also. Even if the supporters of all the other parties also statistically prefer an interlocutor from their own political ranks, most of them do identify an acquaintance for political discussions who votes for another party. This is a highly positive signal for democracy. The aim is to achieve a political culture in which channels of communication between citizens of different views remain open. Clearer awareness of the degree of influence of one's own milieu can help to bring this about.

Appendix: Parties in Germany

CDU/CSU	Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union	center-right
SPD	Social Democratic Party Germany	center-left
Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (Grüne)	Federation 90/The Greens	center-left
FDP	Liberal Democratic Party	center-right
Die Linke	The Left	far-left
AfD	Alternative for Germany	far-right

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The Author

Dominik Hirndorf (M. A., M. Sc.) studied Political Science at the Universities of Passau, Constance and Gothenburg. Thereafter he worked for the *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute* at the University of Gothenburg. Since 2020 he is researcher in the Department Electoral and Social Research in the Division Analysis and Consulting at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Dominik Hirndorf
Electoral and Social Research Department
Analysis and Consulting
T +49 30 / 26 996-3858
dominik.hirndorf@kas.de

Postal address:
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.
10907 Berlin

Politics is omnipresent in everyday conversation. Both the way in which people talk about political subjects and their choice of interlocutors can have a decisive influence on their political preferences. Analyses of a representative study by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung show that an individual's partner, in particular, has the potential to exert influence. Moreover, notable differences are discernible between the supporters of different parties with respect to discussions both within and outside the partnership. These are especially clear in relation to the frequency of discussion, diversity of opinion, and agreement between the party preferences of the interlocutors. In addition, a parallel analysis of private use of the Internet for political communication explores the questions of who consumes political content online and of the composition of this part of the voting-eligible population. Finally, the two topics are linked in answering the question as to whether there is overlap between those who talk about politics actively online and those who do so offline.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.