


Socialism's legacy: the impact of political socialization on citizens' conceptions of democracy

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ABSTRACT

Political culture literature asserts that congruence between the existing democratic system and citizens' views and expectations of democracy is crucial for democratic stability. Consequently, citizens' conceptions of democracy not only influence political attitudes or vote choice, but also the endurance of democracy. For the German case, research has shown that differences in political socialization in East and West have caused differences in what conceptions of democracy citizens hold, suggesting that attitudes of young generations socialized in re-unified Germany are converging. However, persistent disparities between East and West and a surge in support for the right-wing populist AfD, especially in East Germany, raise the questions of how sustainable political socialization effects are, and how a populist conception of democracy might be related to political socialization. Using ESS 10 data, the article tests cohort effects on a liberal, a social democratic, and a populist understanding of democracy in Germany. The results show that cohorts socialized in a socialist system are more committed to a socialist, but also to a populist conception of democracy, while attitudes of young people are indeed converging.


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1. Introduction

While it is widely acknowledged that citizens' attitudes towards democracy influence democratic stability and resilience of the political system,¹ the impact of the political regime one grows up in on citizens' expectations of democracy has not been as intensely studied. This is particularly interesting as democracy is not one universal set of values and institutions, but democratic regimes are shaped in different ways and people hold different conceptions of democracy, i.e. different understandings of what democracy should be and how it should operate. In fact, it has been found that the democratic system shapes what citizens expect of democracy in the sense that citizens internalize characteristics of the political system they grow up in as the

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democratic ideal.² Different conceptions of democracy can lead to varying evaluations of the democratic system, depending on how congruent they are with institutional reality, and translate into different levels of satisfaction with democracy, which in turn influence political behaviour and democratic stability. Thus, political socialization plays a key part in how citizens view and act in a democracy.

To examine how particular political regimes and political socialization shape conceptions of democracy, the case of Germany is particularly interesting, as part of the population was socialized in the socialist system of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which differed gravely from the liberal democratic system of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in West Germany and Germany today. Research has shown that East and West German citizens differ in their political attitudes and behaviour in several regards, such as their economic policy preferences,³ views on gender roles,⁴ nationalist attitudes,⁵ or their understanding of ideological “left” and “right.”⁶ In terms of electoral behaviour, East Germans are less likely to feel an intrinsic duty to vote,⁷ are less attached to one particular party, and more favourably disposed towards the right-wing extremist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and far-left Die Linke.⁸ With regard to political culture, East and West Germans are similarly supportive of democracy as an idea, but East Germans tend to be less satisfied with the way democracy works,⁹ and more likely to trivialize the Nazi regime and dictatorship.¹⁰ Citizens in East Germany tend to hold more favourable attitudes towards direct democracy and socialism,¹¹ while West Germans are more supportive of liberal democracy.¹² Furthermore, East Germans tend to be more instrumental in their understanding of democracy, while West Germans hold more proceduralist understandings.¹³

Regarding the role of political socialization for conceptions of democracy, the literature has found that citizens in post-communist countries are more socialist,¹⁴ while citizens growing up in a liberal democracy are more favourable towards a liberal conception of democracy.¹⁵ Particularly, a study by Sack looks at the effect of political socialization for the German case, using cross-sectional data to show that people who grew up in the GDR are more socialist and less liberal than people who grew up in West Germany, while attitudes are converging for people who grew up in re-unified Germany.¹⁶

However, these findings need to be revisited for two reasons: On the one hand, in recent years we have seen electoral successes of the populist AfD and an increase in populist attitudes, especially in East Germany.¹⁷ The AfD attracts populist voters and voters that previously supported the Die Linke,¹⁸ successor of the socialist governing party in the GDR, who perceive German culture to be under threat and have high distrust in established political actors.¹⁹ Research has shown that people who intend to vote for populist parties are less attached to liberal democratic values and more inclined to support direct democracy and also authoritarianism.²⁰ Thus, to better understand the success of the AfD in East Germany, it needs to be assessed whether political socialization under a socialist regime not only influences support for liberal and socialist values, but also facilitates a populist conception of democracy.

On the other hand, we do not know to what extent socialization continues into adulthood and to what extent the values acquired through political socialization are passed on to younger generations, especially as some empirical evidence suggests that attitudes among the younger generations in Germany might not be converging after all.²¹ In lack of longitudinal data on different conceptions of democracy that allows for the disentanglement of age, period, and cohort (APC) effects, the analysis of new cross-sectional data can help us to understand whether observed cohort differences remain or dissolve over time.

Against this background, this article seeks to answer the question how political socialization in different political systems, specifically a liberal democracy and a socialist system, continue to shape conceptions of democracy over 30 years after regime change. To do so, this article focuses on a liberal, a social democratic, and a populist conception of democracy. While the former two may be viewed as expressing values institutionalized in the political systems of the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR, respectively, populism has not been institutionalized in either part of Germany. I thereby seek to replicate earlier findings by Sack and expand them in two ways: First, I consider the effect of political socialization on a populist conception of democracy, providing a new theoretical argument on how socialization in the GDR and the experiences made during regime transformation could be related to the support of populist values. Second, I use new data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Wave 10, which allows me to verify previous findings with regard to cohort effects, and validate them by using different measurements of socialization and applying Generalized Additive Modelling (GAM) of the birth year to allow for a flexible inclusion of cohort effects, which has been shown to constitute a robust test of cohort categorizations.²²

The following section introduces the theoretical background regarding political socialization and conceptions of democracy, concluding with several hypotheses for the effects of belonging to a particular birth cohort on liberal, social, and populist conceptions of democracy. In the third section, the methodological approach is discussed by introducing the data basis, the operationalization of the conceptions of democracy and control variables, and the plan for data analysis. The fourth section presents the empirical findings for the three conceptions of democracy. The conclusion summarizes and discusses the results.

2. Theoretical considerations

Political socialization, i.e. the internalization of political values and norms through exposure to them in early life, plays a key role in which democratic values citizens adopt.²³ This means that, while there is a lifelong process of political learning, political attitudes and political behaviour are heavily influenced by experiences made at a rather young age.²⁴ In their so-called “formative years,” children and young adults are exposed to biased information on politics and political ideas through their personal environment, such as parents and schooling, as well as political events and political circumstances. Thus, political values are transmitted between generations.²⁵ In the literature, the formative years are usually understood to occur between the ages of 17 and 25, but there is evidence that socialization starts even earlier. As van Deth et al. demonstrate, children in their first year of primary school already have consistent political knowledge and orientations.²⁶ Furthermore, political trust and issue attitudes are shown to be well established by the age of 14 and carry into the attitudes of young people until the age of 30.²⁷ Dennis et al. show that differences in attitudes towards democracy due to political socialization persist and even increase in later life.²⁸ With regard to communism, Pop-Eleches and Tucker find that early exposure to communism until the age of 18 has a more consistent impact on later political attitudes than adult exposure.²⁹ Overall, political socialization creates generational differences due to shared political socialization experiences among birth cohorts, ultimately leading to political and societal change when generations are being replaced over time.

Political socialization is one of the central explanatory variables for the persistent East-West divide in Germany, as it has been shown both descriptively and causally that values learned in the two different political systems carry over into political attitudes and behaviour after re-unification.³⁰ While the “Bonn republic” in West Germany was a liberal democracy almost identical to the German political system today, the GDR was a “socialist welfare state with an authority-related, hierarchical decision-making structure.”³¹ Since the GDR’s constitution emphasized the leadership of the – homogeneous – working class and its party, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and its elite had a strong claim to leadership, also beyond the political sphere.³² There was no political opposition or choice between political alternatives, political protest was discouraged, and dissent punished.³³

Differences in political socialization can cause differences in attitudes towards democracy. On the one hand, the length of democratic experience influences how people define democracy and how performance assessments impact support for democracy.³⁴ On the other hand, experiences made in an authoritarian system and during democratic transition also seem to influence support for democracy, as people who came of age during different types of authoritarian rule are less supportive of democracy than those who came of age in a democratic system.³⁵ Support for democracy also depends on how citizens read their country’s authoritarian past, with people being less satisfied if they share the ideological beliefs of the former authoritarian system.³⁶ Among people who experienced democratic transition in their adult years, ideological radicalism is found to be higher.³⁷ Concerning conceptions of democracy, it has been shown that authoritarian experiences in fact increase the likelihood of supporting socialist democracy,³⁸ while citizens growing up in a liberal democracy are more favourable towards a liberal conception of democracy.³⁹ Political socialization in socialism also influences the views on liberal democracy.⁴⁰

One of the few comprehensive studies of the impact of political socialization in different political systems on conceptions of democracy is a study by Sack, who uses the German case as a natural experiment to show the effect of growing up in different political systems on what citizens understand as a crucial part of democracy.⁴¹ Studying a liberal and a socialist conception of democracy, he finds that for the older cohorts, people who grew up in the GDR show a higher commitment to socialist values than people who grew up in West Germany. Regarding a liberal conception of democracy, this is the other way round, i.e. people who grew up in West Germany are more supportive than people who grew up in the GDR. For the youngest cohort born in 1985 or later and therefore socialized in a unified Germany, there are no differences in the support for liberal and socialist democracy. Thus, Sack shows clear effects of political socialization in a liberal democratic and socialist political system on liberal and socialist attitudes. As the study uses cross-sectional data, age, period, and cohort effects cannot be disentangled, and it remains questionable whether these are actual generational effects or whether the length of democratic experience among East Germans influences what conceptions of democracy they hold. Replicating the analysis with newer data can verify these results. Moreover, as discussed above, including a populist conception of democracy in the analysis accounts for political developments in Germany in the last ten years and helps clarify whether there is a connection between political socialization and the rise of the AfD in East Germany.

Apart from political socialization, the economic situation is seen as a central explanatory variable for East-West differences in Germany.⁴² However, the results are

ambiguous: Recent studies provide evidence both for an explanatory potential of socio-economic development and social capital in Germany (also beyond the East-West divide),⁴³ as well as against it.⁴⁴ It has also been pointed out that differences in socio-economic characteristics structure regional differences even beyond the East-West divide.⁴⁵ Still, as research shows that the length of democratic experience influences how important economic assessments are for attitudes towards democracy,⁴⁶ satisfaction with the current economic situation needs to be considered when comparing citizens with different political socializations.

2.1. Conceptions of democracy

Political culture research suggests that citizens' attitudes towards the political system influence the quality and persistence of democracy. According to Almond and Verba, congruence between citizens' political culture and political reality creates democratic stability.⁴⁷ More specifically, Norris asserts that a democratic deficit arises when there is a mismatch between citizens' expectations of democracy and their evaluations of the democratic performance.⁴⁸ Thus, the study of conceptions of democracy seeks to reveal the aspirations for democracy citizens have, their different normative ideas of what the ideal democratic system is and how political institutions should be designed in order to produce legitimate and democratic policies. What the different conceptions share is a core of basic democratic values covering, for instance, notions of human rights and popular sovereignty. This means that there is an overlap between the different conceptions of democracy, and they provide alternative, but not mutually exclusive views on democracy.⁴⁹ The competition between the conceptions can serve both as challenge as well as corrective for democratic systems. In the literature, a liberal democratic understanding is the most consistently studied conception, although there has been a surge of interest in populism in recent years.⁵⁰ Since I seek to assess the effect of political socialization in particular political systems, I focus my analysis on the two conceptions of democracy most congruent with what the respective political systems in the two parts of Germany institutionalized, a liberal and a social democratic conception, as well as a populist conception of democracy, as the success of the AfD especially in East Germany suggests that political socialization could also impact support for populism.

A liberal understanding of democracy, which is most congruent with the institutional reality in the FRG today and in West Germany before re-unification, follows Dahl's concept of polyarchy and captures the basic requirements for democracy.⁵¹ In the literature, liberal democratic values are understood as the minimum consensus necessary for democratic stability.⁵² A liberal conception of democracy covers commitment to basic democratic values, such as civil liberties, the rule of law, or free and fair elections, but can also go beyond these minimum requirements to capture more demanding views, encompassing values such as inclusiveness and responsiveness.⁵³

A social conception of democracy, in contrast, speaks to values endorsed by the socialist system of the GDR.⁵⁴ In this system, "the State pursues collective interests, which are based firstly on comprehensive social security and secondly in the realization of egalitarian principles of equality."⁵⁵ Studies find that according to East Germans, socialism entails especially social rights, i.e. the right to work or childcare, as promoted

by the SED,⁵⁶ but to some extent also minimal elements of democracy such as freedom of expression or free elections.⁵⁷ Consequently, East Germans are more likely to include social and economic features in their definition of democracy, which corresponds to the finding that East Germans tend to be instrumental rather than procedural democrats.⁵⁸

Finally, populist ideology divides society into two groups, “the people” and the elite, whose interests are diametral. Following the definition by Mudde, populism is

[...] an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.⁵⁹

Populism is seen as a thin-centred ideology that always occurs in combination with different other ideologies. Central dimensions of a populist understanding of democracy are unlimited popular sovereignty, for instance through direct participation, anti-elitism, and anti-pluralism.⁶⁰

2.2. Hypotheses

Although several studies have used political socialization as an explanatory factor for political culture in post-communist/socialist Central and Eastern Europe and East Germany in particular, literature on conceptions of democracy has rarely tested this explanation in comparative studies of different democratic contexts. Building on the previous analysis by Sack,⁶¹ I use new data to assess whether the detected effects can still be found almost ten years later and after the rise of the AfD as a populist party that is particularly successful in East Germany. Furthermore, I expand the analysis to a populist conception of democracy, for which socialization effects remain understudied. Thus, new insights can be gained on how political socialization in different political systems shapes what conceptions of democracy citizens hold and how sustainable these socialization effects are.

Based on the literature discussed above, several expectations can be formulated. Since a liberal conception of democracy matches the political reality in West Germany until 1990 and in re-unified Germany, it is to be expected that citizens who grew up in the GDR are less supportive of liberal democracy than citizens who grew up in the FRG, as the former were not socialized in a liberal democracy. For the youngest cohorts, commitment to liberal democratic values should not differ significantly between East and West as they have been socialized in the same political system – if one assumes that the political values and norms learned in socialism are not passed on to younger generations living in a liberal democracy. This leads to the first pair of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: In the generations socialized in two different political systems, East Germans score significantly lower on a liberal conception of democracy than their West German counterparts.

Hypothesis 1b: In the generations socialized in re-unified Germany, East Germans and West Germans score similarly high on a liberal conception of democracy.

Similarly, support for a social conception of democracy should be higher for people who were politically socialized in a socialist system compared to people socialized in a liberal democracy. Previous research also suggests that the young generations

socialized in re-unified Germany are converging in their commitment to social democratic values.⁶² Therefore, the second set of hypotheses reads as follows:

Hypothesis 2a: In the generations socialized in two different political systems, East Germans score significantly higher on a social conception of democracy than their West German counterparts.

Hypothesis 2b: In the generations socialized in re-unified Germany, East Germans and West Germans score similarly low on a social conception of democracy.

Thirdly, there is no existing comparative research on the impact of political socialization on a populist conception of democracy. Given that populist institutions have not existed in any part of the country, at a first glance populist attitudes seem to be equally likely to occur in East and West Germany. Conceptually, however, several core principles of liberal democracy go against the populist notions of anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, and direct democracy, making a positive effect of liberal democratic socialization on having a populist conception of democracy unlikely. By contrast, values acquired through socialist socialization and during democratic transition can meaningfully complement populist attitudes: On the one hand, socialism pursues the common good and collective interests, which speaks to the populist ideas of popular sovereignty and anti-pluralism.⁶³ On the other hand, the political experience in the GDR was characterized by bad experiences with a strong party elite, which resonates with anti-elitism and demands for direct participation in politics through referenda as promoted by populism.⁶⁴ This is also supported by a high agreement of East Germans with the statement that socialism would have been good if only it had been executed right.⁶⁵ Additionally, the experiences made and values acquired by East Germans during regime transformation could influence what conceptions of democracy they hold beyond the effect of political socialization. Positive experiences with direct participation in the protests leading to the end of the GDR and political empowerment during this time could have strengthened the preference for a more direct form of participation. In this context, high expectations of democracy and disappointment after reunification as East Germans were deprived of the opportunity to bring in their interests and values to shape a new political system could further promote the rise of populist understandings of democracy. The experience of regime transformation and the overlap between socialist and populist ideology should lead to significant differences between people with socialist and liberal democratic political socializations with regard to a populist conception. Thus, I formulate the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: In the generations socialized in two different political systems, East Germans score significantly higher on a populist conception of democracy than their West German counterparts.

Hypothesis 3b: In the generations socialized in re-unified Germany, East Germans and West Germans score similarly low on a populist conception of democracy.

3. Method and data

To assess to what extent political socialization influences support for a particular conception of democracy, I focus on the German case which provides a unique framework to analyse the impact of diverging political socialization as the citizens born before 1990 were born into two different political systems, the liberal democratic “Bonn

republic” in West Germany and the socialist German Democratic Republic in East Germany. Thus, they made different political experiences in their formative years that could still impact their political attitudes today, although they have been living in the same political system for over 30 years. The German citizens born after 1989 only ever experienced the liberal democratic system of re-unified Germany. Today, approximately 15% of the German total population live in former East Germany, the East German population is slightly older (mean age of 47.2 compared to 44.2 in West Germany) and less international (7.2% of people living in East Germany are non-Germans, compared to 15.6% in West Germany as of 2022).⁶⁶

I utilize data from the European Social Survey (ESS) Wave 10, fielded in late 2021, with $N = 8,725$ respondents in Germany.⁶⁷ ESS 10 includes a module on attitudes towards democracy, building on items from the ESS 6 fielded in 2012. In the ESS 10, the mode of data collection in Germany was changed from in-person interviews to self-administered interviews. Given that there is different social desirability bias in self-administered surveys and that in general, people tend to agree more strongly on self-completion questionnaires, the comparison of data from the ESS 6 and the ESS 10 should be done with caution, as identified time trends could also be survey mode effects. Furthermore, the survey was fielded in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in which social topics received a lot of attention in Germany, which could result in a bias towards social questions and thus a social democratic understanding of democracy in the answers.

The ESS 10 questionnaire includes 12 items on conceptions of democracy, of which nine are repeated items first fielded in ESS 6. These items ask the respondents how important they think different aspects are for democracy in general, measured on an 11-point scale ranging from “Not at all important for democracy in general” to “Extremely important for democracy in general.” While it has to be noted that this question style could lead to satisficing behaviour by the respondents and draws the attention to very specific aspects of a democracy,⁶⁸ the “importance” of a certain element best captures the value that people assign to it (compared to other formulations such as “necessary”) and ensures comparability across items and contexts.⁶⁹ As mentioned above, the liberal conception of democracy covers commitment to basic components of electoral democracy and civil liberties, as well as more demanding values of inclusiveness or responsiveness.⁷⁰ Thus, it is operationalized using items on free and fair elections, political opposition, media freedom, equality before the law, and minority rights. The ESS does not include any questions on a socialist conception of democracy, which would be most congruent with the political socialization in the GDR, but two items on social democracy.⁷¹ It has been found that East Germans themselves define socialism mainly in terms of social rights, for instance the right to work, and they are more likely to include social and economic considerations in their definition of democracy.⁷² In addition, previous research was able to show the anticipated socialization effects for East Germany using the social democratic items included in the ESS.⁷³ Therefore, the social conception is operationalized with two items on poverty protection and establishing income equality. Lastly, several items cover the basic ideas of populism, namely direct democracy, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty, and are thus used as a measure for a populist conception of democracy. While in the ESS, direct democracy is analysed as a distinct model of democracy,⁷⁴ populism highlights popular sovereignty, which can plausibly be institutionalized by elements of direct democracy, and research shows that voting for populist parties goes hand in hand

with a preference for direct democracy.⁷⁵ I therefore include it in the populist conception of democracy. The operationalization of the three conceptions of democracy is summarized in [Table 1](#).

Based on these considerations, a confirmatory factor analysis is performed to validate the existence of three distinct conceptions of democracy. The individual factor scores are predicted based on these results, resulting in a continuous measure for each conception, and then standardized to a value between 0 and 1 to account for the varying numbers of indicators. The conceptions of democracy are not operationalized exclusively, i.e. respondents can score high on one, several, or even none of the conceptions. Thus, although determinants of each conception can be analysed, no conclusions can be drawn about which understandings of democracy dominate in Germany. The results of the maximum-likelihood confirmatory factor analysis confirm the validity of the model and the existence of the three distinct factors.⁷⁶ RMSEA (0.067), CFI (0.937) and TLI (0.912), and SRMR (0.044) all point towards a satisfactory fit of the model to the data. Summary statistics for the three factors after standardization are reported in [Table 2](#).

As the effect of socialization in different political systems is the focus of the study, place of political socialization and belonging to a particular birth cohort are used as the central explanatory variables. Since the ESS 10 does not provide a question on whether the respondent grew up in West or East Germany, I use place of residence as a proxy. Considering that since reunification, more East Germans have moved to West Germany than the other way round,⁷⁷ using place of residence will underestimate the true effects of socialization rather than overestimate them. Data from the ESS 6, where place of socialization was still included in the questionnaire, confirms that there are no meaningful differences in the results when using place of socialization or place of residence.⁷⁸ Based on the federal state that people reside in, I construct a dummy for living in the East ($n = 1263$), in reference to living in the West of

Table 1. Operationalization of the three conceptions of democracy under study.

Liberal conception of democracy	
National elections are free and fair.	
Different political parties offer clear alternatives to one another.	
The media are free to criticize the government.	
The rights of minority groups are protected.	
The courts treat everyone the same.	
Social conception of democracy	
The government protects all citizens against poverty.	
The government takes measures to reduce differences in income levels.	
Populist conception of democracy	
Citizens have a final say on political issues by voting directly in referendums.	
The views of ordinary people prevail over the views of the political elite.	
The will of the people cannot be stopped.	

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the three conceptions of democracy.

	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Liberal	7,805	.880	.123	0	1
Social	7,805	.784	.180	0	1
Populist	7,805	.730	.163	0	1

Germany ($n = 7077$). Due to the ambiguous nature of Berlin as divided between West Germany and East Germany and considering the high mobility between former West Berlin and former East Berlin, I exclude respondents from Berlin ($n = 385$) from the analysis.⁷⁹

For the main analyses using birth cohorts, I divide the respondents into five birth cohorts based on time of political socialization. Table 3 reports the division of birth cohorts and associated case numbers for East and West Germany. In line with the research by van Deth et al.,⁸⁰ it is assumed that political socialization starts at an age of six, as conceptions of democracy concern more general (democratic) values rather than political behaviour such as voting that is formed later in life.⁸¹ The first birth cohort covers people being born and socialized in World War II and post-war Germany, when the two different regimes were forming but there was still exchange between East and West Germany (1931–1955). The second cohort was born and socialized in a time where West Germany and the German Democratic Republic were distancing themselves from one another through reforms (1956–1968). The third cohort, born between 1969 and 1983, is the last one socialized in two different contexts, with international crises and the start of the decline of the GDR. The youngest two birth cohorts were socialized in re-unified, liberal Germany, with the cohort born between 1984 and 1996 being socialized in a newly re-unified Germany that was still growing together, and the youngest cohort being socialized in an increasingly Europeanized context (1997–2006).

To assess determinants of having a particular conception of democracy, weighted OLS regression models are estimated for each conception. Political socialization is measured by including birth cohort, place of residence in East or West Germany, as well as an interaction term of the two to account for the differences in socialization. To get a direct comparison to the findings of Sack,⁸² I estimate models with his exact specifications (but combining the two oldest generations in one cohort and adding a second cohort socialized in re-unified Germany), which are reported in the Appendix. Although seeking to identify cut-offs for the generations that make sense in both contexts, it could be the case that generations experienced different formative events in East and West Germany and the cohort classifications leads to bias in the results.⁸³ Therefore, the Appendix reports several models that use different operationalizations for socialization following Pop-Eleches and Tucker as further robustness checks for the results.⁸⁴ A further set of models uses Generalized Additive Modelling for the East and West German sub-samples with the same specifications as the OLS regression models but including birth year as a smooth term. Since the cohort classifications used in the other models constitute a loss of information, as effects are assumed to be the same for several birth years, GAMs allow for testing flexible effects of belonging to a particular pre-defined generation by year of birth, thus providing an opportunity to validate the cohort classification.⁸⁵ However, these models need to be interpreted with caution, as case numbers for the oldest cohort in the sample, particularly in East Germany, are rather low.

Table 3. Birth cohorts and associated case numbers.

Birth cohort	1931–1955	1956–1968	1969–1983	1984–1996	1997–2006	<i>N</i>
West Germany	1,500	1,704	1,378	1,245	844	6,671
East Germany	379	317	230	163	102	1,191
<i>N</i>	1,879	2,021	1,608	1,408	946	7,862

The economic situation, a central explanatory variable for differences between East and West Germany, is also accounted for in the models by including a variable measuring the satisfaction with the present state of the economy in Germany on an 11-point scale, recoded as a binary measure that reflects dissatisfaction (value of 4 or lower). The interaction terms for living in East Germany and the satisfaction with the present state of the economy correspond to research showing that economic performance assessments influence attitudes towards democracy depending on how long one has lived in a democracy.⁸⁶ Furthermore, I include gender as a binary variable, level of education as a four-point categorical variable, and urban/rural residence as a categorical variable (countryside, small city or town, large city) – since it has been shown to influence support for democracy and autocracy and further political attitudes as well as behaviour such as vote choice⁸⁷ – as control variables in the models.

4. Results

Before turning to the explanatory analyses, I briefly discuss descriptive differences between East and West Germany regarding the three conceptions of democracy under study. Looking at the means for the three conceptions (Figure 1), it is notable that the liberal conception is the most popular conception among both East and West Germans, while both groups score lowest on the populist conception. However, there are clear differences between East and West Germans: While West Germans are significantly more liberal than East Germans, East Germans are more social democratic and more populist than West Germans. Thus, there seems to be an East-West divide in conceptions of democracy among German citizens.

Turning to the regression models (Table 4), there are significant effects of living in East Germany for all three conceptions. For the liberal conception of democracy, the effect is negative, i.e. people living in East Germany score lower on that conception. For a social and a populist conception of democracy, in contrast, there is a positive effect. Belonging to a particular cohort affects a liberal and a social conception of democracy,

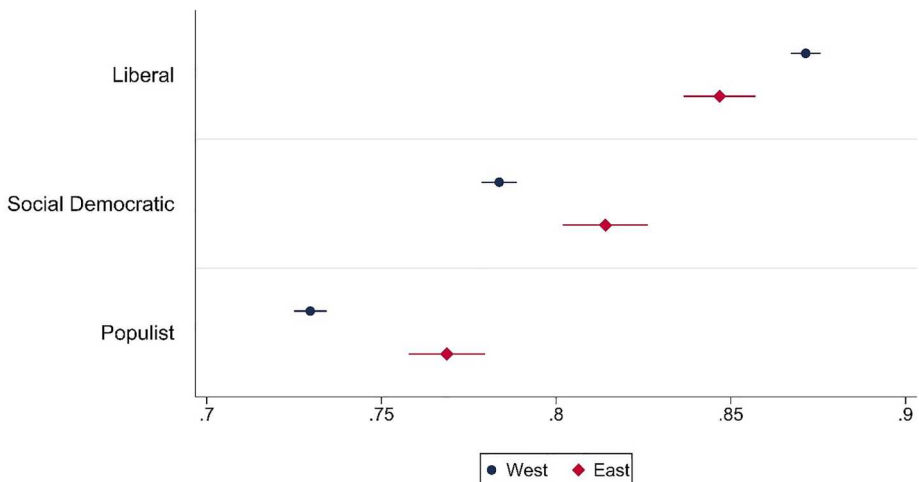


Figure 1. Mean Conceptions of Democracy by Region. Data: ESS 10, own calculations.

Table 4. Full OLS regression models for the three conceptions with * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Data: ESS 10, own calculations.

	Liberal	Social	Populist
East	-0.051***	0.033*	0.049***
Birth Cohort (Ref: Born 1931–1955)			
1956–1968	-0.013*	-0.007	0.007
1969–1983	-0.042***	-0.023**	0.006
1984–1996	-0.057***	-0.017	0.008
1997–2006	-0.044***	-0.011	0.015
East*1956–1968	0.031*	0.013	0.008
East*1969–1983	0.045**	-0.020	-0.030
East*1984–1996	0.033	-0.013	-0.038
East*1997–2006	0.017	-0.034	-0.054*
Dissatisfied with economic situation in Germany	-0.020**	0.036***	0.041***
East*Dissatisfied with economic situation	-0.007	-0.002	-0.009
Female	-0.011**	0.023***	0.009
Education Level (Ref: Low education)			
Medium	0.037***	-0.016*	0.003
High	0.081***	-0.036***	-0.031***
Urban/Rural (Ref: Countryside)			
Small city or town	0.004	0.011	-0.000
Large city	0.011*	0.017**	-0.013*
Constant	0.864***	0.789***	0.726***
R^2	0.080	0.026	0.034
Adjusted R^2	0.078	0.024	0.032
N	6797	6797	6797

with young people scoring lower especially on the liberal conception. However, the explanatory values of East/West, birth cohort and the interaction term between the two are rather low for all three conceptions (see Appendix for additional models). Regarding satisfaction with the economic situation in Germany, dissatisfaction has a significant effect on all conceptions, albeit independent of living in East or West Germany. The models using the exact specifications by Sack cannot directly replicate the results achieved with ESS 6 data (see Appendix).⁸⁸ In these models, there is a negative effect of living in East Germany on having a liberal conception of democracy, while belonging to a particular cohort and the interaction terms are – with one exception for the generation socialized right before German re-unification – not significant. For the social democratic conception, belonging to any generation born after 1955 has a significant negative effect compared to the oldest generation. While it has to be kept in mind that the mode of data collection changed between the two studies, these results indicate that the findings by Sack do not actually capture generational effects or that effects of socialization are not as sustainable as assumed in the literature.

Zooming in on the liberal conception of democracy, living in East Germany and belonging to a younger birth cohort both decrease the commitment to liberal democratic values. The interaction term is positive and significant for the generations that were socialized before German re-unification. The predicted marginal means for the full model (Figure 2) show little to no differences for political socialization. Considerable differences are seen only for the oldest cohort, born between 1931 and 1955, in which West Germans are significantly more liberal than their East German counterparts. For the other cohorts, there is a much smaller difference in predicted marginal means and the confidence intervals overlap largely for the youngest three generations, indicating that there are no clear East-West differences in the generations born after 1968. The results of the models using other socialization measures (see Appendix) show that

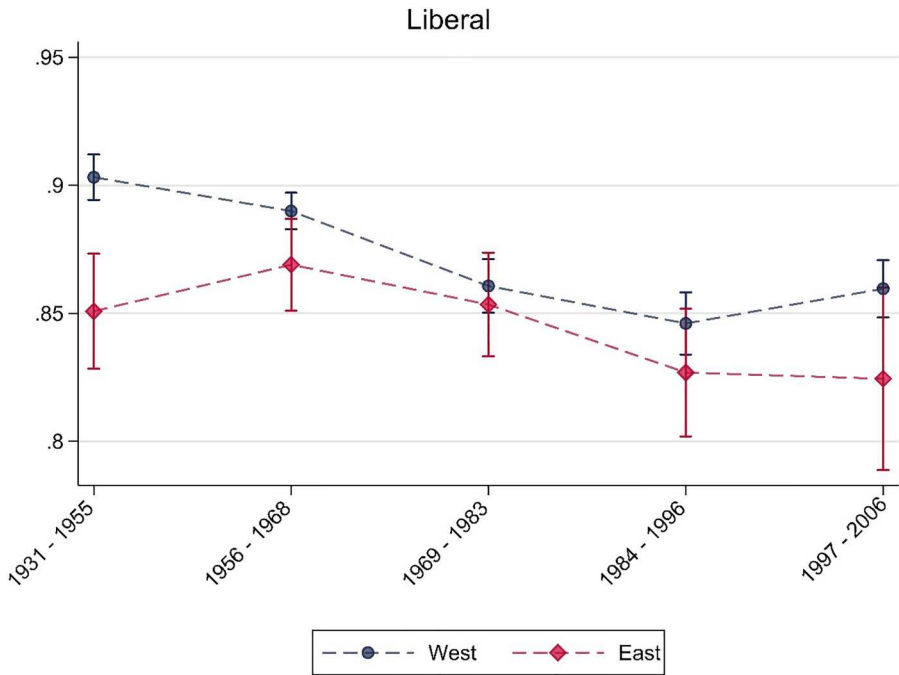


Figure 2. Predicted marginal means for the liberal conception of democracy based on the full OLS regression models, by birth cohort and East/West. Data: ESS 10, own calculations.

there is a strong positive effect of age on having a liberal conception of democracy, while the different measures of socialization do not have any meaningful effects.

A shortcoming of previous research is that the definition of cohorts can be arbitrary, which is why I validate the classification using GAMs for the sub-samples (reported in the Appendix). For a liberal conception of democracy, the smoothed birth year effect shows that both East and West Germans born before the 1970s are significantly more liberal than Germans born afterwards, who were socialized mainly in re-unified Germany. This largely matches the (non-)findings in the OLS models and supports the assumption that age effects might have a bigger explanatory power for a liberal conception – especially since the smoothed effect of birth year for East Germans resembles a linear function. Overall, young Germans in both groups are significantly less committed to liberal values than older Germans.

Regarding the hypotheses, the expected differences between East and West Germans for the liberal conception of democracy (H1a) can thus not be confirmed. In the younger generations, East Germans score slightly lower on the liberal conception than West Germans. Therefore, the hypothesis on the younger generations converging in their attitudes (H1b) can only be confirmed tentatively, as East and West Germans do differ slightly in their level of commitment to liberal democratic values, and they do score lower on the liberal conception than the older West Germans.

For the social conception of democracy, living in East Germany increases the commitment to social democratic values. In terms of cohort effects, being born between 1969 and 1983 has a negative effect on having a social conception. For the cohort born between 1956 and 1968, the predicted marginal means (Figure 3) show that

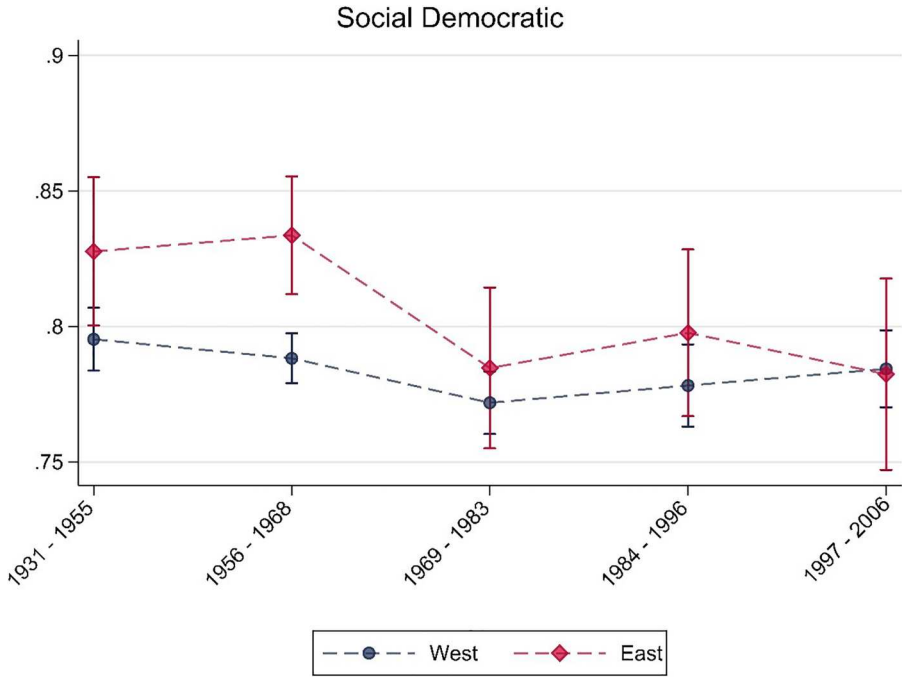


Figure 3. Predicted marginal means for the social conception of democracy based on the full OLS regression models, by birth cohort and East/West. Data: ESS 10, own calculations.

East Germans score significantly higher on the social conception than their West German counterparts. For the younger generations, the predictions overlap and they show similar levels of commitment to social democratic values. When validating the results with other socialization measures, there is little to no effect of any of the alternative variables. The partial effect plots for the GAMs confirm that younger East Germans are less social democratic than the older generations born before the 1960s.

Thus, regarding the hypotheses for the social conception of democracy, it can partly be confirmed that East Germans score significantly higher on the social conception than West Germans in the generations born until 1968 (H2a). Still, there is no significant difference for the generation born between 1969 and 1983, although this generation was also socialized in two different political systems and should therefore show differences. It also needs to be pointed out that looking at the social democratic conception is a conservative test for cohort effects, as a socialist conception of democracy goes further than the socio-economic policy preferences measured in the ESS. For the younger generations, it can be confirmed that East and West Germans have a similar level of commitment to social democratic values (H2b).

Finally, for the populist conception of democracy, living in East Germany has a positive effect on having a populist conception. The interaction term for being born in East Germany and belonging to the youngest generation born after 1996 has a significant negative effect, indicating that young East Germans are less populist than older East Germans and West Germans. The predicted marginal means (Figure 4) for the oldest two cohorts show that East Germans born until 1968 are more populist than their West German counterparts. For the younger cohorts born in 1969 and later,

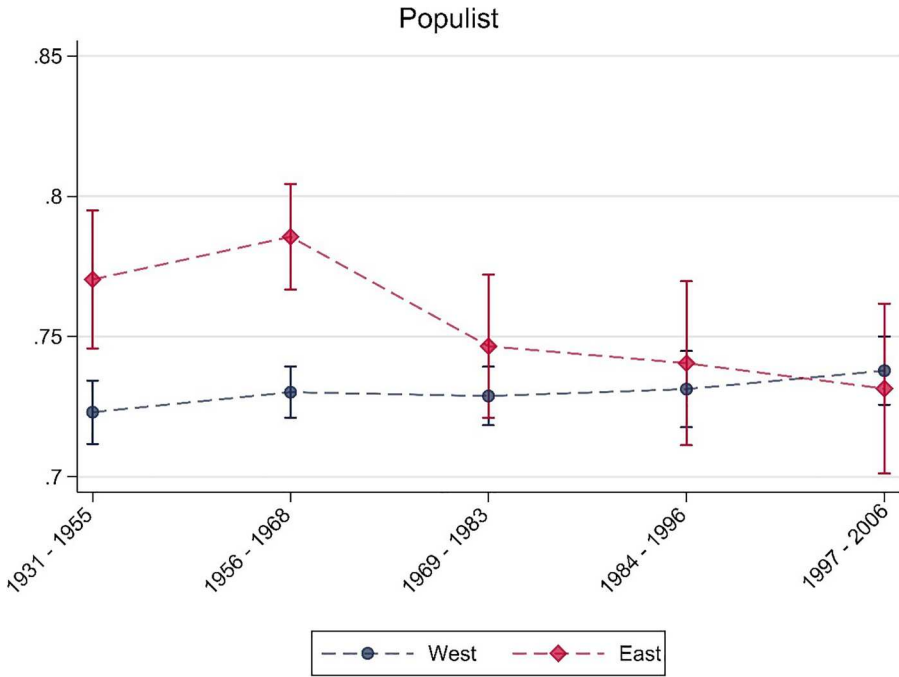


Figure 4. Predicted marginal means for the populist conception of democracy based on the full OLS regression models, by birth cohort and East/West. Data: ESS 10, own calculations.

East and West Germans do not show any significant differences in the level of populism. Thus, similarly to the findings for the social democratic conception, the last generation socialized in two different political systems does not show any East-West differences. In the models using alternative measures of socialization, the years one has spent in socialism and early life socialization in socialism have a significant positive effect, suggesting that socialist socialization indeed influences how populist people are.

The results of the GAMs show an interesting difference in trends for the two subsamples. While in East Germany, there is a linear negative effect of birth year on a populist conception of democracy, the effect shows a positive trend for West Germans. Thus, the oldest cohorts in West Germany, which have lived in a liberal democracy the longest, are significantly less populist than younger West Germans, indicating that young Germans meet somewhere in the middle in their attachment to populist principles.

Therefore, it is largely confirmed that the generations socialized in two different political systems – except for the last one born between 1969 and 1983 – show significant differences, with East Germans being more populist than West Germans (H3a). Furthermore, it is confirmed that younger East Germans and West Germans score similarly on a populist conception of democracy (H3b).

To sum up, the analyses show that there are indeed cohort effects on conceptions of democracy, although they are not as clear-cut as existing literature suggests: While differences between East and West Germany due to political socialization can be identified for the socialist and the populist conception, there are no clear cohort effects for a liberal conception of democracy.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this article was to shed light on the effect of political socialization on citizens' conceptions of democracy in Germany, where citizens socialized in a liberal democracy and citizens socialized in a socialist system now live in one liberal democratic system. Particularly, I sought to expand existing analyses on the topic to a populist conception of democracy, given the fact that the populist AfD has gained ground especially among the East German electorate, and thus analyse whether political socialization plays a role in the success of the AfD. By replicating Sack's analyses on liberal and social conceptions of democracy with newer data, I also sought to assess whether observed cohort differences remain or dissolve over time. Building on existing literature, it was hypothesized that political socialization in a liberal democracy leads to a higher commitment to liberal values, while political socialization in socialism induces higher commitment to a social conception of democracy. For the populist conception of democracy, it was hypothesized that values acquired in socialism could serve as an ideological complement for populist attitudes.

The empirical analysis shows that there are East-West differences in conceptions of democracy depending on the birth cohort. For the liberal conception of democracy, there are no clear cohort effects, which contradicts Sack's findings based on data from 2012 (ESS 6). Only in the oldest generation, which was socialized in temporal proximity to World War II, East-West differences in liberal conceptions can still be found. The highest commitment to liberal values is found among the two oldest generations, and liberal attitudes are converging for younger generations. East Germans are generally less liberal than their West German counterparts, which could indicate that the personal environment as a socializing agent is quite important for liberal values, i.e. political values are transmitted between generations independently from the political system they live in. Another explanation for the East-West differences among the oldest generations could be that instead of belonging to a particular birth cohort, the duration of democratic experience positively impacts the commitment to liberal values. However, this is not supported by the data, as East Germans born between 1956 and 1983 should show a similar level of commitment to liberal values if this was the case. Overall, the findings fit existing results that coming of age in an authoritarian system negatively influences support for (liberal) democracy.⁸⁹

With regard to the social democratic conception, older generations in East Germany hold more social democratic values than West Germans, which fits previous findings that people socialized in the GDR are more socialist and more instrumental in their democratic aspirations.⁹⁰ The attitudes of East and West Germans are overlapping slightly for the oldest generation born before 1955, which was partly socialized in the same political system post-World War II. In line with the findings by Sack, the younger generations born after 1968 in East and West Germany show a similar level of commitment to social democratic values.

Most notably, I can also identify an effect of political socialization on a populist conception of democracy, which goes beyond previous analyses on political socialization. East Germans born until 1968, socialized exclusively in the GDR, are significantly more populist than citizens socialized in a liberal democracy. The younger generations show similar, lower commitment to populist ideas. As discussed above, this could be because socialism is – in contrast to liberal democracy – compatible with the core populist ideas and can thus serve as an ideological complement to the thin-centred ideology of

populism. I argued that the idea of a pre-politically defined collective interest of the working class in socialism resonates with the anti-pluralist idea of a *volonté générale* in populist ideology. Furthermore, populist ideas speak to the experiences made by East Germans in the GDR during the Peaceful Revolution and democratic transition period, followed by disappointment with democracy in re-unified Germany. These experiences could explain attitudes of anti-elitism as well as demand for direct participation in democracy.

The empirical analysis shows that the differences in populist attitudes in East and West Germany can to some extent be explained by political socialization and experiences made during the democratic transition. It also provides preliminary evidence that political socialization can help understand the success of the AfD in East Germany: East Germans might be more inclined to vote for a populist party due to their socialization in socialism. This will have to be investigated more thoroughly in future research.

I further show that despite differences in policy and process preferences between East and West Germans, young Germans in both parts of the country hold very similar values when it comes to the question what democracy is and what it should entail. However, these findings cannot confidently be assigned to socialization effects as this study suffers from several data limitations that restrict the explanatory power of socialization effects: It uses cross-sectional data that can only be compared to results from one other point in time, the measurement of the social conception of democracy only covers one policy-oriented aspect of a socialist conception, and the study uses place of residence as a proxy for place of socialization. These limitations could only be overcome with longitudinal data covering both several conceptions of democracy and a direct measurement of political socialization, which are presently not available. A promising route for future research would be an expansion of the analyses to further countries in order to assess whether the findings reported here are particular to the German case or can also be observed for Francoist political socialization in Spain or communist socialization in Central and Eastern European countries, for instance.⁹¹ Such studies could also further elucidate whether political socialization or experiences during regime transformation matter more for holding a populist conception of democracy, i.e. whether it can be assigned to values acquired in socialism, bad experiences with socialism, or values and experiences acquired during the Peaceful Revolution. Finally, future studies could expand the analysis to further understandings of democracy, such as stealth or deliberative democracy.

Notes

1. Claassen, “Does Public Support Help Democracy Survive?”
2. Heyne, “The Making of Democratic Citizens.”
3. Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, “Good-Bye Lenin (or Not?).”
4. de Vries and O’Brien, “Women and the Wall.”
5. Berning and Ziller, “Verbreitung und Entwicklung rechtsextremer Einstellungen.”
6. Neundorff, “Growing Up on Different Sides of the Wall.”
7. Hur, “Is there an Intrinsic Duty to Vote?”
8. Arzheimer, “Im Osten nichts Neues?”; Mannewitz, “Really ‘Two Deeply Divided Electorates?’”; Träger, “Ost vs. West, Nord vs. Süd, Stadt vs. Land.”
9. Westle, “30 Jahre deutsche Einheit.”
10. Berning and Ziller, “Verbreitung und Entwicklung rechtsextremer Einstellungen.”
11. Dalton, Bürklin, and Drummond, “Public Opinion and Direct Democracy”; Fuchs, “The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany”; Westle, “30 Jahre deutsche Einheit.”

12. Fuchs and Roller, "Learned Democracy?"
13. Landwehr and Leininger, "Instrumental or Procedural Democrats?"
14. Heyne, "The Making of Democratic Citizens"; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, "Communist Socialization"; Sack, "Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations."
15. Fuchs, "The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany."
16. Sack, "Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations."
17. Arzheimer, "Im Osten nichts Neues?"
18. König, "Support for a Populist Form of Democratic Politics"; Steiner and Landwehr, "Populistische Demokratiekonzeptionen und die Wahl der AfD"; Niedermayer and Hofrichter, "Die Wählerschaft der AfD."
19. Pickel, "Die Wahl der AfD."
20. Wegscheider, Kaltwasser, and van Hauwaert, "How Citizens' Conceptions of Democracy Relate to Positive and Negative Partisanship."
21. Westle, "30 Jahre deutsche Einheit."
22. Grasso, "Age, Period and Cohort Analysis in a Comparative Context."
23. Heyne, "The Making of Democratic Citizens."
24. Neundorff and Smets, "Political Socialization and the Making of Citizens."
25. Campbell, "Political Culture and the Legacy of Socialism."
26. van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar, "Children and Politics."
27. Hooghe and Wilkenfeld, "The Stability of Political Attitudes."
28. Dennis et al., "Political Socialization to Democratic Orientations."
29. Pop-Eleches and Tucker, "Communist Socialization."
30. Davidson-Schmich, Hartmann, and Mummert, "Positive Freedom in the Aftermath of German Unification"; Grix, "East German Political Attitudes"; Landwehr and Leininger, "Instrumental or procedural democrats?"; Rohrschneider, *Learning Democracy*.
31. Lepsius, "Das Legat zweier Diktaturen für die demokratische Kultur," 168. Own translation.
32. Pollack, "Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR," 116; Davidson-Schmich, Hartmann, and Mummert, "Positive Freedom in the Aftermath of German Unification," 337.
33. Pollack, "Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR," 121; Davidson-Schmich, Hartmann, and Mummert, "Positive Freedom in the Aftermath of German Unification," 337.
34. Camacho, "Understanding Support for Democracy."
35. Voicu and Bartolome Peral, "Support for Democracy and Early Socialization."
36. de Leeuw et al., "Are Would-be Authoritarians Right?"
37. Jou, "Ideological Radicalism and Democratic Experience."
38. Heyne, "The Making of Democratic Citizens."
39. Fuchs, "The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany"; Fuchs and Roller, "Learned Democracy?"
40. Finkel, Humphries, and Opp, "Socialist Values and the Development of Democratic Support."
41. Sack, "Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations."
42. cf. Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, "Good-Bye Lenin (or Not?); Holtmann, "Deutschland 2020."
43. Mannewitz, *Politische Kultur und demokratischer Verfassungsstaat*.
44. Pickel and Pickel, "The Wall in the Mind."
45. Holtmann, "Deutschland 2020," 496–7.
46. Camacho, "Understanding Support for Democracy."
47. Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*.
48. Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
49. Ferrín, Hernández, and Landwehr, "Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy."
50. König, Siewert, and Ackermann, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Citizens' Preferences for Democracy"; Rooduijn, "How to Study Populism and Adjacent Topics?"
51. Dahl, "A Democratic Paradox?"
52. Ferrín and Kriesi, *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*; Fuchs, "The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany."
53. Hernández, "Europeans' Views of Democracy."
54. Rohrschneider, *Learning Democracy*.
55. Fuchs, "The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany," 128.
56. Pollack, "Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR," 120.
57. Fuchs, "The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany," 133.

58. Hofferbert and Klingemann, “Democracy and its Discontents in Post-Wall Germany”; Landwehr and Leininger, “Instrumental or procedural democrats?”
59. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543.
60. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, “How Populist are the People?”; Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Populism and Liberal Democracy.”
61. Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations.”
62. Heyne, “The Making of Democratic Citizens”; Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations.”
63. Pesthy, Mader, and Schoen, “Why is the AfD So Successful in Eastern Germany?” 75.
64. Pesthy, Mader, and Schoen, “Why is the AfD So Successful in Eastern Germany?”; Pollack, “Die konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit der DDR,” 127–8.
65. Campbell, “Political Culture and the Legacy of Socialism”; Jesse, “Friedliche Revolution. Deutsche Einheit. Vereinigtes Deutschland?” 545.
66. Statistisches Bundesamt, “Bevölkerungsstand: Bevölkerung nach Gebietsstand (nach 1990).”
67. European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure, “ESS10 Self-completion – Integrated File.”
68. Frankenberger and Buhr, “For Me Democracy Is ...”
69. Winstone, Widdop, and Fitzgerald, “Constructing the Questionnaire.”
70. König, Siewert, and Ackermann, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Citizens’ Preferences for Democracy.”
71. Ferrín, Hernández, and Landwehr, “Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy.”
72. Fuchs, “The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany,” 133; Hofferbert and Klingemann, “Democracy and its Discontents in Post-Wall Germany.”
73. Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations.”
74. Ferrín, Hernández, and Landwehr, “Understandings and Evaluations of Democracy.”
75. Wegscheider, Kaltwasser, and van Hauwaert, “How Citizens’ Conceptions of Democracy Relate to Positive and Negative Partisanship.”
76. Results of the CFA can be found in the Appendix.
77. Statistisches Bundesamt, “Demografischer Wandel.”
78. A figure comparing estimations for place of residence and place of socialization is provided in the Appendix.
79. Estimation results with individual federal states are provided in the Appendix.
80. van Deth, Abendschön, and Vollmar, “Children and Politics.”
81. cf. Dinas et al., “Early Voting Experiences and Habit Formation.”
82. Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations.”
83. cf. Grasso, “Age, Period and Cohort Analysis in a Comparative Context.”
84. Pop-Eleches and Tucker, “Communist Socialization.”
85. cf. Grasso, “Age, Period and Cohort Analysis in a Comparative Context.”
86. Camacho, “Understanding Support for Democracy.”
87. Zumbunn and Freitag, “The Geography of Autocracy”; Haffert and Mitteregger, “Cohorts and Neighbors”; Träger, “Ost vs. West, Nord vs. Süd, Stadt vs. Land.”
88. Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations.”
89. Voicu and Bartolome Peral, “Support for Democracy and Early Socialization.”
90. cf. Sack, “Regime Change and the Convergence of Democratic Value Orientations”; Landwehr and Leininger, “Instrumental or Procedural Democrats?”
91. cf. Aguilar, “Whatever Happened to Francoist Socialization?”; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, “Communist Socialization.”

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Lea Stallbaum is a doctoral researcher in the DFG-funded project “Conceptions of Democracy among Political Elites and Citizens” at JGU Mainz.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available from Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research at https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10sce3_0.

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