

The German Social Cohesion Panel (SCP): Theoretical Background, Instruments, Survey Design, and Analytical Potential

Jean-Yves Gerlitz^{*I}, Julian B. Axenfeldⁱⁱ, Carina Cornesseⁱⁱ, Olaf Groh-Sambergⁱ, Martin Krohⁱⁱⁱ, Holger Lengfeld^{iv}, Stefan Liebig^v, Lara Minkus^{vi}, Jost Reineckeⁱⁱⁱ, David Richter^v, Nils Teichlerⁱ, Richard Trautmüller^{vii} & Sabine Zinnⁱⁱ

Abstract

The German Social Cohesion Panel (SCP) is a probability-based self-administered longitudinal study in a mixed-mode design (PAPI and CAWI) that is jointly carried out by the Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC) and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The aim of the study is to capture the diversity of social cohesion in Germany from multiple perspectives, particularly regarding the extent to which social cohesion changes over time. The annual surveys, which were implemented for the first time in 2021, are based on a representative sample drawn from German population registers. The SCP covers aspects of social inequality, social conflict and social cohesion; its first wave contains information of more than 17,000 individuals, while almost 8,000 persons participated in its third wave. This data brief provides information about the content and panel history of the first three waves of the SCP.

Introduction

In recent years, several regional and global crises have rapidly emerged. Among them, there have been major refugee movements, the rise of right-wing populist political forces, a global pandemic, extreme weather events induced by climate change, and wars in Europe and the Middle East. These crises have challenged societies and given rise to uncertainties, fears, and controversies over the strategies needed to cope with them. Opposing positions are fiercely debated not only in politics and the established media but also in social media, where they often lead to a hardening of attitudes and violent communication (Bakshy et al., 2015). In public discourse, there is increasing concern about a societal division, i.e., the fragmentation of society into polarized, disconnected subgroups. However, can we actually observe such

*Corresponding author; gerlitz@uni-bremen.de

ⁱUniversity of Bremen, ⁱⁱDIW Berlin, ⁱⁱⁱBielefeld University, ^{iv}Leipzig University, ^vFreie Universität Berlin, ^{vi}Europa-Universität Flensburg, ^{vii}University of Mannheim

tendencies of societal division? If so, how strong is the extent of polarization, and along which dimensions does it occur? What role do social, cultural and economic inequalities play? Finally, how do polarization trends evolve over time?

To answer these and related research questions for the case of Germany from a detailed, longitudinal, and multidimensional perspective, we have established a new probability-based panel data infrastructure, namely the German Social Cohesion Panel (SCP). The SCP is based on a representative population sample drawn from German population registers and was conducted for the first time in 2021. The annual survey is directed not only at the selected individuals but also at all other adult household members. The SCP is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and led in cooperation with the Research Data Centre of the Research Institute Social Cohesion (RDC-RISC) and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), with fieldwork conducted by the infas – Institute for Applied Social Sciences. The collected data are used for the monitoring social cohesion in Germany by the RDC-RISC and for research projects conducted by the RISC and made available to the entire scientific community.

The SCP comprises several innovations related to the conceptualization of social cohesion, survey instruments, and survey design. In addition to providing a general overview of the study, the aim of this data brief is to highlight the novel approaches used and demonstrate the analytical potential of the data. In the “Theoretical Background” section, we present the conceptual expansion of existing definitions of social cohesion by incorporating the aspects of cleavages and segregation, as well as the longitudinal perspective. To measure social cohesion, in addition to including established instruments, researchers at the RISC have developed numerous new instruments. In the “Survey Instruments” section, we provide an overview of the questionnaires of the first three waves of the SCP and present one of the new instruments as an example. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a self-administered panel recruitment and surveying design was used, which is presented together with the recruitment and retention success and sample characteristics in the “Recruitment” section. The “Panel History” section describes the development of the sample over the first four measurement points. The final section discusses the study's analytical potential and provides information about data access.

Theoretical Background

The term “social cohesion” has seen a steep rise in use in fields related to politics and public discourse in recent years (see Deitelhoff et al., 2020). However, it is often invoked in a rhetorical manner when it is perceived as threatened or endangered. A closer look at its usage in the political sphere reveals that it is understood in very different, even contradictory, ways, i.e., sometimes in the sense of cross-border solidarity, other times in the sense of national unity; sometimes emphasizing the diversity and variety of cultures and identities, other times emphasizing a core cultural commonality and agreement; and sometimes addressing the overcoming of social and economic inequalities, other times addressing the overcoming of cultural and political differences.

In the social research community, there have been various attempts made to define social cohesion (see Chan et al., 2006; Delhey et al., 2023; Dragolov et al., 2016; Grunow et al., 2022; Phillips, 2006; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). These definitions generally refer to the quality of relationships between members of a society and their relationships with society as a whole. For example, the “Social Cohesion Radar” developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation (Dragolov et al., 2016) distinguishes three dimensions: the sense of belonging or identification with society (“attachment”), participation in social life and social contacts and exchanges (“relationships”), and orientations toward the common good and participation in the community (“common good orientation”).

Building on the existing concepts, the interdisciplinary Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC) has developed a broader heuristic of social cohesion (Deitelhoff et al., 2020; Forst, 2020, 2022; Grunow et al., 2022). We distinguish between a formal concept of the dimension of social cohesion which is normatively “empty” or neutral, and concrete conceptualizations which necessarily entail normative values. In a formal sense, social cohesion refers to (1) the attitudes and (2) the practices of individuals and groups toward society, (3) the social relations between individuals and groups, (4) the public and media discourses about “good society”, and (5) public infrastructures and the provision of common goods. Any concrete conceptualization of social cohesion will have to fill these formal dimensions with specifications that are normatively loaded and, as such, always contested.

Based on this broader heuristic of social cohesion, the SCP aims to include a wider range of indicators and measures of the five dimensions of social cohesion, allowing researchers to construct their own conceptualizations of social cohesion. We therefore include established indicators such as trust, sense of belonging, and social support. In addition, we expand upon traditional approaches by developing new indicators and measures relevant for analyzing social cohesion. Moreover, given the abovementioned dynamics of multiple crises and transformations of contemporary societies, the SCP is geared toward analyzing threats to social cohesion by various conflicts, inequalities and group segregation. Overall, our unique measurement approach can be characterized as follows:

1. Conceptual openness: We understand social cohesion as a socially and politically contested concept, which makes it difficult to measure with a fixed set of indicators. We include a broad range of indicators and measures of social cohesion along the five dimensions of our heuristic: (1) a broad set of attitudes toward contested facets of the social fabric and more general orientations toward social norms; (2) practices and behaviors towards the society, including experiences of the practices of others; (3) social relations and networks; (4) public and media discourse; and (5) the availability and perception of public infrastructures (for details, see section “Survey Instruments”). Moreover, by asking the study participants themselves about their ideals of “living together” in society, we examine the extent to which different concepts of social cohesion exist in society and potentially come into conflict with each other.

2. Focus on threats to social cohesion (polarization, cleavages and group segregation): We consider the extent of social and political polarization and division as potential threats to social cohesion (see Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum, 2022). The study of trends toward a polarization of opinions and values has gained particular momentum in the United States (Baldassarri & Park, 2020; McCarty, 2019). In Europe, the corresponding research is more limited, although studies addressing the fundamental division of society in the face of increased inequalities and heightened conflicts are also emerging (Herold et al., 2023; Mau, 2022; Mau et al., 2020; Mau et al., 2023; Merkel, 2017). These debates primarily focus on socioeconomic inequalities that have significantly increased in many European countries over the past decades. They also increasingly touch on culturally driven conflicts surrounding issues such as migration and refugees, European integration, climate change, and questions of diversity and identity

related to gender, ethnicity, race, and religion (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Given the broad range of indicators and measures, the SCP allows for a comprehensive analysis of attitudinal and affective polarization and socioeconomic cleavages.

Furthermore, we examine to what extent opposing social groups mutually isolate themselves in terms of the segregation of everyday life environments and social networks (see Teichler et al., 2023). When conflicting and unequal groups no longer encounter each other in their daily lives and have little understanding of each other's realities, this can lead to ignorance, lack of awareness, prejudice and even affective polarization characterized by mutual distancing and the devaluation of opposing factions (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020). This in turn undermines the basis for negotiating compromises at the political level. These processes can be further intensified by information and communication bubbles, which are controversially discussed in the context of digital media (Tucker et al., 2017). The internet provides opportunities for exchange and radicalization, including extreme and fringe positions, conspiracy theories, and hate speech.

3. Longitudinal perspective: The SCP is the first study on social cohesion with a longitudinal panel design. The longitudinal study design makes it possible to analyze the stability and dynamics of social cohesion, to examine the diffusion of values and attitudes both within and between individuals, and to conduct causal analyses of the relationship between socioeconomic status and attitudes, as well as between different aspects of social cohesion. The study design also allows for the integration of innovative longitudinal instruments. For example, we plan to develop and test suitable instruments for the prospective measurement of behavioral intentions and their subsequent (non-)realization over time through dependent interviewing.

Survey Instruments

This section addresses the content and nature of the survey instruments of the SCP. This includes the operationalization of the concept of social cohesion into concrete measurement instruments and the organization of these instruments into questionnaires; in this context, the recruitment survey is of particular importance. Finally, one of the instruments that has been newly developed for the SCP is presented as an example.

As presented in the “Theoretical Background” section, we measure the conceptual mix of conventional (attachment, relationships, common good orientation) and new (polarization, cleavages, segregation) perspectives on social cohesion in the SCP using the following five elements:

1. *Values and attitudes* toward not only on contested topics such as democracy, immigration, gender, climate change, and inequality, but also social norms such as authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, justice orientations, trust in institutions, and national and regional identification, which provide information about cultural and political polarization;
2. *Behavior and social practices* toward society, such as political participation, civic engagement, leisure activities, media usage and collective self-efficacy, as well as experiences such as perceived discrimination, recognition and devaluation, which in turn provide information on both polarization and segregation dynamics;
3. *Social relationships* that allow us to infer the nature of social networks, as well as social segregation; these relationships include social trust, social networks and sympathies towards social groups and their representation in one's own personal networks, social support, and prejudices;
4. *Discourses* that elucidate conceptions of social cohesion, such as ideals of living together in society and perceptions of the status quo; and
5. *(Infra-)structures* that provide information about the distribution of benefits and costs of public goods through their availability, accessibility and resulting impairments.

In addition, we include extensive measures of *socioeconomic status*, such as income, education, employment status and occupational classes, as well as property, wealth and indebtedness, which allow us to make conclusions about economic polarization.

The five elements of social cohesion are represented in nine thematic modules with measurement instruments that cut across them to some extent (see Table 2): *Living Together & Identification, Environment & Infrastructure, Gender & Diversity, Inequality & Evaluation of Own Situation, Politics & Institutions, Participation & Practices, Networks & Social Relationships, Values & Personality, and Sociodemographics*. During operationalization,

existing established instruments are partly used, while new innovative measurement instruments are developed in other cases. All new developments are pretested, including an extensive pilot study conducted prior to the SCP (see Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum, 2022).

According to the survey instruments, there are four types of sections: the questionnaire on aspects of social cohesion, which is completed by all respondents; the questionnaire on individual sociodemographics for respondents who already participated in a previous wave; the questionnaire on individual sociodemographics for new respondents (i.e., new household members or NHMs; see section “Recruitment”), which also captures biographic information that is only surveyed once; and the household questionnaire, which is filled out by the so-called anchor person of a household (AP; see section “Recruitment”) and covers household-level information such as the household composition, dwelling and assets and liabilities.

Table 1 provides an overview of the content of the questionnaire on aspects of social cohesion of the first three waves. As the success of the SCP heavily relies on the recruitment and panel consent, the goal is to construct an initial questionnaire that is concise, intellectually stimulating, and diverse, while still capturing a solid measure of sociodemographic information that extends beyond the thematic focus of social cohesion. Ultimately, the questionnaire for the first wave of the SCP was divided into two parts; the second part (SCP 2021_2) was conducted approximately three months after the recruitment survey (SCP 2021_1) and included detailed information about the household.

Table 1: Modules and instruments of the first three waves of the SCP

Modules & Instruments	2021_1 (W1_1)	2021_2 (W1_2)	2022 (W2)	2023 (W3)
<i>Living Together & Identification</i>				
Populism 1 (anti-elitism, sovereignty, homogeneity)	X			X
Populism 2 (elitism, pluralism)			X	
Conspiracy mentality			X	
Social dominance orientation		X		
Authoritarianism		X		
Living together ideals*	X			X
Living together perceptions*				X
Social cohesion		X		X
Globalization		X		
COVID-19 measure attitudes	X			
COVID-19 costs*		X		
Identification			X	
<i>Environment & Infrastructure</i>				
Climate change concern (global)	X		X	X

Modules & Instruments	2021_1 (W1_1)	2021_2 (W1_2)	2022 (W2)	2023 (W3)
Climate change stoppability (global)	X			X
Climate policy concerns			X	
Climate change consequences concerns			X	
Climate change attitudes			X	
Extreme weather event affectedness			X	X
Impairment by undesirable infrastructure*			X	
Climate-friendly infrastructure construction			X	
Infrastructure availability			X	
<i>Gender & Diversity</i>				
Antisemitism			X	
Immigration		X		
Islamophobia			X	
Gender roles		X		X
Gender & lifestyles equality*			X	
Remembrance culture flight movement 2015*			X	
Universalism & traditionalism*	X			X
Religious fundamentalism		X		
<i>Inequality & Evaluation of Own Situation</i>				
Social inequality attitudes			X	
Concerns about areas of life			X	
Relative deprivation	X			X
Social justice orientations			X	
Social justice perception*			X	
Satisfaction with areas of life		X		X
Life satisfaction (global)	X		X	X
Meaningfulness of life	X			X
Subjective social status (social ladder)	X		X	X
Subjective social trajectories			X	
Discrimination experiences		X		
COVID-19 restrictions	X			
Subjective health status		X	X	X
Biographical status assessment*				X
<i>Politics & Institutions</i>				
Satisfaction with democracy	X			X
The idea of democracy	X			X
Freedom of speech*	X			X
Trust in institutions	X			X
Collective efficacy			X	
Collective self-efficacy			X	
Political interest		X		
Political positioning	X			
Voting intention	X			X
Party affiliation		X		
Position issues			X	
<i>Participation & Practices</i>				
Memberships			X	
Leisure behavior		X		X
Political participation			X	
Media use		X		
Social media players		X		
Critical life events			X	X
<i>Networks & Social Relationships</i>				
Social groups acquaintances*	X			X
Social groups sympathy*	X			X
Everyday cohesion experiences*	X			X
Generalized trust	X			X
Personalized trust		X		
Social support potential	X			
Reciprocity norm				X
<i>Values & Personality</i>				

Modules & Instruments	2021_1 (W1_1)	2021_2 (W1_2)	2022 (W2)	2023 (W3)
Schwartz values (PVQ 21)		X		
Narcissism		X		
Locus of control		X		
Social desirability		X		
Emotional states		X		X
Justice sensitivity			X	
Parents experiences		X		
Parents parenting goals		X		

+ Sociodemographics (Individual & HH)

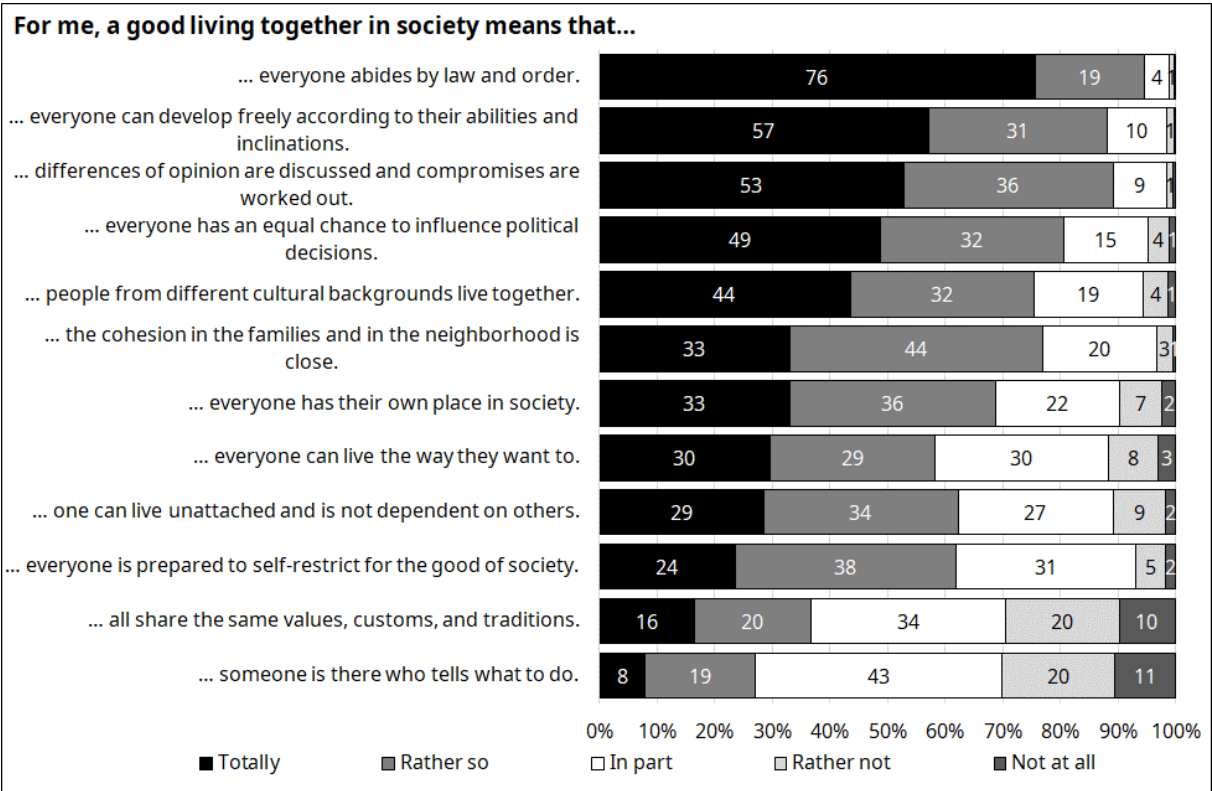
*own developments

For illustrative purposes, we present a measurement instrument that has been newly developed as part of the SCP and tested within the SCP Pilot Study 2020 (Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum, 2022). The instrument measures ideals of living together and is part of the “Living Together & Identification” module. Ten out of the twelve items represent guiding principles of living together, which in turn represent poles of the five societal domains political decision-making, cultural values, social norm bonding, social status order, and close social relationships; an example is the preference for a corporative status order (where everyone has a fixed place) versus a meritocratic status order (where everyone can freely develop themselves; for further details, see Table A1 in the Supplement). In addition, two more items are included (equal chance to influence political decisions and self-restriction for the good of society), which are highly relevant in the context of living together.

In Figure 1, weighted frequencies ordered by the proportion of absolute agreement are presented for the APs of the recruitment survey (SCP 2021_1 Anchor; Groh-Samberg et al., 2023). We are surprised by the extraordinary consensus among the German population that everyone should abide by law and order (95% when combining both agreement categories, 76% absolute agreement), which is the item representing conformist norm bonding. The second-highest value of absolute agreement (57%) is associated with the notion of being able to freely develop oneself, which indicates a meritocratic status hierarchy. In contrast, the concepts of an autocratic political decision-making process (someone tells one what to do) and homogeneous cultural values (the same values, customs, and traditions) receive the least amount of approval. However, when considering both agreement categories, these concepts are still relatively widespread in Germany, at 27% and 36% respectively, not to mention the large shares of the population that partially agree with the statements (43% and 34%

respectively). The majority of respondents agree with the remaining eight statements, with combined agreement values ranging from 62% to 89%. The fact that six of these statements represent opposing poles of societal areas indicates that the idea of an ideal society is complex, ambiguous, and partly contradictory for most people. Analyzing and explaining this complexity is just one of the many interesting possibilities offered by the SCP data.

Figure 1: SCP – Agreement to ideals of living together in society (in %)



Source: SCP 2021_1 (Anchor); N=12,760-12,846; weighted analyses.

Recruitment

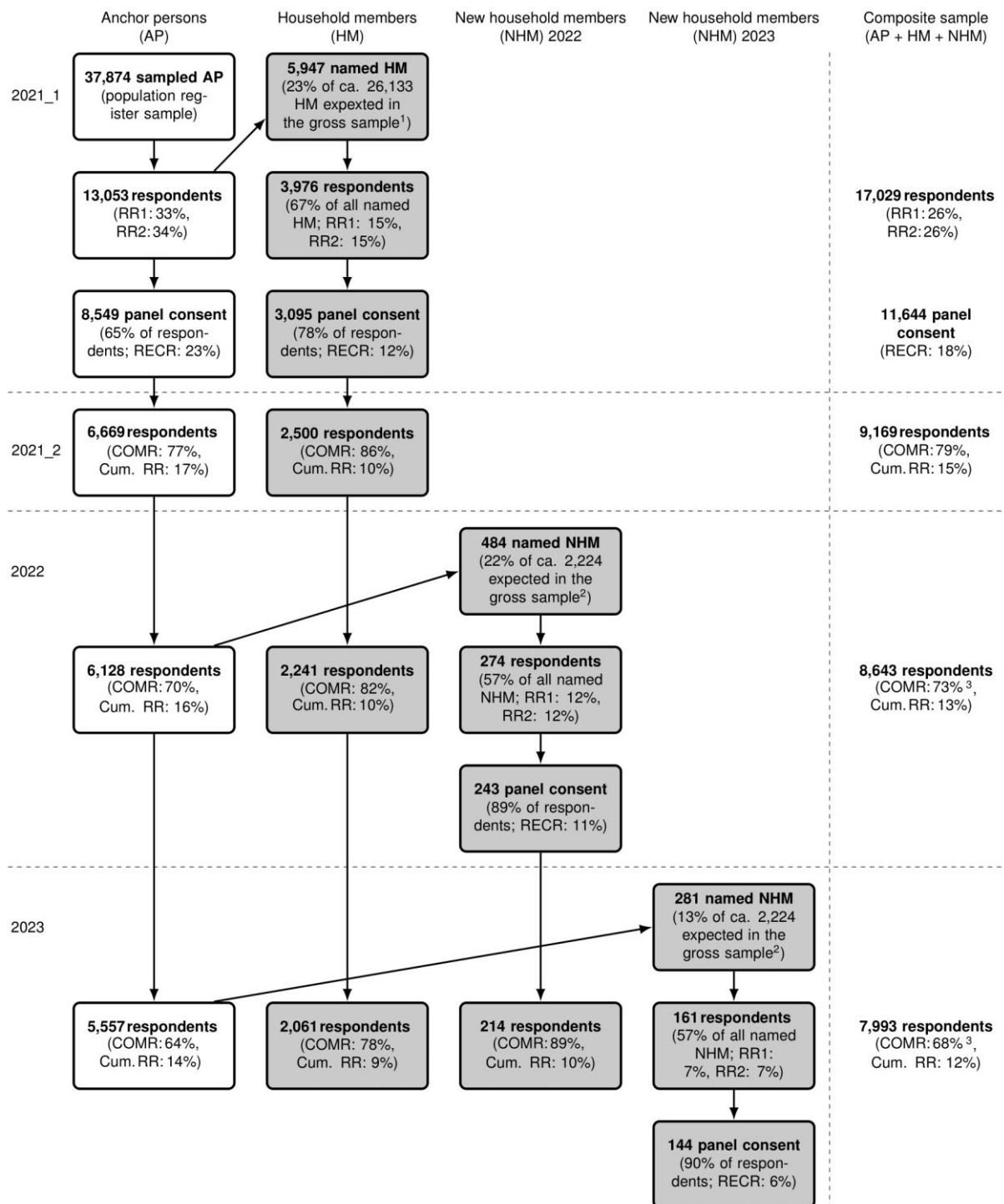
The SCP is designed as a self-administered survey of individuals clustered within their household contexts. During the first stage of a two-stage random sampling procedure, 299 German municipalities were drawn as primary sampling units (PSUs), stratified by region and urbanity. Then, 37,874 individuals were drawn from the local population registers in these municipalities. The selection of individuals was conducted proportionally according to size within the PSUs, with a general oversampling in Eastern Germany to facilitate regional comparisons. The sampled individuals were contacted via postal mail to serve as anchors for their household (hence the term “anchor persons” or APs); i.e., they were asked to provide

data not only on themselves but also on their household, including the names of their adult household members (HMs).

The initial mailing to the APs included a brief invitation letter, a brochure with study information, a detailed data protection sheet, a 5-euro note as an unconditional prepaid cash incentive to participate, and a paper questionnaire (so-called pen-and-paper interviews or PAPI) with a prepaid return envelope for the initial survey. In addition to the paper questionnaire, the invitation letter indicated the option to participate in the survey online (a computer-assisted web interview, i.e., CAWI, via a survey link or a QR code); concurrent mixed-mode survey designs such as this one have been shown to perform well in recent general population surveys in Germany (for example, see Luijkx et al., 2021).

During the initial recruitment survey (i.e., SCP 2021_1), which was conducted from September 2021 to April 2022, APs were asked to provide their consent to participate in regular panel survey waves (panel consent) and to provide information about their household members. All named household members aged 18 and older (HMs) were subsequently invited by mail to participate in the study. The HMs received the same study materials as the APs and were asked for panel consent but were provided with a slightly shorter questionnaire and no prepaid incentive. After data collection, all participants in the initial recruitment survey (APs and HMs) received a conditional postpaid cash incentive of 10 euros by mail together with a letter thanking them for their participation. Similarly, in the following panel waves, APs were asked to name new adult household members (NHMs) who had either moved into the household or reached the age of 18. The listed NHMs were invited by mail to participate in the study; they received the same study materials as the HMs, with a few additional questions about their personal history (questions about unchanging sociodemographic characteristics that had already been asked of the panel participants) and were asked to provide panel consent. Conditional upon participation, they also received a letter with a 10-euro cash incentive for their participation.

Figure 2: Recruitment and panel history of the SCP



Note: Response rate 1 (RR1), response rate 2 (RR2), recruitment rate (RECR), completion rate (COMR) and cumulative response rate (cum. RR) were calculated based on the AAPOR standard definitions (The American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2023). Respondents who answered at least 80% of the questionnaire were considered complete interviews, while other respondents who answered at least 50% of the questionnaire were considered partial interviews.

¹ The number of household members in the gross AP sample is unknown. Therefore, the expected number of HMs in the gross sample was calculated with German Microcensus data and used for calculating the RR.

² The expected number of NHMs per year in the gross sample was estimated from SOEP data from 2021 (Goebel et al., 2023). This number was used for calculating the RR for NHMs.

³ The COMR was calculated only for the existing panel and did not take newly recruited NHMs into account.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the recruitment and the first follow-up panel waves of the SCP. A total of 13,053 APs^a participated in the initial recruitment survey, representing a response rate of 33% (RR1) or 34% (RR2). Almost two-thirds of the responding APs indicated their willingness to participate in further surveys (panel consent), which corresponds to a recruitment rate of 23%. The APs named an additional 5,947 adult HMs, indicating an average of 1.46 adults per household, which suggests some underreporting compared to the official statistic of 1.69 adults per German household (numbers based on our own calculations using Microcensus data). Two-thirds of the reported HMs participated in the survey. Given the expected number of 26,133 HMs in the gross sample, this corresponds to a response rate of 15%. Among the responding HMs, 78% provided panel consent, resulting in a recruitment rate of 12%. Thus, the composite sample consisted of 17,029 responding APs and HMs, for an overall response rate of 26%. A total of 11,644 of these respondents provided panel consent (overall recruitment rate: 18%).

A majority (62%) of the respondents in the recruitment survey participated in the paper questionnaire (PAPI). Participants in the online questionnaire (CAWI) mostly opted for portable devices instead of stationary desktop computers (19%), while smartphone participation was particularly common (38%; see Table A2 in the Supplement); this can be explained by the provision of QR codes in addition to survey links in the invitation letters. The recruitment questionnaire for APs consisted of a maximum of 55 questions, while that for HMs had two fewer questions, namely, the household roster and the question about other household members aged 18 and older. The computer-assisted web interviews of APs had an average duration of 33 minutes (median of 30 minutes), while those of HMs lasted 28 minutes on average (median of 25 minutes).

In scientific population surveys, it is never possible to survey all individuals who were drawn into the sample, which can lead to selection bias. An examination of nonresponse bias in the initial survey revealed below-average participation rates in the 40-to-50-year-old and over-80-years-old age groups, as well as among individuals from medium-sized towns with populations between 20,000 and 100,000 residents. With respect to panel consent, increased

^a This number slightly deviates from the 13,055 APs in the SCP 2021_1 (Anchor) because two AP who began the survey but stopped before answering a question were excluded from the main panel dataset.

nonresponse rates were observed among women, Eastern Germans, individuals aged 45 to 49 years and those over 75 years, and residents of medium-sized towns (see Figure A1 in the Supplement).

Table 2: Sample of the SCP 2021_1 (Anchor) by sociodemographic indicators

		N*	in % unweighted	in % weighted
Gender	Male	6,315	49.0	48.9
	Female	6,529	50.7	50.8
	Diverse	37	0.3	0.4
Age	18-34	2,933	22.9	24.4
	35-49	2,588	20.2	22.6
	50-64	3,780	29.5	27.2
	65+	3,529	27.5	25.8
Migration background	Yes	3,124	23.9	30.4
	No	9,931	76.1	69.6
Region	Eastern Germany	4,658	35.7	19.9
	Western Germany	8,397	64.3	80.1
Education (ISCED 11)	In school	33	0.3	0.2
	Primary	103	0.8	1.3
	Lower secondary	756	6.0	6.8
	Upper secondary	947	7.5	7.7
	Postsecondary nontertiary	5,822	45.8	46.4
	Bachelor's or equivalent	2,252	17.7	16.6
	Master's or equivalent	2,498	19.7	19.0
	Doctoral or equivalent	290	2.3	2.0
Income position (% of median)	Below 60%	1,250	13.1	17.4
	60-80%	1,382	14.5	15.1
	80-100%	1,898	19.9	18.8
	100-120%	1,370	14.4	13.2
	120-150%	1,658	17.4	16.9
	150-200%	1,271	13.3	12.1
	More than 200%	709	7.4	6.6
Employment status	Full-time employed	5,079	40.3	41.8
	Part-time employed	2,435	19.3	18.2
	Unemployed	253	2.0	2.8
	Not employed	4,835	38.4	37.3
Total		13,055	100	100

Source: SCP 2021_1 (Anchor); *the sum of N of indicators might deviate from total N due to missing values.

By using statistical weighting procedures, such selective biases can be reduced. The weights developed for the SCP 2021_1 (Anchor), which is the first Scientific Use File that contains the initial survey data of the AP (Groh-Samberg et al., 2023), are based on base weights of the population register sample (so-called design weights, which account for the unequal selection

probabilities of anchor persons into the sample), as well as survey participation probabilities (which are calculated using nonresponse analyses with auxiliary sample information, such as microgeographic area data) and an extrapolation factor to the total population of German households aged 18 and above (which are calculated based on German official population statistics). Table 2 displays the distribution of some sociodemographic characteristics in the sample. The unweighted percentages show that the diversity of the German population is already well represented even without weighting factors. For example, individuals with a migration background, who are typically underrepresented in surveys, are well represented. The remaining biases can be mitigated through the use of the statistical weighting procedure. This is particularly true for the SCP's intended overrepresentation of people in Eastern Germany. Other noticeable adjustments include age, income, and employment status, as younger, low-income, and unemployed individuals are traditionally underrepresented in surveys.

Panel History

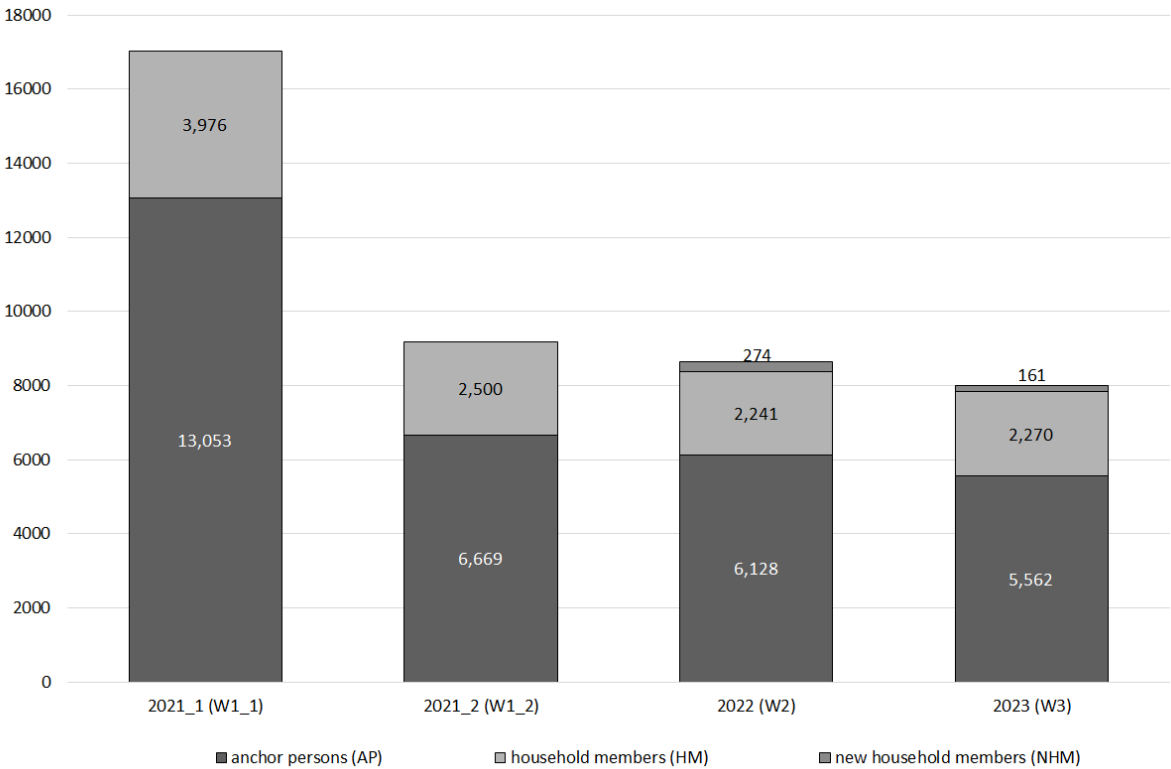
Looking at the panel retention of the first waves, we see a quite familiar picture (see Figure 2). The main decline in study participants occurred between the first two measurement points, which in our case was between the first and second parts of the first wave (2021_1 and 2021_2; for details on the division, see the “Survey Instruments” section), the latter of which was conducted from December 2021 to July 2022. In this first follow-up panel wave, 9,169 APs and HMs participated (80% of those who provided panel consent, for an overall cumulative response rate of 15%). Completion rates were greater among the HMs (86%) than the APs (77%). However, due to the more successful recruitment among the APs, they had a greater cumulative response rate (17%) than that of the HMs (10%). The reduction from 17,029 in the recruitment wave to 9,169 respondents in the following panel wave can mainly be explained by the loss of 5,387 participants who gave no panel consent and thus could not be invited to any subsequent survey waves that occurred after the SCP 2021_1.

The following two waves, in which data were collected from September 2022 to January 2023 (second wave W2) and May to September 2023 (third wave W3), showed relatively stable panel participation (overall 8,643 respondents in 2022 and 7,993 in 2023), with only small drops in overall completion rates each year (from 80% in 2021_2 to 74% in 2022 to 69% in

2023). The cumulative response rate was 15% in 2021_2, 13% in 2022 and 12% in 2023. HMs continued to have higher completion rates than APs (78% vs. 64% in 2023) but lower cumulative response rates (9% vs. 14% in 2023).

The APs named 484 NHMs in 2022 (W2) and 281 in 2023 (W3), i.e., individuals who either moved into the household or reached the age of 18. In both waves, a majority 57% of the named NHMs participated in the survey; of the responding NHMs, 89% declared panel consent in 2022, while 90% did so in 2023. The response rates were relatively low among the NHMs (12% in 2022 and 7% in 2023), as were the recruitment rates (11% and 6% respectively). This is because NHMs can only be recruited from the remaining panel, whereas in the initial gross sample, we would expect 2,224 NHMs each year (based on our own calculations using SOEP data; Goebel et al., 2023). However, with a 2023 completion rate of 90% among the NHMs recruited in 2022, the attrition rate in this group was low.

Figure 3: SCP – Sample size by wave and subsample



Source: SCP 2021_1, 2021_2, 2022, 2023; W = wave.

Figure 3 visualizes the development of sample sizes in the SCP over the first survey waves. The subsample sizes correspond to those in the datasets, differ in part from those presented in

Figure 2, and reflect the categorization of respondents during data collection; i.e., all NHMs become HMs after their recruitment, and HMs may become APs if they move out of their original household or if the original AP drops out of the survey. Overall, it can be concluded that the SCP achieves a large probability-based sample with a decent overall response rate. Moreover, we can observe two main challenges to the overall level of survey response in the SCP. First, the subsample of the HMs in the initial sample is visibly smaller than the subsample of the APs (and smaller than would be expected based on population counts). This is because the participation of HM is conditional upon the APs participating in the survey and reporting their household members. Second, the number of respondents dropped significantly between the first and second surveys. This is primarily because 35% of the APs and 22% of the HMs gave no panel consent. Apart from that, we observe stable sample sizes with only low rates of attrition from 2021_2 onward.

Analytical Potential and Access

With the German Social Cohesion Panel (SCP), we introduce a new, innovative high-quality longitudinal study that has extraordinary potential for analyzing current social issues – both in terms of both content and methodology. The collaboration of individuals and institutions with outstanding expertise, the large sample size, and the adherence to the highest standards in survey design, data collection, and data management ensure high data quality.

The content focus of the SCP is on social cohesion, combining established constructs such as attachment, relationships, and common good orientation, with new perspectives such as the “dark side” of cohesion (e.g., overidentification, racism) and threats (polarization, segregation, cleavages, and social inequalities). In surveying the various aspects of social cohesion, we rely on a combination of values, attitudes, and practices, complemented by detailed sociodemographics. The conceptual openness of the SCP enables us to include new instruments at any time to respond to current issues and developments as well as accommodate new research strands.

In addition to providing a novel theoretical perspective on social cohesion, the SCP also features methodological innovations. In this context, newly developed and tested measurement instruments should be mentioned. Moreover, coupling with additional studies

and experiments is planned and partly already being implemented (for example, there will be a vignette study conducted on group membership, affection and practices of cohesion, carried out jointly with the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies in Chile). In addition, the longitudinal perspective of cohesion research opens up completely new possibilities. Thus, causal analyses can be conducted, and diffusion processes, effects and interactions of values, attitudes and practices can become observable.

The SCP can be ordered by all postdoctoral researchers affiliated with a scientific institution. For that purpose, interested researchers have to set up a data user account at <https://fgz-risc-data.de/en/registration>. Such an account provides access to all Scientific Use Files available at the Research Data Centre of the Research Institute Social Cohesion (RDC-RISC). Account holders (primary users) may share the data with researchers under their supervision (secondary users). Secondary users must be listed in the primary users' data user account and must sign a privacy policy, which must be archived by the primary user. The data are provided for scientific use only.

References

- The American Association for Public Opinion Research. (2023). *Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys*.
- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
- Baldassarri, D., & Park, B. (2020). Was There a Culture War? Partisan Polarization and Secular Trends in US Public Opinion. *The Journal of Politics*, 82(3), 809–827.
- Chan, J., To, H.-P., & Chan, E. (2006). Reconsidering Social Cohesion: Developing a Definition and Analytical Framework for Empirical Research. *Social Indicators Research*, 75(2), 273–302. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-2118-1>
- Deitelhoff, N., Groh-Samberg, O., & Middell, M. (Eds.). (2020). *Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt: Ein interdisziplinärer Dialog*. Campus Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.12907/978-3-593-44646-2>
- Delhey, J., Dragolov, G., & Boehnke, K. (2023). Social Cohesion in International Comparison: A Review of Key Measures and Findings. *Kölner Zeitschrift Für Soziologie Und Sozialpsychologie*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-023-00891-6>
- Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z. S., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., Boehnke, K., & Unzicker, K. (2016). *Social Cohesion in the Western World: What Holds Societies Together: Insights from the*

- Social Cohesion Radar* (1st ed. 2016). *SpringerBriefs in Well-Being and Quality of Life Research*. Springer International Publishing.
- Forst, R. (2020). Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt: Zur Analyse eines sperrigen Begriffs. In N. Deitelhoff, O. Groh-Samberg, & M. Middell (Eds.), *Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt: Ein interdisziplinärer Dialog* (pp. 41–53). Campus Verlag.
- Forst, R. (2022). *Die Herrschaft der Unvernunft: Zum Begriff der (anti-)demokratischen Regression*. FGZ Working Paper Nr. 4. Forschungsinstitut Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt. https://fgz-risc.de/fileadmin/user_upload/fgz-wp_4_forst_die-herrschaft-der-unvernunft.pdf
- Goebel, J., Grabka, M. M., Schröder, C., Zinn, S., Bartels, C., Beckmannshagen, M., Franken, A., Gerike, M., Griese, F., Halbmeier, C., Kara, S., Krause, P., Liebau, E., Nebelin, J., Petrenz, M., Satilmis, S., Siegers, R., Steinhauer, H. W., Süttmann, F., . . . Zimmermann, S. (2023). *Socio-Economic Panel, data from 1984-2021 (SOEP-Core, v38.1, Remote Edition - Update)*. SOEP/DIW Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.5684/soep.core.v38.1r>
- Groh-Samberg, O., Cornesse, C., Gerlitz, J.-Y., Kroh, M., Lengfeld, H., Liebig, S., Minkus, L., Reinecke, J., Richter, D., Traunmüller, R., & Zinn, S. (2023). *German Social Cohesion Panel 2021 - Anchor Persons: Dataset and Documentation*. RDC-RISC/SOCIUM, SOEP/DIW Berlin. <https://doi.org/10.60532/scp.2021.ap.v1>
- Grunow, D., Sachweh, P., Schimank, U., & Traunmüller, R. (2022). *Gesellschaftliche Sozialintegration. Konzeptionelle Grundlagen und offene Fragen.: FGZ Working Paper Nr. 2*. Forschungsinstitut Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt. <https://fgz-risc.de/wp-2>
- Helbling, M., & Jungkuntz, S. (2020). Social Divides in the Age of Globalization. *West European Politics*, 43(6), 1187–1210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1674578>
- Herold, M., Joachim, J., Otteni, C., & Vorländer, H. (2023). *Polarisierung in Deutschland und Europa: Eine Studie zu gesellschaftlichen Spaltungstendenzen in zehn europäischen Ländern. MIDEM Studie: 2023-2*. Mercator Forum Migration und Demokratie (MIDEM). [https://forum-midem.de/cms/data/fm/user_upload/Publikationen/TUD MIDEM Studie 2023-2 Polarisation in Deutschland und Europa.pdf](https://forum-midem.de/cms/data/fm/user_upload/Publikationen/TUD_MIDEM_Studie_2023-2_Polarisierung_in_Deutschland_und_Europa.pdf)
- Luijkx, R., Jónsdóttir, G. A., Gummer, T., Stähli, M. E., Frederiksen, M., Ketola, K., Reeskens, T., Brislinger, E., Christmann, P., Gunnarsson, S. P., Hjaltason, Á. B., Joye, D., Lomazzi, V., Maineri, A. M., Milbert, P., Ochsner, M., Pollien, A., Sapin, M., Solanes, I., . . . Wolf, C. (2021). The European Values Study 2017: On the Way to the Future Using Mixed-Modes. *European Sociological Review*, 37(2), 330–346. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa049>
- Mau, S. (2022). Kamel oder Dromedar? Zur Diagnose der gesellschaftlichen Polarisierung. *Merkur*, 76(874), 5–18.
- Mau, S., Lux, T., & Gülzau, F. (2020). Die drei Arenen der neuen Ungleichheitskonflikte: Eine sozialstrukturelle Positionsbestimmung der Einstellungen zu Umverteilung, Migration und sexueller Diversität. *Berliner Journal Für Soziologie*, 30(3-4), 317–346.
- Mau, S., Lux, T., & Westheuser, L. (2023). *Triggerpunkte: Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (2. Auflage). *edition suhrkamp : Sonderdruck*. Suhrkamp. <https://portal.dnb.de/opac/mvb/cover?isbn=978-3-518-02984-8>

- McCarty, N. (2019). *Polarization: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford University Press.
- Merkel, W. (2017). Die populistische Revolte. *Kulturpolitische Mitteilungen*(157), 53–56.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism. *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 61(2), 389–391.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-020-00246-2>
- Phillips, D. (2006). *Quality of Life: Concept, Policy and Practice*. Routledge.
- Schiefer, D., & van der Noll, J. (2017). The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review. *Social Indicators Research*, 132(2), 579–603.
- Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum. (2022). *Gefährdeter Zusammenhalt? Polarisierungs- und Spaltungstendenzen in Deutschland: Ausgewählte Ergebnisse der FGZ-Pilotstudie 2020*. SOCIUM, Forschungsinstitut Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt.
<https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/1739>
- Teichler, N., Gerlitz, J.-Y., Cornesse, C., Dilger, C., Groh-Samberg, O., Lengfeld, H., Nissen, E., Reinecke, J., Skolarski, S., Traunmüller, R., & Verneuer-Emre, L. M. (2023). *Entkoppelte Lebenswelten? Soziale Beziehungen und gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt in Deutschland: Erster Zusammenhaltsbericht des FGZ*. SOCIUM, Forschungsinstitut Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt. <https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/2517>
- Tucker, J. A., Theocharis, Y., Roberts, M. E., & Barberá, P. (2017). From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(4), 46-59.

Supplement

Table A1: SCP 2021_1 – Guiding principles of living together in society

traditional-communitarian ←	area		→ liberal-individualistic	
<i>“For me, good living together in society means that...”</i>				
<i>... someone is there who tells what to do.</i>	autocratic	political decision-making	discursive	<i>... differences in opinion are discussed and compromises are worked out.</i>
<i>... all share the same values, customs, and traditions.</i>	homogeneous	cultural values	heterogeneous	<i>... people from different cultural backgrounds live together.</i>
<i>... everyone abides by law and order.</i>	conformistic	social norm bonding	individualistic	<i>... everyone can live the way they want to.</i>
<i>... everyone has their own place in society.</i>	corporative	social status order	meritocratic	<i>... everyone can develop freely according to their abilities and inclinations.</i>
<i>... the cohesion in families and in the neighborhood is close.</i>	collaborative	close social relations	unattached	<i>... one can live unattached and is not dependent on others.</i>

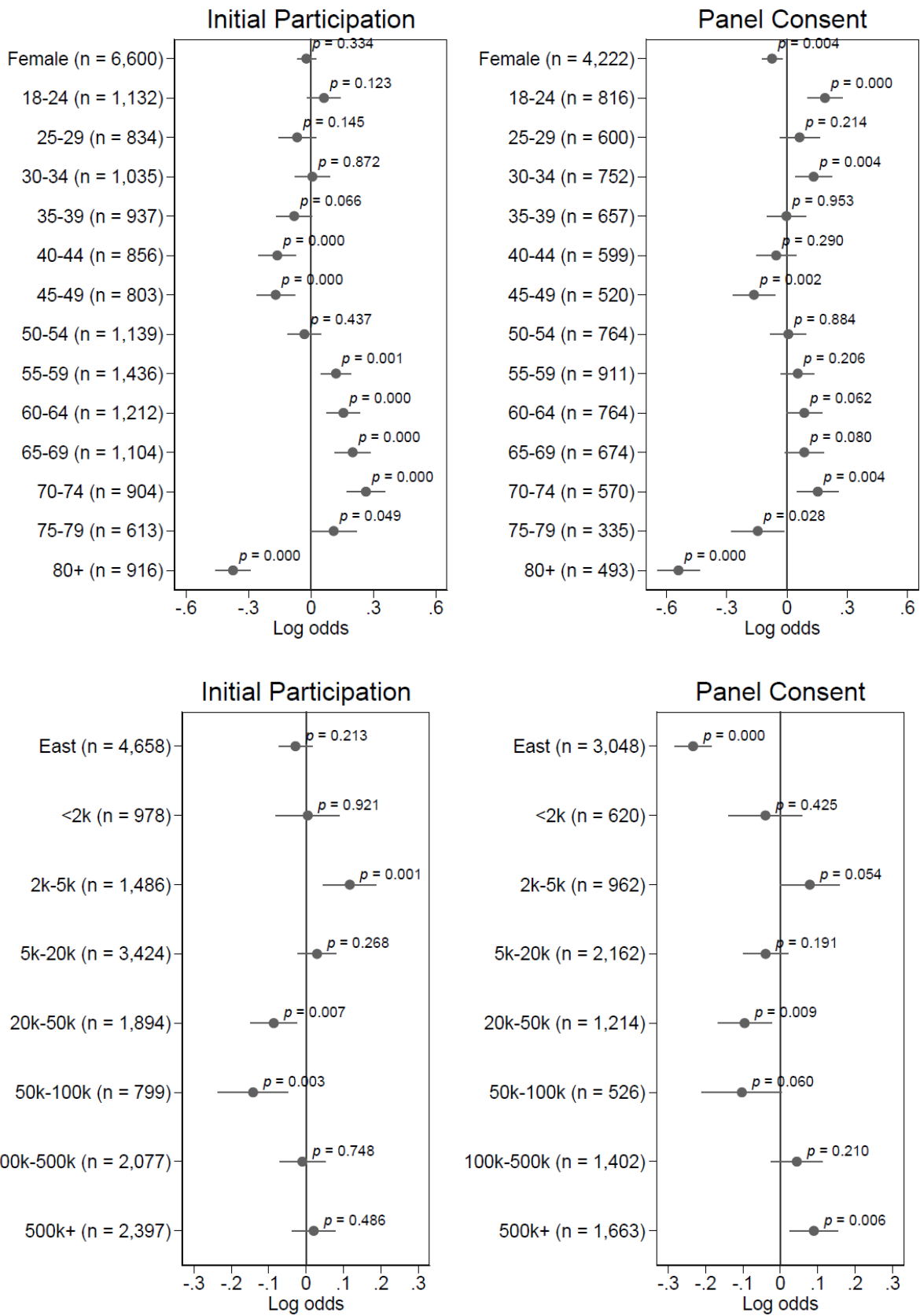
Source: Task Force FGZ-Datenzentrum (2022, p. 21), own translation.

Table A2: Survey mode and device use of SCP 2021_1

	N	in %
Paper questionnaire (PAPI)	10,562	62.0
Online questionnaire (CAWI)	6,469	38.0
<i>thereof via</i>		
PC*	1,247	19.3
laptop*	1,662	25.7
smartphone*	2,427	37.5
tablet/other device*	686	10.6
Total	17,031	100.0

Source: SCP 2021_1; *the sum of N of indicators might deviate from total N due to missing values and multiple responses.

Figure A1: Nonresponse bias SCP 2021_1 – Demographics and geographics



Source: SCP 2021_1.