

# Polarisation in Germany: Insights from the Science Barometer 2025

This background paper provides an overview of the topic of polarisation and summarises key findings from the *science barometer 2025*. The aim is to better understand the extent and structure of ideological and affective polarisation in Germany and to determine the extent to which social divisions actually exist or are merely perceived. The following chapters explain what we mean by polarisation, how it can be measured and what results are evident with regard to different topics.

## The data

The analyses presented here are based on data from the *science barometer 2025*, a regular representative survey of the attitudes of citizens in Germany towards science and research. The *science barometer* consists of a core section of variables that are collected regularly in order to track trends in the attitudes of the German population towards science and research over time. In addition, each year a focal topic is surveyed extensively in order to get to the heart of current developments. In 2025, the focal topic was '**polarisation**'. In the following, the focal topic of polarisation will be examined in depth in order to better understand how the population in Germany perceives polarisation and how it should be assessed against the backdrop of general attitudes towards science and research.

For the *science barometer 2025*, German speaking citizens living in Germany who were at least 14 years old were surveyed. A total of **2,011 people** were polled. The survey took place between the **4th and 18th July 2025** and was conducted online as a **computer-assisted web interview survey (CAWI)**. Participants were selected via the Payback Online Panel of the survey institute Verian. This panel is based on the approximately 34 million Payback customers

in Germany and is recruited offline in order to achieve the most diverse and representative group of respondents possible. The sample was compiled using a **representative quota method**. This means that the target group for the survey was divided into subgroups based on certain characteristics - gender, age, federal state and school education. The aim here is to ensure that the group surveyed in the end is composed in such a way that it corresponds as closely as possible to the overall population in Germany in terms of these key characteristics. To ensure **representativeness, structural adjustment weighting** was also carried out following the data collection. This statistical procedure can be used to compensate for additional distortions that arise, for example, because some groups participate less in surveys or are more difficult to reach. Weighting was carried out according to federal state, size of town, gender, age, occupation, school education and household size.

This paper focuses on an analysis of the focal topic of 'polarisation'. The other results of the *science barometer 2025* are documented both in official brochure and on the project website. The complete **questionnaire** and all **results in tabular form** can be found online at: [www.wissenschaftsbarometer.de](http://www.wissenschaftsbarometer.de) (German versions only).

## What does polarisation mean?

First, a brief definition of terms is necessary. In particular, ideological and affective polarisation will be discussed, as well as the concept of perceived divisiveness. The term polarisation describes a division of opinions or social groups into two camps, whether due to differences in content or emotional rejection. Two fundamental dimensions can be distinguished: **ideological** and **affective polarisation**.

**Ideological polarisation** refers to a situation where positions on a particular issue are concentrated at opposite ends of the opinion spectrum. A society or group is considered ideologically polarised when many people find themselves at the extremes of the opinion spectrum, i.e. they hold very opposing views (see Fig. 1a).

*Example:* When it comes to artificial intelligence, there are widely differing positions between those who want to regulate the use of this technology and those who oppose such regulation.

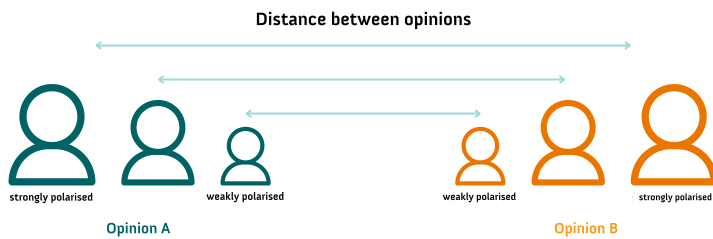


Figure 1a: Illustration of ideological polarisation

**Affective polarisation** extends even further. While ideological polarisation describes differences in opinions, affective polarisation refers to emotional attitudes towards people with different views. Affective polarisation occurs when people treat 'others' with mistrust or aversion, while feeling strongly connected to their own group (see Fig. 1b).

*Example:* A person who strongly advocates the regulation of artificial intelligence would perceive people who oppose regulation as less likeable.

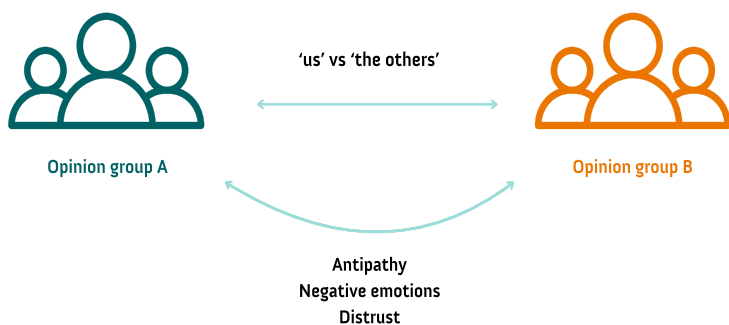


Figure 1b: Illustration of affective polarisation

**Perceived divisiveness** describes the subjective perception of how strongly people feel that certain issues are socially divisive. This perceived potential for conflict on a given issue can be high, even if the measured differences in opinions or attitudes on the issue or towards groups that hold different opinions are not that great.

## How was polarisation measured?

In the *science barometer 2025* polarisation was measured on three levels. For each of the four issues – **migration, climate change, gender-inclusive language** and **social inequality** – two opposing statements were formulated, representing two opposing poles in the public debate and reflecting concrete political positions. On the issue of migration, the endpoints of the scale are: 'Immigration should be made easier in Germany' and 'Immigration should be more restricted in Germany'.

### Level 1: Intrinsic polarisation

First, the survey examined how the respondents positioned themselves in regard to these issues. To do this, they ranked themselves on a scale from 0 to 10 between the two opposing statements. These distributions show how dispersed or concentrated opinions are on the respective issues – in other words, whether many people rank themselves in the middle or rather at the extremes. On this basis, **ideological polarisation** on the four issues was determined.

### Level 2: Evaluation of opinion groups

In the second step, affective polarisation was assessed, i.e. the emotional reactions to people with views that differ from one's own views or coincide with one's own views. To this end, respondents used a so-called **feeling thermometer** (scale from -5 to +5) to rate how **negatively** or **positively** they felt about people who held one of the two extreme positions on the four issues. In the case of immigration, this meant that each person gave two ratings:

1. How sympathetic/warm they find advocates of easier immigration.
2. How sympathetic/warm they find advocates of a restrictive immigration policy.

The difference between the two values can be used to determine a person's affective polarisation. The greater the difference between the ratings of the two groups, the stronger the affective polarisation. The maximum possible value of 10 corresponds to the greatest emotional distance between the two groups. If, on the other hand, both groups were rated equally, there is no affective polarisation to be observed.

### Level 3: Perception of affectedness and division

Two further aspects were also surveyed: Firstly, **personal affectedness**, i.e. how relevant the respondents consider the individual issue for themselves. This assessment was made on a scale from 0 ('not affected at all') to 10 ('very strongly affected').

Secondly, **perceived divisiveness** was measured, i.e. the perception of how controversial the respective issues are perceived to be in society. Respondents indicated this on a scale from 0 ('very controversial') to 10 ('not controversial at all').

## Overview: Distributions of opinions

A look at the four issues examined – **migration, climate change, gender-inclusive language** and **social inequality** – clearly shows how differently opinions are distributed in society. While a broad middle ground emerges on some issues, attitudes on others are clearly concentrated on one side of the opinion spectrum.

Such distribution patterns provide insight into the form of ideological polarisation observed: one-sided clustering concentrations at one end or the other, without a strong counterbalance - is less indicative of evenly distributed polarisation between two poles than of an asymmetric, issue-specific concentration of opinions.

A first look at the distribution of personal attitudes reveals clear differences between the issues (Fig. 3). When it comes to **gender-inclusive language** and **migration**,

### Infobox: How to read density distributions?

The curves shown indicate how strongly certain response areas are represented in the population.

The x-axis represents a scale from 0 ('too far' / 'less') to 10 ('not far enough' / 'more').

The y-axis shows the relative frequency, i.e. how many respondents gave similar ratings.

High values on one side of the scale indicate a concentration of similar opinions. An even distribution indicates an even distribution of attitudes and thus less (ideological) polarisation.

critical attitudes tend to dominate: many respondents believe that gender-inclusive language is used 'too much' and that migration should be 'more restricted'. The distribution in the diagram is heavily skewed to the 'left', indicating a predominantly negative orientation.

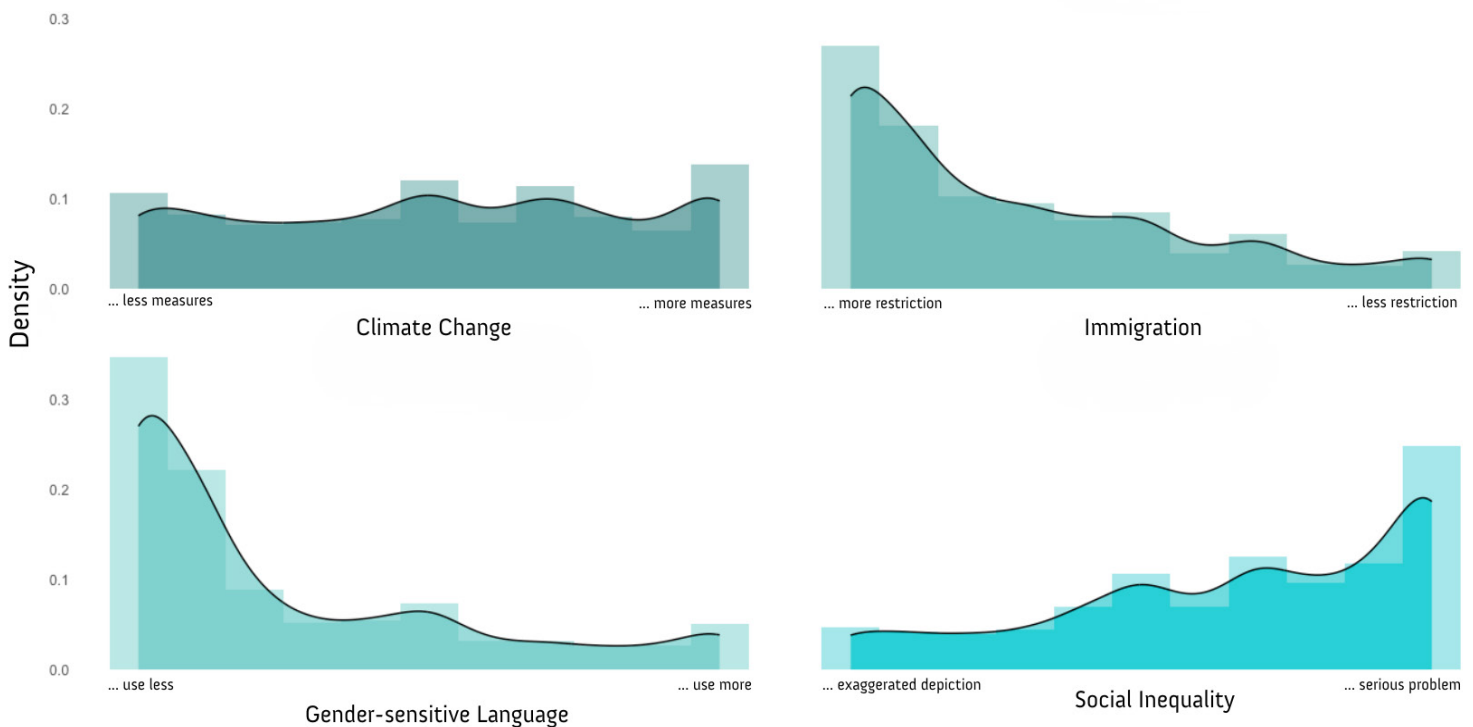


Figure. 2: Distribution of ideological polarisation by issue

For **climate protection**, the picture is more balanced: responses are distributed relatively evenly across the scale, indicating greater diversity of opinion and less ideological polarisation. This makes climate change the issue with the greatest diversity of opinion. For **social inequality**, in contrast, the distribution shifts clearly to the 'right', with many respondents calling for 'more redistribution'. This issue therefore receives the strongest support for further measures.

## Overview: Affective polarisation

To examine affective polarisation, first a **global index of affective polarisation** was calculated, integrating the values for all four issues examined. To compute this index, the distances between respondents' evaluations of the two opposing opinion groups were calculated and then averaged across all four issues. The index therefore ranges from 0 to 10.

- A value of 0 indicates that a respondent shows no systematic sympathy or antipathy toward people with opposing views for any of the issues. In other words, they consistently rated both groups equally.
- A value of 10 indicates maximum affective polarisation across all issues, i.e. the greatest possible emotional distance between two groups. This occurs when a person reports maximum sympathy (+5) towards people who share their opinion and feels maximum antipathy (-5) towards people who do not, yielding a distance of 10 (from +5 to -5) across all issues.

If a person has a value of 0 here, it means that they have always rated all groups equally in each of the four subject areas. This applies to 3.87% of the 2,011 respondents.

A value of 10, by contrast, indicates that a person is maximally affectively polarised on all four issues. This is the case for 2.27% of the 2011 respondents. In order to describe a group of particularly strongly polarised individuals, respondents whose index values fell within the top quintile of the sample were classified as strongly polarised.

### How strong is the affective polarisation?

Based on the **global index**, **22.8% of respondents**, more than one in five people are strongly polarised. This group displays a pronounced emotional distance from people holding opposing opinions across all issues, with a mean affective polarisation score of at least 7.

### INFOBOX – Measured values of affective polarisation

Three parameters are used to describe the extent of affective polarisation:

#### Mean value

The mean value indicates the average emotional distance a person feels between the two groups of opinion on an issue. At the group level, it reflects the average degree of affective polarisation within the respective population group.

#### Group of the most polarised

People who rate the two opinion groups on an issue with the greatest possible distance (10 points) are considered maximally polarised. The share of these respondents shows how many people experience particularly strong emotional contrasts. For example, on the issue of migration, 18.4% of all respondents are maximally polarised (cf. Fig. 4).

#### Group of highly polarised individuals (global index)

To capture affective polarisation across all issues, an overall polarisation index was calculated. Since only a small number of individuals show maximum distances on all issues simultaneously, a group of **highly polarised individuals** was defined. This group includes respondents whose index values are in the top 20% of the total sample.

Depending on the form of presentation, different impressions may arise: for one issue, the mean value may be higher, while for another, the proportion of maximally polarised individuals may be more prominent. Both measures shed light on different facets of affective polarisation.

However, a look at the individual issues reveals clear differences (see Fig. 3):

The discourse on gender-inclusive language is the most polarised – 28% of respondents are highly polarised on this issue. This issue therefore ranks highest in terms of measured affective polarisation. The three remaining issues – migration, climate change and social inequality – are substantially lower, with shares of between 17% and 18%, and are broadly comparable.

### Dominance of individual opinion groups

A look at the positions on the issues (see Fig. 4) shows that certain attitudes are much more prevalent than others within these highly polarised groups.

On the issue of **migration**, the group of highly polarised respondents is dominated by those who advocate a more restrictive immigration policy (around 69%), while around 31% are in favour of easing immigration restrictions.

On the issue of **climate change**, more conservative positions tend to prevail among the strongly polarised respondents: 57% of strongly polarised respondents consider climate protection measures too far-reaching, while 43% consider them not far-reaching enough.

The pattern is most pronounced among the strongly polarised respondents on the issue of **social inequality**: here, 81% of the strongly polarised respondents belong to the group that considers social inequality a serious problem, while 19% consider the problem to be exaggerated.

In contrast, the opposite picture emerges when it comes to **gender-inclusive language**: around 75% of strongly polarised individuals reject it as being used too frequently, while 25% support a more frequent use.

### Which groups of people are particularly polarised?

When affective polarisation is examined by socio-demographic characteristics, only minor differences in affective polarisation emerge between the groups considered, and these differences are not statistically significant (see Fig. 5). Although the descriptive analysis suggests some tendencies— such as slightly higher values among men, middle-aged people or respondents with lower incomes – these differences are not statistically significant. Other characteristics such as level of education, size of place of residence, or region, also show no significant effects.

### Affective polarisation and political orientation

In contrast to socio-demographic characteristics, political attitudes and preferences show significant differences in affective polarisation (see Fig. 5). The self-assessment on the left-right scale is clearly associated with polarised attitudes: respondents who identify as left-wing exhibit the highest affective polarisation ( $M = 5.32$ ). Within this group, 28.6% are considered strongly polarised – significantly more than in the overall sample. Similarly high values are also shown by respondents who position themselves on the right ( $M = 5.21$ ), with a comparable share of strongly polarised individuals (27%). By contrast, affective polarisation is significantly lower among those in the political centre ( $M = 4.17$ ), and only 16.2% of these respondents are strongly polarised.

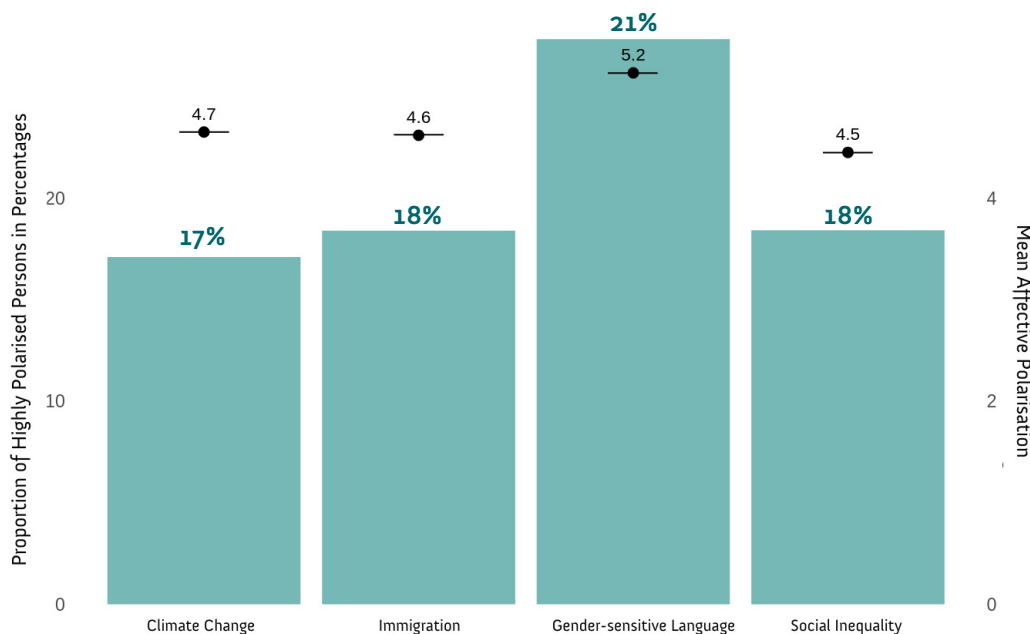


Figure 3: Affective polarisation by issues (means and confidence intervals) and percentage of the most polarised (in per cent)

Overall, these results suggest that affective polarisation is most pronounced at the political extremes, while it decreases noticeably towards the centre of the political spectrum.

A similar pattern emerges for **party identification**. Particularly high levels of affective polarisation are found among supporters of *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* ( $m = 6.15$ ) and *Die Linke* ( $M = 6.11$ ); 40.7% and 44.1%, respectively, are strongly polarised. *AfD* voters also show significant above-average polarisation ( $m = 5.47$ ), with 32.4% of them being strongly polarised.

Significantly lower values are found among supporters of the *SPD* ( $m = 4.54$ ; 18.3% strongly polarised) and *CDU/CSU* voters ( $m = 4.20$ ; 12.8% strongly polarised). The values are particularly low among *FDP* voters ( $m = 3.79$ ; 9.4% strongly polarised). Respondents without a party preference and non-voters show low to medium values ( $m = 4.22$  and  $4.47$  respectively) and thus lie close to the overall average.

These findings illustrate that affective polarisation is strongly linked to political self-identification and party preference. The more strongly individuals align themselves with an ideological orientation, the more they distance themselves emotionally from political opponents. Polarisation is not one-sided, but affects both the left and right ends of the political spectrum with similar intensity. The political centre, by contrast, is characterised by comparatively low affective polarisation.

Overall, affective polarisation in Germany appears to be less shaped by traditional socio-demographic factors and more closely associated with political orientation and ideological self-identification.

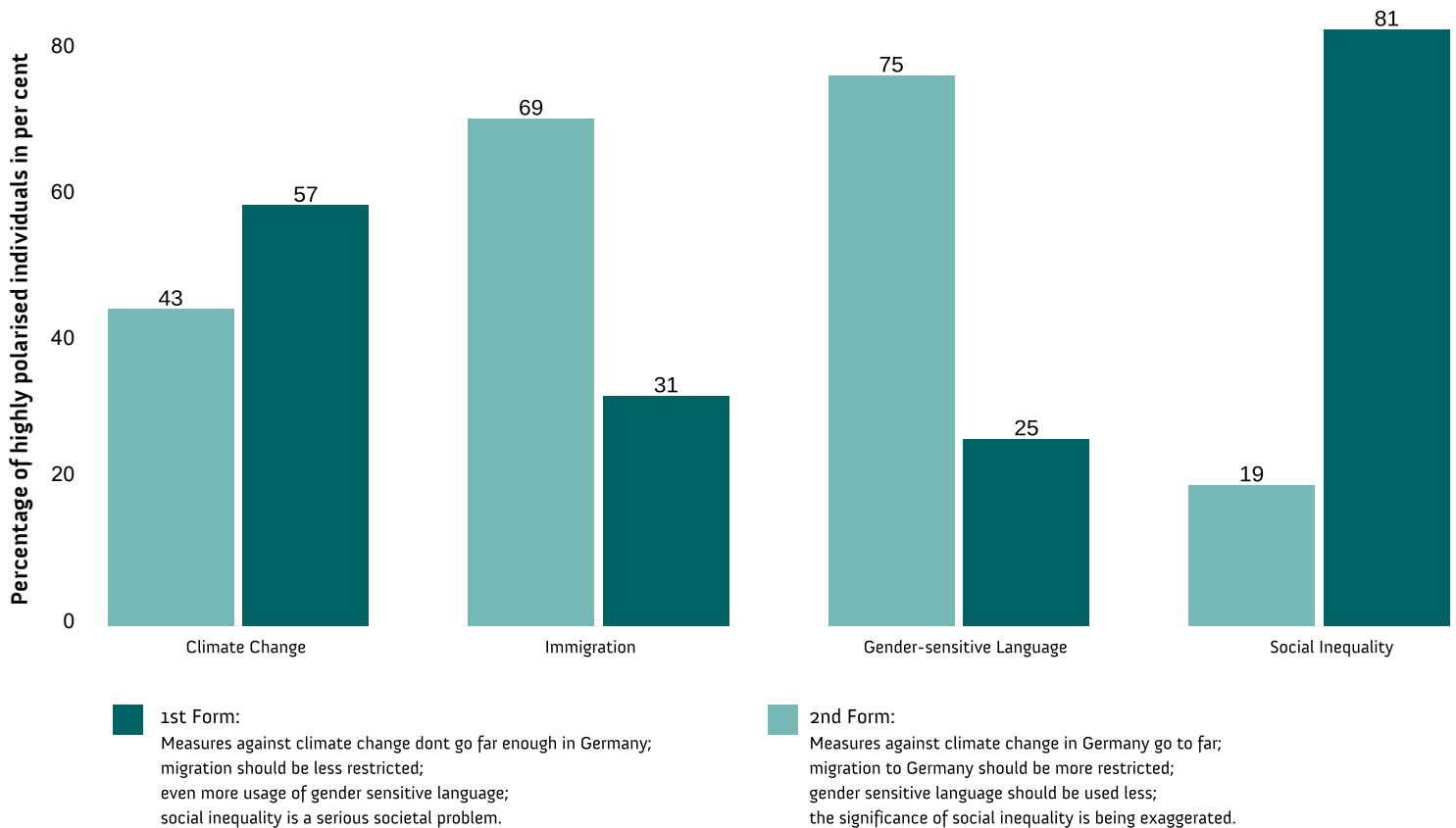


Figure 4: Shares of the respective opinion groups among the most polarised persons by issue (in per cent)

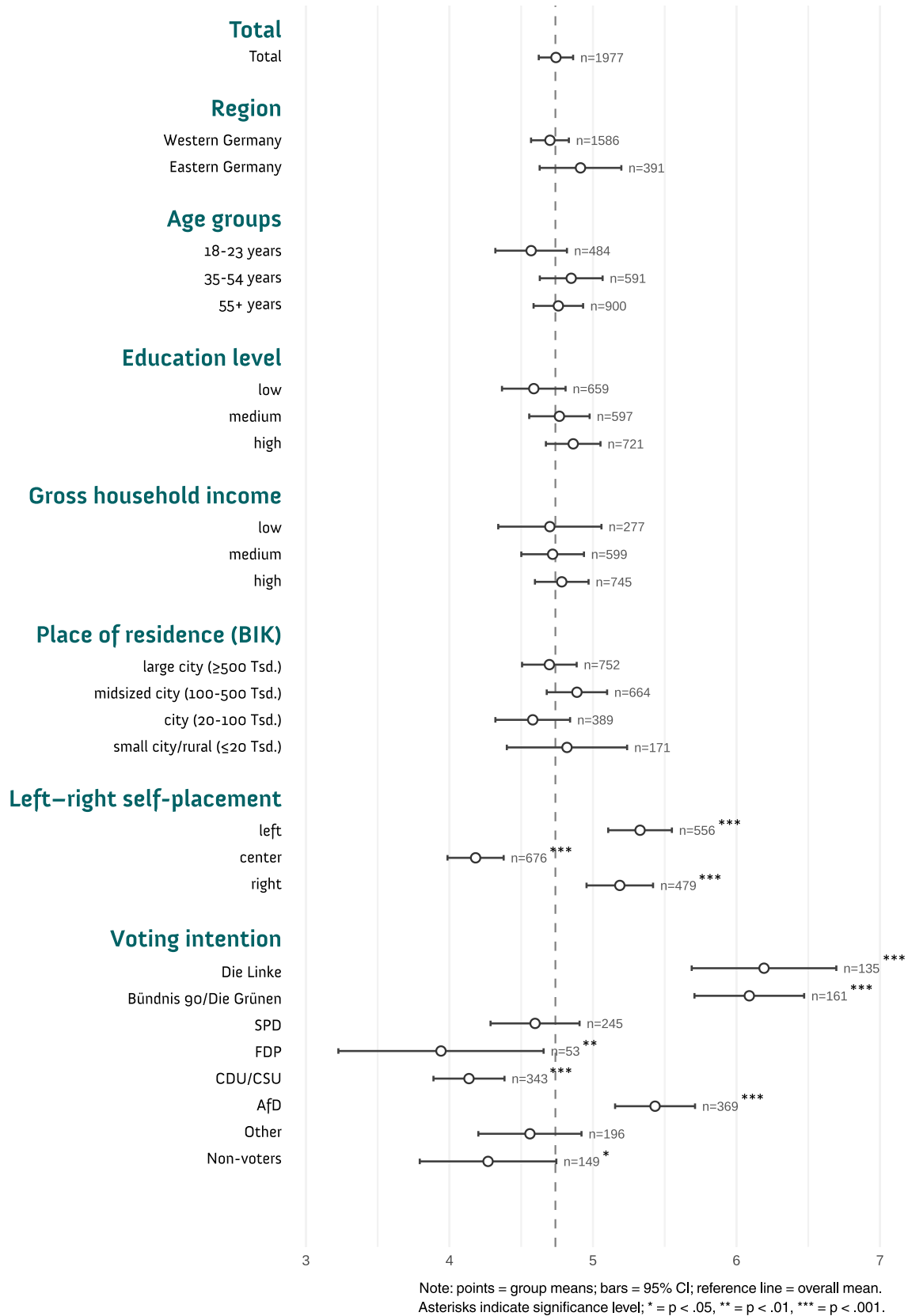


Figure 5: Affective polarisation index by subgroups, sociodemographic and political characteristics (means and confidence intervals)

### Affective polarisation and perceived divisiveness

Beyond perceived relevance, the extent to which an issue is assumed to carry potential for conflict may be decisive for polarisation effects. It is therefore particularly informative to examine to what extent the measured polarisation values are related to subjective perception, i.e. whether those issues that are considered highly controversial also exhibit a higher degree of emotional distance between opposing opinion groups. In the *science barometer 2025*, respondents were therefore asked, for each issue, how controversial they perceive societal debates to be. Responses were recorded on a scale from 0 ('very controversial') to 10 ('not controversial at all').

As Fig. 6 shows, the **perceived divisiveness** is highest on the issue of migration, followed by gender-inclusive language, while climate change and social inequality are almost on par.

However, this ranking is not reflected in the measured levels of **affective polarisation**. The greatest discrepancy between perceived divisiveness and affective polarisation is found for the issue of migration: migration is perceived as significantly

more controversial than the affective polarisation on this issue would suggest. The opposite pattern emerges for gender-inclusive language. Although it is subjectively perceived as less controversial than migration, it shows the highest measured affective polarisation. For climate change and social inequality, perceived divisiveness also exceeds what would be expected on the basis of measured affective polarisation.

### Affective polarisation and personal impact

In addition to respondents' perceptions of the issue's potential to be divisive, we also assessed the extent to which they felt personally affected by it. We assumed that higher personal impact would be accompanied by higher affective polarisation. However, the analyses show no statistically significant correlation: respondents who feel particularly affected do not necessarily react more emotionally to opposing positions.

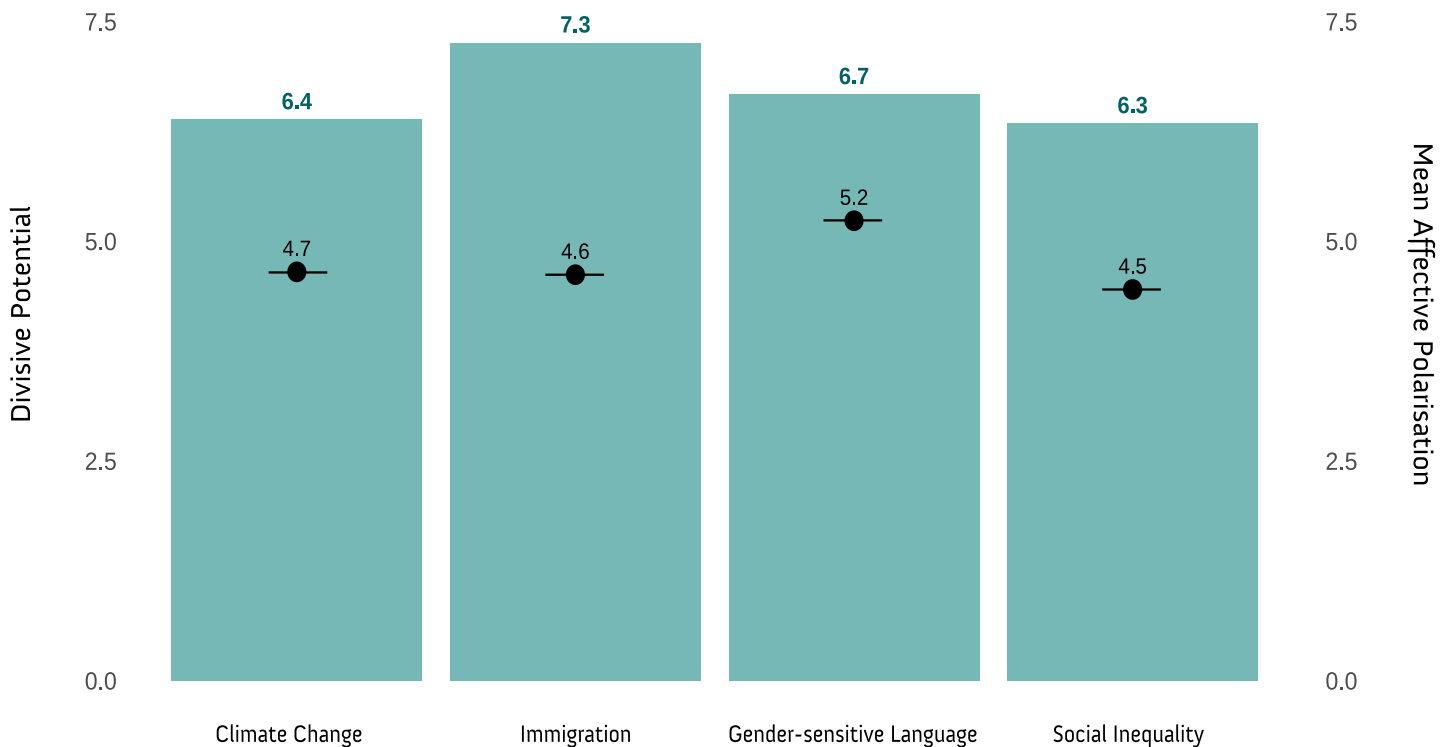


Figure 6: Divisive potential for the different issues (means) und affective polarisation (means)

### What do these results mean?

The findings of the *science barometer 2025* indicate that **social polarisation in Germany is issue-dependent**. When it comes to attitudes towards specific issues (ideological polarisation), clear patterns emerge, such as a predominantly negative attitude towards gender-inclusive language and stronger support for redistribution in the context of social inequality. At the same time, other issues, such as climate change, exhibit a comparatively broad diversity of opinion.

On an emotional level (affective polarisation), marked differences also emerge across issues. The debate on gender-inclusive language shows a particularly strong affective polarising effect, while respondents are less strongly polarised on the issue of migration, climate change and social inequality. Overall, fewer than a quarter of respondents are strongly affectively polarised, while the majority display only moderate or low emotional distance from people with different opinions.

Taken together, the findings do not suggest a pervasive societal divide, but rather **isolated tensions and issue-specific differences** in both opinions and emotions. Polarisation is thus a clearly discernible, but limited phenomenon within the landscape of public debate in Germany.

### Authors

Maja Kohler

Liliann Fischer

Rebecca Höfer

Bastian Kremer

The *science barometer 2025* is funded and supported by



Klaus Tschira  
Stiftung



### Citation

Kohler, Maja; Fischer, Liliann; Höfer, Rebecca; Kremer, Bastian (2025): *Polarisation in Germany: Insights from the Science Barometer 2025*. Berlin: Wissenschaft im Dialog gGmbH.