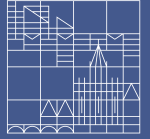


Inequality

magazine

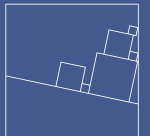
N°8

Universität
Konstanz



7 Years of Research. Looking Back and Ahead

Cluster of Excellence
The Politics of Inequality



**7 Years of Research.
Looking Back and
Ahead**

*Research Magazine of the
Cluster of Excellence
“The Politics of Inequality”
at the University of Konstanz*

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Claudia Diehl is a Professor of Microsociology at the University of Konstanz and Co-Speaker of the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

Gabriele Spilker is a Professor of “International Politics—Global Inequality” at the University of Konstanz and Co-Speaker of the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

Editorial

DEAR READERS

When we began preparing this issue, it was still uncertain whether we would be able to continue our work in the coming year. On 22 May 2025, the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the German Council of Science and Humanities announced their decision: we remain *excellent*—and will be funded for another seven years! We are therefore even more pleased to present this issue, offering a retrospective on the first funding period and the research carried out during that time.

At the core of our work lies the study of the political causes and consequences of inequality. Our research is structured around three interlinked areas: perceptions of inequality, political participation, and policy-making—the “three Ps”. We are particularly interested in the interactions between how people perceive the unequal distribution of resources, the political mobilisation that may result, the responses and measures taken by political actors, and the (long-term) feedback effects these responses have on the distribution of resources.

We investigate, for instance, why certain forms of distribution are perceived as unjust while others are not, and to what extent these perceptions shape their political attitudes. We examine the conditions under which demands for justice lead to political participation—whether individually, in groups, or through civil society organisations. Likewise, we analyse how political decision-makers respond to such demands, and how political measures, legislation, and decisions in turn influence perceptions, preferences, and structural inequalities.

All of our research projects are situated within at least one of these three Ps. In this issue, we present a selection of exemplary projects and findings from our first funding phase.

And what about the *future*? Looking ahead to the second funding period, we will focus more strongly on the question of how to prevent social inequality from becoming a self-reinforcing process. This includes exploring how our assumptions about the causes of inequality shape the ways in which we address it. What role does inequality play in the global resurgence of social protest movements? And how can political decisions help to reduce—rather than reinforce—structural inequalities?

An opportunity to explore these issues in international dialogue will be the third *In_equality Conference*, which will take place here in Konstanz from 15 to 17 April 2026—mark your calendars!

We look forward to innovative research projects, international collaboration and partnerships, dedicated early-career researchers, and a growing, vibrant Cluster-community. /

Yours
 MARIUS R. BUSEMEYER,
 CLAUDIA DIEHL &
 GABRIELE SPILKER

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“Identifying and explaining the self-reinforcing dynamic was a major outcome of the first funding phase. Now we want to examine how a different feedback dynamic might emerge—one through which political responses can effectively address or reduce inequality.”

Marius R. Busemeyer

INTERVIEW

7 Years of Research. Looking Back and Ahead

(Interview: A. Kampermann)

IN_EQUALITY MAGAZIN *Marius and Claudia, in 2019 you brought the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” to the University of Konstanz. What made you take on such a massive project—and did you know what you were getting into?*

MARIUS R. BUSEMEYER It all started with discussions in our department of Politics and Public Administration about launching a major collaborative research project. That was almost exactly ten years ago. We considered a range of possible topics, but pretty quickly things started converging on “inequality.” In the next phase, we looked around the university for partners. I soon came across Claudia, and we sat down one summer day and asked ourselves: can we, and do we want to, take this on? And as naïve as we were, we said: sure, sounds like a great idea! And then things really took off..

CLAUDIA DIEHL ...right, Marius asked me, and for me it was a mix of things. I was excited about the topic, and as a sociologist, I’d been wanting to work more closely with the political scientists in Konstanz. I saw this as a chance to strengthen cross-departmental inequality research, especially with a focus on how people perceive inequality. But when it all became real—when the Cluster was actually selected for funding—I had a moment where I thought: “Wow, things are getting real now.”

Gabi, you joined the Cluster a bit later. What brought you here?

GABRIELE SPILKER The Cluster! There was a call for the Cluster Professorship in “International Politics—Global Inequality,” and I applied. I was lucky enough to be offered the position. Without the Cluster, I wouldn’t be here. I definitely didn’t expect to become the second co-speaker so soon. And no—I didn’t really know what I was getting into either.

What are your roles as Cluster speakers?

MB There’s the official part, of course—we represent the Cluster both internally and externally, as laid out in the charter. But just as important, I think, is the informal role: we’re points of contact for all sorts of concerns, whether from early-career researchers or principal investigators. We’re closely engaged with everyone. I also really enjoy the more strategic discussions with the university leadership, like how the Cluster fits into the university’s overall direction as part of the Excellence Strategy, and our role as “Cluster ambassadors” at official functions and public events. And finally, there’s the day-to-day coordination with the Cluster’s management office. So it’s a demanding role, but also an incredibly varied one—ranging from academic tasks to administrative and representational duties. →

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Cluster Timeline

01 January 2019
Start

The Cluster officially launches—with Marius R. Busemeyer as Speaker and Claudia Diehl and Nils B. Weidmann as Co-Speakers.

01 February 2019
Managing Office

The Managing Office gets up and running with the arrival of Jessica Haase as its first Managing Director.



“If you’re open to it, it’s enriching to explore new topics and collaborate across disciplines. It’s not always easy—but definitely productive.”

Gabriele Spilker

Do you still find time for your own research?

GS If we didn’t have a reduced teaching load, it would be tough—at least in some phases. After all, the Cluster never really stops! It’s different from teaching in that regard, which is intense too, but also has quieter stretches during semester breaks. The Cluster, by contrast, has 120 members, and there is always someone who needs something.

8 *Let’s stay on the personal side for a moment: What makes the Cluster and its community feel especially visible and vibrant to you?*

MB The international aspect is something I really love. For me, the In_equality Conference is always a highlight. At that event, you witness firsthand how the world of inequality research comes to our little town of Konstanz. Plus, the Cluster has definitely helped internationalize the university. And then there’s the interdisciplinary nature of the work—something that’s not always easy to achieve. But our early-career researchers often embody that naturally. It is clear that a real community is forming here—confident, active, and full of initiative.

How has the Cluster influenced your own research?

CD Probably more than it has for researchers from the majority disciplines, since I’m more of an outlier in the Cluster. I’ve moved more toward political science and economics.

GS If you’re open to it, it’s enriching to explore new topics and collaborate across disciplines. It’s not always easy—but definitely productive.

MB It’s changed my teaching, too. I’ve co-taught seminars with colleagues from other departments—something I hadn’t done before.

What does the Cluster enable that wouldn’t be possible otherwise?

MB The Cluster gives our research—and our institution—a whole new level of visibility. We were doing meaningful, relevant research before, but because of the Cluster, that work is translated into a much more visible output.

CD And our research has become more holistic in a way. From the start of each project, we’re thinking: what are the big questions? How can we turn those into concrete research projects? And how can we make sure the findings reach the right audiences?

How do you choose which projects to fund or support within the Cluster?

CD The basic prerequisite for each project is, of course, that it needs to be clearly connected to inequality—specifically, to the political dimensions of inequality. That gives us a solid framework for deciding what fits and what doesn’t.

MB And we’ve built in a unique project structure, more or less forcing researchers to collaborate in interdisciplinary teams. That’s a challenge—we expect our cluster members to engage not only with our thematic focus, but also with a structure that’s a bit unusual and sometimes a little demanding. But I think it’s been worth it. There’s often this idea that interdisciplinarity comes at the cost of excellence. We’ve found the opposite to be true: it’s a win-win, because real scientific innovation often happens in the under-explored spaces between disciplines.

GS But at the same time—and I think that’s really the little detail that makes all the difference—it is that researchers propose the topics themselves. Within the framework we’ve outlined, it’s all bottom-up. And that’s crucial—you need intrinsic motivation. →

01 April 2019
Student Assistant

The Cluster hires its first student assistant, Rosa Buss, for the Managing Office.

22 May 2019
In_equality Colloquium

The In_equality Colloquium Series kicks off. Luna Bellani delivers the inaugural lecture on “Upward Income Mobility and Legislator Support for Education Policies”.

“From the very beginning, we ask ourselves: What are the big questions? How can we translate them into research projects? And how can we make the results accessible to a wider public?”

Claudia Diehl

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Much of last year’s work was devoted to preparing the renewal proposal for a second funding period as a Cluster of Excellence. How much work does a proposal like that actually involve?

CD Such a renewal proposal is no small feat. On the one hand, you have to show what you’ve already accomplished. On the other, you have to map out your plans for the future. That quickly raises the question: why haven’t you done that already? It’s a delicate balance. And then there’s the oral presentation, where you present everything in person. Of course, you want it all to be perfect—which takes a lot of practice so you can really function as a team.

GS In retrospect, the oral presentation felt a bit like a court hearing. We sat in two rows on one side, facing the reviewers, with representatives from the German Research Foundation at the head of the room.

How does that situation feel? Is it still nerve-racking, or have you grown used to it at this point in your careers?

GS That was definitely a tense situation—although we relaxed a bit over time. And sure, experience helps. From the outside, people often assume that once you’ve reached our career stage, you’re no longer being evaluated—but in fact, it happens surprisingly often.

CD There’s a big difference, though: when you mess up in other situations, it’s on you. But here, with this renewal proposal, if you mess up, it’s not just your problem—it affects the whole Cluster, the university, and potentially even the city, since the university’s status in the Excellence Strategy hinges on the success of both Clusters at the University of Konstanz. That weight of responsibility felt pretty brutal.

Last question—if each of you had one wish, what would it be?

CD I’d love to have a data visualization expert—someone who could help us present our more complex studies and findings in a way that’s clear, accessible, and visually engaging.

GS What I’m really excited about is that renewed funding will allow us to open new positions for postdoctoral research groups. I’m hoping for researchers with truly innovative ideas who can bring fresh momentum to the Cluster.

MB In the second funding period, I’d love to put even more emphasis on community building. I want to create something lasting—something that will continue beyond the second phase. I want the idea of the Cluster to live on, both here in Konstanz and in the wider research community—that’s my wish. /

What are your plans for the future?

MB In terms of research, a key question for us will be to identify the political factors that transform the dynamic of self-reinforcing inequality, which we identified in many projects, into a mitigating-inequality dynamic. Identifying and explaining the self-reinforcing dynamic was a major outcome of the first funding phase. Now we want to examine how a different feedback dynamic might emerge—one through which political responses can effectively address or reduce inequality.

GS We also want to expand our international partnerships. We’ve already established new collaborations with partners in Chile and South Africa, for example, especially in our project on climate inequality.

CD One area we want to strengthen even further is the public visibility of our findings. There’s so much disinformation out there, and it’s getting harder to counter it. We need to be creative and make sure our research gets to where it belongs: in the media, in public discourse, and in the hands of policymakers.



Annalena Kampermann is Public Relations and Science Communications Officer at the Cluster of Excellence.

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04 July 2019
SOEP

As one of two external sites, the Cluster gains access to regional data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP).

09–11 October 2019
Opening Conference

The Cluster hosts its opening conference, featuring a public keynote by DIW president Marcel Fratzscher and a panel discussion with Friedrich Breyer and Bettina Kohlrausch.

20 October 2019
Journalist-in-Residence

Paul Stoop becomes the Cluster’s first Journalist-in-Residence and helps develop the program.

Perceptions

The research area “Perceptions” focuses on how people perceive inequality: How do individuals view the unequal distribution of valuable resources? Under what conditions do they consider these distributions unfair—and how does this shape their support for policies aimed at reducing inequality?

In the first few years, the Cluster’s research primarily focused on educational opportunity, access to information (see the article by Ulloa, Kacperski and Selb), the distribution of income and wealth, as well as rights and privileges.

People’s perceptions of inequality are shaped by individual beliefs about how resources are distributed in society—and their own perceived position in that distribution. Due to cognitive limitations and limited access to information, these perceptions often diverge from reality—a phenomenon confirmed by the findings of “The Inequality Barometer,” the Cluster’s major infrastructure project. In Germany, for instance, individuals from less privileged and less educated backgrounds tend to overestimate their own position in the income distribution, whereas more privileged individuals often underestimate theirs. Interestingly, this misperception is less pronounced in contexts with particularly high levels of inequality (as shown by Diehl and Wolter in their contribution to this issue). Most people are also strikingly optimistic about their future. For example, they tend to overestimate the likelihood of children from low-income families to end up among the top income earners as adults.

Whether a given distribution is seen as fair or unfair is the result of a complex interaction between normative beliefs and subjective assessments of reality. This judgment is influenced by ideological worldviews and self-interest.

Beliefs about the causes of inequality also play a key role. Linguistic research highlights how public discourse—especially the way inequality is framed in the media or political communication—shapes these beliefs. The main factor here is whether inequality is perceived as the result of real differences in individual performance or as a symptom of unfair treatment.

Data from the large-scale PerFair project (“Students’ Perceptions of Inequality and Fairness”) show that most 12-year-old students believe that educational opportunities in Germany are fair. They express a strong belief in meritocracy—and do so largely regardless of their social background. This faith in merit-based fairness persists even in the face of well-documented educational inequalities. In contrast, horizontal inequalities—that is, differences between groups such as women or ethnic minorities—are challenged more frequently. These inequalities have become more visible in public debate in recent years; as a result, longstanding disparities are now viewed much more critically. Findings from the Cluster project “Perceptions of Gender and Seniority Wage Inequality,” for example, challenge earlier research suggesting that women are more satisfied with lower wages than men. Like gender inequality, health inequalities—examined in the project “Conditions of International Solidarity (CONSOLI)” (see Leuffen et al. in this issue)—are often perceived as undeserved and unfair, which tends to foster greater solidarity with those affected.

What might help foster a more realistic perception of inequality? This question is crucial, given that support for redistributive policies is often limited. Research points especially to the role of information. When people are presented with accurate data that challenge their incorrect perceptions, support for inequality-reducing policies often increases—though not always. Understanding when and why this happens will remain a key question for Cluster researchers going forward. /

PERCEPTIONS

Ask, Click, Engage: *The Influence of Search Engines on Political Perception*

(R. Ulloa, C. Kacperski, P. Selb)

Political information is just a click away—but who actually searches for it? A study shows how differences in education, topic complexity, and general digital behavior affect how people engage with political content online. Search engines shape what we read, what we learn—and ultimately, how we participate in political processes.

The Cluster welcomes its first External Senior Fellow: Lucy Barnes, Professor of Comparative Politics at University College London.

01 November 2019
External Senior Fellow

The Cluster takes part in the Berlin Science Week for the first time.

07 November 2019
Berlin Science Week



In today's digital world, accessing political information is easier than ever. A few keystrokes can lead us to articles, debates, expert commentary, and official government sources on almost any policy topic. But easy access doesn't always mean active engagement. Who actually searches for information? Who clicks? Who reads? And most importantly—who learns something new? These questions are crucial when it comes to understanding how citizens perceive policies and how likely they are to participate politically.

In a recent study, we invited over 500 adults from Germany to inform themselves online about three policies that were being discussed in parliament and in the media at that time: child support reform, cannabis legalization, and the renewable energy transition. To better understand their online behavior, they allowed us to track their web activity anonymously. The goal was to understand how people search for information online, what kind of sources they access, and whether this

can change people's knowledge and opinions on the topics they enter in their search engine.

The results reveal that there are differences not just in what people search for, but also how they engage with the information they find. Not everyone connects in the same way. Most participants visited only one or two articles, but a few clicked through twenty. Across the board, search engines like Google acted as gatekeepers, determining which sources appeared first and were most likely to be read. Figure 1 lists the most commonly accessed URLs (simplified as which domains they belong to) to find information on the top-ics mentioned above, showcasing a variety of sources people use. →



The Cluster gets a Kidsbox—a mobile playroom for babies and young children up to elementary school age.

06 March 2020
Kidsbox

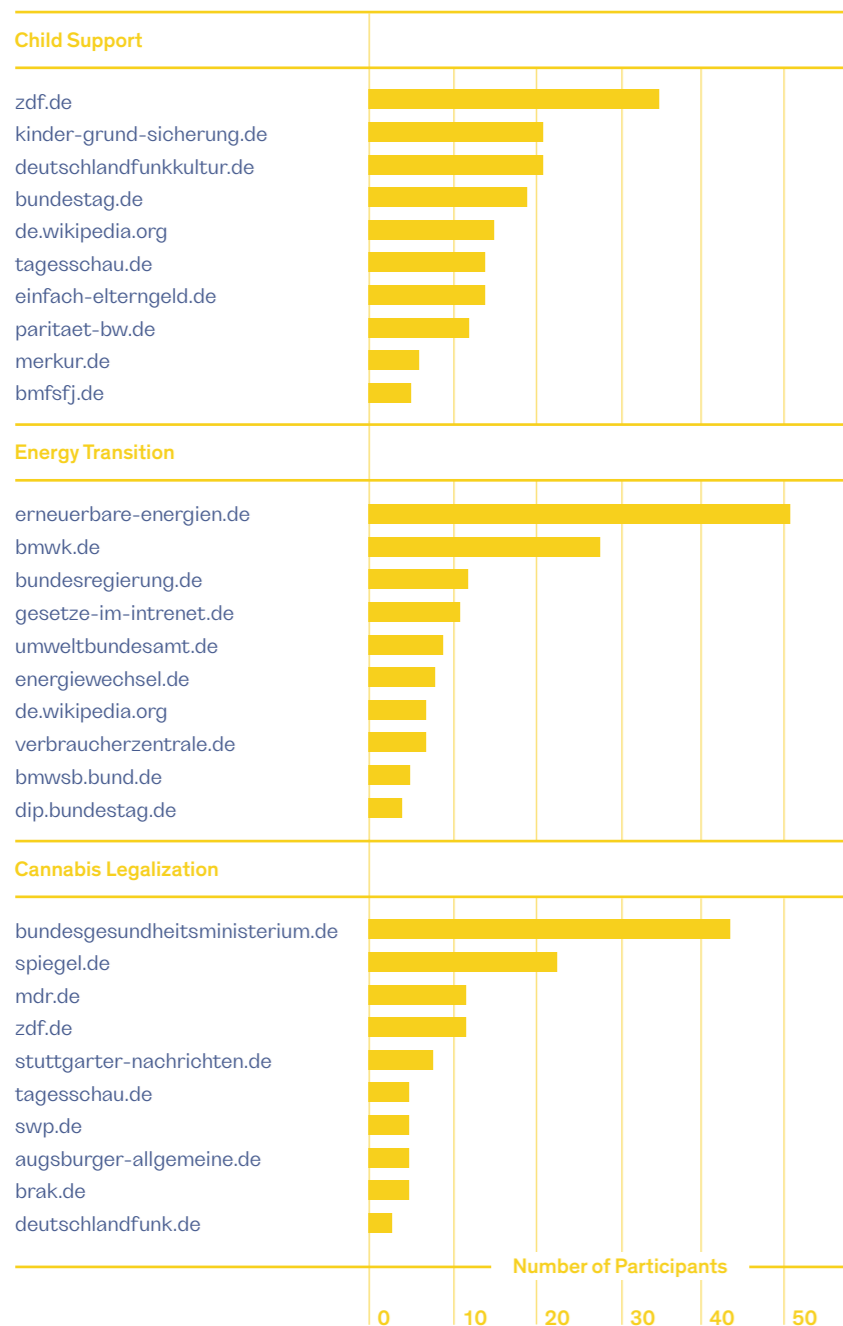


Figure 1: The graphic illustrates which sources were used by how many participants to find information about the respective legislative proposals.

We also found that participants with more years of formal education were more likely to seek out policy-relevant articles, sought out more articles overall (see Figure 2), and spent more time reading them. This difference has real consequences: when people with lower formal education are less likely to dive into political topics online, they miss

opportunities to challenge or refine their views based on new evidence and find the political representation that best suits their interests.

In addition, we found that not all policies spark the same kind of engagement, for example comparing less complex topics such as child support with energy transition policies. It is possible that how policies are framed—e.g., through accessible language—can make a difference. That’s an important lesson not only for communication professionals, but also for governments and institutions aiming to reach a broad(er) audience. /

Peter Selb is a Professor of Survey Research at the University of Konstanz as well as Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

Roberto Ulloa is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

Celina Kacperski is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Clusters of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality” and “Collective Behaviour” at the University of Konstanz.

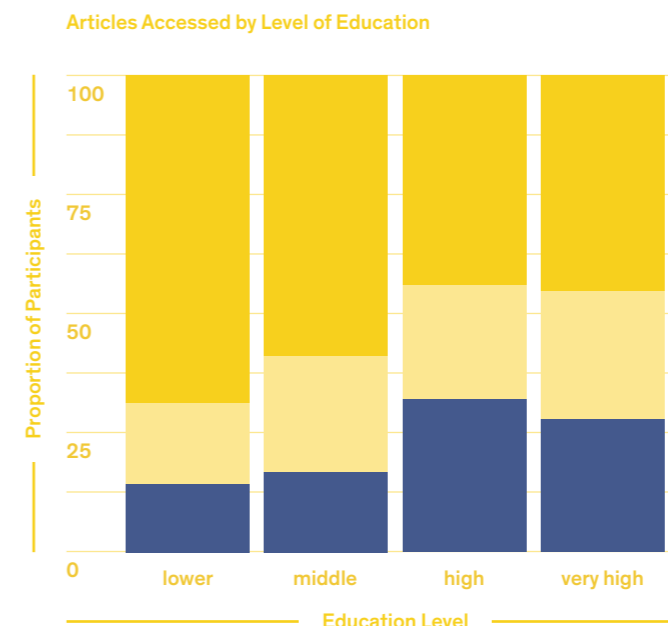


Figure 2: The graphic shows how many articles about each legislative proposal were viewed by people with different levels of formal education.

Articles Read
 ● 1 source
 ● 2 sources
 ● 3 or more sources

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the University of Konstanz enters emergency mode. Cluster members shift to working from home.

16 March 2020
Covid-19 pandemic

PERCEPTIONS

Inequality Next-door: Why Neighborhoods Matter

(C. Diehl, F. Wolter)

Many people believe they are in the middle of the income distribution—often mistakenly. New data from the “The Inequality Barometer” show that those living in socially diverse environments assess their own position more accurately. This shapes awareness of social inequality—and attitudes towards redistribution and social justice.

Many people underestimate how unequally income is distributed in Germany. A well-known phenomenon in this context is what researchers call “center bias”: people often have a distorted view of where they stand in the income distribution. Lower-income individuals tend to believe they are better off than they actually are, while high earners often underestimate their privileged position. In other words, most people place themselves somewhere in the middle—even when that’s not true (see Figure 1).

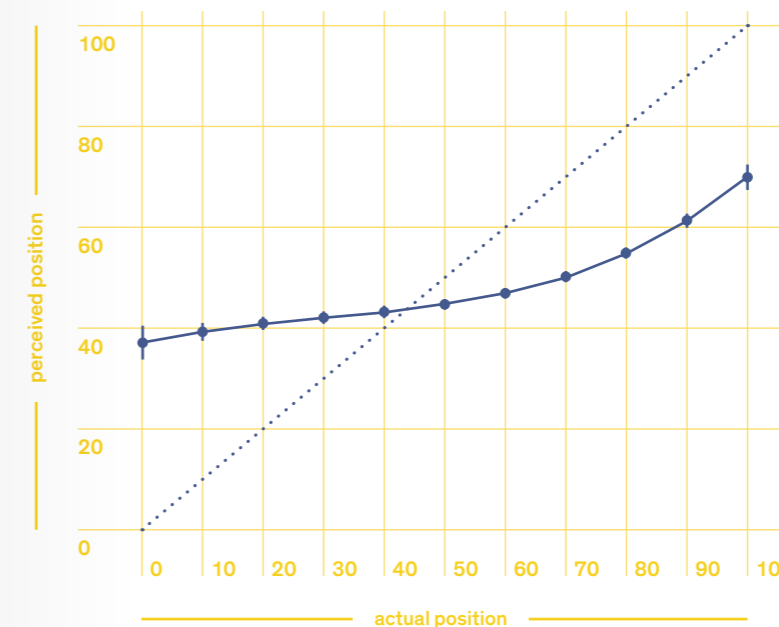


Figure 1: Perceived and actual income position Note: The chart illustrates how people perceive their own income position—compared to their actual position in the income distribution (survey of 5,327 respondents)

So where does this distorted self-perception come from? One explanation lies in the kind of the people we compare ourselves to. We often measure ourselves against those in our immediate environment—neighbors, colleagues, or acquaintances with similar levels of education or similar jobs. In other words, we rely on “ego-centered reference groups.”

Starting from this idea, we used data from the Cluster project “The Inequality Barometer” to ask whether local inequality—that is, inequality within a person’s own municipality—influences how accurately people assess their position in the income distribution. The idea behind this is straightforward: people who live in areas with high income inequality are more likely to encounter the full range of the income spectrum—both affluent and low-income households—right outside their door. That kind of exposure creates more heterogeneous comparison groups, which in turn could lead to a more realistic assessment of one’s own standing.

Testing this “exposure hypothesis” requires robust data. As part of the Inequality Barometer, survey participants were asked to estimate their own position on the income ladder: “What do you estimate: What is the portion of households in Germany that have a lower household income than your household?” To assess how local inequality affects their responses, we also needed a measure of inequality at the municipal level, such as the Gini coefficient, which indicates the level of income or wealth inequality in a country or municipality. A value of 0 means perfect equality, whereas a value of 1 means that a single household possesses everything. Such fine-grained geographical inequality data was generously provided by colleagues in economics (Garbasevski et al., 2023). Using this dataset, we were able to calculate the relationship between local inequality and respondents’ self-assessment of their income position, while also accounting for individual and municipal characteristics. Table 1 shows how inequality varies within and between a sample of municipalities. →

More inequality—more realistic self-perceptions? The results indeed support the exposure hypothesis: in municipalities with greater inequality, both lower- and higher-income residents tend to assess their position more realistically. The bias toward the perceived middle is less pronounced in these areas.

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Figure 1 (see p. 19) shows the familiar pattern: lower-income individuals overestimate their position in the distribution, while higher earners underestimate it. Figure 2 illustrates that this effect is less pronounced in municipalities with higher levels of inequality. In these areas, people's perceptions more closely match their actual income positions. Conclusion: The inequality we see around us shapes how we see ourselves.

The study shows that our local surroundings influence how we perceive social inequality—and where we place ourselves within it. While the effects are not statistically strong in

every case, and linking survey data with local inequality data brings methodological challenges, the findings offer an important impetus for further research on inequality perceptions. Heterogeneous reference groups—such as mixed-income neighborhoods or diverse educational environments—can help people see the true extent of inequality more clearly. They may also lead to a greater awareness of one's own privileged or disadvantaged place in the broader distribution of wealth. That has political implications: a growing body of research shows that people who underestimate inequality are also less likely to support redistribution. /

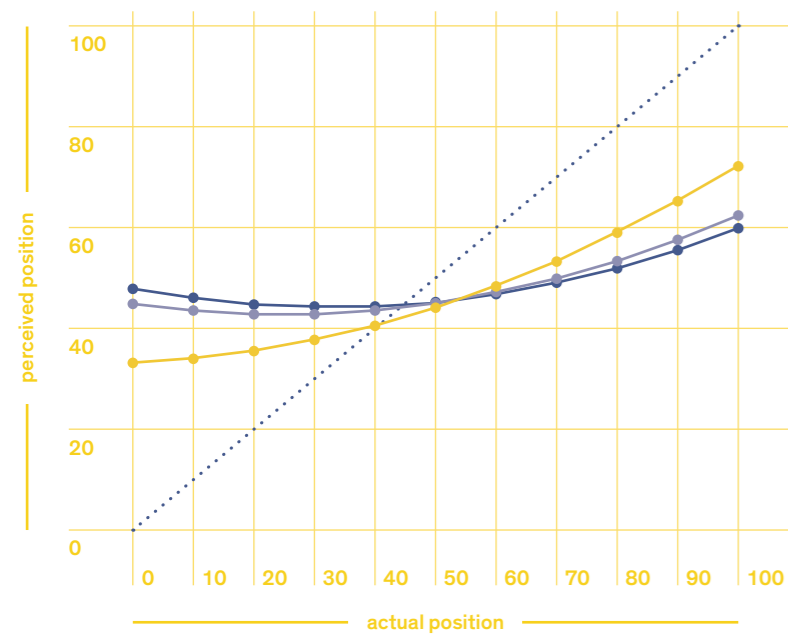


Figure 2: Perceived income position by local Gini coefficient

- low local Gini (0.31)
- high local Gini (0.63)
- average local Gini (0.49)
- actual position



The Cluster publishes its first Policy Paper: Sebastian Koos and Dirk Leuffen (2020), “Beds or bonds? Conditional solidarity in the coronavirus crisis.”

01 July 2020
Policy Paper

Municipality	State	Population	Average monthly income in 1.000 Euro	Local Gini (x10)
Kauern	Thüringen	459	1.7	4.4
Paska	Thüringen	93	1.9	4.0
Kleinebersdorf	Thüringen	175	1.9	3.7
Barsbek	Schleswig-Holstein	628	2.6	3.1
Berlin	Berlin	3,782,202	2.9	5.0
Konstanz	Baden-Württemberg	85,770	3.2	5.4
Kronberg im Taunus	Hessen	18,569	6.8	6.0
Königstein im Taunus	Hessen	16,831	8.5	6.3

Table 1: Sample municipalities in Germany

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Felix Wolter is a Research Associate at the Institute of Sociology, LMU Munich.

Claudia Diehl is a Professor of Microsociology at the University of Konstanz and Co-Speaker of the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

The “Inequality” specialization is introduced in the Graduate School of the Social and Behavioural Sciences (GSBS) at the University of Konstanz.

01 October 2020
Graduate School of the Social Behavioural Sciences



The Cluster holds its first retreat, on Reichenau Island.

07—09 October 2020
Cluster Retreat

It is well established that political parties shape domestic politics, particularly in the realm of inequality. However, their influence does not stop at national borders. A growing body of research highlights that parties also play a significant role in shaping foreign policy. Political scientists Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks illustrate this connection with their concept of “constraining dissensus”: It shows that conflicts in domestic politics and the growing politicization of international issues can reduce support for European integration, linking what happens inside political parties to outcomes in foreign policy.

These kinds of constraints are not limited to the European context. Similar patterns can be seen in broader areas of international cooperation and solidarity—such as in the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the defunding of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Within the Cluster project “Conditions of International Solidarity” (CONSOLI), we examine public support for international aid, cooperation, and multilateral actions. Our research extends the European case and includes countries from around the globe. The first survey was conducted in Argentina, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Poland, South Africa, Sweden, and the US in fall 2023. It revealed patterns of support for international health solidarity that challenge some core claims put forward in the populist rhetoric.

Populist leaders on both the left and the right generally claim to speak in the name of “the people” and to defend the concerns, interests, and will of the people against a detached and self-centered cosmopolitan elite. Populists claim to defend democracy as a government by and for the people. Likewise, the electoral successes of populists often create pressures for mainstream parties to adjust their policy positions in an attempt to win back voters. Yet, it remains unclear whether populists truly voice majority preferences or merely project their own positions onto the electorate. Perceptions, thus, play a crucial role in the domestic politics of international cooperation and global inequality. →

Underestimated Solidarity. *Public Support for Global Health Policies Is Stronger than Claimed*

(D. Leuffen, S. Baute, M. Heermann, G. Pasquettaz)

Populists often assert that “the people” reject costly international cooperation. But new global survey data tells a different story: citizens across nine countries strongly support global health solidarity—from emergency aid to WHO cooperation. The findings challenge populist rhetoric and reveal backing for multilateralism in times of global crisis.

The CONSOLI survey data reveals that most citizens do not oppose engaging in costly global health policies, a particularly contested area of foreign policy-making. Moreover, our results show strong public support for international cooperation, with most respondents being in favor of more international collaboration, especially in healthcare. A majority also backs financial contributions to global health funds, both for preventing disease outbreaks and for emergency aid. Although attitudes towards the WHO seem to become more polarized, many citizens take middle-ground positions, suggesting that persuasive political leadership could tip opinion decisively towards multilateralism.

These findings undermine the populist narrative that international health solidarity lacks popular backing. Instead, we observe that broad public support for international health cooperation persists despite their rhetoric and attempts to undermine international organizations and solidarity. Thus, one should think and look twice when populists claim to speak in the name of the people. /

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Dirk Leuffen is a Professor for International Politics at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality".



Sharon Baute is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Social Policy at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality".



Giada Pasquettaz is a Doctoral Researcher at the Chair of Political Science and International Politics at the University of Konstanz.



Max Heermann is a Postdoctoral Researcher at ETH Zurich.

Right after the retreat, the Cluster holds a kickoff event to welcome the first cohort of Early Career Researchers (ECRs).

13 October 2020
Early Career Researchers

Katharina Holzinger, Principal Investigator at the Cluster and professor of international politics, is elected Rector of the University of Konstanz.

09 December 2020
Rectorate

In_equality magazine

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The Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality. Perceptions, Participation and Policies"

is an interdisciplinary Cluster of Excellence at the University of Konstanz within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. The gap separating the poor from the rich, the worldwide rise of populism, the division of burdens in the fight against climate change, unfairly distributed access to education—many current debates are as much about inequality as they are about other issues. These topics pose highly complex questions, yet scientifically grounded answers are still few and far between. This is where we come in to investigate "The Politics of Inequality": the political causes and consequences of inequality.

The Cluster of Excellence is grateful to the University of Konstanz and the German Research Foundation for their funding and support.

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The Politics of Inequality

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Participation

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Individual-level perceptions and political attitudes shape the ways in which citizens engage politically, from voting behavior to civic involvement and public protest.

But under what conditions do perceptions turn into political action? This is the central question explored by the Participation research area of the Cluster.

Serving as a bridge between the Perceptions and Policies areas, we investigate how social inequality influences political participation. Different forms of inequality can affect political behavior both directly—through individual perceptions—and indirectly—via party narratives and, therefore, influence political decision-making.

For instance, the project “The Politics of Labor Market Inequality and Occupational Mobility” examines how fear of downward mobility affects voting behavior. Using survey data, the research team shows that so-called status discordance—the gap between the social status people expected to achieve in childhood and what they actually attained in adulthood—is an important factor in explaining the support for right-wing populist parties (what this has to do with our workplace is explained by Consiglio and van Staalduinen further below).

Another line of research focuses on how political parties speak about inequality. The project “Mobilizing Inequalities: From

Grievances to Conflict” analyzed the social media communications of over 250 ethnic groups and political parties. Contrary to common assumptions, the findings show that explicit mobilization along ethnic lines is less widespread than previously thought.

The “Varieties of Egalitarianism” project complements this perspective through a systematic mapping of party manifestos: How do parties talk about inequality? What role does redistribution play in their political agendas? The findings highlight significant differences in how parties frame social inequalities and what aspects they prioritize (as Horn demonstrates in his magazine article).

The research area also looks at more radical forms of political engagement. The “Climate Inequalities in the Global South” project, for instance, investigates when and how climate change exacerbates existing inequalities—and whether this leads to protest (see Isaacson et al. in this issue). The aforementioned “Mobilizing Inequalities” project goes even one step further and explores the conditions under which ethnic mobilization by political parties escalates into conflict—the most extreme form of political participation.

Taken together, research in the Participation area paints a multidimensional picture: it examines diverse forms of political participation—from institutional involvement to protest and conflict—and connects them with different dimensions of inequality: income and wealth, rights and privileges, but also environmental resources as a new empirical focus. /

Design agency yella park takes over the Cluster's print and web design. From now on, the Cluster has a distinct visual identity.

05 February 2021
Corporate Design



The first issue of In_equality magazine is published. Contrary to earlier plans, it focuses on "Covid-19 and Inequality."

04 May 2021
In_equality magazine

The Cluster participates for the first time in the Progressive Governance Summit, hosted by partner organization. Das Progressive Zentrum (DPZ).

09–11 June 2021
Progressive Governance Summit

The Cluster Café gets a dishwasher.

18 June 2021
Cluster Café

PARTICIPATION

Inequality and Protest amid the Climate Crisis

(S. Isaacson, V. Jansesberger, S. Koos, G. Spilker, R. Strauch)

Climate change hits the Global South particularly hard, yet protest often fails to materialize. An interdisciplinary research project investigates why, using data from 87 countries and case studies from South Africa and Chile. Initial findings suggest that it is only when environmental change intersects with social inequality that concern turns into political mobilisation.

Droughts in Peru, water shortages in South Africa, devastating storms in Bangladesh—climate change is on full display across the globe. But it is most acutely felt in the Global South. Its consequences hit hardest in regions that are already grappling with deep-seated political and social inequalities. But how do people there respond to these challenges? And when does extreme environmental stress trigger political protest?

These are the central questions of the research project "Climate Inequalities in the Global South: From Perceptions to Protest." The goal is to understand when and why environmental change leads to protest, how social inequalities shape these dynamics, and how those affected experience and interpret what is happening around them.

Bringing together perspectives from sociology and political science, this interdisciplinary project is divided into two parts: a cross-national (macro-analytical) analysis of protest events, and a micro-analytical approach based on individual perceptions of climate change, social inequality, and political participation. These perspectives and components complement one another and are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of how environmental change can provoke political reactions.

At the macro level, patterns of political mobilization are analyzed using a newly coded dataset on environmental protests in the Global South (ECO-MMAD). The dataset includes over 1,400 documented protest events

in 87 countries since 2012 (see Figure 1). Initial findings show that protests are especially likely to occur in response to issues like water scarcity, environmental pollution, and resource exploitation. By contrast, extreme weather events alone rarely lead to protest—more often, it is the perception of social inequalities that tips the balance.

Two case studies in South Africa and Chile expand on these findings through expert interviews with representatives from NGOs, public authorities, and affected individuals. In each country, around 10 to 20 experts were interviewed over the course of several weeks. The Chilean interviews took place in May 2024, both in the capital Santiago and in the northern city of Arica, near the borders with Bolivia and Peru. In South Africa, interviews were conducted in Johannesburg and Durban in October and November 2024.

In Chile, the interviews reveal that while many regions are heavily affected by environmental problems, organized protest remains relatively rare. One reason: the pollution and water shortages are often caused by resource extraction, which in many places creates jobs and is therefore tolerated by parts of the population. Moreover, the groups most affected often lack the resources and capacity to organize protests.

Very similar findings emerge in South Africa. A man affected by the 2022 flood disaster reported: "I'm starting from scratch." He lost nearly everything, his health has →

Anja Karliczek, then Federal Minister of Education and Research, visits the Cluster.

Both Cluster Professorships are filled: Gabriele Spilker takes up the post in “International Politics—Global Inequality,” and Sebastian Koos becomes professor of “Sociology—Social Movements.”



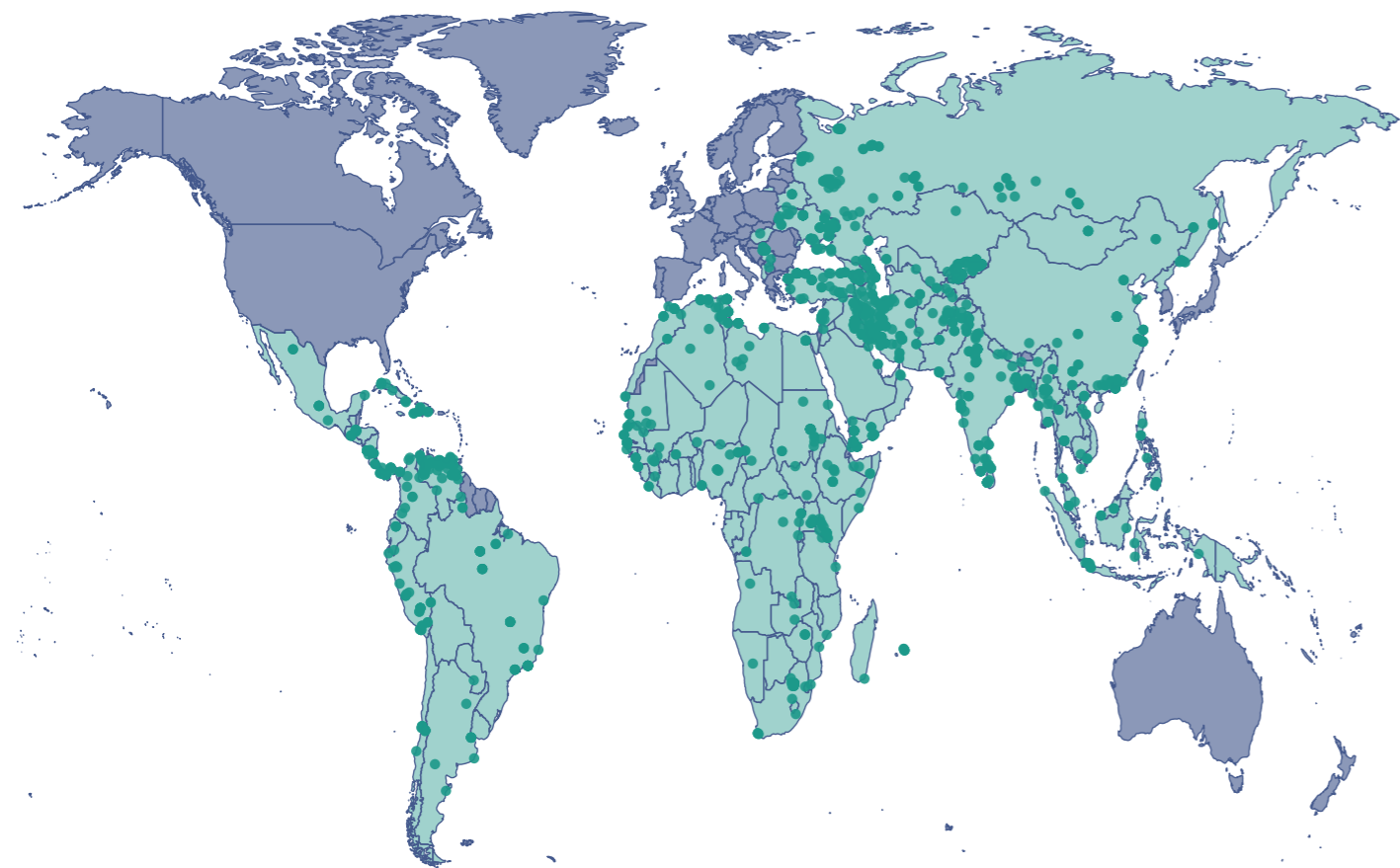
The Cluster launches its Instagram profile and shares its first post.

28 June 2021
Federal visit

01 October 2021
Cluster Professorships

17 March 2022
Social Media

Figure 1: The map shows environmental protest events (dots) in 87 documented countries (in green) between 2012 and 2022.



suffered, and yet he still has to repay loans on his house. In such circumstances, protest seems like a luxury. This is where groups like Abahlali base-Mjondolo step in. Founded in 2005 in Durban to oppose forced evictions in informal settlements, the grassroots movement now counts more than 100,000 members across South Africa. It not only mobilizes shack dwellers politically but also serves as a solidarity network, providing support to those hit hardest by environmental disasters.

To deepen our understanding of how people in particularly vulnerable regions perceive environmental change and inequalities—and whether they are moved to act politically—the expert interviews will be supplemented by representative population surveys in both countries as the project continues. In this way, the project contributes to a better understanding of the limits and possibilities of protest under conditions of deep social inequality in an era of climate change in the Global South. /



Sebastian Koos is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Summer Isaacson is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Rebecca Strauch is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Viktoria Jansesberger is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Gabriele Spilker is a Professor of “International Politics — Global Inequality” at the University of Konstanz and Co-Speaker of the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

The first In_equality Conference takes place. Steffen Mau (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin) opens with a public keynote at the Bodensee-forum in Konstanz. Other keynotes are given by Jason Stanley (Yale), Stefanie Stantcheva (Harvard), and Catherine De Vries (Bocconi University, Milan).

06–08 April 2022
In_equality Conference

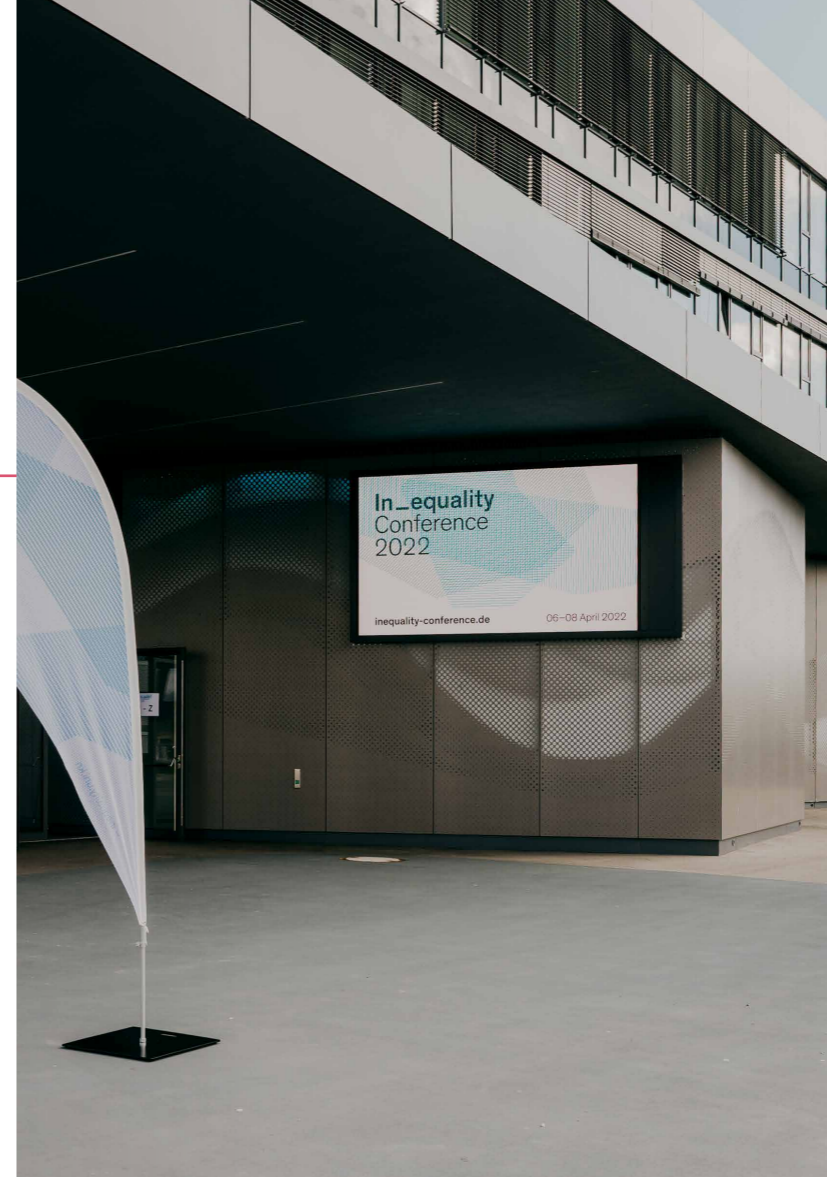
Gabriele Spilker becomes the Cluster’s new Co-Speaker, succeeding Nils B. Weidmann.

01 October 2022
Executive Board

PARTICIPATION

Working Together 32 or Drifting Apart? *The Democratic Costs of Homogeneous Work Environments* (V. Consiglio, B. van Staalduinen)

Who we work with shapes how we think about politics. New research shows that occupational segregation lowers political participation and weakens support for mainstream parties. Diverse workplaces, once engines of democratic understanding, are quietly disappearing—with lasting political consequences.



In recent decades, automation, globalization, and digitalization have reshaped the types of work and skills that are in demand. We know that this occupational change has contributed to changes in the political landscape: The decline of middle-skill jobs and stagnant wages in low-skill jobs have deepened social inequality and made right-wing parties more attractive for voters of these groups.

As part of our project “The Politics of Labor Market Inequality and Occupational Mobility” we investigate an overlooked feature of this development: the increasing segregation of different occupational classes into separate workplaces. Using administrative data (SIAB—Sample of Integrated Labor Market Biographies) on individuals’ employment histories, including the types of co-workers they are surrounded with, we first show that low and high occupational class workers have become much less likely to work alongside other workers in different class groups over the past 30 years. We then link the information on workplace homogeneity—that is, the share of same-class co-workers—to rich survey data on political attitudes (SOEP-CMI-ADIAB) to study how working in more homogeneous workplaces influences people’s views on politics and society. →

Applications open for the new master's programme "Sociology of Inequality" at the University of Konstanz.

01 October 2022
Master's programme

A new public outreach format launches: in cooperation with Zebra Kino Konstanz, the Cluster hosts the first Film & Talk event, screening the documentary Ungleichland by Julia Friedrichs, a former journalist-in-residence.

14 February 2023
Film & Talk

Thomas Wöhler becomes Managing Director, taking over from Jessica Haase, who played a key role in building the managing office and infrastructure since 2019.

01 March 2023
Management

Based on earlier theoretical work that emphasized the role of diverse industrial workplaces in supporting democratic politics, we expect that more heterogeneous workplaces help people with different levels of educations, skills, and interests to develop a better sense and understanding of each other and bridge political differences. Declining exposure to people from different social backgrounds, instead, dampens the interest and sense of efficacy that are essential for political participation.

Our analysis confirms this pattern: decreasing interaction with other occupational groups—especially the shrinking middle class—is linked to lower political participation and reduced support for mainstream-right parties. Among workers in high-status professions, we observe a notable decline in support for these parties within medium-sized firms. However, this effect disappears in larger companies. Additional findings reveal that individuals in lower-status occupations, while not necessarily feeling a stronger affinity with radical right parties, are nevertheless more likely to vote for them at the ballot box.

We also looked deeper into what might drive the political behavior of workers in more homogeneous workplaces. Our findings show that for both low and high occupational class workers, working in more homogeneous workplaces limits the exchange of social recognition. This recognition helped foster autonomy, confi-

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SOEP-CMI-ADIAB is a dataset that consists of the survey data of respondents of the SOEP (Socio-Economic Panel) and administrative data of the IAB (Insitute for Employment Research).

dence, and positive perceptions of social status. Exposure to colleagues in middle occupational positions appears especially important, offering a stable reference point for workers both at the bottom and at the top of the workplace hierarchy.

Among low occupational class workers who are surrounded by a larger share of colleagues in similar jobs, political disengagement seems to stem from pessimistic views about career advancement and social mobility as well as a weaker belief in a meritocratic society. Meanwhile, high occupational class workers do not seem concerned about the risk of future status loss. Instead, their isolation seems to encourage a more passive acceptance of the status quo, reflected in lower levels of political engagement.

Our research highlights the workplace as a key site where political attitudes form, renewing attention to its central role in democratic politics. /



Briitta van Staalduinen is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality".

Valentina Consiglio is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality".



The Cluster hosts the Fall Academy “Challenging Inequality (II)” for Early Career Researchers in Konstanz.

04–06 October 2023
Fall Academy

Frederik Gremler becomes the first doctoral candidate to complete a dissertation within the Cluster. Congratulations!

21 November 2023
Graduation

The In_equality ECR Excellence Awards are presented to Susanne Garritzmann and Nadja Wehl, Viktoria Jansesberger, Felix Wolter, and Qi Yu.

16 January 2024
In_equality ECR Excellence Awards

36 Although egalitarian ideals enjoy widespread public support, political responses often fall short. The Emmy Noether Group “Varieties of Egalitarianism” at the Cluster explains why: party strategies, institutional filters, and political risks create barriers that prevent redistributive goals from turning into effective policies.

PARTICIPATION

A Long and Winding Road. *Mapping the Political Roots of Persistent Economic Inequality* (A. Horn)

Inequality has persisted or increased in advanced democracies despite widespread public support for equality and redistribution. This raises a fundamental question: if democracy is built on the ideal of political equality, why does it coexist with rising economic divides? Most research in recent years has focused on what citizens want—typically showing that people, across countries and demographics, support more redistribution than is provided by the systems they currently live under. But this “demand side” story can only take us so far. If voters want more equality, then why don’t parties deliver? To answer that, we need to look at the other side of the equation: political elites, parties, and the institutional and electoral environments they operate in.

Our project “Varieties of Egalitarianism” takes on this puzzle by combining new data with a fresh theoretical lens. The centerpiece of the project is the Varieties of Egalitarianism (VoE) database—which allows us to track how political parties and governments have addressed or ignored different concepts of equality over the past fifty years. Covering 12 OECD countries across continental Europe, Scandinavia, and most English-speaking democracies (the US, the UK, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia),

VoE offers a detailed view of how parties talk about inequality and redistribution in their manifestos from 1970 to 2021.

We built VoE using a novel approach that combines machine learning tools with expert validation and online crowd-coding—meaning that every political statement is classified by multiple coders after they pass an entry test. This allowed us to classify not just how often parties positively refer to equality in their manifestos, but what kind of equality they focus on—be it economic, equal rights and anti-discrimination, social mobility, or more symbolic appeals. These distinctions matter: while parties on the left historically emphasized economic equality, we show that older left parties have not consistently maintained their emphasis on redistribution, while new green parties often focus more on equal rights and identity-based forms of (in)equality. →

Daron Acemoğlu, MIT professor of economics and future Nobel Prize winner, gives a lecture at the In_equality Colloquium.

20 February 2024
In_equality Colloquium

For the second time, the Cluster and the city of Konstanz host the In_equality Conference. Keynotes are delivered by Claudia Diehl (University of Konstanz), Evelyn Huber and John D. Stephens (University of North Carolina), Joscha Legewie (Harvard University), Thomas Piketty (EHESS / Paris School of Economics), and Maria Polinsky (University of Maryland).

10–12 April 2024
In_equality Conference



A leaky “Equality” Pipeline

Startingpoint:
Voters mostly demand equality

Party manifestos:
No programmatic response to high inequality and selective response to rising inequality

Policies:
Even when parties react with equality rhetoric, the policy response spares the rich/most well-off

Outcome:
Modest effect of chosen policies, policies that are avoided would lead to actual leveling

Result:
Equality demands remain unmet

Alongside this empirical mapping, we develop an argument about how and why inequality persists in democracies. Parties are susceptible to incentives that lead to what we refer to as selective egalitarianism: their responses are filtered and constrained at every stage of the political process—creating a leaky pipeline in which the preference for equality becomes far more limited when translated into party programs, policies, and ultimately policy outcomes.

First, at the level of programmatic responses, problems of mobilization of poor voters, biases in newsworthiness and visibility, and the tendency to justify the status quo make it unlikely that even leftist parties address high levels of inequality or increasing gains of the richest 1 percent, which is insulated from political reactions. Programmatic reactions by parties occur only when groups below the median are visibly falling behind—not when they are already left behind.

Second, in terms of actual policy responses, we identify three policy pathways through which governments that take egalitarian and redistributive programmatic positions address inequality: predistribution (e.g., minimum wage policies), welfare state policies, and fiscal redistribution (taxes on top incomes and wealth). We show that while all of these tools are occa-

sionally used, the most effective ones—like taxes on the rich—are the least likely to be politically viable because they inflict concentrated costs and the risk of political backlash. The rich are often spared from redistribution even by parties that claim to support equality.

The goal is not just to analyze the gap between public demand and political responses, but to explain how it persists—and why it’s so difficult to close. For scholars, analysts, and policymakers, we offer both data and a framework for understanding why inequality is so politically resilient. It’s a contribution to ongoing debates about what kinds of equality are pursued in politics, by which actors, and under what conditions real change is possible. /



Alexander Horn is a Research Group Leader of the Emmy Noether Group “Varieties of Egalitarianism” and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

Policies

The Cluster's third research area focuses on Policies, addressing two key questions: first, how do policy-makers respond to public demands of individual and collective actors and are these policy responses themselves biased; and second, to what extent do policies affect structural inequalities as well as perceptions and preferences, tying this research area back to the start of the policy cycle.

Assessing, as a first step, the degree of inequality in the responsiveness of policy-making, Cluster researchers have come up with a number of important findings. Previous research on inequality in the responsiveness of policy-making had revealed a strong bias of policy-makers to privilege the preferences of high-income citizens compared to those of low-income individuals. The Cluster project "Political Elites and Inequality" has identified a plausible mechanism for why this bias in responsiveness may exist, namely the individual perceptions and preferences of members of the political elite (see Breunig et al. in this magazine). On the basis of hundreds of interviews with members of the parliaments of the federal states in Germany as well as via a collaboration with an international team of researchers, the project team found evidence that political elites hold more conservative views on inequality and redistribution compared to the general population, which may be related to their particular social networks. These networks tend to be biased towards upper social strata.

The second research goal in the Policy area is to assess the impact of policies on structural inequalities as well as on perceptions and preferences. An example for the first aspect is research conducted in the context of the Cluster project on "Digitalization, Automation and the Future of Work in Post-industrial Welfare

States." This research shows that even though large-scale labor market transformations, driven by rapid technological change, contribute to increasing inequality in wages and employment opportunities, firm-level or public policies do matter in shaping these effects. For instance, the existence of works councils at the firm level dampen the negative effects of automation shocks on employment outcomes (more on this in the article by Findeisen, Dauth, and Schlenker). Other research findings from this project point to the important role of welfare state policies and institutions. Generous welfare state policies can, for example, mitigate the negative side effects of perceived technology-related stress.

Our research also shows that individuals at risk of being affected by large-scale transformations demand some form of compensation via social policies. A final example for important research findings comes from the project on "Administrative Inequalities", which shows that inequalities can also emerge in the implementation of policies, in this case policies related to applications for asylum or German citizenship. The project has gathered a lot of administrative data that is hard to obtain, demonstrating the high variation in outcomes across localities within Germany, even in the implementation of federal laws (see the contribution by Schneider and Zuber). /

POLICIES

The Postcode Penalty: Unequal Treatment in Germany's Administrative System

(G. Schneider, C. Zuber)

42 All people are equal before the law. Or at least, they should be. In the Cluster project “Administrative Inequality: The Case of Foreign Nationals in Germany (AdmIn)”, an interdisciplinary team investigates spatial disparities in how asylum and citizenship laws are implemented in Germany. The central question: Are identical cases treated differently depending on where a person lives—and thus: which authority is responsible for their application?

10 April 2024
In_equality Research Award

Simon Jäger, associate professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton University, receives the 2024 In_equality Research Award for outstanding research on inequality.

Unequal treatment is not limited to schools, workplaces, or the exercise of political rights. It can also occur in government agencies and courts—namely, when identical claims, brought under the same legal framework and involving the same legal status, are evaluated differently, depending on where or when they are decided. Recent research has shown, for instance, that asylum offices are more likely to approve applications immediately following a shipwreck, while the chances of rejection increase the day after a terrorist attack.

Our project examines why decisions by government agencies and courts in Germany vary depending on where they are made. This kind of place-based unequal treatment is especially problematic for individuals who, due to limited financial means or legal restrictions on mobility, cannot move to the jurisdiction of an agency that—based on prior decisions—offers the best chances of success.

In previous studies, we found that recognition rates at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) vary significantly depending on the regional branch office—even for asylum seekers from the same countries of origin. Our latest research reveals similar disparities in the 48 administrative courts that handle appeals against rejected asylum claims. Figure 1 shows data from four such courts: while Bayreuth and Gera reject most appeals, courts in Darmstadt and Meiningen overturn a majority of negative BAMF decisions.

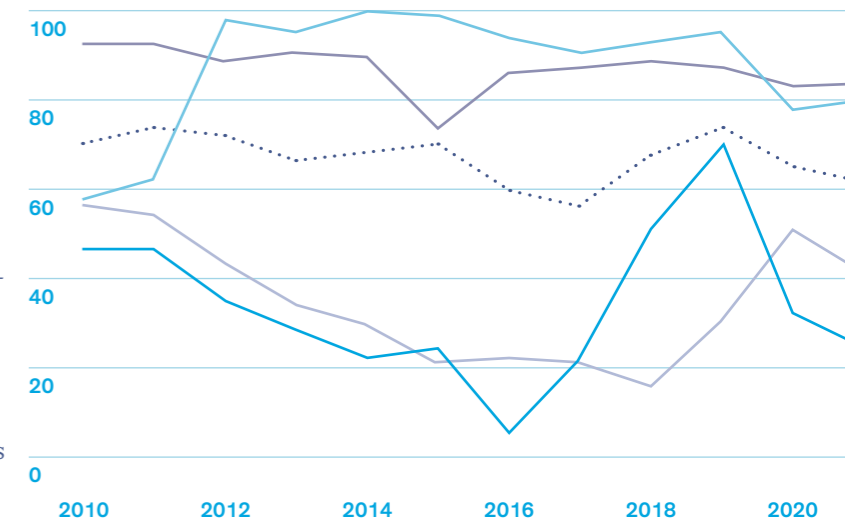


Figure 1: Rejection rates of asylum appeals in four administrative courts

- Administrative courts
- Gera (TH)
- Meiningen (TH)
- Darmstadt (HE)
- Bayreuth (BY)
- ... Average

Part of the disparity between the two courts in Thuringia can be traced to the fact that Gera handles cases from several so-called safe countries of origin, whereas Meiningen does not handle cases from any country in that category. However, investigative reporting has also revealed that two administrative judges in Gera rejected appeals from certain countries more often than judges elsewhere in Germany. This points to a pattern of systematic unequal treatment—and potentially, discrimination. →



27 April 2024
Cluster Café

The 50,000th cup of coffee is served at the Cluster Café.

01 May 2024
External Senior Fellow

The Cluster welcomes its 25th External Senior Fellow, Mazen Hassan, Professor of Comparative Politics at Cairo University.

A similar pattern emerges in decisions on dual citizenship for Turkish applicants. Until mid-2024, local naturalization authorities had discretion over whether to allow applicants to retain their original nationality when acquiring a German passport. Figure 2 shows how this played out between 2000 and 2017 in North Rhine-Westphalia, a state with particularly large variations in local naturalization practices. These differences are particularly striking between Hamm and Hagen, two comparably sized cities: in Hamm, the chances of retaining Turkish citizenship were essentially zero, whereas in Hagen, most applicants were granted German citizenship without having to give up their Turkish passports.

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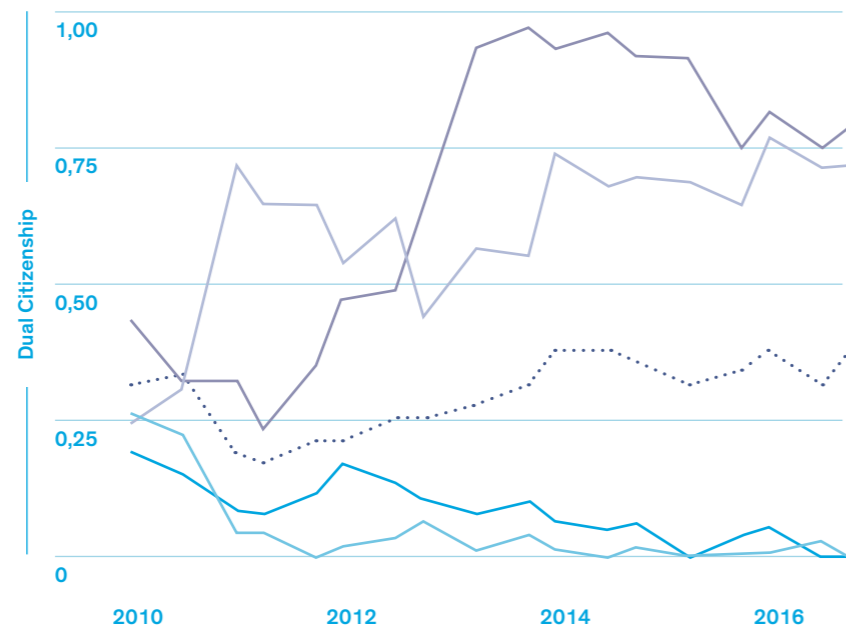


Figure 1: Share of naturalizations granting dual German-Turkish citizenship in North Rhine-Westphalia by local authority

- Hamm Stadt
- Mönchengladbach Stadt
- Steinfurt
- Hagen Stadt
- ... Average

What explains this unequal treatment by location? Our findings suggest that the decisions of the responsible government agencies and administrative courts are informed by regional and local political preferences. These include public attitudes toward immigration (as measured in surveys) and the political leanings of state governments, district commissioners, or mayors. This is especially problematic given that the authority to legislate in the areas we studied— asylum and citizenship—rests with the federal government, not the states or local municipalities.

What can be done to address these inconsistencies in implementation? A first step would be to find out how public policy is actually implemented by decentralized authorities. At present, however, key data on how government agencies and courts make decisions is either not collected at all or withheld under largely opaque data protection rules. But thanks to the efforts of the AdmIn project, we now have a reliable dataset covering asylum and naturalization decisions, which could inform efforts to make practices more consistent across jurisdictions. Additional steps might include cross-agency peer reviews, carried out on a random basis, as well as systematic training of staff that extends beyond the boundaries of individual offices and courts. /



Christina Zuber is a Professor of German Politics at the University of Konstanz as well as Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Gerald Schneider is a Professor of International Politics at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

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22 August 2024
Renewal Proposal



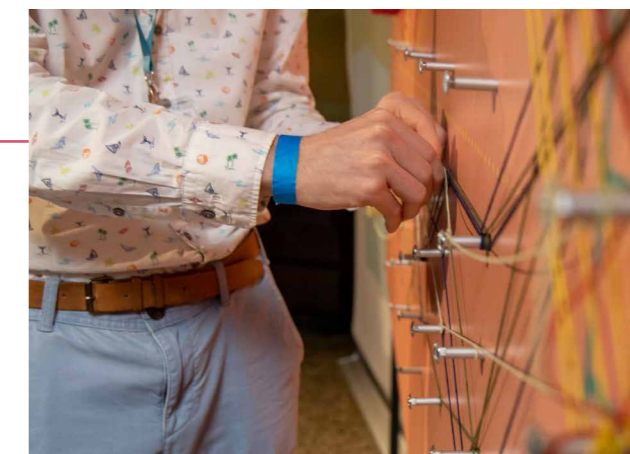
After about a year of writing, the Renewal Proposal (in the picture: the battle with the word limit) for a second funding period is submitted. (Almost) everyone goes on vacation afterwards.

22 October 2024
Working Paper Series

The 40th issue of the Cluster’s Working Paper Series is published. In cooperation with SWR (a regional public broadcaster), Eva Thomann and colleagues examine the scale, causes, and consequences of administrative overload. A documentary about their findings airs alongside the publication.

01–10 November 2024
Berlin Science Week

The Cluster returns to the Berlin Science Week—this time with its own exhibit from the “Inequality Barometer” project.



Technological advances often bring productivity growth and economic gains, but these are rarely shared evenly. Automation is no exception: while productivity rises, the gains may primarily benefit employers, leaving workers behind. The Cluster project “Digitalization, Automation and the Future of Work in Post-Industrial Welfare States” aims to understand whether works councils can reduce economic inequality.

Organized Labor vs. Robots. *Works Councils Can Protect Workers from Automation Fallout*

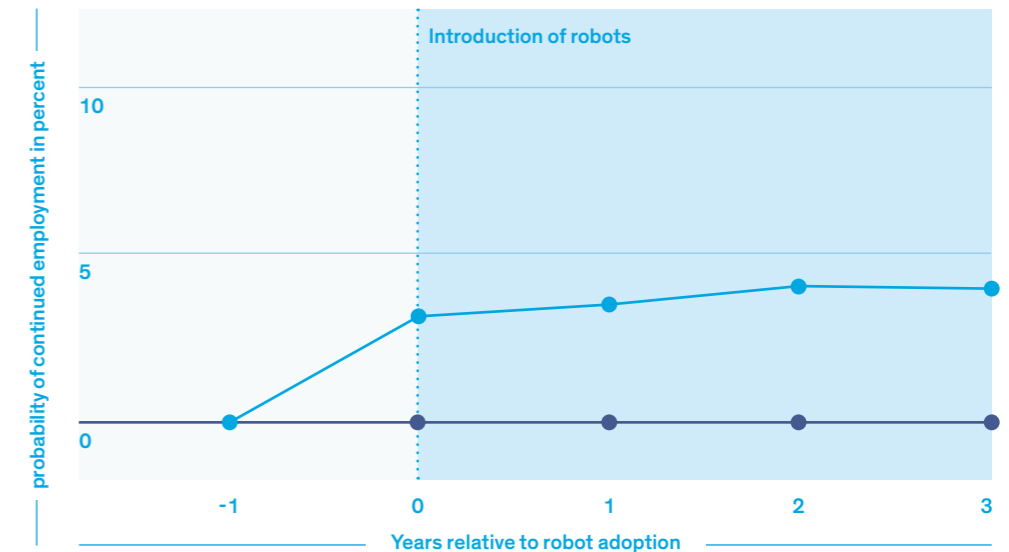
(S. Findelsen, W. Dauth, O. Schlenker)

13 November 2024
Cooperation Event

As part of a collaboration with the Konstanz Adult Education Center (VHS), journalist and lawyer Ronen Steinke visits the Cluster and reads from his book “Vor dem Gesetz sind nicht alle gleich” (Not everyone is equal before the law) at a sold-out event.

Figure 1: The figure shows how the probability of continued employment after the introduction of robots differs between employees in firms with and without a works council (measured in percentage points). In firms with a works council, this probability is approximately four percentage points higher than in those without.

● Works council
● No works council



Is technological progress a threat to human labor? The introduction of automation technologies may raise fears among employees. Whether robots affect worker in all firms alike, is the nuanced question we have addressed. In our research, we combine information on the adoption of robots in Germany between 2014 and 2018 from the IAB-Establishment Panel, conducted by the Institute for Employment Research in Nuremberg. This annual survey covers around 15,000 establishments with worker-level administrative records. This data allows us to investigate whether the wage, earnings, and employment trajectories of

similar workers in similar firms evolve differently during automation events, depending on whether their establishment has a works council or not.

Works councils are present in around 9 percent of establishments and cover around 40 percent of all German employees. They have information, consultation, and co-decision-making rights—especially regarding decisions related to personnel-related management. These entrenched rights increase worker power and reduce information asymmetries between the management and the workforce. As a consequence, they can shape the process of automation by incentivizing the firm to retain and retrain their workforce. →

24 November 2024
Media Coverage

The Cluster is mentioned in the media for the 1,000th time.

Our results clearly indicate that the presence of works councils mitigates the risk of employee dismissals. Figure 1 shows that, following the introduction of robots, the probability that employees remain employed at the firm is approximately four percentage points higher in companies with a works council than in comparable firms without workplace co-determination.

While this effect is quite homogenous across workers' characteristics, older workers benefit especially strongly from this increased job security as they struggle more to find a new job. Employees in firms with a works council are therefore less likely to experience unemployment as a result of robotic automation.

Although works councils in Germany cannot directly negotiate over wages, they effectively protect automation-exposed workers—those in routine-manual occupations—from wage cuts related to automation by levelling their pay grade classification. By contrast, workers in firms without works councils see a wage decline of around 3.5 percent.

However, the strength of works councils' protection varies with firms' labor market conditions. Their effect on job stability is greatest when firms can easily replace employees. Conversely, in tight labor markets, where firms already have strong incentives to retain their workforce, works councils provide no additional benefit. Importantly, we do not find evidence that works councils prevent technological progress. Rather, they encourage firms to accompany the investment in automation technologies with training for their workforce. This combination of retaining and retraining could explain why firms with works councils see greater productivity growth after automation events, aligning economic performance with employee well-being.

Our research highlights that automation itself does not necessarily deepen inequality—rather, it is the institutional context that shapes how workers are affected. Our findings indicate that worker representation allows incumbent workers to capture rents, ultimately facilitating acceptance of automation within firms. But where do these incumbent workers' gains originate? Our analysis suggests the cost is borne by capital owners and external workers. Future research should prioritize investigating these redistributive dynamics across different labor market institutions. /



Sebastian Findeisen is a Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality".

Wolfgang Dauth is a Professor of Regional Labor Economics at the Otto Friedrich University in Bamberg.



Oliver Schlenker is a Doctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence "The Politics of Inequality" and at the Leibniz Centre for European Economic Research (ZEW) in Mannheim.



23 January 2025
Presentation

The new year kicks off with the Oral Presentation of the Renewal Proposal in Bonn. Thirteen Cluster Researchers, the Rector of the University of Konstanz, and the Managing Director field questions from the international review panel.

05 March 2025
In_equality podcast

The first episode of the In_equality podcast is released, titled "Is Trump the End of Democracy?" It features Herbert Kitschelt, Professor of International Relations at Duke University and former External Senior Fellow.

POLICIES

More Common Ground than Expected? *What Citizens and Politicians Consider Fair*

(C. Breunig, F. Breyer, W. Gaissmaier, G. Schwerdt, M. Sterba)

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How just do citizens and political decision-makers consider our pension system, inheritance tax, or university tuition fees? The Cluster project “Political Elites and Inequality” explores this question and shows how strongly subjective perceptions of fairness shape political attitudes—and how they can be influenced through targeted information.



22 May 2025
Continued Funding

The German Research Foundation (DFG) announces its decision on Continued Funding for the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

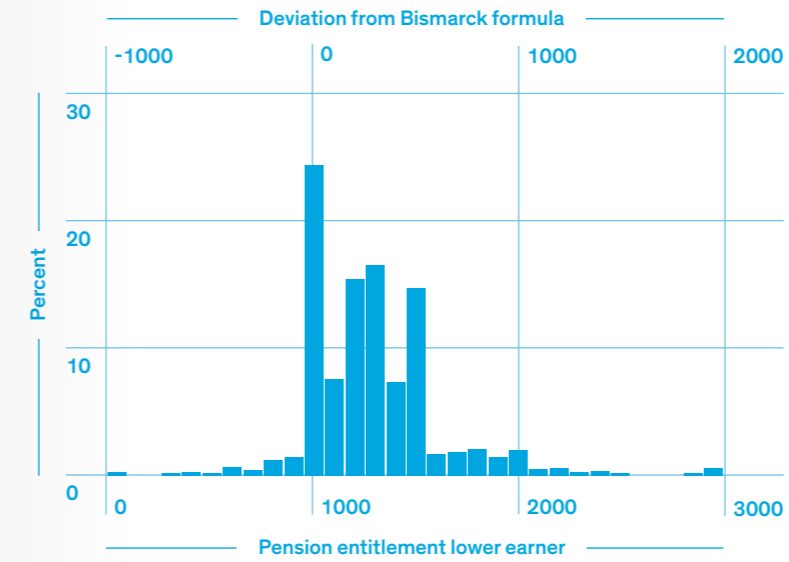
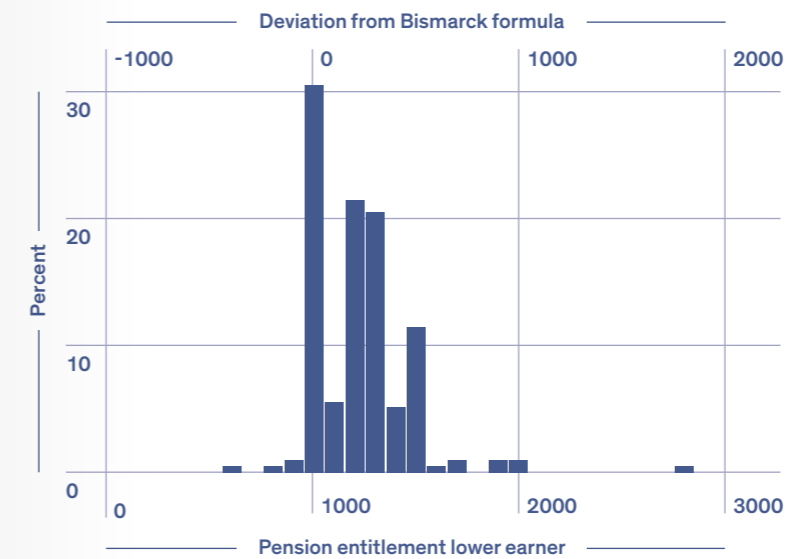


Figure 1: Preferred distribution of pension entitlements

● citizens
● policymakers

These graphics show what level of pension (between 0 and 3,000 euros) respondents consider fair for people with low incomes. The top part shows the responses from citizens (survey by Infratest Dimap, 2020); the bottom part shows the responses from politicians (own survey with 535 members of eight state parliaments, 2021–2022).



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Subjective perceptions of social equality and inequality play an important role in the political process. Governments observe whether their policies are met with approval, and political parties have the opportunity to campaign for support through their platforms. In the “Political Elites and Inequality” project, we study the extent to which citizens and lawmakers perceive key social policy measures aimed at reducing inequality as fair. Our focus includes policies such as the pension system, inheritance taxes, university tuition fees, and parental contributions for childcare. We are also interested in understanding why certain policies are considered fair or unfair—and how these perceptions might shift when people are presented with additional information. →

But how do you measure what people perceive as fair or unfair? In our survey on fairness in the German statutory pension system, we proceeded as follows: respondents were shown an example involving two fictional retirees. Both had worked for the same number of years, but one—Mr. Großmüller—had consistently earned twice as much and thus paid twice as much in pension contributions as the other, Mr. Kleinschmidt. Respondents were also told that the total pension amount available to both individuals was 3,000 euros. First, they were asked to estimate how this sum would actually be divided between the two men. Only about one-third of respondents gave the correct answer: 2,000 euros for Großmüller, 1,000 euros for Kleinschmidt. This means that two-thirds were unfamiliar with the so-called Bismarck system of German pensions, in which monthly pension payments are strictly proportional to contributions made.

Next, respondents were randomly assigned to different information conditions: one-third were informed of the actual distribution; another third also received the additional information that Großmüller has a life expectancy four years higher than Kleinschmidt and would therefore receive benefits for a longer period. The final third received no further information. Among the policymakers, the sample was divided into two groups (due to smaller sample size): both were told the actual distribution, but only one group received the information about differences in life expectancy.

Our findings show that the Bismarck system is considered “rather fair” or “completely fair” by only about half (49 percent) of the citizens who were informed about the actual distribution. The same applies to the surveyed policymakers: 54 percent rated the system as “rather fair” or “completely fair.”

This percentage declines slightly when information about life expectancy differences is provided. Figure 1 also shows that when asked what they personally consider a fair distribution, only 25 percent of citizens and 30 percent of politicians proposed the actual 2,000 euros to 1,000 euros split. The vast majority of respondents preferred some form of redistribution in favor of the lower earner. On average, citizens wanted Mr. Kleinschmidt to receive 280 euros more per month, resulting in 1,720 euros for Großmüller and 1,280 euros for Kleinschmidt.

Policymakers allocated an average of 220 euros more to Kleinschmidt (1,780 euros vs. 1,220 euros). These findings suggest that the Bismarck pension system—long treated as untouchable by nearly all major political parties—is not seen as fair by either the general public or the state legislators surveyed. Most respondents from both groups believe that income disparities from working life should not be mirrored so rigidly in retirement payments.

Is this kind of agreement also found across other topics covered in the project? Our findings suggest: yes. In many cases, legislators often respond much like “ordinary” citizens. For example, they also tend

to misjudge the extent of economic inequality. In international comparison, we can also show that the same applies to their assessments of public opinion.

These findings raise important questions about the congruence between public preferences and policymaking. Our research suggests that misjudging what the public wants may contribute to representation gaps. The good news, however, is that relatively small and simple interventions—such as providing factual information or data on political majorities in support of specific measures—can help reduce these misperceptions, as our individual studies have shown. /

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Methodology

The core of our empirical analysis is a survey administered to two groups: around 4,000 citizens, selected to be representative of the population and surveyed online, and 535 members of state parliaments (Landtage) from eight German states, who were interviewed via one-on-one video calls.



Christian Breunig is a Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Maj-Britt Sterba is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Guido Schwerdt is a Professor of Economics at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Wolfgang Gaissmaier is a Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Konstanz and Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.



Friedrich Breyer is a Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Konstanz and former Principal Investigator at the Cluster of Excellence “The Politics of Inequality”.

15 July 2025
In_equality Colloquium

The 99th In_equality Colloquium takes place. To mark the occasion, the latest issue of the In_equality magazine is released—the very one you’re holding in your hands.

2026–2032
To be continued...

We look forward to another seven years of excellent research!

PUBLISHED

Selected publications by Cluster researchers
(Published, September 2024—May 2025)

Sharon Baute and Luna Bellani (2024)

“Healthcare Deservingness: How Risk Factors and Income Shape Responsibility Attribution for Health Outcomes and Healthcare Costs.” *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcae049>

Florian Bottner, Viktoria Jansesberger, Markus Ohndorf, Gabriele Spilker and Robert Steiger (2025)

“What the New Loss and Damage Fund Needs for Public Approval: Choice Experimental Evidence from Austria.” *Climatic Change* 178 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-024-03843-x>

Marius R. Busemeyer, Sophia Stutzmann and Tobias Tober (2024)

“Digitalization and the Green Transition: Different Challenges, Same Policy Responses?” *Regulation & Governance*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12624>

Fabio Carrella, Segun Toafeek Aroyehun, Jana Lasser, Almog Simchon, David Garcia and Stephan Lewandowsky (2025)

“Different Honesty Conceptions Align Across US Politicians’ Tweets and Public Replies.” *Nature Communications* 16. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-025-56753-6>

Claudia Diehl and Sabine Trittler (2025)

“Newcomers’ Self-Assessed Visibility and Their Perceptions of Discrimination: The Case of Turks and Syrians in Germany.” *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaf015>

Frederik Gremler, Manuel Vogt and Nils B. Weidmann (2024)

“Intra-Ethnic Divisions and Disagreement Over Self-Determination Demands in Ethnic Movements.” *Political Science Research and Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2024.33>

Niklas Hänze (2024)

“When Conflict Becomes Calamity: Understanding the Role of Armed Conflict Dynamics in Natural Disasters.” *Journal of Peace Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433241265028>

Henning Hermes, Philipp Lergetporer, Fabian Mierisch, Guido Schwerdt and Simon Wiederhold (2024)

“Information About Inequality in Early Child Care Reduces Polarization in Policy Preferences.” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 228. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2024.106780>

Benjamin A. Korman, Max Reinwald, Florian Kunze and Sebastian Koos (2025)

“How Political Context Affects Immigrant Newcomers’ Social Undermining Dynamics and Well-Being at Work.” *Academy of Management Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2023.0303>

Jack Lucas, Lior Sheffer, Peter John Loewen, Stefaan Walgrave, Karolin Soontjens, Eran Amsalem, Stefanie Bailer, et al. (2024)

“Politicians’ Theories of Voting Behavior.” *American Political Science Review* online first (November):1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001060>

Briitta van Staaldouin and Delia Zollinger. (2024)

“Perceptions of Social Mobility, Gender, and Progressive Politics.” *Comparative Political Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140241306939>

Susanne Strauss, Ole Brüggemann and Julia Lang (2025)

“Who Perceives Lower Wages for Women to Be Fair? How Perceptions of the Fairness of Men’s and Women’s Wages Vary by Firm and Workplace Characteristics.” *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaf013>

Theresa Wieland and Fabian Thiel (2025)

“Increasing Individual-Level Climate Mitigation Action: The Role of Behavioral Dimensions and Inequality Perceptions.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04712-3>

Anna Zamberlan, Diana Roxana Galos, Susanne Strauß and Thomas Hinz (2025)

“Fairness Evaluations of Higher Education Graduates’ Earnings: The Role of Female Preference for Equality and Self-Interest.” *The British Journal of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13192>

Sergio Zanotto, Diego Frassinelli and Miriam Butt (2024)

“Language Complexity in Populist Rhetoric.” In *Proceedings of the 4th Workshop on Computational Linguistics for the Political and Social Sciences: Long and Short Papers*, edited by Christopher Klamm, Gabriella Lapesa, and Simone Paolo Ponzetto, 61–80. Stroudsburg, PA, USA: Association for Computational Linguistics (ACL). <https://aclanthology.org/2024.cpss-1.5/>



Oliver Schlenker

“Gesundheitseffekte von Digitalisierung” (Deutschlandfunk, Campus und Karriere, August 8, 2024)

Susanne Strauß and Thomas Hinz

“Perceived sexism ‘dents female students’ academic performance” (Times Higher Education, September 9, 2024)

Sukayna Younger-Khan

“Exzellenzstrategie: Sichtbarkeit und Prestige” (ZEIT für X, October 1, 2024)

Guido Schwerdt

“Minenfeld Erbschaftssteuer – Neid oder soziale Gerechtigkeit” (Deutschlandfunk Kultur, Zeitfragen, October 7, 2024)

Eva Thomann

“Amt am Limit – Der Staat vor dem Kollaps?” (SWR Story, October 22, 2024)

Marius R. Busemeyer

“Chancengleichheit – gibt es die in Deutschland?” (ARD, Fakt, December 10, 2024)

Nadja Wehl

“Wie sich politische Ideologien verändert haben” (Bayerischer Rundfunk, December 11, 2024)

Gerald Schneider

“Vor dem Gesetz sind alle gleich – oder?” (radioeins, Die Profis, Januar 11, 2025)

Thomas Kurer

“Ein Euro mehr Miete – vier Prozent mehr Zustimmung für die AfD” (Focus Online, January 17, 2025)

Daniel Thym

“Zur Debatte um die Verschärfung im Asyl- und Migrationsrecht” (ARD, Tagesschau, January 24, 2025)

Florian Kunze

“The Road Ahead: Preserving DEI Amid Political Pushback” (Forbes, February 21, 2025)

Christina Felfe de Ormeño

“Ökonomen fordern: Jetzt aber schnell, Herr Merz” (Süddeutsche Zeitung, March 2, 2025)

Claudia Diehl

“Eine Frage der sozialen Herkunft” (Deutschlandfunk Kultur, Tacheles, March 22, 2025)

Thomas Hinz

“Wenig Antisemitismus an Unis” (Frankfurter Rundschau, April 9, 2025)

David Garcia

“Die Macht des Bauchgefühls” (Der Spiegel, April 29, 2025)

Marius R. Busemeyer, Professor of Comparative Political Economy and Speaker of the Cluster, has been elected to the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

The European Research Council has awarded a prestigious ERC Consolidator Grant to **Steffen Eckhard**, Professor of Public Administration & Public Policy (Zeppelin University) and Principal Investigator at the Cluster.

56 **Anke Hoeffler**, Professor of Development Research and Principal Investigator at the Cluster, has been elected to the Leopoldina, the German National Academy of Sciences, founded in 1652.

For his paper “The Paternalist Politics of Punitive and Enabling Workfare: Evidence from a New Dataset on Workfare Reforms in 16 Countries, 1980–2015” published in the *Socio-Economic Review*, **Alexander Horn**, Emmy Noether Research Group Leader at the Cluster, was awarded the SER Prize.

The *Journal of Personnel Psychology* honored **Florian Kunze**, Chair of Organizational Behavior and Principal Investigator at the Cluster, with the 2024 Best Paper Award for his article “Age Separation and Voluntary Turnover”.

In_equality ECR Excellence Award

The cluster has honored outstanding scientific achievements by its early career researchers for the second time. In the “Doctoral Researchers” category, the award went to **Oliver Schlenker** and **Niklas Hänze**; in the “PostDocs” category, **Sharon Baute** and **Tobias Tober**, as well as **Ole Brüggemann**, were awarded.

Honors, memberships, appointments, and awards for Cluster members (Selection, September 2024—May 2025)

HONORS

— Cluster members

Mariia Gubina
Managing Office
IT Support

Johannes Kotz
Research Associate
Cluster project “Political Elites and Inequality: Information, Heuristics and Policy”

Scott Kunkel
Postdoctoral Researcher
Cluster project “Perceptions of Political Charisma in Low-Status Speakers”

Ilona Pap
Substitute Lecturer

Stefanie Ruess
Doctoral Researcher
Cluster project “Administrative Inequality: the case of foreign nationals in Germany”

Angélica Serrano Galvis
Postdoctoral Researcher
Cluster project “Improving Equity in Education through Youth Mentoring”

Briitta van Staaldin
Postdoctoral Researcher
Research group “The Politics of Labor Market Inequalities”

Eva Thomann
Professor of Public Administration
Principal Investigator

Annika Trautwein
Researcher
Cluster project “Students’ Perceptions of Inequality and Fairness (PerFair)”

Nina von Uexkull
Professor of International Politics
Principal Investigator

Antonia Velicu
Substitute Lecturer

— Guests and Fellows 2024 & 2025 (until June)

Diego Aycinena
University of Pennsylvania
External Senior Fellow

Halvard Buhaug
Peace Research Institute Oslo in Norway & Norwegian University of Technology and Science
External Senior Fellow

Pihal Deepak
International Institute for Population Sciences Mumbai
ZuKo Connect Fellow

Juan Diego García-Castro
University of Costa Rica
External Senior Fellow

Thomas Gareau
Cornell University
Doctoral Researcher

Antti-Jussi Kuovo
University of Turku
Guest Researcher

Gabriela Lotta
Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV)
External Senior Fellow

Julia Lynch
University of Pennsylvania
External Senior Fellow

Angel Miklashevsky
Zeppelin University
Doctoral Researcher

Carlos Hernán Quizhpe Parra
University of Cuenca, Ecuador
Guest Researcher

David Rueda
Nuffield College, Oxford University
Guest Researcher

Cinthia Sayuri Misaka
University of Campinas
ZuKo Connect Fellow

Bernd Schlipphak
University of Münster
Guest Researcher

Andreas Schneider
Journalist-in-Residence

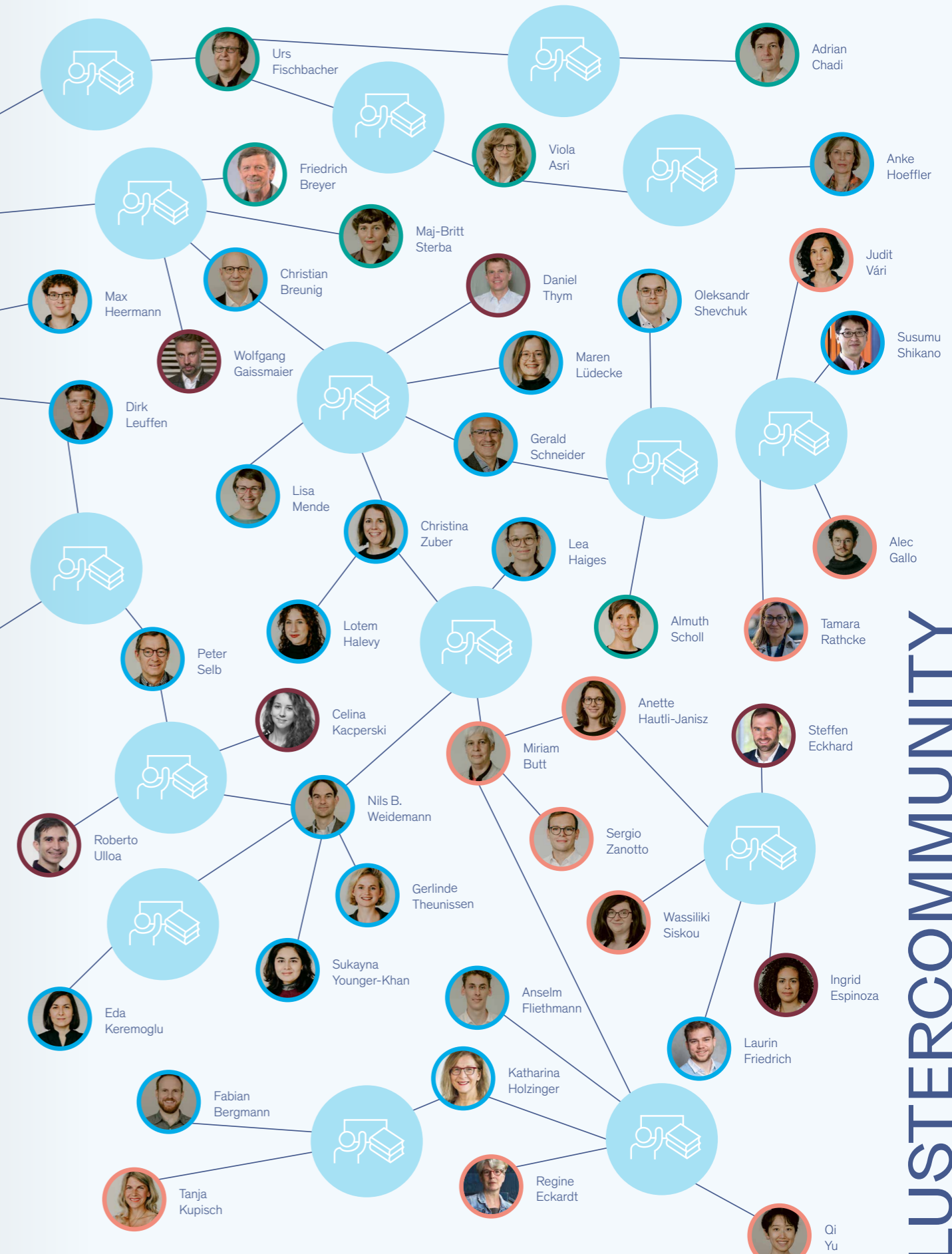
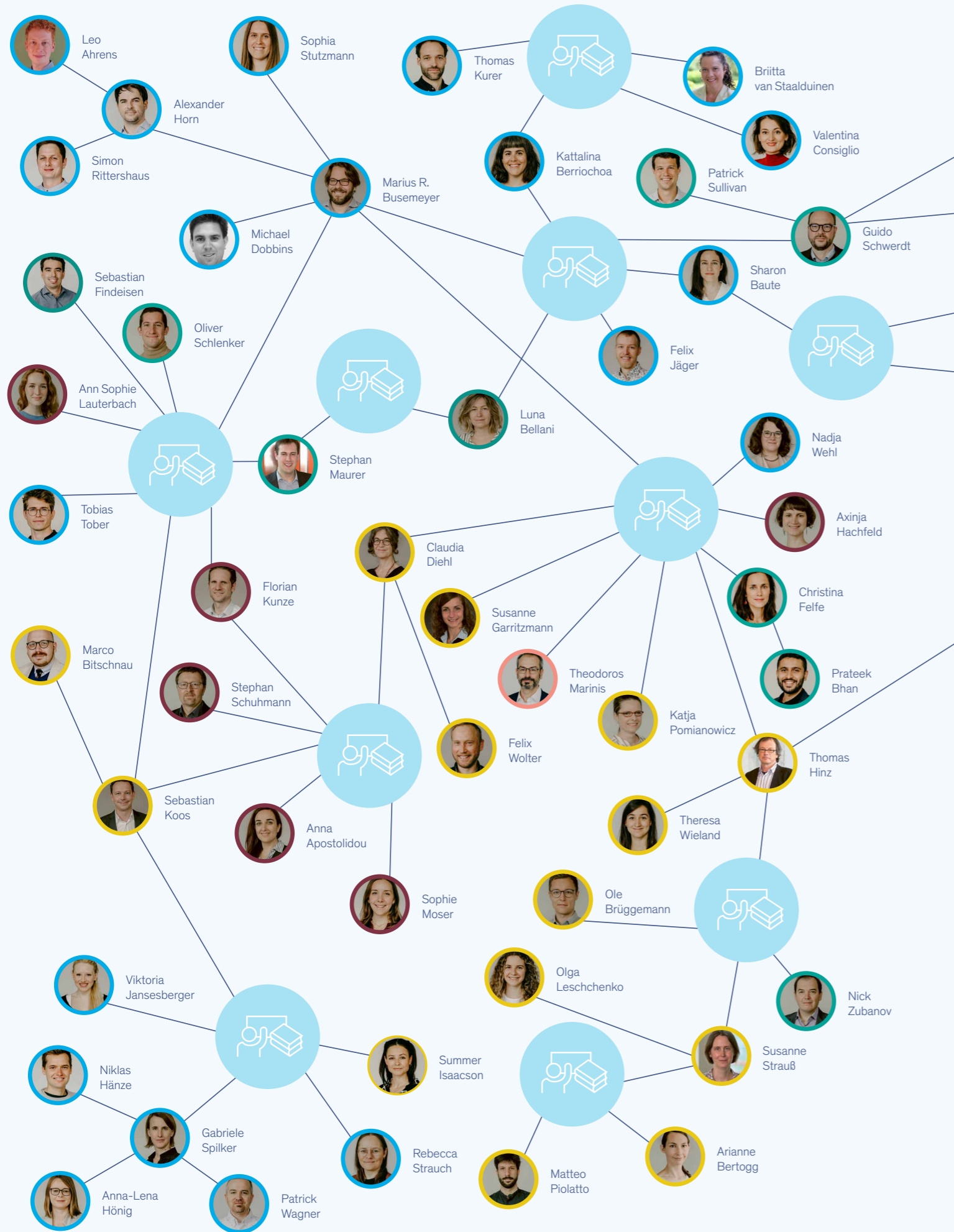
Eric Schoon
Ohio State University
External Senior Fellow

Mulugeta Tarekegne Tsegaye
Addis Ababa University
External Senior Fellow

Simon Weschle
University of North Carolina
Gastwissenschaftler mit einem Humboldt Fellowship

Andreas Wimmer
Columbia University
External Senior Fellow

Haoyou Zhao
Nanyang Technological University
ZuKo Connect Fellow



Disciplines/Disziplinen:

- Political Science/Politikwissenschaft
- Sociology/Soziologie
- Economics/Ökonomie
- Linguistics/Linguistik
- Other/Andere

 Research Projects/
 Forschungsprojekte

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