

Exploring the Relationship between Feelings of Insecurity, Distrust in the Government and Support for Populism

A Qualitative Study on the Perceptions of German Youth After
Recent Terror Attacks

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In this work we made use of generative artificial intelligence. Please see the appendix for the disclosure statement.

Abstract

This research investigates the research question: *To what extent do feelings of insecurity caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?* In order to answer that question, four sub-questions are applied that deal with sources of distrust in the government, feelings of insecurity due to terror attacks, the resulting impact on trust in the government, and factors stimulating support for populism. These sub-questions were answered by analysing existing literature and conducting interviews. Based on existing literature, it was suspected that feelings of insecurity caused by terror attacks decrease young people's trust in the government and increase support for populism. The main findings were that, in general, there is a feeling of insecurity due to the attacks among the German youth, which is a factor driving the decrease in trust in the government. Furthermore, while factors influencing declining trust in the government overlap with those increasing support for populism, emotional and moral motivations are especially important drivers of populist support.

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1. Introduction

The election of Donald Trump and the rise of populist parties across Europe indicate that populism is on the advance in many countries worldwide. Citizens seem dissatisfied with the government, and distrust is spreading. Populists, who propagate simplistic explanations for crises and claim to be working against the elites, seem to have easy access to disappointed citizens. In Europe, the high number of recent terrorist attacks might result in a feeling of insecurity among large parts of the population and in particular among the youth (European Parliament, 2025).

Following the high number of terrorist attacks in the past months, in Germany a public discourse about safety measures has gained significant traction. Many attackers had already been convicted of assault or should have left the country long ago, which portrays the government in a negative light. Since there is the possibility that some of these attacks could have been prevented if the government had acted more decisively, public anger has emerged. Furthermore, the country is facing rising support for the populist party AfD, which exploits those circumstances to propagate its agenda (Le Monde, 2024). This complex situation raises the question:

To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?

In order to examine this question systematically, four sub-questions are investigated.

1. *What are sources of distrust in the government?*
2. *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?*
3. *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?*
4. *What stimulates young people to support populist parties?*

The first sub-question *What are sources of distrust in the government?* is employed to get an overview of the factors leading to a decrease in trust in the government. For the assessment whether terrorist attacks had an impact on the youth in general, the sub-question *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?* will be examined. The relation of the feeling of unsafety and young people's trust in the government is investigated in the next sub-question

To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government? Then the sub-question *What stimulates young people to support populist parties?* will be examined. This approach will help in answering the research question step by step due to connecting the findings of the sub-questions with each other.

The research question and the sub-questions imply that this work is exploratory research, as the questions require to be answered in detail and have so far received little academic attention. To be more concrete, a sequential exploratory design is applied which ensures a thorough understanding on multiple levels. This research setup allows for combining an individual and a societal approach (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Conducting interviews and analysing existing literature, studies, and theory are elements of an in-depth study of the topic. Compared with a more quantitative approach, this research work has the limitation that due to conducting only 8 interviews it might not be as representative as a quantitative one would be. Nevertheless, it provides clear insights and helps in recognizing and understanding context patterns (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

To get an overview of the state of the art in research on the topics of populism and trust in government, the main literature on which this research is based will be briefly reviewed.

Evidence and knowledge of the support for populist parties has been the subject of various pieces of research. For example, Müller deals with this matter in his book “What is populism”. In his work, it is assumed that emotional, social, identity reasons and distrust in and disappointment with the current government might lead to citizens supporting populism (Müller, 2016).

Existing research also implies that issues in institutional and political procedures might lead to distrust of government in general. That implies that issues with preventing the recent terror attacks in Germany might have led to a decrease in trust in institutions (Tyler, 2006).

Moreover, existing research argues that when a party focuses on a specific theme and emphasizes that topic frequently, it can create the impression that this party is particularly competent in that field (Petrocik, 1996). This will be further explained in the theory part of this work.

Furthermore, reviews on existing literature mention how populist parties act as counter democratic forces, focusing on “the people as judge” and mistrusting the other parties (Rosanvallon, 2008).

1.1 Scientific value of the research

From a scientific angle, this project provides the opportunity to deal with a topic in a qualitative way, which is usually addressed in a more quantitative way. It can contribute deeper insights into existing knowledge and, in addition, more in-depth insights into how the youth in Germany feels about the terror attacks and how they trust the government.

There is not yet any qualitative research available on how the recent terror attacks have affected the young generation in Germany and its feeling of safety. Moreover, there is no detailed literature on which factors affect Germany's youth's level of trust in the government. There is a knowledge gap at this point in time. This research holds scientific value as it provides the opportunity to close this knowledge gap and help with providing more detailed information on the issue.

In general, very little qualitative research exists on what are the reasons that prompt people's distrust in the government and their alignment with populist parties. That is why this project will add some new insights into how the youth in Germany feel about the issue and how that might affect the trust in politics and institutions, the positioning in the political spectrum, and potential alignment with populist parties. The findings of this research can be used as a basis for future research on the topic of youth's distrust in the government and support for populist parties.

1.2 Social value of the research

Since the problem of distrust in the government has played a crucial role in recent times and there is a rise of populist parties across the world, this topic is relevant and important for societies around the globe. As there is no research yet on the specific case of the impact of terror attacks in Germany and in the recent federal elections there was a strong increase in support from the youth for the populist party AfD (Sonnenberg, 2025), it has significant importance for Germany. Finding reasons for the recent support of populism, especially in the young generation, might help prevent more alignment with populist parties and strengthen democracy. It is important to find out the reasons why the youth mistrusts the government and the established political parties, in order to be able to do something about it. Moreover, this research holds social value as it provides policy recommendations, based on the findings, which are designed to strengthen and protect democracy.

2. Background and theoretical framework

This research aims to answer the following question: *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?* The question involves different concepts which need to be understood in order to be able to answer it. The research question leads to the sub-questions

1. *What are sources of distrust in the government?*
2. *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?*
3. *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?*
4. *What stimulates young people to support populist parties?*

From these, the importance of the following concepts evolves: Feelings of insecurity, trust in government, young people's political participation and populism.

2.1 Key concepts and Definitions

Since feelings of unsafety are one of the main objectives of this research, it is crucial to define them properly. In this document, they are defined in the following way: *"The feeling of unsafety refers to the subjective perception of threat or danger, regardless of objective risk"* (Elchardus & Smits, 2003).

Trust in government is also one of the main topics of this research and is defined as *"the confidence that citizens have in authorities to do the right thing"* (Barnes & Gill, 2021).

When defining young people's political participation, the question arises what counts as political participation. The question is answered by this project in the following way: *"Political participation can be loosely defined as citizens' activities affecting politics. [...] By now, the list of participatory activities has become virtually infinite and includes actions such as voting, demonstrating, contacting public officials, boycotting, attending party rallies, guerrilla gardening, posting blogs, volunteering, joining flash mobs, signing petitions, buying fair-trade products, and even suicide protests"* (van Deth, 2021). This research defines youth as people aged 18 to 25. That is because the minimum voting age for the "Bundestag" in Germany is 18

(Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2023), and 25 is the maximum age parents in Germany are entitled to receive state support for their children, “Kindergeld” (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023).

As this research aims to find factors stimulating the youth to support populist parties, it is of great importance to have a clear definition of the term populism. Since different definitions of populism exist, this research focuses on Müller’s definition as an anti-pluralistic form of politics, which is based on moral claims and claims to be the only “real represent[ative] of the people” (Müller, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical framework

This research is based on existing theories, which will be shortly explained in the following.

2.2.1 Youth’s political participation

In order to analyse findings on the German youth’s political behaviour, it is crucial to gain some background information on political participation of young people in Germany. To analyse the German youth’s political participation in general and gain an overview of the topic, this research focuses on the Shell Youth Study (2024), because this study provides a recent detailed overview of the German youth’s political participation. The study provides the information that 55% of participants describe themselves as politically interested and 51% claim that they inform themselves about politics regularly. The study does not see a “shift towards right-wing politics” among young people and states that the majority trusts in the democratic institutions of Germany. Nevertheless, it is mentioned that the number of male participants who classify themselves as right-wing has increased from less than one in five in 2019 to one in four (25%) in 2024. At this point, it is important to note that the participants of the Shell Study are between 15 and 25 years old, while this document focuses on the age range of 20 to 25. That is since in Germany federal voting is only permitted for citizens aged 18 and above, and this document aims to focus on young people who have already gained some voting experience (Albert, Quenzel & de Moll, 2024).

2.2.2 Populism

When looking at the term populism in public administration and political research, Jan-Werner Müller’s *What is Populism* holds great importance. Thus, as mentioned before, this research bases its definition of populism and what inspires people to support populism on Müller’s work. Müller defines populism as an anti-pluralistic form of politics, which is based on moral and

claims to be the only “real represent[ative] of the people.” He also emphasizes that support for populist parties does not only stem from educational, social, or financial backgrounds but also from disappointment and protest against parties in power, identity politics and also emotional aspects (Müller, 2016). Müller’s work was chosen because it takes into account multiple dimensions and, compared to other theories, does not simplify the complex reasons leading to support for populism.

2.2.3 Counter democracy and populism

Another important input on this issue is the theory of counter-democracy by Pierre Rosanvallon. He argues that next to democracy, there is counter-democracy with the three main aspects of surveillance, prevention, and judgement. He describes populism as an extreme form of counter-democracy. He states that populism contains pathological surveillance through stigmatisation of authorities. Furthermore, it consists of preventive sovereignty and the people as judge. Preventive sovereignty explains how populist parties tend to be against the established system and mainly focus on resistance against it. The “people as judge” concept explains how populism implies that the populist party is the only real represent[ative] of the people (Müller, 2016) and tends to reduce the state to its functions of mere control and punishment. These insights can also help explain what leads to citizens’ support for populist parties (Rosanvallon, 2008).

2.2.4 Procedural Justice Theory and Trust in Government

Furthermore, an important theory in the field of public administration and political science, when considering trust in government, is Tom R. Tyler’s Procedural Justice Theory. This theory aims at explaining what leads to distrust in the government. It focuses on four central aspects that are considered important for procedural justice. Those are voice, neutrality, respect and trustworthiness. Given this research focuses on understanding what leads to public distrust, the focus will lie on the aspect of trustworthiness. Tyler’s theory highlights that perceived unfair or corrupt procedures lead to public distrust. Against this background, it can be assumed that issues in the procedures of preventing terror attacks might lead to distrust in the government (Tyler, 2006).

2.2.5 Perceived threat and policy preferences

When examining the consequences of terror attacks or general threats on citizens’ preferred policies, it has been found that in a situation of perceived threat, citizens tend to prefer

protective policy approaches. Since the threat of terror attacks in the US after 9/11 led to more support for surveillance policies, in particular against immigrants of Arabic origin, it can be assumed that the perceived threat after terror attacks performed by persons with Arabic background might result in more support for stronger policies against this ethnic group in Germany as well. Given the AfD promotes such policies, this might lead to more support for this party (Huddy & Weber, 2007).

2.2.6 Issue Ownership Theory and populist parties

In examining aspects that lead to the support of populist parties, the theory of issue ownership from political science is important. This theory highlights how political parties focus on specific themes and thereby become associated with these themes. That can create the impression that a certain party is particularly competent in a certain field just because of the frequent mentioning of that topic. In the case of this research, the German party AfD, which can be considered as right-wing populist, highlights the danger of terror attacks by migrants, and that way somehow seems to own this topic. According to the Issue Ownership Theory, this could be a factor prompting people to support the AfD because they are scared of terror attacks and they believe that the AfD is the best option in order to prevent such attacks in the future (Petrocik, 1996).

2.2.7 Social Amplification of Risk Framework

When investigating how terrorist attacks affect the feelings of safety among young people, a number of factors play a role. This is explained by the Social Amplification of Risk Framework. This framework highlights how political discourse, social environments and media coverage can emphasize certain topics and by that increase feelings of vulnerability and unsafety (Kasperson et al., 1988). As the terrorist attacks are a topic which is frequently debated in Germany (Die Zeit, 2024), there might evolve increased feelings of unsafety.

2.3 Hypotheses and theoretical expectations

The first sub-question *What are sources of distrust in government?* is of theoretical nature and deals with learning about the potential reasons for distrust in the government among young people. Based on the literature and research available on this topic, it can be assumed that issues in governmental procedures, such as issues in procedures to prevent terror attacks, can lead to citizens distrusting the government. As Tyler explains, procedures which are perceived as unfair

or corrupt lead to distrust in the government. A failure of preventing a terror attack may imply that there were issues within the procedure. So, *it can be expected that there are several different sources of distrust in government among young people, with one being failure to prevent terror attacks (H1)*.

In the context of sub-question 2, terror attacks are an independent variable (IV) and feelings of safety are a dependent variable (DV). So, *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?* examines how the IV affects the DV. The sub-question is of empirical nature and will be answered based on interviews. Existing theory implies that a strong presence of certain events within the social discourse enhances feelings of unsafety. Terrorist attacks are a topic which is frequently and strongly debated within the German public discourse. Therefore, hypothesis 2 can be formulated in the following way: *Recent terror attacks tend to make young people in Germany feel insecure (H2)*.

The third sub-question assesses *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?* The assessment is about the impact of the IV (feelings of unsafety) on the DV (trust in the government). Based on the literature (Tyler, 2006), *it can be assumed that a rise in feelings of unsafety will lead to decreased trust in the government (H3)*. As Tyler explains, issues in the procedures of providing safety can lead to a feeling of unsafety, which leads to a decrease in trust in the government. Moreover, populist parties utilize these feelings of fear to push their agendas and convince voters.

For the 4th sub-question *What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?* it can be suggested, based on the theory (Müller, 2016), that support for populist parties may be highly impacted by distrust in the government and the parties in power. Moreover, Müller argues that emotional and identity aspects play a decisive role too. The AfD can be considered as less rational in their tone than most other parties. The party tries to evoke certain feelings and emotions in the voters. The focus primarily lies on fear, anger and patriotism. Furthermore, the Issue Ownership Theory implies that people might vote for the AfD because they assume that the AfD is competent in aspects of security, given the fact they mention them a lot. To conclude, *it can be expected that distrust in government and emotional reasons stimulate young people highly to vote for populist parties (H4)*.

3. Methodology

In this chapter the methodology of this research including the research design, the method of data collection, the method of data analysis and the coding scheme are explained.

3.1 Research Design

This study applies a qualitative, two-part explanatory research design. The qualitative approach provides the possibility of garnering more in-depth, detailed data which is pivotal for learning more about young people's perspectives. The research question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust in government and support populist parties?* aims at understanding to what extent feelings of unsafety lead to more support for populist parties. This requires an explanatory approach. Answering the research question in detail requires the exploration of some elements that have been phrased in terms of four sub-questions

1. *What are sources of distrust in the government?*
2. *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?*
3. *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?*
4. *What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?*

In order to address the first element, existing data on which factors increase young citizens' distrust in the government is analysed. Scientific literature and a survey on this topic are examined to gain clear, detailed insights into existing knowledge on which factors lead to a decrease in citizens' trust in the government.

For the second element, it is explored how the German youth has perceived recent terrorist attacks and whether these terrorist attacks have led to a feeling of insecurity.

In the third element, it is examined to what extent feelings of insecurity affect young people's trust in the government. So, the sub-question addresses how important the independent variable "feelings of insecurity" is compared with the other factors for distrust in the government resulting from the analysis under sub-question 1. For the second and third element, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight German citizens aged between 18 and 25.

For the last element, existing theory and research on what stimulates support for populism in general are analysed, to gain more insights into what prompts citizens to align with populism. The findings for this element are compared to the findings of the other sub-questions to learn about how general distrust in the government relates to support for populism and how the terrorist attacks and resulting feelings of insecurity play a role in this regard. At this stage of the explanatory scheme, the findings of the four sub-questions are connected: .

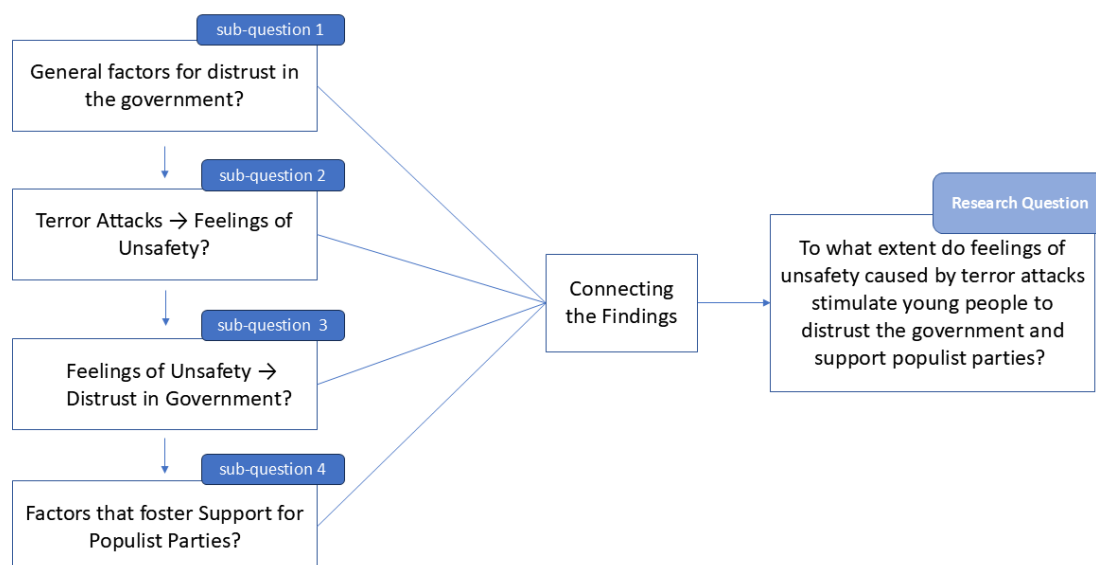


Figure 1, Diagram: Research Question and Sub-Questions

The review of existing literature revealed that most research performed on these aspects was conducted in a quantitative way.

The combination of analysing existing data and creating and analysing more qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews provides the possibility to gain more insights into citizens' subjective perspectives on the foundation of existing data. This leads to more detailed knowledge grounded in existing theory and adds a more holistic perspective on the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

3.2 Method of data collection

When examining the two theoretical sub-questions 1. *What are sources of distrust in government among young people?* and 4. *What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?*, the first step is to choose adequate data. The focus is on scientific literature, as this implies that the texts will be detailed enough and adhere to academic standards to function as a

basis for this research. Firstly, a broad range of texts dealing with populism and democracy was collected. Then, the texts aligning most with the research topic and of best quality were chosen to be analysed. For example, to gain deeper insights on populism in general, as mentioned in the theory part, Jan-Werner Müller's *What is Populism?* was chosen. This procedure of choosing the most fitting texts out of a pool of contextual texts assures the use of adequate data that aligns with the question to be explored.

For examining the empirical sub-questions 2. *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?* and 3. *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?*, the data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. This procedure allows for deeper insights into the participants' perceptions and leaves space for additional questions if needed. In comparison to more quantitative tools such as surveys, an interview offers the participants the possibility to provide a more detailed explanation about their perspectives (Longhurst, 2009).

Since the duration of this research project does not provide enough time to include a larger group of interviewees, eight participants aged between 18 and 25 were interviewed. The sampling was performed in a purposive way. Attention was paid to the attributes of gender and education. This allowed for representing, to some extent (given the limited sample of eight interviewees), different parts of society, thereby providing the possibility to learn about different opinions and perspectives in different groups of the same age. Four female and four male participants were interviewed. In order to ensure different backgrounds, people were approached at two public spaces: one of the biggest bus stations in the city of Mainz and a big station in the city of Frankfurt. The people were briefly informed about the topic of the thesis and asked to participate. They were given the choice to be interviewed at a time that suited them in a quiet spot in public or at their or the interviewer's accommodation in order to make the interview as comfortable as possible for them. Six decided to be interviewed in a private space, while two preferred being interviewed in a quiet public space.

At this point, it must be mentioned that the sample of interviewees might be biased to some extent, as it might include a specific type of person who has time and is ready to be interviewed about such a sensitive topic (Collier & Mahoney, 1996). This could bias the outcomes.

The interview questions were created based on the relevant sub-questions and pre-tested twice before the actual interviews were conducted. This allowed for some adjustments in order to

improve the quality of the interviews. The interviews were recorded with the app *Voice Recorder*.

3.3 Method of data analysis

In order to analyse the scientific texts, textual analysis was applied to garner the relevant information. Content analysis was used to identify the key messages and concepts of the texts. This ensured precise insights into the material and helped to understand which factors determine young people's support for populism (Mayring, 2015). The various texts were analysed accordingly, focusing on aspects related to the sub-questions *What are sources of distrust in government?* and *What stimulates young people to support populist parties?*

For the data analysis of the interviews, a qualitative content analysis was conducted, which allowed for a structured and detailed examination of the data (Mayring, 2015). The interviews were conducted in German with German-speaking participants to ensure accessibility for those not fluent in English. In the next step, they were transcribed using the app “Voice Recorder.” The transcripts were then reviewed and manually corrected. Subsequently, they were translated into English and coded using Atlas.ti. After coding, the findings were further analysed in written form.

After completing these steps, the connections between the interview data and the findings from the other sub-questions were examined. Based on this analysis, the research question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?* was discussed.

3.4 Coding Scheme

The coding scheme was created in advance based on the sub-questions, the theory, and the interview questions. The research tool Atlas.ti was employed in order to code the collected information and to analyse it. The codes were generated in a deductive approach according to Mayring. This allowed setting subjective opinions in context based on predefined rules, thereby ensuring alignment with academic standards (Mayring, 2015). The codes themselves were categorized into broader code groups with subcodes to generate a better overview of the data. The broader groups are related to the two sub-questions *Do the recent terror attacks make young*

people feel insecure? and *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?* to help answer these in detail. In general, this procedure provides insights on dominant themes and patterns within the collected data as well as the opportunity to gain deeper insights into subjective perceptions and opinions.

Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?

The following codes were applied to analyse the interviews regarding young people's perception of the terror attacks:

| <u>Perception of Attacks</u> |
|--|
| • Perception of terrorist attacks |
| • Societal discourse (media, social environment) |
| • Subjective feeling of unsafety |
| • Presence in everyday life |
| • No feeling of unsafety |

Figure 2, Table 1, Coding Scheme: Perception of Attacks

| <u>Fear of Attacks</u> |
|--------------------------------|
| • Protective measures |
| • Talking about the topic |
| • No behavioral change |
| • Latent presence of the topic |
| • Feeling anxious |

Figure 3, Table 2, Coding Scheme: Fear of Attacks

Perception of attacks was chosen as the first category, because it is crucial to understand if participants perceived a high number of attacks at all. This can be considered a prerequisite to find out if participants feel anxious about terror attacks. The subcodes were chosen to distinguish whether participants feel insecure or not, if they perceived the terror attacks at all, if the attacks are present in their lives, and if they recognize a societal discourse about the topic.

The second category, *Fear of attacks*, was chosen in order to learn more about the nature of the feeling of unsafety and how strong it is. Therefore, different subcodes were established (Table 2).

To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government

Sub-question 3 aims at understanding how important the factor of feeling unsafe is compared to other factors, such as those from sub-question 1. In order to learn more about the topic, the three categories — trust in institutions/the state after attacks, sources of distrust, and impact on voting/political behaviour — with different subcategories for each category, were established.

| <u>Trust in Institutions / the State after Attacks</u> |
|---|
| • Loss of trust after attacks |
| • Dissatisfaction with measures and communication |
| • Satisfaction with measures and communication |

Figure 4, Table 3, Coding Scheme: Trust in Institutions/ the state after the Attacks

| <u>Sources of Distrust</u> |
|------------------------------------|
| • Elites perceived as out of touch |
| • Feeling of not being represented |
| • Lack of transparency |
| • Perceived incompetence |
| • Unfair processes |

Figure 5, Table 4, Coding Scheme: Sources of Distrust

| <u>Impact on Voting Behavior / Political Orientation</u> |
|---|
| • Change in voting decision |
| • Change in political orientation |
| • Rethinking the voting decision |
| • Not voting |
| • No influence on political behavior |

Figure 6, Table 5, Coding Scheme: Impact on Voting Behaviour/ Political Orientation

These different categories and subcodes allow for a structured approach to understand how the terrorist attacks affect the youth's trust in institutions and the state. Moreover, the possibility to compare sources of distrust in general and distrust due to the attacks is provided. This assures the background to answer the question to what extent feelings of insecurity affect the youth's trust in institutions. That is because the coding scheme provides the opportunity to examine the loss of trust after attacks and the satisfaction with measures and communication, but also explores general factors and the impact of the perception of how the state deals with terror attacks on voting and political behaviour. This allows for a detailed evaluation of to what extent feelings of unsafety affect trust in the government.

4. Findings and Analysis

In the following, the four sub-questions will be answered in order to discuss the research question: *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?*

The explanatory scheme is structured as follows: Firstly, it will be explored what kinds of sources for distrust in government among young people in general exist, i.e., which independent variables affect the dependent variable trust in government. Subsequently, it will be assessed if the recent terror attacks make young people feel unsafe. In the next step, it will be explored to what extent feelings of unsafety affect young people's trust in the government. In the last step, it will be examined what stimulates young people to support populist parties, i.e., what effect the independent variable "feelings of unsafety" has on the dependent variable "trust in government."

This procedure allows identifying general factors for distrust in government among young people first and finding out how they are affected by terror attacks. Then, the interviews will give insights into how the factor of feeling unsafe particularly affects trust in the government. At this point, connections to sub-questions one and two can be established, and the first part of the research question can be answered. In the last step, it will be examined what leads young people to support populist parties. Finally, causal connections to the first three sub-questions can be explored, and the research question can be answered completely. Taking these different steps is crucial to ensure that every part of the research question is answered in a detailed way before connecting the dots.

4.1 What are sources of distrust in the government?

In the following, sub-question 1 *What are sources of distrust in the government?* will be discussed based on theory and existing research on the topic. *I.e.* it is explored which independent variables (IV) lead to a decrease in the dependent variable (DV) "trust in government."

Hypothesis 1 *It can be expected that there are several different sources of distrust in government, with one being failure to prevent terror attacks* is tested.

To gain insights on that topic, the *Procedural Justice Theory* by Tyler (Tyler, 2006) and the *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions* (OECD, 2024) will be considered. The

combination of a theory and empirical data will ensure that different aspects are considered and the question can be answered in as much detail as possible.

Tyler's theory of procedural justice states that issues and perceived mistakes in political procedures can lead to a decrease in trust in the government among citizens. The theory focuses on the four central aspects of "Voice," "Neutrality," "Respect," and "Trust" (Tyler, 2006). "Voice" deals with how the citizens feel represented, i.e., in which way their opinion is represented within the procedure. "Neutrality" examines if the decision-making process is perceived as transparent and objective. Decisions should be understandable and well-explained to the public. "Respect" focuses on how citizens and their concerns should be taken seriously and not ignored or looked down upon. "Trust" focuses on how the people in power are perceived as trustworthy and competent. It should be clear that their intent is always to do what is best for the people (Tyler, 2006).

The theory states that decisions are more widely accepted if the decision-making procedures are perceived as fair, even if the outcome of the decision is unfavoured. A procedure which is perceived as fair leads to increased trust in institutions, while procedures perceived as unfair or untransparent lead to the opposite (Tyler, 2006).

So, based on Tyler's theory, it can be concluded that the independent variable "decision procedures perceived as fair" is causally related to the dependent variable "distrust in the government." Based on the theory, it can be concluded that a decrease in the IV will lead to an increase in the DV.

Moreover, on the basis of the Procedural Justice Theory, the four main aspects of "Voice," "Neutrality," "Respect," and "Trust" can be seen as independent variables affecting the DV. So, representation of own opinion, transparent procedures, respecting the citizens and acknowledging their concerns, as well as trustworthy politicians, are factors which influence citizens' trust in the government.

In the next step, the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2024) is examined to gain some empirical insights on the theory. The survey was chosen because it deals with the topic at stake and provides empirical insights into the theory.

The OECD survey was conducted in October and November 2023 in 30 OECD countries, including Germany, which is crucial for this research. At this point, it must be mentioned that this survey does not in particular focus on the youth, so it cannot make any accurate claim about

young people's trust level in institutions in Germany. Nevertheless, the OECD study provides information on tendencies of trust levels within the OECD countries and, in particular, drivers for these, which is relevant in the context of this research. The study claims that "today the most effective drivers for higher trust are related to complex, global and long-term policy issues where citizens feel they do not have a voice and policy decisions are viewed to be taken more in the private interests rather than on the best available evidence" (OECD, 2024).

In the following, it will be assessed what the study finds to be important factors affecting trust in the government and how Germany performs in these areas (OECD, 2024).

The survey assesses that "satisfaction with day-to-day interactions with public institutions" helps to maintain trust. On the other hand, it can be concluded that dissatisfaction with these day-to-day interactions will decrease trust in governmental institutions, which makes it an important driver of trust (OECD, 2024).

The survey reveals that 36% of the participants in Germany have high or moderately high trust in the government, 14.6% of the participants answered the question neutrally, and 48.7% claim to have no or low trust in the government. So, compared to the average of all participating countries, German citizens seem to have less trust in their public institutions (OECD, 2024).

The OECD study suggests that within the 30 participating countries, concerns about how the government deals with complex policy topics, for instance AI, lead to a decrease in trust levels. The average of citizens believing in the government to tackle those issues is 40%. In Germany, 32.8% of the participants are confident that the government will balance interests of current and future generations, while 19% are neutral, 41.7% are not confident, and 6.5% "don't know." This implies that Germany's citizens again have less trust in their government than the average OECD citizen and that balancing the interests of current and future generations is one aspect which drives the trust levels in Germany to a low level (OECD, 2024).

Another factor affecting trust levels mentioned in the survey is the "use of evidence in decision-making." The research explains that clearly communicated evidence-based decisions can help to raise trust levels, while, on the opposite, it can be concluded that untransparent procedures lead to less trust, which also aligns with Tyler's theory of procedural justice. For Germany, the survey states that 38.9% "find it likely that government takes decisions based on evidence," while the OECD average for that category is 41.3%. Again, Germany is below average, which

can be a reason for the low performance in the survey in general and makes evidence-based decision making another important driver for trust in the government (OECD, 2024).

To conclude, the study proves that the IV “how procedures are perceived” is highly impacting the DV “trust in government,” which aligns with Tyler’s theory of procedural justice. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of the IV “politicians’ perceived competence,” which also aligns with Tyler’s theory, and the IV “day-to-day experiences of the citizens.” Furthermore, the study portrays that the trust levels of German citizens tend to be below average.

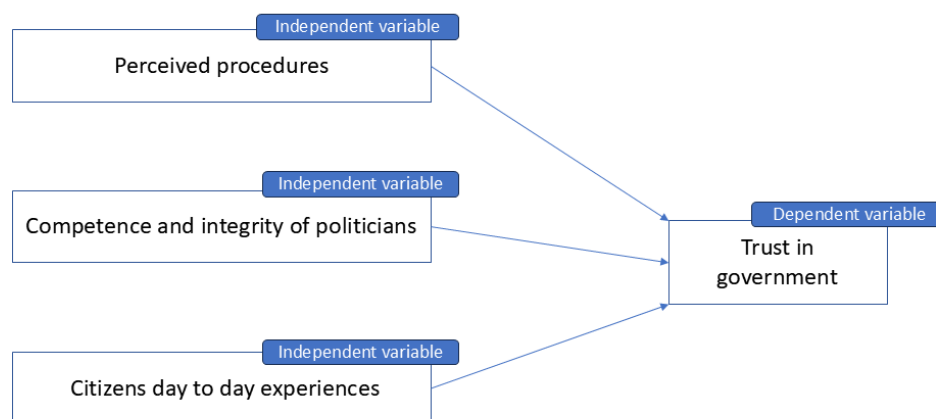


Figure 7, Diagram sub-question 1

For hypothesis one, *It can be expected that there is a number of different sources of distrust in government, with one being failure to prevent terror attacks*, that means the hypothesis is verified to the point that there are indeed a number of different sources of distrust in government, with *perception of procedures, perceived competence of politicians, and citizens’ day-to-day experiences* being main factors. As failure to prevent terror attacks belongs to some extent to all of these three, that part of the hypothesis can also be verified.

4.2 Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?

In the following, the sub-question *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?* will be answered. Hypothesis 2, *Recent terror attacks tend to make young people in Germany feel insecure*, will be investigated.

In order to answer this question, eight German citizens aged 18 to 25 were interviewed. They were asked questions about their personal perception of the terror attacks and about their perception of the atmosphere in their generation regarding the attacks.

| | | 9: Interview 3 16 | 10: Interview 1 14 | 11: Interview 2 12 | 12: Interview 4 18 | 13: Interview 6 10 | 15: Interview 5 7 | 16: Interview 8 7 | 17: Interview 7 11 | Summe |
|--|----|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| ◆ Feeling anxious | 4 | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 4 |
| ◆ Latent presence of the topic | 10 | | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | 3 | 1 | 10 |
| ◆ No behavioral changes | 11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 11 |
| ◆ No feelings of unsafety | 7 | | 2 | 3 | 1 | | 1 | | | 7 |
| ◆ Perception of terrorist attacks | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | 1 | 1 | 7 |
| ◆ Presence in everyday life | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| ◆ Protective measures | 3 | | | | | 3 | | | | 3 |
| ◆ Societal discourse (media, social environment) | 9 | 1 | 2 | 3 | | | | | 3 | 9 |
| ◆ Subjective feeling of unsafety | 12 | 3 | | 1 | 2 | 2 | | | 4 | 12 |
| ◆ Talking about the topic | 6 | | | 4 | 1 | | | 1 | | 6 |
| Summe | | 8 | 7 | 17 | 10 | 7 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 70 |

Figure 8, Table 6, Findings sub-question 2, created with atlas.ti

Six out of the eight participants claimed to recognize a higher frequency of terror attacks recently. Three out of the eight participants claimed to feel anxious to some extent, and six were of the opinion that the topic holds latent presence within their generation (Table 6). This aligns with the Social Amplification of Risk Framework, which emphasizes how the presence of a topic within social discourse and media can lead to increased feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (Kasperson et al., 1988).

The participants who did not feel insecure because of the attacks explained that they think the probability of an attack is low or that they do not really think about the topic a lot (Interview 1, Interview 2). Participant 1 claimed not to feel insecure but to get stressed out by family members and friends who keep talking about the topic and being worried (Interview 1). This implies that even if some young people might not feel stressed because of the attacks themselves, they are still affected by them through a feeling of unsafety within their social environment.

While many of the participants claim to be a little more cautious when attending big events like concerts or Christmas markets, only participant 6 claimed to take special safety measures after the latest attacks. This person explained that they started sharing their location with their family due to safety concerns. This participant also mentioned that this measure was not only taken because of the terror attacks but for safety reasons in general (Interview 6). So, it can be concluded that even if the terror attacks might not be the only reason why young people may feel insecure to some extent, they still are an important factor.

Six out of the eight participants stated that the terror attacks are a topic within their social environment or that they talk about the topic frequently (Table 6). While some claimed that they know people who do not attend big events anymore out of fear (Interview 2), others state that the attacks have shocked the people they know but that this has not led to changes in behaviour.

Those findings imply that even if only three of the participants claimed to feel insecure themselves, the majority stated that within their generation the topic is often discussed and that the youth thinks about it often and at least to some degree feels insecure. So, the sub-question *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?* can be answered with yes, the attacks make at least some young people feel insecure, and Hypothesis 2 *Recent terror attacks tend to make young people in Germany feel insecure* can be verified.

4.3 To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?

When examining to what extent feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government, it is crucial to also learn about other factors affecting the youth's trust and how the feeling of unsafety is connected to distrust in the government. Here is the connection to sub-question one *What are sources of distrust in government among young people?* When answering that question, it is remarkable that the way procedures are perceived, perceived incompetence of politicians, and a feeling of not being represented play an important role here.

Hypothesis 3 — *A rise in feelings of unsafety will lead to decreased trust in the government* — will be tested.

The sub-question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?* will be answered with the help of the conducted interviews, which asked the participants about how the terror attacks and the government's measures to prevent them affected their trust in the government. At this point, it must be acknowledged again that the number of participants was limited to eight due to the limited size and duration of this project. So, the interviews give an impression of different opinions within the youth but do not have the aspiration of being fully representative. For that purpose, a quantitative study would have to be conducted.

| | | 9: Interview 3 16 | 10: Interview1 14 | 11: Interview2 12 | 12: Interview4 18 | 13: Interview6 10 | 15: Interview 5 7 | 16: Interview8 7 | 17: Interview7 11 | Summe |
|---|----|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------|
| ◆ Change in political orientation | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| ◆ Change in voting decision | 0 | | | | | | | | | 0 |
| ◆ Dissatisfaction with measures and communication | 19 | 7 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 19 |
| ◆ Elites perceived as out of touch | 1 | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 |
| ◆ Feeling of not being represented | 5 | | 3 | 2 | | | | | | 5 |
| ◆ Lack of transparency | 5 | 3 | | 1 | 1 | | | | | 5 |
| ◆ Loss of trust after attacks | 4 | 2 | | | 1 | 1 | | | | 4 |
| ◆ No influence on political behavior | 9 | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 9 |
| ◆ Not voting | 3 | | 1 | 2 | | | | | | 3 |
| ◆ Perceived incompetence | 5 | 2 | 1 | | 2 | | | | | 5 |
| ◆ Processes perceived as unfair | 8 | 5 | | 1 | 2 | | | | | 8 |
| ◆ Rethinking voting decision | 1 | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| ◆ Satisfaction with measures and communication | 5 | | | | | | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| Summe | | 21 | 12 | 10 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 66 |

Figure 9, Table 7, Findings sub-question 3, created with atlas.ti

The participants were asked *Do you think the government's procedures to prevent terror attacks are effective?* Only one out of eight participants claimed to be fully satisfied with the government's procedures to prevent terror attacks. Participants were of the opinion that the government talks a lot about what it intends to do but does not really act. (Interview 4) Moreover, some participants were not sure which measures the government takes to prevent terror attacks. This could be traced back to a lack of transparency and communication, which are also crucial for trust (Tyler, 2006). On the other hand, it might suggest that these participants are not very interested in the topic. One participant criticized the administrative procedures in Germany in general:

“In my opinion, it's often the same in Germany — people come up with ideas or measures, and then the focus shifts to discussing whether they're feasible in terms of bureaucracy and all that. There's a lot of talk about what's possible, but you don't really see anything being actually implemented. Either it takes forever, or things get watered down more and more.” (Interview 4)

Furthermore, this participant was not satisfied with the way the government communicates and talks about mistakes either:

“For me personally, I think one thing would be to improve communication about what's actually happening. Like, really go out and explain more — what measures are being taken, how certain decisions come about. Maybe also be more willing to stand up, admit mistakes, and offer

solutions, instead of just acting like there was nothing that could have been done.” (Interview 4)

So, in general some of the young people tend to feel that the government tries to play down its own mistakes and does not communicate a lot. This lack of transparency can also be connected to sub-question one, as it is one factor next to or connected to feelings of unsafety which leads to citizens distrusting the government.

Some interviewees also claimed that the government tends to focus on the wrong aspects in order to prevent terror attacks, which implies issues in procedures, which was an important factor for distrust (Tyler, 2006) found when answering sub-question 1.

Two of the eight participants claimed not to feel represented by the German government and the German parties (Table 7) and Participant 2 even claimed that they believe the government has a “distorted worldview”, which can be connected to seeing the government as alienated elite that cannot be trusted. That aligns with one of the biggest factors from sub-question one of losing trust in government. Both participants explained that they do not vote, as one felt like their voice does not make a change and both were not happy with the German parties. One explained:

“Like I said earlier about politics in general, especially that they lie a lot, say A but do B, I just don’t like that. German politics.” (Interview 2)

These answers highlight how perceived incompetence and a lack of transparency and lies results in young people turning away from the political parties.

Only one of the eight participants claimed to rethink their voting decision (Table 7) due to the terror attacks and how the government dealt with them. This was also the only participant who changed something in his political orientation due to the circumstances. This participant was also found to perceive the government as incompetent and procedures as unfair.

At that point it has to be mentioned that the two participants who claimed that they do not vote already had the intention not to vote even before the terror attacks. So, their decision not to vote was no direct consequence of the terror attacks and how the government dealt with them. They already gave up before. One even explained:

“I did not like German politics before and I do not like it the same way now.” (Interview 2)
When this participant was asked more about the reasons behind their dislike for German parties they explained:

“None of them really work for me. Everyone has their issues — I don’t know. The AfD is way too radical for me. The CDU breaks too many campaign promises. We’ve just had the SPD in government, and I would not vote for them again. I find the Greens a disaster when it comes to their environmental policies. So yeah, I wouldn’t really vote for any of them.” (Interview 2)

So, this participant gave the impression that they are interested in politics, as they could tell a reason for every party why they would not vote for them. The other one who did not vote (Participant 1) claimed that they did not feel like their vote would change anything in German politics. When asked why they feel that way they explained:

“It’s difficult. There are many older people who vote or simply many old people in Germany. The majority decides, so I feel a bit insignificant.”

So, they feel like the older generation is in the majority and that that prevents the youth’s interests from being realized. Moreover, they both felt that the government’s measures to prevent terror attacks were not adequate but they also both stated that they feel not unsafe because of the terror attacks.

To conclude, it is not the case that the two participants do not vote and do not trust the government because of feelings of unsafety. Instead, they do not feel represented in general and perceive the government as not competent, which also aligns with the findings of sub-question 1. There, it was found that perceived incompetence fosters distrust in the government (Tyler, 2006).

Three out of the eight participants directly state that the terror attacks and the government’s reaction to it leads to them losing trust in the government. (Table 7) All three of them were also amongst those interviewees who stated that they feel subjectively unsafe and dissatisfied with the government’s measures and communication on terror attacks, as found in answering sub-question one. That implies that a feeling of unsafety is an important factor which leads to a decrease of trust in the government. This verifies H3 *A rise in feelings of unsafety will lead to decreased trust in the government.*

So, it can be concluded that feelings of unsafety *are* an important factor which affects young people’s trust in the government next to other important factors such as feeling represented,

perception of procedures and perceived competence of politicians. It affects the youth's trust in the government, but the evidence from the interviews does not imply that it is the one main driver.

4.4 What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?

In the following, the sub-question *What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?* is explored. This includes an assessment of which of the factors identified when answering sub-question one *What are sources of distrust in government among young people?* increase the dependent variable “support for populist parties.” To answer this question, Jan-Werner Müller's theory on populism can provide some useful hints.

Hypothesis 4 — *it can be expected that distrust in government and emotional reasons stimulate young people highly to vote for populist parties* — is tested at this point.

In his book *What is populism*, Müller highlights how populism tends to be anti-pluralistic and against the “elites.” He emphasizes that populism is not only found in certain population groups but is rather a phenomenon which is observed in all different parts of society. He describes that populists believe that there is one homogenous society and that the “elites” do not belong to that group and do not act in the interest of this group. Müller prioritizes that populism is not necessarily connected to extreme radical political views but more to the idea of the “people” versus the “elites.” He also highlights how populists promote themselves as the only real representative of the people, while all other politicians are part of the elite and disconnected from the people. This vision is not grounded on empirical facts but more on a certain moral and sentiment. People who do not agree with the populists' points of view are automatically degraded to not having the people's best interest in mind and even being traitors (Müller, 2016).

After this overview of his general thoughts on populism, in the following it will be explained what Müller regards as stimulators for support of populist parties. As mentioned before, he underlines his thesis that social class, social disadvantage, or the fear of losing one's social status cannot be regarded as a reason why certain individuals align with populists. In his opinion, the moral aspect of populism and the illusion of “us against the elites” provides an easy, moral grounding for the supporters of populist parties' dissatisfaction with current politicians. This simple approach is attractive to a lot of people (Müller, 2016).

So, according to Müller, people support populist parties primarily because they are not aligned with current policies, do not feel represented by politicians, and sympathize with the uncomplex

moral promoting why “the elites” are in the wrong and the populists are in the right spot. This indicates that the independent variables “dissatisfied with current policies” and “do not feel represented” lead to an increase in the dependent variable “support for populist parties.” As “do not feel represented” was also a factor for distrust in government when answering sub-question one, it must be concluded that the reasons why people vote for populist parties are at least to some point connected to the reasons why their trust in the government declines. That aligns with Müller’s theory, as the declining trust in the government and the feeling of not being represented will probably increase the perception of the government as alienated elite, which does not act in the “real will of the people.” Müller also explains how populists tend to discredit the media and other institutions as corrupt and part of the alienated elites to promote their narrative of being the only ones saying the truth (Müller, 2016).

In conclusion, Müller acknowledges that socioeconomic factors play a role in the support for populist parties, but he assumes that the main factors are the moral and twisted political reality populists create along with the easy answers they give to complicated questions. He also sees dissatisfaction with current policies and with not feeling represented as important independent variables which stimulate the dependent variable “support for populist parties” (Müller, 2016).

In order to get some more empirical insights into the theory, the study Populismusbarometer 2020 by the Bertelsmann Stiftung will be examined in the following. The study was conducted in the form of online surveys in 2020. There were around 10,000 participants aged 18 or older. The study is highly relevant for this research as it focuses on political views of German citizens. They were asked questions about various political themes, including questions to find out which factors might influence the probability to vote for populist parties (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

Key findings of the study were that support for populism in general was declining in Germany at that time, but that the key factor for support for populist parties was an anti-establishment attitude. This aligns with Müller’s theory of populism being primarily anti-pluralistic and anti-establishment. At this point, it must be mentioned that due to the reason that the study was conducted in 2020, when COVID-19 was a topic affecting Germany and the whole world, the study does not exactly represent the current situation in Germany but is still relevant and was conducted by a reputable publisher (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

When identifying the predominant drivers for voters to support populist parties, different sentences were given to the participants and they had to state to what extent they are aligned with these. Different sentences connected to an anti-establishment opinion were provided and

it was found that an alignment with these could be connected to support for populist parties. An example for such a sentence is „Die Politiker im Bundestag kümmern sich wenig darum, was Menschen wie ich denken.“, which can be translated into “The politicians in the Bundestag do not really care what people like me think.” So, the sentence indicates a feeling of not being represented and instead being neglected by the politicians, which was found to be a factor for distrust in the government and again for support for populist parties. This again highlights how these two aspects are connected (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

Another factor for support for populist parties found in the study was the wish for more direct forms of democracy and the desire that the “Volk,” the people, should have more power in decision-making. A sentence to test this opinion was „Das Volk sollte öfter über wichtige politische Fragen abstimmen.“, which can be translated into „The citizens should vote more frequently on important political questions.” This desire for more direct democracy reflects distrust, dissatisfaction or disbelief in the capabilities of the elected political representatives to make the right decisions. Not only can it be connected to Müller’s theory of populism in the way that “distrust in the elites” exists, but also to Tyler’s Procedural Justice Theory. In this theory, the trustworthiness of politicians is expected to play an important role connected to people’s trust in the government. That again implies that the factors leading to distrust in the government lead to support for populist parties (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

As also found in Müller’s theory, the study considers an anti-pluralistic attitude as a driver for support for populist parties. The study finds that especially voters of the German populist party AfD tend to be of the opinion that only a few parties — instead of a broad range — should be up for elections. This is in alignment with the populist view that there is only one “will of the people,” as Müller states in his book.

Next to these three key drivers for support for populism, the study also finds the following additional factors: feeling of being powerless and not being heard, feeling of unsafety, and the cleavage between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

The feeling of being powerless and not being heard can again be connected to not feeling represented, which leads to perceived deficits in democracy. Again, this can make it easier to fall for the populist view of the alienated elites who do not act in the best interest of the people.

The feeling of unsafety gains further relevance in the course of this analysis as it can be closely connected to the recent terror attacks in Germany. The Bertelsmann Stiftung emphasizes that at

this point the study's focus is on the perception of the people and not on whether they are really unsafe. Cultural fears but also the fear of losing the current socioeconomic class can play a role here (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

The cleavage between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism deals with how people who are more cosmopolitan tend to vote for the established parties such as SPD, while citizens with a more communitarian view tend to more often support populist parties (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

To conclude, dissatisfaction with current politics, not feeling represented, an anti-pluralistic and anti-establishment view, and in Germany the wish for more direct democracy tend to be key factors which lead to a higher probability of supporting populism. Some other factors tend to be socioeconomic, a feeling of being powerless, feeling unsafe, and the cleavage between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020).

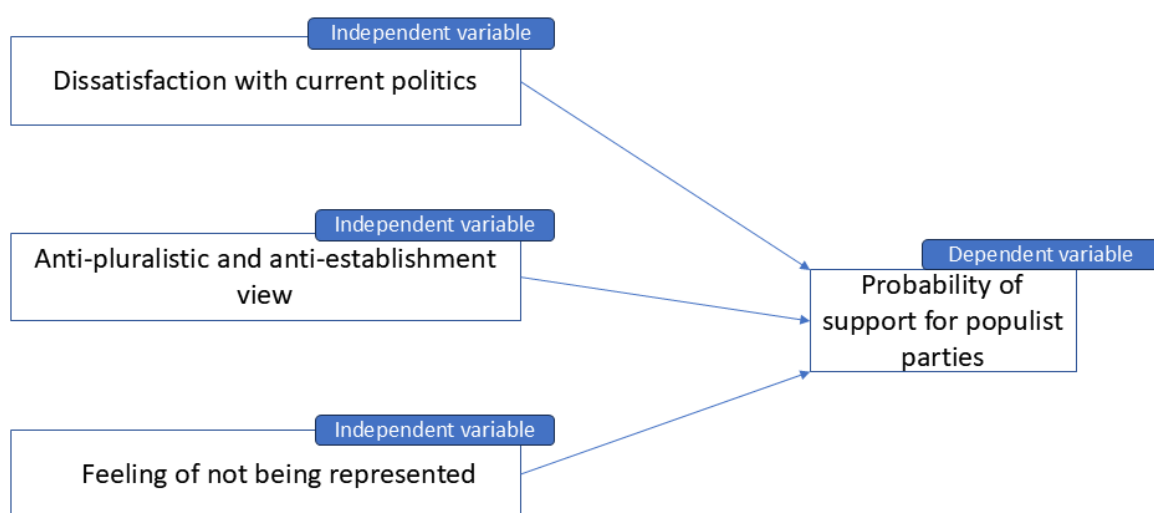


Figure 10, Diagram sub-question 4, created with PowerPoint

Hypothesis 4 — it can be expected that distrust in government and emotional reasons *stimulate* young people highly to vote for populist parties can be verified to the point that emotional reasons, such as the feeling of not being represented, do highly impact the probability of support for populist parties. Moreover, distrust and dislike against the “elites” (the government) *are* also found to affect the dependent variable “*probability of support for populist parties*” highly. Based on the other sub-questions, it can be said that there might be similar factors for “*distrust in the government*” and “*probability of support for populist parties*”, but *they* do not automatically occur together. So, distrust in the government increases the probability of support for populist parties but does not automatically lead to *it*.

4.5 Connecting the findings of the four sub questions

Based on the analysis of the four sub-questions, the information obtained can now be used to answer the research question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust in government and support populist parties?*

Based on sub-question 1, it can be concluded that the feeling of unsafety is one factor affecting young people's trust in the government negatively. When investigating sub-question 2, it was found that there is a latent feeling of unsafety among the youth due to the terror attacks, which implies, based on sub-question 1, decreased trust in the government. Answering sub-question 3 proved that feelings of unsafety due to the terror attacks is one, next to other factors, affecting the youth's trust in the government negatively. So, at that point, it can be concluded that feelings of unsafety do stimulate the youth to distrust the government to some extent, but it is only one among a number of factors. Moreover, the analysis of the interviews highlighted how feelings of unsafety due to terror attacks are a potential reason for distrust in the government but do not automatically lead to that.

Since dissatisfaction with current politics, which seven of the eight participants claimed regarding German security policies, was found when analysing sub-question 4 to also lead to an increase in support for populism, it can be concluded that the discontent of the youth with current security policies and procedures can lead to an increase in support for populist parties. At this point, it must be mentioned again that this research found that dissatisfaction with current policies due to safety issues or other reasons is a potential trigger for support for populist parties, but does not automatically lead to that, as even participants of the interviews who were highly discontented with the German state's safety measures still voiced their dislike for the populist party AfD.

Moreover, the fact that even participants, such as participant 2, who claimed to not trust German politics at all did still not turn to the AfD emphasizes how distrust in politics is a factor for support for populist parties, but that there is no automatic connection between these two.

5. Conclusion

In this conclusion, the main findings of this research will be revisited, policy suggestions based on the findings and suggestions for future research on the topic will be made, and the research itself will be reflected upon critically.

5.1 Revisiting main findings

This research aimed at answering the research question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust the government and support populist parties?* To guarantee a systematic, detailed approach, the following sub-questions were employed:

1. *What are sources of distrust of government?*
2. *Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?*
3. *To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government?*
4. *What does stimulate young people to support populist parties?*

For sub-question one, it was found that the dependent variable “*distrust in government*” is highly dependent on the independent variables “*how procedures are perceived*,” “*politicians’ perceived competence*,” “*citizens’ day-to-day experiences*,” “*Voice*,” “*Neutrality*,” “*Respect*,” and “*Trust*.” So, sources of distrust in the government are primarily procedures perceived as unfair, not feeling represented, and politicians who are perceived as not trustworthy and incompetent.

For the second sub-question, it was found that even if only five out of eight participants claimed to feel unsafe, the other three described some feelings of unsafety within their social environment. So, all participants feel unsafe themselves or know people who feel unsafe because of the terror attacks. Based on that, it can be concluded that in general, the terror attacks make at least a part of the youth feel unsafe.

For sub-question 3, it was found that feelings of unsafety do stimulate young people to distrust the government, but that it is not the sole factor, but one of a number of other factors, like the ones found in sub-question one. Next to the feelings of unsafety themselves, in particular the communication by the government was criticized by the participants.

In answering sub-question four, it was found that dissatisfaction with current policies, not feeling represented by the government and the parties, an anti-establishment and anti-pluralistic mindset, socioeconomic factors, and also the feeling of being unsafe can stimulate people to vote for populist parties. At this point, it must be mentioned that a number of these factors are the same factors found when answering sub-question one — so factors leading to a decrease in trust in the government often lead to an increase in support for populist parties.

This highly aligns with Müller's theory that populism frames the government as alienated elites who cannot be trusted (Müller, 2016). It was interesting that the two participants of the interviews who claimed to feel not represented by the government both chose not to vote at all. Even participant 2, who claimed that the government had a distorted worldview and did not really understand the issues of the people, did not turn to the populist party AfD but gave up on the German parties. This participant explained that they believe the AfD is too extreme. This implies that even if a part of the youth aligns with the idea of the alienated elites, that does not automatically lead to them supporting populism, as they might not align with the other points promoted by populist parties or they might even consider populists as belonging to the elites themselves given they are also politicians. This is also an interesting topic for potential future research.

Based on the findings of this research, the research question *To what extent do feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks stimulate young people to distrust in government and support populist parties?* can be answered in the following way:

Feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks is one of the factors affecting the youth's trust in the government and can lead to a decrease in trust. It is also a factor for people to support populist parties, but there is no automatic link between feelings of unsafety caused by terror attacks and support for populist parties. This study does not derive a direct link between loss of trust in the government and support for populist parties either, because even those interviewees who claimed not to trust the government tended to give up on all parties and not to vote at all instead of turning to populist parties.

In response to the research question, feelings of unsafety resulting from terror attacks represent one of several factors that may lead to decreased trust in the government and increased support for populist parties. However, they cannot be considered the primary driver. Rather, such

feelings merely increase the probability of these outcomes, without necessarily causing them directly.

Answering the research question closes a knowledge gap as the research provided qualitative information on the German youth's perception of terror attacks and how that affects its political behaviour. There was no data on that specific topic yet and most data on similar topics tends to be quantitative. This research gave new perspectives and can be used as a starting point for future research in that topic. Moreover, this research is not only relevant from an academic perspective but can also help in a practical way in terms of policy recommendations.

5.2 Policy recommendations

When the interviewees were asked about their opinion on the government's procedures to prevent terror attacks and their communication about these incidents, the majority stated to be dissatisfied. This highlights the importance for the government to change something in its security policies and communication, because suboptimal procedures, perceived incompetence, and a lack of transparency were found to be main factors leading to young people distrusting the government.

Even if they, like the participants of this study, might not directly turn to populist parties, the dissatisfaction with political parties and the act of abstention from voting are huge threats to democracy. Democracy is meant to be made by the people, and when the youth gives up on it, it might stop working in the future (Almlund, 2018).

Based on the interviews, the following measures by the government would help young people to gain back or increase trust after incidents like terror attacks:

1. Clear communication and owning up to mistakes made

One thing standing out when analysing the interviews is that several participants did not know about any measures the government takes to prevent terror attacks. That could foster the impression that the government does not act at all and does not care about the people. One measure to improve this situation is clearer communication on actions taken, owning up to mistakes and making direct improvements (Interview 6).

This approach can help to increase trust, as it provides more transparency and removes the opportunity for populist parties to portray themselves as the only ones caring about the issue. Based on the *Issue Ownership Theory*, the AfD would no longer be able to appear as the party who cares most about those issues to uninformed citizens (Petrocik, 1996).

2. Stronger preventive measures

As issues in procedures to prevent terror attacks can be an important factor leading to a decrease in trust, it is crucial to improve preventive measures, which was also stated by some interview participants. It is crucial to rethink safety concepts, as they appear insufficient to citizens (Interview 2).

3. Harsher penalties and tougher government action against misconduct

As laid out in Tyler's *Procedural Justice Theory*, processes perceived as unfair or corrupt play an important role in decreasing citizens' trust in the government. The perception of citizens that penalties are too low or not even imposed (Interview 3) gives the impression that German law enforcement procedures are unfair. Penalties which are perceived as fairer would thereby increase citizens' trust.

4. More policies aimed at the youth

In both the interviews (Interview 2) and the OECD study, it was concluded that finding a balance between the interests of the youth and older citizens in Germany is one factor which increases trust in institutions (OECD, 2024). This emphasizes the urgency to work on policies which directly address the youth. Otherwise, the feeling of not being represented might exacerbate tendencies of resignation from politics and support for populism among young people.

Focusing on these policy recommendations can help in restoring the youth's trust in German politics and thereby contribute to protecting democracy and the government's legitimacy.

5.3 Limitations and Reflection

As mentioned before, due to the limited time and resources available for this research, the number of interviewees was limited to only eight. The fact that the focus is on portraying different parts of society can contribute to a broader overview of what the youth thinks about the topic but at the same time does not provide a fully representative output with conclusions

that can be generalized. At this point, it can be recommended for future research to conduct a study with more participants in order to get generalizable insights. This is considered an important direction, as learning about what leads the youth to mistrust the government, give up on political parties or turn to populists is crucial to protect democracy. Moreover, such a direction of research can also be used as a basis for policy recommendations to strengthen trust in the government in general.

Furthermore, the interviews led to a high number of interesting insights, which could be analysed in even more detail. Due to the limited scope of this project, this analysis had to be kept concise and focused on the most important factors. This analysis could be intensified in future research on this topic.

Another point where the research needs to be reflected critically: the question of which measures may help the participants to regain trust in the government after events like terror attacks, which make citizens feel unsafe, was originally not included in the interview questions. In one interview, the researcher realized that it might be useful to not only learn about why young people may mistrust the government after such incidents, but also help understand what can be done in the future to regain trust. As the question only came up in the process of the interviews, it was not asked to each participant, which could have led to even more insights on that matter. This topic could be very interesting for future research and might help in strengthening democracy, especially in times like these when populism and scepticism towards politics are on the rise. In particular, the focus on the youth is important, as it is the future of the country.

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Interview Questions

Do the recent terror attacks make young people feel insecure?

Do you think terror attacks in Germany have become more frequent within the last year?

Do you feel unsafe because of these terror attacks?

Did you take special safety measures as staying away from certain places or events or did you change something in your routines in general because of the terror attacks?

How do you perceive the atmosphere among your generation after these events, do you think that something has changed?

To what extent do feelings of unsafety stimulate young people to distrust the government

Do you think the governments procedures to prevent terror attacks are effective?

Do you think the government understands and reacts to the fears of the citizens?

Did your trust in the German safety policies change after the terror attacks? If yes, what changed?

Did the recent terror attacks lead to you considering changing your voting decision?