

### The loneliness of the unemployed: social and political participation in Germany in a European context

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## The Loneliness of the Unemployed: Social and Political Participation in Germany in a European Context

*The economic and social crisis highlights the importance of social connections, as they could potentially function as a sort of "personal safety net". These connections can provide social support, access to information, informal help or jobs, emotional support (Coleman 1990), and may deeply affect an individual's ability to cope with job loss or declining incomes. On a social level, political activities, volunteering, helping each other, keeping a promise or telling the truth, are the "cement of society". It becomes critically important in a social climate of increasing uncertainty and risk. This article focuses on social and political participation indicators, including trust, social meetings, political activities and social isolation. We present Germany in a European context, and also compare the situation of specific social groups in Germany. The unemployed are particularly exposed to social isolation: about one out of eight German unemployed have no close friend at all. In addition, they are less likely to be politically active, which reduces their interest representation potentials.*

Unemployment was shown to have a negative impact on well-being, over and above the income loss (Winkelmann and Winkelmann 1998). Unemployment hurts, as it harms self-esteem and may bring a loss in personal connections and a sense of aimlessness. The detrimental effects are likely to be greater in cases where unemployment is involuntary and came unexpectedly. Social connections, especially contacts with employed friends, may help with finding jobs. On the other hand, the company of other workless people may ease the pain of unemployment as joblessness may feel more "normal" (Clark 2003).

This chapter focuses on social and political participation indicators, including (1) trust, (2) political activities, (3) social meetings and (4) social isolation, and discusses these four themes in this sequence. We seek to answer the following questions:

- Are there significant differences in the level of social trust across social groups: which groups are the most and least trusting in Germany?

There is an increasing recognition among policy-makers that "social connections and relationships" are a key dimension of well-being, reflected for example in the European years of Volunteering (2011) and that of Active Ageing (2012). The report by the "Stiglitz Commission" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009) includes "social connections and relationships" as one of the dimensions of well-being.

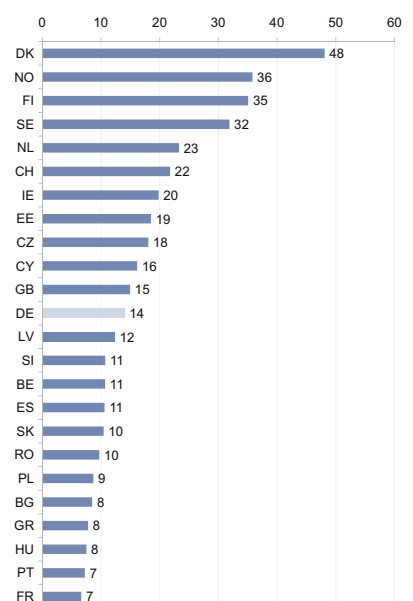
The actions of one's peers and the group norm have a profound influence on individual's behaviour, although the impact is not always positive (mafia, gangs). In addition to our immediate connections, there is a more indirect network effect. Eating habits, health attitudes, sex norms are transferred to us through the friends of our friends, and we are influenced by people we do not even know personally (Christakis and Fowler 2009).

Social capital can be regarded as a goal in itself, as social relationships, and interpersonal trust proved to bring happiness to

people's lives (Helliwell 2006). Marriage has the strongest effects (both in a positive and a negative way), but friends tend to be the source of companionship, and are leisure partners (Argyle 1999). People with stronger support networks were found to live longer (ibid, p. 362). People with more friends live longer in part because of the biochemical effects of social isolation, and in part because public health systems are more effective in areas of higher social capital (Stiglitz, Sen et al. 2009). Social isolation is a risk factor for premature death, to nearly the same degree as smoking (Berkman and Glass 2000).

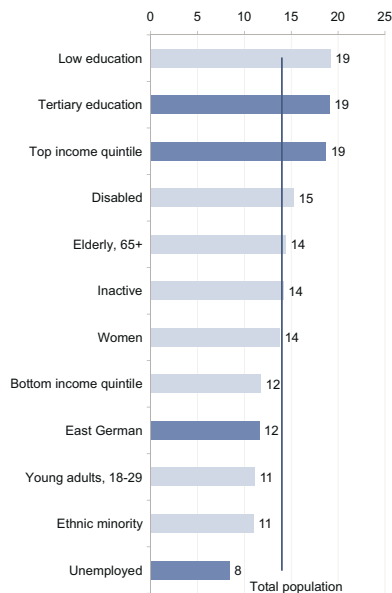
Social networks provide (1) social support, (2) social influence, (3) social engagement and attachment, and (4) access to resources and material goods (Berkman et al 2000). Granovetter (1973, 1983) distinguishes between "strong ties" which provide emotional support, and "weak ties" (acquaintances) which have a larger reach, and thus can be more useful with providing information or access to resources (e.g. jobs) or organizing collective action.

Figure 1: % of population saying most people can be trusted, 2008



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0

**Figure 2: High trust across specific social groups in Germany, 2008, % within group**



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0

Notes: Bars with lighter shading indicate that the difference between the means is not significant at a 10% level.

Inactive: includes those in retirement, doing housework or those who are long term sick or disabled, and excludes those who are in full-time education.

Low education: less than lower secondary education (ISCED 0-1), for Germany: "Volks-/Hauptschule nicht beendet" or "Schule beendet ohne Abschluss einer weiterführenden Schule"

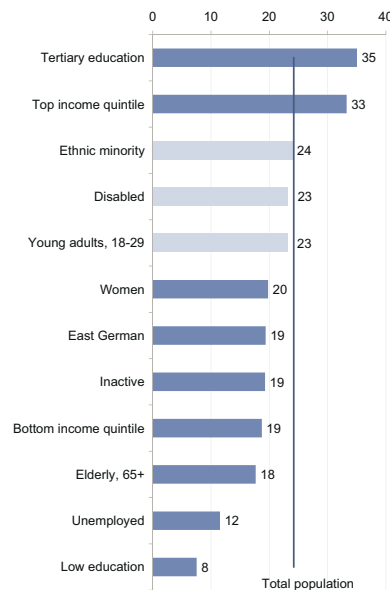
Disabled: those who say that they are hampered "a lot" in their daily activities by a longstanding illness, or disability, infirmity or mental health problem.

Ethnic minority: respondents saying that they belong to a minority ethnic group in the country.

- Are the unemployed more likely to be more politically active (given their more leisure time, their potentially greater dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system) or less politically active (signalling disinterest, lack of motivation or a sense of powerlessness)?
- Are the unemployed more likely to spend much time with friends, making use of their greater leisure time?
- Are the unemployed more likely to be socially isolated and thus exposed to greater psychological distress and a lower chance for re-entry to the labour market?
- Is there a significant difference between the situation of the unemployed and other disadvantaged social groups (those with low schooling, the disabled or those on low incomes)?

The analysis is based on the European Social Survey Data (ESS)<sup>1</sup>. We restricted the sample to 24 countries, including EU member states and Norway. The resulting sample includes 46 000 individuals. The sample size varies between 1215 (Cyprus) and 2725 (Germany),

**Figure 3: Political activities across specific social groups in Germany, 2008, % within group**



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0,

Notes: See Figure 2.

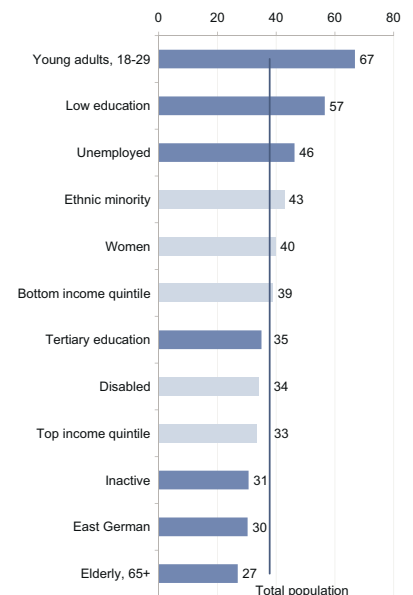
and covers the adult population aged 15 or over. The field work was conducted in 2008 or 2009, in Germany it was between 27 July 2008 and 31 January 2009. The final sample size for Germany includes 2751 individuals after a response rate of 48%. After excluding missing values (item non-response) in key variables of interest, it falls to 2725.

### Lower trust among the unemployed

Trust is a key measure of social cohesion. Our measure of trust is bipolar, ranging from mistrust to a high level of general social trust towards "most people", using a scale from 0 to 10<sup>2</sup>. We focus on high trust, on those who gave scores of 8, 9 or 10 to this question. They make up 16% of the total sample and 14% of the German sample.

The share of trustful Germans appears to be below the level of Nordic countries, but higher than in most Eastern European nations. In Germany, 14% of the population thinks that most people can be trusted (giving values of 8 to 10 on a scale of 1 to 10), which is about the average value in our sample of European countries (Figure 1). In Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark, 30% or more people report a high level of trust (scores 8 to 10). Denmark has the highest level of trust, with about half of the population being very trusting. This is not related to the particular cut-off point of our measure, as the Danes report the highest level of trust in case of alternative measures as well (using 9 and 10, or using only 10 as response categories). 2% of Germans responded with the maximum value of 10 on the scale (with answers ranging from 0.2% to 6.0% in other countries).

**Figure 4: Intense social contacts across specific social groups in Germany, 2008, % within group**



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0

Notes: Intense social contacts: meeting friends, relatives or colleagues every day or several times a week. See also the Notes under Figure 2.

There is a significantly lower prevalence of highly trusting people among the unemployed. They are thus more likely to believe that other people will not cooperate with them, which in itself could be a barrier for making contacts and making use of contacts.

The below-average trust value of East Germans may be connected to the cultural heritage of the Socialist regime, similar to the relatively low values of other Eastern European countries (Figure 2).

People with high income levels or high level of education are more likely to say that most people can be trusted (19% versus 14% among the total population, as shown by Figure 2). Although the average value is also high for those with low education, the confidence interval of the estimates is very wide, between 8% and 28%, partly due to the small number of observations, so the difference compared to the rest of the population is not statistically significant.

### Germans are active by international comparison, however strong social disparities in political participation

We measure rather diverse facets of political participation, including political commitment as party membership, or simply an occasional action like signing a petition<sup>3</sup>. Among these activities, people are least likely to work in a political party or take part in a public demonstration, and most likely to sign a petition, contact a politician and boycott certain products, although there is a large variation across countries (Table 1).

The share of the population who worked in a political party or action group varies between 1% (Hungary) and 9% (Cyprus) across the European countries in our sample. The range is much wider for signing a petition: 3% (Romania) to 47% (Sweden).

Germany has a relatively large politically active population in a European comparison. Over one in four Germans have worked in an organization or association and about one in three persons signed a petition or boycotted certain products during the past 12 months. Wearing a campaign badge is not particularly popular in the country, with only 5% of the population doing so.

High income and highly educated social groups are more likely to engage in political activities (Figure 3). In contrast, many groups at risk of social exclusion, including the unemployed, those with low education and low income play a little role in trying to influence politics affecting their lives. Similarly, the political engagement of East Germans, inactive population, the elderly (which largely overlaps with the former category of the inactive, given that a large part of the latter consists of pensioners), and also that of women remains below the national average. These differences were found to be statistically significant.

#### The young, those with low education and the unemployed maintain the most intense social contacts

Our measure of social contacts refers to meeting friends, colleagues or relatives out of personal choice, rather than based

on duty or related to work. We created an indicator for intense social contacts, indicating whether an individual meets friends, relatives or colleagues every day or several times a week<sup>4</sup>. 43% of the total sample, and 36% of the German sample are estimated to have intense social contacts according to this definition.

Most people like to spend time with friends and benefit greatly from doing so. A simple hypothesis may assume that those with much leisure time are most likely to see their friends a lot. We would expect students, young people or the unemployed to do so. On the other hand, some people may not do this if they do not have friends or are reluctant to see them. The unemployed may be affected if their circle of friends greatly overlapped with former colleagues or if they are ashamed or feel to be “different” and may thus avoid (working) friends. People of older age may want to maintain intense social contacts, but they have often lost many of their friends or even their spouse, leaving a “social vacuum” behind. They may be also hindered by activity limitations, which may physically impede them to go out and see others. For these reasons, the elderly may be less able to maintain intense social contacts.

The unemployed, those with low education, and young adults are more likely to have intense social contacts (Figure 4). Comparing these figures with those in Figure 6 on social isolation (rare or no meeting) provides an interesting social profile of social contacts. The elderly, the inactive and East Germans are

more likely to be socially isolated and less of them engage in intense social contacts, which is a rather consistent pattern (Figure 4 and 5). Similarly consistent findings refer to young adults, who are socially very active and very few of them are socially isolated.

Both social isolation and intense social contacts are more prevalent among the unemployed. Our calculations suggest two distinct subgroups: unemployed who are actively seeking work are more likely to have intense social contacts and are less likely to be isolated (48% and 7%, respectively). In contrast, unemployed who are passive and have given up job search, tend to suffer more from isolation and are less likely to have intense social contacts (42% vs. 19%, respectively). The polarization suggests that it is not only the availability of free time (the opportunity cost of time), which determines the intensity of social contacts. There may be a behavioural pattern which may be called a strive for connectedness, which is manifested both in the quest for jobs and for social contact with people. The unemployed are thus far from being a homogenous group, as indicated by the polarised pattern of social networking.

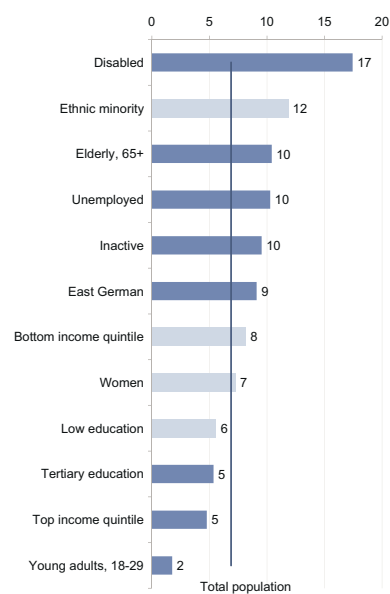
Highly educated people seem to prefer a golden middle way: they are less likely to have intense social personal contacts with friends or relatives, and in parallel, they are also less likely to be socially isolated. They are likely to have scarce leisure time, but seem to make sure that they are not cut off from friends and relatives together. This group is probably more likely to use alternative, non-personal methods

**Table 1: Political participation in the past 12 months, 2008, % within countries**

|    | contacted<br>politician or<br>government<br>official | worked in<br>political<br>party or<br>action group | worked in<br>another<br>organisation<br>or association | worn or<br>displayed<br>campaign<br>badge/sticker | signed<br>petition | taken part<br>in lawful<br>public<br>demonstration | boycotted<br>certain<br>products |
|----|--|--|--|---|--------------------|--|----------------------------------|
| DE | 17   | 4  | 26   | 5   | 31                 | 8  | 31                               |
| BE | 15   | 4  | 21   | 7   | 28                 | 7  | 11                               |
| BG | 5  | 4  | 2  | 3   | 7                  | 4  | 4                                |
| CH | 12   | 5  | 13   | 7   | 38                 | 8  | 25                               |
| CY | 20   | 9  | 7  | 7   | 6                  | 2  | 6                                |
| CZ | 16   | 2  | 9  | 4   | 15                 | 5  | 7                                |
| DK | 19   | 5  | 25   | 11  | 34                 | 9  | 22                               |
| EE | 11   | 3  | 5  | 5   | 8                  | 2  | 56                               |
| ES | 10   | 3  | 10   | 5   | 17                 | 16   | 8                                |
| FI | 21   | 4  | 34   | 15  | 32                 | 2  | 30                               |
| FR | 15   | 4  | 15   | 11  | 34                 | 15   | 28                               |
| GB | 17   | 2  | 7  | 6   | 38                 | 4  | 24                               |
| GR | 10   | 4  | 4  | 3   | 4                  | 6  | 14                               |
| HU | 9  | 1  | 5  | 1   | 7                  | 2  | 6                                |
| IE | 23   | 5  | 17   | 10  | 24                 | 10   | 14                               |
| LV | 12   | 1  | 3  | 4   | 6                  | 7  | 5                                |
| NL | 14   | 3  | 26   | 5   | 24                 | 3  | 9                                |
| NO | 22   | 6  | 28   | 26  | 38                 | 7  | 23                               |
| PL | 7  | 3  | 6  | 4   | 8                  | 2  | 5                                |
| PT | 7  | 1  | 3  | 3   | 5                  | 4  | 3                                |
| RO | 11   | 6  | 3  | 4   | 3                  | 4  | 3                                |
| SE | 15   | 4  | 27   | 18  | 47                 | 7  | 37                               |
| SI | 11   | 3  | 2  | 4   | 9                  | 2  | 5                                |
| SK | 7  | 2  | 6  | 2   | 22                 | 2  | 7                                |



**Figure 5: Social isolation (rare or no meeting) across specific social groups in Germany, 2008, % within group**



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0

Notes: See Figure 2.

of personal interaction, including e-mails or social media.

### Social isolation hits the unemployed and the elderly, but is highest among the disabled

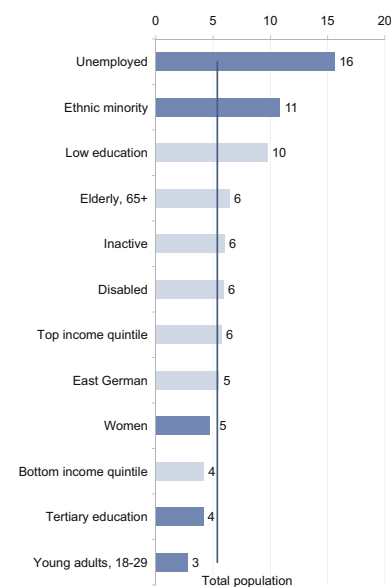
Social isolation, measured as rare or no social contact<sup>5</sup>, is very high among the disabled, over twice as frequent as among the general population (Figure 5). 17% of those who are hampered a lot in their daily activities by disability are isolated socially. Old age, inactivity or unemployment, or living in East Germany also increases the prevalence of social isolation.

Isolation is relatively low among young adults, the top income quintile and those with tertiary education. Young adults seem to be particularly well protected against isolation, with less than 2% affected.

For a number of social groups, we did not find a statistically significant difference: ethnic minorities, low education, and women. There is a particularly wide dispersion among the ethnic minority groups (the 95% confidence interval ranges from 5% to 17%).

An alternative measure of social isolation, defined as the share of those who have nobody with whom they could talk about personal matters, shows much less pronounced pattern across social groups (Figure 6). It is also evident that more people have little or no personal contacts than no close relationship (nobody with whom they could talk about personal matters). Many people may have no personal contacts, but still feel

**Figure 6: Social isolation (no friend) across specific social groups in Germany, 2008, % within group**



Database: Own calculations, based on the European Social Survey, ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0

Notes: See Figure 2.

connected to at least one person. It may be partly due to the increasing importance of alternative communication methods (phone, e-mail, internet platforms) or possibly professional care. The difference between the two indicators is particularly marked for the disabled, who were found to be the most disadvantaged group in terms of lack of social contacts, but they are not significantly different from the total population in terms of having no supportive contact or relationship.

The unemployed are the most exposed to social isolation, about 16% of them having no close friend. Isolation is lower among the unemployed who are actively seeking a work and higher among those who do not seek work actively.

Women, young adults and those with tertiary education are much less likely to be without a close friend. The ratio is the smallest among young adults, with around 3%. This confirms earlier evidence with the alternative indicator.

There are consistent patterns indicating the disadvantage of the unemployed population in Germany: They are less likely to be trusting, more likely to be socially isolated, and less likely to be engaged in political activities. On the other hand, the unemployed are more likely to maintain intense social contacts, and it is especially so among those who are actively seeking work. The unemployed are thus far from being a homogenous group.

The accumulation of social isolation and unemployment warrants for caution.

Almost one out of six German unemployed claims that they have no one to discuss intimate and personal matters with. This, combined with the mental stress related to unemployment, is likely to make them more prone to psychological hardship, which may well have physical health consequences as well. All this may greatly impair their ability to re-enter the labour market or even to engage in meaningful social activities such as volunteering or home care.

The situation of the unemployed is polarised. Both social isolation and intense social contacts are more prevalent among the unemployed. We found that the unemployed who are actively seeking a job are much better integrated socially than others who gave up searching. The unemployed who are seeking a job actively are much more likely to maintain intense social contacts and are less likely to become isolated. The direction of causality may run both ways here: unemployed with intense social life may find it easier to remain active in their job search, or those who are determined to find a job may make more efforts to keep their social contacts alive. In addition, there may be a behavioural trait behind this relationship, influencing both job search and social networking: extroverts may be more active seeking a job and the company of other fellow humans. We are not able to disentangle these different effects here due to data constraints, but it is clear that social contacts have a significant impact on the behaviour, job search and well-being of the unemployed.

Policy efforts fostering the social engagement and the social contacts of people may play a key role in cushioning the negative effects of unemployment, and at the same time helping entry into the labour market.

1 The ESS4-2008 Edition 4.0 was released on 2 February 2011. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway - Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.

2 Measure of trust: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" Answers: score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted.

We focus on those who gave scores of 8, 9 or 10 to this question.

3 „There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you...

- contacted a politician or government or local government official?
- worked in political party or action group?
- worked in another organisation or association?
- worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker?
- signed a petition?

– taken part in a lawful public demonstration?

– boycotted certain products?"

Answers: yes or no.

4 „How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or colleagues?"

„Meet socially" implies meet by choice rather than for reasons of either work or pure duty.

Answers: 1 never, 2 less than once a month, 3 once a month, 4 several times a month, 5 once a week, 6 several times a week, 7 every day.

5 „Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?"

„Intimate" implies things like sex or family matters, "personal" could include work or occupational issues as well.

Answers: 1 yes, 2 no.

We use the term "no friend" for those who gave the answer "no".

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# Strategie des „active ageing“ in Deutschland besonders erfolgreich

## Objektive und subjektive Indikatoren zum Übergang in den Ruhestand im europäischen Vergleich

Die Frage, bis zu welchem Alter Erwerbstätige ihre Beschäftigung in der Regel ausüben müssen und wann sie in den Ruhestand eintreten können, ist hierzulande in den vergangenen Jahren intensiv diskutiert und 2007 durch einen Beschluss des Deutschen Bundestages politisch entschieden worden. Allerdings bleibt die Entscheidung, die Regelaltersgrenze sukzessive auf 67 Jahre anzuheben, bis heute umstritten. Während auf der einen Seite gefordert wird, die Anhebung der Altersgrenze rückgängig zu machen, geht anderen die Anhebung nicht weit genug. Begründet wird die Verlängerung der Lebensarbeitszeit vor allem mit dem demographischen Wandel und einer höheren Lebenserwartung, die – bedingt durch eine gleichzeitig wachsende Ruhestandsdauer und das Umlagesystem der Rentenversicherung – eine zunehmende Belastung der jüngeren Generationen mit sich bringt. Argumentiert wird zudem mit der gestiegenen Leistungsfähigkeit älterer Arbeitnehmer und einem sich bereits abzeichnenden Fachkräftemangel in Deutschland. Einwände gegen die Anhebung der Altersgrenze stützen sich dagegen auf Beobachtungen, dass viele Arbeitnehmer schon heute den Belastungen nicht gewachsen sind und vorzeitig aus dem Erwerbsleben ausscheiden müssen sowie die geringen Chancen, die ältere Arbeitnehmer auf dem Arbeitsmarkt vorfinden. Diese Diskussion wird in ähnlicher Weise gegenwärtig auch in anderen europäischen Ländern geführt, wobei sich nicht nur die gesetzlichen Rahmenbedingungen und die darauf bezogenen Reformanstrengungen, sondern auch die tatsächlichen Prozesse des Übergangs in den Ruhestand in der Europäischen Union derzeit erheblich unterscheiden.

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht, wie sich das Geschehen des Übergangs vom Erwerbsleben in den Ruhestand in Deutschland im Vergleich zu anderen europäischen Ländern darstellt und in den zurückliegenden Jahren verändert hat und kontrastiert die Ergebnisse mit Befunden zu den in der Bevölkerung dazu vorherrschenden Präferenzen und subjektiven Bewertungen. Im Einzelnen sollen die folgenden Fragen angesprochen werden:

- Wie gestaltet sich die Erwerbsbeteiligung im höheren Lebensalter, und wie hat sie sich in Deutschland – auch im Vergleich zu den anderen EU-Mitgliedsländern – seit dem Ende der 1990er Jahre entwickelt?
- Wie unterscheiden sich die gesetzlichen Altersgrenzen, das tatsächliche Renteneintrittsalter sowie die zu erwartende Dauer der im Ruhestand verbrachten Lebenszeit zwischen den europäischen Ländern?
- Bis zu welchem Lebensalter glauben die Beschäftigten ihren derzeitigen Beruf ausüben zu können, und wie schätzen sie selbst die voraussichtliche Dauer des Lebens im Ruhestand ein?
- Würden es die Bürger vorziehen, auch nach Erreichen der gesetzlichen Altersgrenze eine Erwerbstätigkeit ausüben zu können und beabsichtigen sie selbst über die Altersgrenze hinaus einer Beschäftigung nachzugehen?
- Wie beurteilen die Bürger die Möglich-

keit eines flexibleren Übergangs in den Ruhestand im Vergleich zu den derzeitigen, zumeist starren Regelungen?

Die Analysen stützen sich auf unterschiedliche Informationsgrundlagen. Neben Daten der amtlichen Statistik, die vor allem für die Betrachtung der Erwerbsbeteiligung und -dauer sowie das Renteneintrittsalter und die Ruhestandsdauer herangezogen werden, basiert die Untersuchung der auf den Übergang in den Ruhestand bezogenen Präferenzen und subjektiven Einschätzungen der Bürger auf Daten einer Eurobarometer-Befragung aus dem Jahr 2011<sup>1</sup>.

### Strategie des „active ageing“ trägt Früchte

„Active ageing“ ist das Stichwort, unter dem vor allem auch auf der Ebene der europäischen Politik eine Strategie verfolgt wird, die Nachhaltigkeit der Rentensysteme sicherzustellen und dabei gleichzeitig „adäquate Renten“ zu gewährleisten (European Commission 2012b). Dabei geht es primär darum, einem langjährigen Trend zu einer „Entberuflichung des Alters“ und einem vorzeitigen Ausstieg aus dem Erwerbsleben entgegenzuwirken, wie er sich insbesondere auch in Deutschland – schon in den 1970er Jahren einsetzend – bis etwa in die zweite Hälfte der 1990er Jahre manifestiert hatte.<sup>2</sup>