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Fifteen Years after the Fall of the Wall (September 30, 2004)

The *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* [Institute for Electoral Research] in Mannheim gauges the political mood in Germany on a regular basis. The findings from a special 2004 study on German unity showed that it enjoyed very high approval among the population: 80% support. But responses to specific questions – such as, who benefited from unity – still revealed considerable differences between East and West. The findings are reported in the following article from *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Unity with Justice and Freedom

East Germans should get used to lagging behind West German living standards. Federal President [Horst] Köhler recently caused an uproar with this remark. All the more surprising is the discovery that Germans in West and East are increasingly satisfied with unification – even when some differences of opinion persist.

Nearly fourteen years after unification, the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* commissioned a special issue of *Politbarometer* [Political Barometer].¹ Despite new East-West discussions, there is little doubt almost fifteen years after the fall of the Wall that German unification was the correct path: today, 83 percent of all German citizens believe that the unification of the two German states was the right thing.

Approval for Unification Grows

Shortly before the anniversary of reunification, a total of 15 percent – 8 percent in the East, but as many as 17 percent in the West – said that unification was “not the right thing.”

¹ Every month, the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* publishes survey findings on Germans' attitudes and opinions about political parties, individual politicians, and topics of current interests. Sporadically, special issues are published, as was the case on the 15th anniversary of German unification. The *Politbarometer* surveys are carried out on behalf of ZDF, one of the two major German broadcasting corporations – eds.

With this overall assessment, Germans have almost returned to the base level at the beginning of the 1990s. As early as two years after the merger of the two states, 80 percent spoke of a right and 17 percent of a wrong decision (December 1992).

Since then, approval for German unification has grown in small steps, though it has never crossed the 90 percent mark.

But apart from this exceedingly positive feedback, one in ten German citizens (10 percent) thinks it would be good if there were two German states again, although the vast majority (88 percent) is of the opposite opinion.

East-West Gap is Shrinking

Even though members of all social groups clearly rejected a new division, an above-average number of poll respondents with little formal education, as well as those in personally difficult financial situations, advocated the model of two German states.

Moreover, there are once again East-West differences: in the new *Länder*, 6 percent favor the reestablishment of two states, whereas that figure is 11 percent on the territory of the old Federal Republic.

Despite all presumed as well as obvious shortcomings, the gap between East and West – and this seems especially remarkable these days – is shrinking in the eyes of the population: compared to 26 percent in year five of unification (December 1995) and 30 percent before the last *Bundestag* elections [in 2002], 40 percent of today's poll respondents already say that the commonalities between the two parts of the Republic prevail.

But 56 percent are more apt to see differences, with East and West Germans being decidedly unanimous on the question of – of all things – differences.

Controversial Köhler Statement

Those polled diverge, however, when it comes to assessing the future development: among citizens who see mostly differences between East and West today, about half believe that this will still be the case in ten years. The other half expects that at least by then, commonalities will prevail.

Irrespective of which view predominates where, 68 percent of those polled support the federal president's statement that Germans will have to live with different living conditions for quite some time; 29 percent did not agree.

But comments in response to Horst Kohler's statement diverged in East and West: 25 percent in the West, but 46 percent in the East, did not want to accept that people would have to come to terms with different living conditions in the long run.

Differences of Opinion on the Economic Rebuilding of the East

The situation is different when it comes to wages and salaries: 61 percent of those polled – 86 percent in the East, but also 55 percent in the West – consider the existing disparities unjust, a total of 33 percent describe the differences in earnings as appropriate, whereby the number of those who speak of “just” differences is noticeably higher in the West (38 percent) than in the East (12 percent).

Considerable differences of opinion also exist on the subject of *Aufbau Ost* [the Economic Rebuilding of the East]: in assessing the volume of subsidies, 4 percent of East Germans, but no fewer than 50 percent of West Germans, note that the new federal states are receiving “too much” financial support from tax revenues.

All told, 41 percent of Germans believe that the tax-financed support goes too far, 38 percent classify it as appropriate, 11 percent criticize the contribution to *Aufbau Ost* as inadequate, and 11 percent are unable to judge.

Almost No One Sees Personal Profit in Unification

Finally, the assessment of who is most likely to have profited from unification depends substantially on where those polled live – but in any case reports of personal profit are rare: for in the western part of the Republic almost half (47 percent) identify East Germans as the chief beneficiaries of reunification, whereas in the East only one in seven says as much (15 percent).

Conversely, 35 percent of East Germans describe people in the western part of the Republic largely as profiteers, whereas only 10 percent in the West see themselves as winners. Admittedly, however, 37 percent of those polled in the East and 20 percent in the West do state that unification benefited both sides equally; 11 percent in the East and 19 percent in the West say that it benefited “neither of the two.”

From an all-German perspective, 41 percent of all citizens describe East Germans as having benefited more from unification, and 15 percent say that of West Germans. Twenty-four percent are under the impression that the benefit is distributed equally between both sides; 18 percent of all Germans see no winners of unification either here or there.

For the special issue of *Politbarometer* on German unification, the *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* did a telephone poll of 1,683 randomly selected voters across the country between September 21 and September 23, 2001. (West: 999; East: 684).

Source: "Einigkeit mit Recht und Freiheit" ["Unity with Justice and Freedom"], *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (online edition), September 30, 2004.
[<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/599/399383/text/>]

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