



ARTICLE

Digital Political Participation of Western and Eastern Parts of Germany Residents (based on Change.org Online Petitions)

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ABSTRACT

The article shows the results of a study aimed at finding the determinants, which describe the petitioning activity of the residents of the western and eastern parts of Germany. The research material consists of 1,036 petitions from the German-language segment of *Change.org* during the period of 2012–2018 (322 petitions from eastern part of Germany, 714 petitions from western part of Germany). A thematic classifier based on the analysis of electronic petitions was created. It subdivided all the petitions into 18 thematic groups, for example, human rights, animal protection, culture, politics, migration issues, proposals for reforming certain areas of life, transport system, Internet, protection and support for people with disabilities and rare diseases, financial questions, environmental protection, housing issues, weapons/spirits/tobacco/drugs, healthcare, elderly people, education, sports, sustainable development. Statistically significant differences between western and eastern territories were found only in the animal protection thematic group. It is stated that the bipolar construct East/West rooted in the historical logic of the legacy of socialism and capitalism on the German territories could not explain the logic of the petitioning activity of the contemporary Germans. Moreover, the historical heritage/separation factor is found in the socio-economic problems of the regions, but it is not critical while determining the values and civic activism of German people.

KEYWORDS

Germany, online petition, electronic petition, digital political participation, *Change.org*

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Introduction

Contemporary Germany has a complex of territories that are both connected and divided historically. The unification of Germany at the end of the 20th century formed a unique platform that allows researchers to study and compare the processes occurring in the western and eastern parts of Germany in the context of historical (namely socialist) heritage and at the same time in the context of the formation of modern relations between European territories. The purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of digital political participation of residents of the western and eastern parts of Germany in the form of online petitions to discuss the role of historical experience in shaping modern civil action strategies of the studied territories.

The problem of the division of Germany can be presented in a variety of contexts: centuries-old fragmentation of territories, mismatch of the borders of the German-language space with state borders, absence of a unified capital for a long period, confessional division of German lands into the Protestant north and the Catholic south, etc. (Rogozhin, 2011). Throughout its existence, Germany experienced not only regional, confessional, etc. “disintegration”, but also an especially acute split of the national identity of the population after the Second World War (Shultse, 2007).

The reunification of Germany in 1989 was “epoch-making” (Weidenfeld & Körte, 1991); it opened up opportunities for new searches in identity-building (Klein, 2014; Korotetskaya, 2012). At the same time, the period of existence of the East Germany (officially the German Democratic Republic), and the West Germany (officially the Federal Republic of Germany), according to researchers, formed rigid ideological and political borders that divided the east and the west of the country, the so-called “mental barrier” appeared in the minds of Germans, which differentiated all Germans on the basis of their belonging to the lands of the GDR or FRG (Kauganov, 2013; Poptsov, 2015). The last thirty years of the coexistence of German territories, have undoubtedly changed the self-awareness and self-perception of a united society, however, researchers looking at economic, cultural, political, psychological, social, etc. differences between the eastern and western lands do not give an unambiguously positive answer to the question of “equalization”, “achievement of similarity” or complete integration of territories. Comparing eastern and western parts, researchers study:

- socio-economic and demographic problems, which, as a rule, are more acute in the eastern lands, namely unemployment (Semerikova, 2014), labour productivity (Burda & Severgnini, 2015); health (Prütz et al., 2014), birth rates (Klüsener & Goldstein, 2012; Vatterrott, 2011); education and IQ (Roivainen,

2012); cultural problems (including the problem of “second-class citizens”) (Ushkevich, 2003), etc.;

- problems of internal migration from the eastern to western part and within eastern lands (Heiland, 2004; Sander, 2014), as well as the impact of external migration on regional imbalances (Scherr, 2013);
- problems of decentralization and recentralization of the German federal system (Wollmann, 2017), including the problem of “levelling” of the territories (Lavrovskiy, 2001), territorial inequality (Best, 2011; Zawilska-Florczuk, 2011), and the reproduction of neocolonialist relationships between eastern and western lands (Klyuter & Klyuter, 2001).

Only a few researchers express optimistic or non-trivial ideas (for example, in favor of the eastern territories) reproducing the context of comparison of the Eastern and Western lands (Klüsener & Goldstein, 2012; Zawilska-Florczuk & Ciechanowicz, 2011). The majority of them, however, state that the rapprochement of East and West within the borders of one country is slower than it was expected with the unification of Germany in 1989 (The process of unification of Germany: 9 November 1989 [fall of the Berlin Wall] – 3 October 1990 [German Unity Day]). Researchers approach comparative studies of the western and eastern parts of Germany in the political sphere even more carefully, since the question of the “Soviet legacy” is still very delicate (Molodikova & Lyalina, 2017).

Electronic Petitions and Digital Political Participation

In this study, a comparative analysis focuses on the field of digital political participation of German population in the form of creating and supporting electronic petitions. In modern political science, political participation is one of the main theoretical categories and is defined as an activity whose main purpose is to influence the actions of the authorities (Golbraykh, 2016).

Researchers distinguish between conventional (regulated by law, legal) and non-conventional (rejected by most of the society for religious, moral and other reasons) forms of political participation (Malinovskiy, 2013). Conventional forms include participation in elections, petition signing, meetings with political functionaries, legal strikes, demonstrations, etc. Unconventional forms include participation in unauthorized demonstrations, illegal strikes, seizure of official buildings, traffic blocking, pickets, etc. (Lamprianou, 2013).

With the development of information technologies and digital political communication, offline political participation has also “grown” into digital forms of activity. Researchers focusing on different forms of digital political participation (van Deth, 2014) believe that there is no fundamental difference between online and offline activity. They distinguish between offline forms of political participation, hybrid forms, universal forms (such as electronic petition, whose digital format is determined exclusively by information technology), and those typical only of the online format (online commenting, reposts, links, in exceptional cases, even “likes”, etc.). Considering that the electronic (online) petition is a universal form of political

participation combining online and offline forms, digital activity allows online petitions to reach a new level of publicity, to become a more effective instrument of political influence (Lindner & Riehm, 2009).

In contemporary research, online petitions are seen as a form of democratic innovation and a way to involve new populations in civic engagement (Demushina, 2016). A number of analytical works convincingly prove that online petitions represent informative material for studying civic initiatives, political culture, various forms of civic resistance, etc. (Berg, 2017). Online petitions are submitted or filed on the Internet using special portals, which can attract the widest public attention possible to the problem (Lin, 2012). In addition to national resources for creation of online petitions and organizing polls, there exist international ones that operate in various languages, such as the online platform *Change.org* (Halpin et al., 2018).

Methods and Materials

This study is based on the concept of digital political participation understood as actions taken by ordinary members of the political system to influence the results of its activities. We use thematic mapping of petitions with the AntConc software (analysis of lexical units in electronic texts), hierarchical cluster analysis, and χ^2 criterion (Chi-square of Pearson) to determine statistically significant differences between numerical indicators.

The empirical base of the study was extracted from the online platform *Change.org* using the tools written in the Python programming language. It consists of German-language texts related to Germany. The total empirical base includes 1,036 petitions and covers the period since the creation of the German-language version of the platform *Change.org* (from 2012 to March 2018). 322 petitions were originated in the lands of East Germany (Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia, Berlin) and 714 petitions in the lands of West Germany (Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Bremen Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland and Schleswig-Holstein). Among all the petitions filed, 193 petitions received the status of “victory” (63 petitions from the eastern part of Germany and 130 from the western part).

We have chosen the digital resource *Change.org* due to the fact that this international platform for creating electronic petitions is one of the most popular non-governmental and publicly available online petition platforms in Germany as in many other countries.

Results

Submitting petitions and collecting votes for petitions is a common practice of civic activism in Germany. In accordance with the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany as amended on 17 July, 1975 (Article 45c), a special Petition Committee was created in the Federal Republic of Germany. Complaints and requests forwarded to the Bundestag go directly to the Petition Committee whose representatives consider

the complaints received. However, a petition must collect at least 50 thousand votes in order to be in the spotlight of the petition committee.

The non-governmental German-language version of the platform *Change.org* was launched in July 2012 and currently has more than 3.5 million users. Any Internet user can create a petition or sign the petition for which one is ready to cast one's vote on the *Change.org* platform.

To create a petition, one must register on the website or log in to the website from a Facebook¹ account. No limit of votes has been established to determine the success (victory) of the petition – it all depends on the specific problem and the conditions for its resolution.

After collecting votes and organizing a public relations campaign on social networks, the creator of the petition passes it to the authorities to solve the problem. If the problem is resolved, the author of the petition marks it as successful/completed on *Change.org*. Thus, submitted petitions reflect the aspirations of the population, and those supported reflect the willingness of the authorities or business to resolve a range of problems formulated in the petitions.

Classification of Petitions

We identified, classified, and grouped keywords to create a thematic classifier from the collection of downloaded petition texts using the AntConc software.

As a result, eighteen thematic groups united by a common problem were identified:

- human rights (Recht, Unterstützung, Demokratie, etc.);
- animal protection (Hund, Tier, Wolf, Zirkus etc.);
- culture (EastSideGallery, Weimar, Bach, Kultur etc.);
- politics (Politik, der europäische Feiertag, etc.);
- migration issues (Flüchtlinge, Integration, etc.);
- proposals for improvement of certain areas of life (Sommerzeit, Zeitumstellung, Verbraucherschutz etc.);
- transport system (Bahn, Verkehr, Flughafen, etc.);
- Internet (Livestreamgarantie, TeamViewer, network etc.);
- protection and support for people with disabilities and rare diseases (Hilfe, Behinderung, Erkrankungen, etc.);
- financial issues (Geld, discounter, Grundeinkommen etc.);
- environmental protection (Ozeane, Abgas-Skandal, etc.);
- housing issues (Bezahlbare Wohnungen, BGB-Vorschriften etc.);
- weapons/alcohol/tobacco/drugs (Kleinwaffen, Todesopfer, freies Verkaufsrecht, die Spätis, Alkohol, Tabak etc.);
- healthcare (Krankenversicherung, Psychologische Hilfe, medizinische Kontrollinstanz etc.);
- elderly people (Ghettorenten Gerechtigkeit, gegen Einsamkeit im Alter, Senioren etc.);
- education (Ganztagsschule, Studenten, Grundschule, etc.);
- sports (Olympischer Sportbund, Sport etc.).

¹ Facebook™ is a trademark of Facebook Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

- sustainable development (ToxicSubstances, Windenergieanlagen, Gefahrengutlagers etc.).

This thematic classifier was used to divide the petitions into thematic groups: all the petitions were assigned to one or another thematic group with the keywords used in the petition (one of eighteen). Petitions that ended up in the “human rights” group included appeals calling against any discrimination. Animal protection petitions called for humane attitude toward animals. The “culture” group addressed problems associated with the preservation of historical and cultural heritage objects (galleries, theaters, museums, historical parks, squares, reserves, etc.).

The “politics” group included petitions related to both domestic and foreign policies of the state. “Migration issues” combined petitions in support of refugees, as well as petitions against the policy of “open doors”, etc. The group “proposals for improvement of certain areas of life” included petitions to cancel the clock being put forward daylight saving time in Germany, ban the installation of garbage bins in front of the houses, cancel fireworks on New Year’s Eve, etc. The “transport system” group included petitions of the respective subject. The “Internet” group included petitions about video games, creation of the South Park application for Android², change of Twitter³ interface and others. The group “protection and support for people with disabilities and rare diseases” comprises petitions on the social protection of these population categories.

The “financial issues” group combined petitions related to the state budget system (equitable financing, minimum wage, basic income, etc.). The “environmental protection” group included petitions on limiting the negative impact of human activity on nature (limiting atmospheric emissions, preserving forest complexes and marine ecosystems, etc.) The “housing issues” group included petitions on affordable housing, speculation in residential and commercial real estate, on rent increase, laws to promote housing cooperatives, etc. In the group “weapons/alcohol/tobacco/drugs” were petitions on restriction of arms sale, free sale of alcohol and tobacco, legalization of marijuana, etc. The “healthcare” group included petitions representing a set of medical measures aimed to strengthen and preserve the mental and physical health of citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany, make the quality medical care accessible, and expand preventive measures in the field of health. The group of “elderly people” included petitions calling for social protection of citizens of elderly for insurance of their high standard of living (clubs for older people, reduced retirement age, programs against loneliness in old age, etc.).

The “sports” group included petitions related to change of Olympic sports rules, exclusion of wrestling from Olympic disciplines, ban of pepper spray at football stadiums, preservation of men’s teams in tennis, etc. The “education” group included appeals for recruitment of teachers to elementary schools, introduction of “Nature Management and Environmental Protection” course into kindergarten curriculum, maintenance of educational forums, winter holidays for all students, etc.

The “Sustainable Development” group was made of petitions with proposals for improvement of environmental and technological profile of people’s lives: resolution to

² Android™ is a trademark of Google Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

³ Twitter™ is a trademark of Twitter Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

the problems of working at hazardous nuclear power plants in Belgium, health threat of toxic substances and pesticides, expansion of wind generators, and protection of people living nearby on the electricity routes, etc.

Based on the identified eighteen topics, all German-language petitions territorially associated with Germany were retrieved from *Change.org* archives (1,036 petitions), divided into eighteen groups and analyzed in the context of lands (modern territorial units of Germany), taking into account the historical division of East/West Germany.

Subjects/Themes of Filed petitions: Eastern and Western Parts of Germany

For the period from 2012 to 2018, the number of online petitions created on *Change.org* varies significantly across federal lands. Three groups of territories are distinguished: territories where the activity of creating and promoting petitions on *Change.org* is low, medium and high.

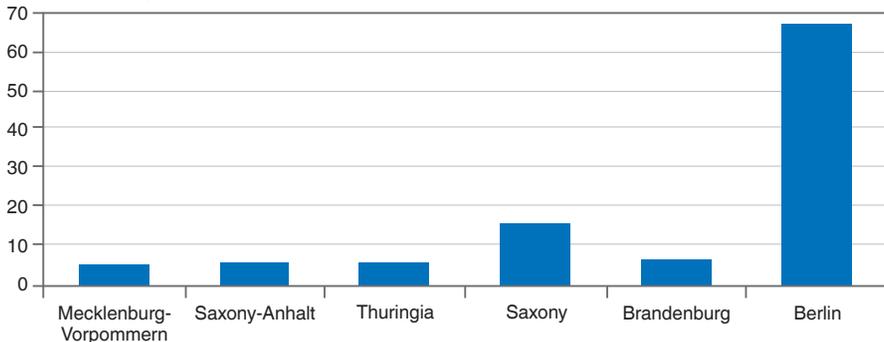
Federal states with low petition activity: Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (13 online petitions), Saxony-Anhalt (15 online petitions), Free State of Thuringia (16 online petitions), Brandenburg (18 online petitions), Saarland (12 online petitions), the free Hanseatic city of Bremen (10 online petitions), the free state of Saxony (42 online petitions), Rhineland-Palatinate (37 online petitions), Schleswig-Holstein (32 online petitions).

Territories with medium activity: Baden-Württemberg (98 online petitions), Lower Saxony (80 online petitions), the free Hanseatic city of Hamburg (72 online petitions), Hesse (62 online petitions). Areas with high activity in creation and promotion of petitions: Berlin (218 online petitions), North Rhine-Westphalia (178 online petitions), the free state of Bavaria (133 online petitions). It follows that the total number of petitions filed in eastern Germany is 322 petitions, and in western Germany is 714 petitions.

This disproportion is due to the population, since the population of the western part of Germany is four times bigger than the population of the eastern part (Wollmann, 2017). At the same time, there is a significant differentiation in the number of requests in the eastern part of Germany: a high concentration of online petitions is in the capital of Berlin (218 petitions), and 104 petitions (one third of the total) fall on the rest of the land (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

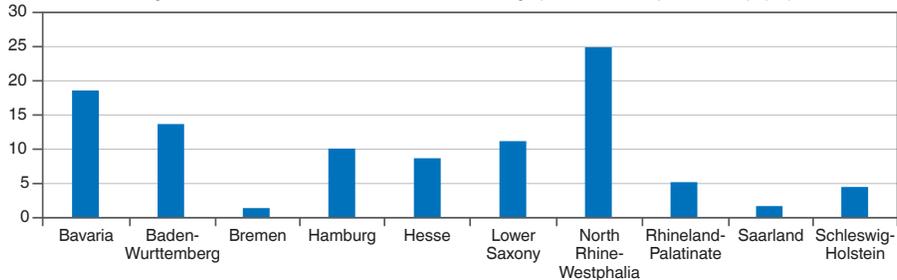
Petition Activity of the Eastern German Lands (number of petitions) (%)



Berlin is a unique territory in Germany that is highly focused on the advancement of online requests (it is also a territory integrating socialist and capitalist heritage). In the western part of Germany, creating online petitions on *Change.org* seems to be even more (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Petition Activity of the Western Lands of Germany (number of petitions) (%)



A comparative analysis of the petitions in western and eastern parts of Germany representing thematic groups in accordance with the classifier presented above confirms that the problems motivated the creation of online petitions are similar in east and west. Statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between online petitions created by residents of the western and eastern parts of Germany are present only in relation to petitions for animal welfare: the theme of animal welfare is a priority for seven western federal lands. In the eastern part of Germany, the theme of “animal welfare” is also popular, but it is just one of many significant problems, while in the west it is a leading one. When comparing statistically insignificant differences between the reasons for petitioning of western and eastern lands, the regional specificity is obvious, which, without statistics, can be attributed to speculation.

However, the list of eastern lands “special petitions” (petitions on housing issues: petitions against weapons/alcohol/tobacco/drugs, petitions on the elderly/senior citizens), and the list of petitions typical only of western lands (petitions on education, sports, sustainable development of society) are evidently different. The challenges of the eastern (“survival”) territories contrast with the challenges of western (“development”) territories.

These signs seem to preserve the deprivation motives in the description of the eastern lands and the super-prosperity motives of the description of western ones; however, the identified differences do not look convincing enough against the background of the dominant similarity of the territories.

Subjects/Themes of Winning Petitions: Eastern and Western Parts of Germany

Petitions registered on *Change.org* and their voting indicators reveal the character of the public problems of territories being more or less supported (and shared) by other residents. At the same time, online petitions with the status of “victory” indicate the interests of those institutions and groups who are the recipients of electronic communications and have the power to “execute petitions”. By analyzing the winning

petitions, one can obtain information on the spheres and problems of public life in which the real interaction between the authorities and citizens is localized.

In the entire collection of online petition texts from eastern part of Germany, more than half are attached to the city of Berlin (63 of 322 filed electronic petitions have the status of “victory”, which is 20%, that is, every fifth petition). The winning petitions were from the thematic groups “animal welfare”, “human rights”, “preservation of cultural heritage”, “migration issue”, “politics”. However, the number of votes did not become a factor affecting success. For example, the petition aiming to develop the South Park application for Android was implemented, although the appeal received the smallest number of votes (33).

Example of a winning petition: FS (ID1518168) 09.05.2014 (33 participants) „Eine South Park App für Android!“ (South Park application for Android)⁴.

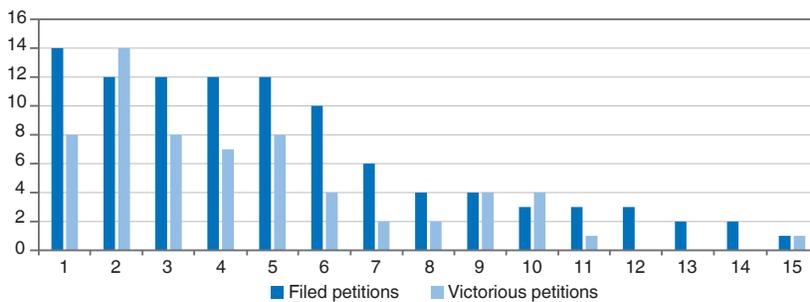
Example of a winning petition: Nico Trinkhaus (ID3664055) 29.06.2015 (463,969 participants) „Lassen Sie Raju, den weinenden Elefanten, in Freiheit leben!“ (Let Raju, the crying elephant, live in freedom)⁵.

The largest campaign among the winning petitions is the campaign for freedom of taking photographs in public places (555,232 participants).

In the eastern lands of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony-Anhalt, the two winning petitions (concerning financial issues, social protection of vulnerable groups, as well as the protection of animals and migration problems). In the lands of Thuringia and Brandenburg – three winning petitions per each (animal welfare, migration issues and financial issues). In Saxony – four (petitions on human rights, migration issues, etc.). Let us consider the frequency of winning petitions in the eastern part of Germany in a comparative context by subject (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Comparative Analysis of Topics of Winning Online Petitions on Change.org in the Eastern Part of Germany (%)



Note. 1 – Human rights; 2 – Animal protection; 3 – Culture; 4 – Politics; 5 – Migration issue; 6 – Proposals for improvement of certain areas of life; 7 – Transport system; 8 – Internet (games, Internet, networks); 9 – Protection and support for people with disabilities and rare diseases; 10 – Financial issues; 11 – Environmental protection; 12 – Housing issues; 13 – Weapons/spirits/tobacco/drugs; 14 – Healthcare; 15 – Elderly people

⁴ <https://www.change.org/p/south-park-digital-studios-llc-comedy-central-eine-south-park-app-f%C3%BCr-android>

⁵ <https://www.change.org/p/lassen-sie-raju-den-weinenden-elefanten-in-freiheit-leben>

The ratio of submitted and winning petitions shows not only the ranking of actual problems of the regions, but also the consistency of activity of those who submit petitions and vote for them and those who are authorized to fulfill the requests of the petitioners.

In the eastern part of Germany, petitions in favor of animal protection and petitions about financial problems are becoming outstanding in terms of the likelihood of their victory. Addressees authorized to solve the problems of petitioners eagerly respond to problems of finance and animal welfare (the winning percentage of petitions for financial concerns and animal welfare among all petitions is higher than the percentage of petitions created for finance and animals).

Example of a winning petition on animal protection: Laura Pastoors (ID12539674) 14.10.2017 (23,228 participants) „Gegen den Abschuss von 6 Welpen in Thüringen“ (Against the execution of 6 puppies in Thuringia)⁶.

Example of a winning petition on financial issues: Wendula Strube (ID826358) 28.10.2012 (792 participants) „Die Praxisgebühr von 10,00 EURO pro Quartal ersatzlos streichen“ (Practice fee of EUR 10.00 per quarter is cancelled)⁷.

Social protection issues for people with disabilities are also supported in a 1 to 5 ratio: every fifth petition on this subject has received the status of “victory”.

Here is an example of a winning petition on protecting people with disabilities:

Lebenshilfe (ID7437110) 30.06.2016 (71,290 participants) „Teilhabe statt Ausgrenzung von Menschen mit geistiger Behinderung!“ (Inclusion instead of marginalization of people with intellectual disabilities)⁸.

Problems related to housing, weapons (including alcohol, smoking and drugs), as well as healthcare, did not find support from the recipients of the petitions. Being representatives of the authorities, as a rule, they showed much less interest in petitions on environmental issues, the Internet and transport.

Petitions on migration issues, human rights, politics or the preservation of cultural heritage were supported by representatives of the authorities of the eastern part of Germany, but the likelihood of their support was generally lower than that of popular topics.

Example of a winning petition on migration issues: Daniel Zeller (ID7326347) 18.06.2016 (12,862 participants) „Familie Brkiss aus Potsdam braucht dauerhaftes Bleiberecht!“ (Potsdam’s Brkiss family needs permanent residency)⁹.

Example of a winning petition on politics: David Caspers (ID11842012) 20.03.2017 (18,800 participants) „Gegen alternative Fakten im Wahlkampf – mehr Informationen für Deutschland!“ (Against Alternative Facts in the Election Campaign – More Information for Germany!)¹⁰.

⁶ <https://www.change.org/p/gegen-den-abschuss-von-6-welpen-in-th%C3%BCrtingen>

⁷ <https://www.change.org/p/die-praxisgeb%C3%BChr-von-10-00-eur-pro-quartal-ersatzlos-streichen>

⁸ <https://www.change.org/p/teilhabe-statt-ausgrenzung-von-menschen-mit-geistiger-behinderung>

⁹ <https://www.change.org/p/familie-brki%C4%87-aus-potsdam-braucht-dauerhaftes-bleiberecht>

¹⁰ <https://www.change.org/p/gegen-alternative-fakten-im-wahlkampf-mehr-informationen-f%C3%BCr-deutschland?redirect=false>

Therefore, the recipients of the online petitions on *Change.org* related to the settlements of the eastern part of Germany, (the authorities, as a rule) willingly support petitions to protect animals, to resolve financial issues and petitions on the social protection of people with disabilities. Every fifth electronic petition created to address such issues was most likely to receive support.

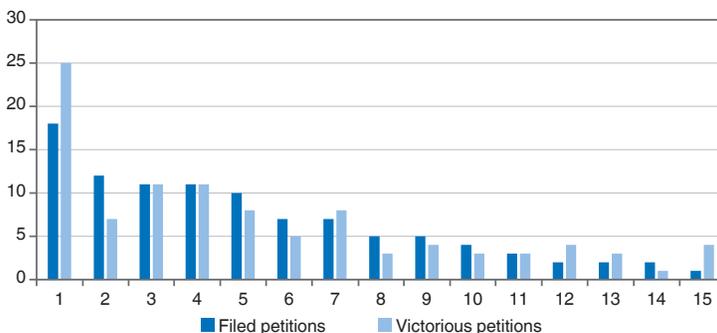
The total amount of the winning petitions in the western part of Germany for the study period is 130 (130 of 714 filed electronic petitions have the status of “victory”, which is 18% representing every fifth petition, as in the east). The most frequent topics of the winning petitions are “animal welfare”, “culture”, “migration issue”, “human rights” and “proposals for changing certain areas of life”. Most online petitions were implemented in the federal lands of North Rhine-Westphalia (30 petitions), Lower Saxony (22 petitions), Bavaria (21 petitions) and Hamburg (12 petitions). In the remaining lands, fewer than 10 successful campaigns were recorded. The least support among users was received by the petition, which was submitted to *Change.org* in support of FireTV AV-receiver modems.

Example of a winning petition Karl Wester-Ebbinghaus (ID12807029) 29.11.2017 (9 participants) „Amazon: vollständige Unterstützung von FireTV Stick (2017) an technisch geeigneten AV Receivern!“ (Amazon: Full FireTV Stick (2017) support on technically suitable AV receivers)¹¹.

A comparative analysis of submitted and winning online petitions posted on the non-governmental resource *Change.org* from the western part of Germany shows the following results (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Comparative Analysis of Topics of Winning Online Petitions on Change.org in the Western Part of Germany (%)



Note. 1 – Animal protection; 2 – Politics; 3 – Human rights; 4 – Migration issue; 5 – Proposals for improvement of certain areas of life; 6 – Environmental protection; 7 – Culture; 8 – Financial issues; 9 – Internet (games, Internet, networks); 10 – Transport system; 11 – Sustainable development; 12 – Education; 13 – Protection and support for people with disabilities and rare diseases; 14 – Healthcare; 15 – Sports

¹¹ <https://www.change.org/p/amazon-vollst%C3%A4ndige-unterst%C3%Bctzung-von-firetv-stick-2017-an-technisch-geeigneten-av-receivern>

Two topics – animal welfare and sports – are most likely to resonate with addressees of petitions (the first group). There are few petitions devoted to sports topics (11 petitions, 5 of them won), whereas popular problems of animal welfare among residents of the western part of Germany turned out to be even more popular with the recipients/addressees of petitions (usually representatives of the authorities) of the western part of Germany (every fourth petition with the status of “victory” belongs precisely to petitions defending animals).

Example of a winning petition on animal protection: Stefanie Braun (ID1015513) 15.02.2013 (60 participants) „Dr. Tonio Borg, EU-Kommissar: Verbieht Kosmetika die an Tieren getestet werden!“ (Dr. Tonio Borg, EU Commissioner: Prohibit animal-tested cosmetics!)¹².

Example of a winning petition about sports: Felix Schatter (ID1012226) 12.02.2013 (6,757 participants) „Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund: Votum gegen den Ausschluss des Ringens von den olympischen Disziplinen“ (German Olympic Sports Confederation: vote against exclusion of wrestling from Olympic disciplines)¹³.

The next group brings together online petitions, which have approximately the same percentage of created petitions, and winning petitions: petitions for human rights, migration issues, culture, education, social protection and sustainable development.

Example of a winning petition about the problems of education: Jan Waldmann (ID1304857) 17.09.2013 (5,058 participants) „Uni Hamburg: Lassen Sie uns nicht mit einem unfertigen Uniabschluss zurück. Unsere Zukunft hängt davon ab!“ (University of Hamburg: Do not leave us with incomplete higher education, our future depends on it!)¹⁴.

The third group of petitions contained problems that were less often supported in comparison with the frequency of their creation and posting online on *Change.org*. This group includes petitions about political issues, ecology, finance, the Internet, transport and healthcare. Comparing online petitions on *Change.org* related to the Federal Republic of Germany, it should be noted that the share of winning petitions in the total array of identified petitions is quite large: in fact, in the western and eastern parts of Germany, every fifth petition posted on *Change.org* gets the status of “victory”. The recipients of online petitions (usually representatives of the authorities) both in the western and eastern parts of Germany act in approximately the same way: the dominant support for petition activity of the inhabitants of Germany relates to animal welfare. Petition recipients also tend to help people: in the east (mainly in the capital), they usually resolve financial issues and social protection issues, whereas in the west, they support petitions about human rights, migration issues, cultural, educational, social protection, and sustainable development issues.

At the level of winning petitions, the differences between eastern and western lands increase. In addition to the expressed interest in the field of animal welfare,

¹² <https://www.change.org/p/dr-tonio-borg-eu-kommissar-verbieht-kosmetika-die-an-tieren-getestet-werden?redirect=false>

¹³ <https://www.change.org/p/deutscher-olympischer-sportbund-votum-gegen-den-ausschluss-des-ringens-von-den-olympischen-disziplinen-2>

¹⁴ <https://www.change.org/p/uni-hamburg-lassen-sie-uns-nicht-mit-einem-unfertigen-uniabschluss-zur%C3%BCck-unsere-zukunft-h%C3%A4ngt-davon-ab>

which combines the supported petitions of the east and west, the western and eastern petitions with the status of “victory” differ in the breadth of topics. In addition, in the east, two of the three petitions territorially connected with the capital (Berlin) receive the status of “victory”, while in the west, the winning petitions are distributed more evenly among the cities. Thus, the social (but more often the state) machine supports socio-economic differences as an element of inequality between regions, dividing Germany into east and west (among the recipients of the petitions there are also representatives of business, not just representatives of state authorities).

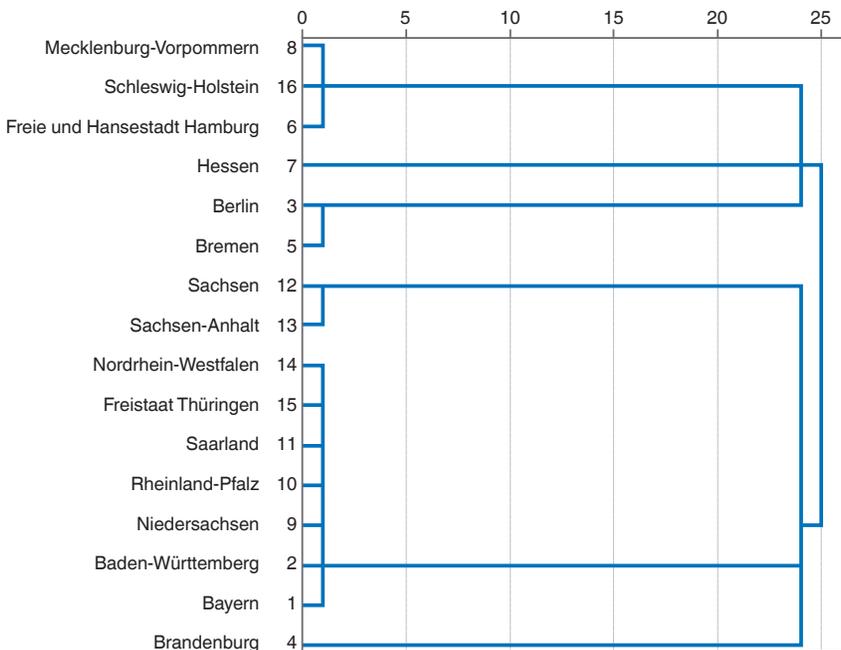
Does Petition Activity Reproduce the Historical Division of Germany into West and East?

Answering the question whether petition activity reproduces the historical division of Germany it should be acknowledged that it is not reproduced, as the analysis on the materials of submitted petitions shows.

First, civic activism associated with the creation and promotion of petitions is characteristic of all territories of Germany. Second, when classifying the themes of petitions (the problems articulated in them), western and eastern lands represented thematically close groups. The integration of the territories is proved by the results of the clustering of German federal lands according to their thematic preferences in submitting electronic petitions, which allows us to distinguish six groups of federal lands (groups of mainly mixed east-west type) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Groups of Federal Lands United by a Common Theme of Electronic Petitions



The first group (the upper one in the figure) consists of the federal lands of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (east), Schleswig-Holstein (west), Hamburg (west) which demonstrated a priority to political issues. Thus, residents of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern created petitions aimed to liquidate the Eurosceptic and right-wing conservative party Alternative for Germany. In Schleswig-Holstein, petitioners protested against the Pegida movement. Foreign policy petitions prevailed in Hamburg.

The second group is represented by the single state of Hesse. During the period covered in the study, the topics “animal welfare” (17.7%), “politics” (17.7%) and “human rights” (17.7%) turned out to be popular among residents of Hesse who submitted electronic petitions.

The third group includes the federal lands of Berlin and the free Hanseatic city of Bremen with the most frequent topic of electronic petitions being “human rights”, which involves the fight against racism and racial discrimination, the problem of gender identity, fight against violence against women and children, etc.).

Both territories are represented by modern metropolitan cities; however, all thematic groups are present in Berlin and in Bremen (a city with low petitioning activity). There are no online petitions on animal welfare, Internet problems and a number of other topics.

The fourth group is represented by the federal lands of the eastern part of Germany only – Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt – where migration issues lead in petition activity. According to the quotas for the distribution of refugees across federal lands of the Federal Republic of Germany for 2016, 5.08% of refugees arrived in Saxony and 2.83% in Saxony-Anhalt (the western land of North Rhine-Westphalia accepted most of the refugees [21.21%]) (Becker & Gurkov, 2016), however, this number of immigrants was enough to provoke protests of the local inhabitants of these lands. Most of the online petitions in these lands were submitted in support of the reception of refugees (as a response to the anti-migration speeches of fellow citizens), and the creators of the petitions insisted on preventing the deportation of citizens living for a long time in Germany.

The fifth and largest group includes the federal lands of North Rhine-Westphalia, Thuringia, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, Lower Saxony, Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria. The cluster consists of western and eastern lands (Thuringia) and is united by the common priority theme of “animal welfare”.

The last, sixth group is represented by one eastern federal land, Brandenburg. Brandenburg is the only land in Germany where the “transport system” is the leading issue. The thematic mixing in the groups of western and eastern lands convinces us that not the historical heritage, but the modern factors influence the petitioning activity of the inhabitants of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Online-Petition Activity of the Eastern and Western Parts of Germany: Discussion

Petitions filed on non-state platforms (without control through registration), especially in the case of multiple voting in their support, reflect the urgent problems that the population faced. An analysis of the problems reflected in the petitions helps the

outside observer in determining the quality and living conditions of the petitioners, as the texts of petitions disclose in detail: “He that is warm thinks all are so”.

Statistically significant differences between the western and eastern lands (a higher number of petitions for animal rights and for ecology, petitions about sports, sustainable development and education, etc.), may be indirect evidence of a higher standard of living in the west of the country.

Residents of the western territories can afford to worry about the future (ecology, protection and rights for all, including animals) while the eastern ones are still struggling with the problems of the present (housing issues, transportation problems, etc.). Nevertheless, the study showed that simply dividing west and east is not enough to interpret the differences in petitioning (civilian) activity of German population. Statistically significant differences only formally differentiate between west and east; a more detailed analysis indicates differences between territories within the western and eastern parts.

If we abandon the logic of “west/east” (interpretation by means of the historical legacy of capitalism/socialism), what other logic can be used to understand the reasons for the classification revealing the problems of the inhabitants of Germany? Is it the logic of regional features? urbanization? migration crisis? economic inequality of territories?

The so-called donor lands (according to the German model of regional alignment – Hesse, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg) have a medium or high petition activity. The key problem that worries their population is the protection of animals. Nevertheless, a number of regions with lower socio-economic indicators also ended up in the group with federal donor lands. The economic factor explains why donor regions were in this group of petition activity (they actively defend their rights and are concerned about the situation of the most discriminated group in the society – animals), but it does not explain why some of the less economically prosperous territories adhere to the same line of behavior in the field of creating petitions.

Regional features also only partially reveal the reasons for territories to fall into one group of petitioning activity. For example, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein are neighboring lands; the thematic proximity of their petitions is probably explained by the general problems of the “northern territories” of Germany (border, frontier territories). However, other border and northern territories do not share the guidelines of the “Hamburg group”. At the same time, the fifth (largest) group uniting a significant number of lands does not fit into regional explanation.

Migration problems can be divided into problems of refugees and problems of partially integrated migrants. The analysis of quotas for migrants does not explain the reasons for the lands that commonly create petitions on migration issues. At the same time, the fourth group (Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt) shows similar indicators for total numbers of unemployed (high rates) and unemployed migrants (low rates) (Khrishkevich, 2016). Probably, the migration theme (in its contradictory sound) is largely due not so much to the situation and the presence of migrants as to the socio-

economic status of the territory (economically successful territories are more patient toward migration issues).

The urbanization factor is especially evident when analyzing the formation of the third group (Berlin and Bremen). These are not just urbanized territories, but student cities with a pronounced liberal ideology. Perhaps their petitioning profiles are determined not by economic, frontier, or migration problems, but by social characteristics and intellectual traditions.

Thus, the results of the present study confirm the need to study economic inequality of Germany territories (Sirotnin, 2008), including the analysis of the regions outside the east/west dichotomy (Heiland, 2004; Klüsener & Goldstein, 2012; Sander, 2014), as well as integration aspects of the inhabitants of Germany (Roivainen, 2012; Zawilska-Florczuk & Ciechanowicz, 2011).

Conclusion

When constructing the research design, initially, the east/west dichotomy was used as the focus in the study of the petition activity of the territories (federal lands) of contemporary Germany. It was assumed that this dichotomy would explain the quantitative and qualitative differences in the petition activity of the population. As a result of the study, it was discovered that the east/west bipolar construct, rooted in the historical logic of the legacy of socialism and capitalism in German territories, cannot explain the logic of the petition activity of modern German residents.

In the western and eastern parts of Germany, the population is actively creating petitions (and posting them on the *Change.org* non-governmental international petition platform), the content of the appeals is determined by a set of problems: the general socio-economic well-being (or disadvantage) of the territory, urbanization, regional features (the role of the frontier territories), the solution of migration issues in the context of the economic problems of the region, etc.

Statistically significant differences between online petitions created by residents of the western and eastern parts of the Federal Republic of Germany are present only in relation to petitions for the protection of animals (in the western part of Germany, animal protection is a key topic).

The share of winning petitions in the total body of petitions is large; both in the western and eastern parts of Germany, every fifth petition posted on *Change.org* receives the status of "victory".

Online petition recipients (government and business representatives) in both the western and eastern parts of Germany are more likely to support petitions protecting animals. In addition, the winning petitions in the eastern part of Germany support the solution of social protection problems, while in the western part of Germany they support the solution of migration problems and address issues of education, culture, social protection and sustainable development.

At the level of winning petitions, the differences between the eastern and western parts are increasing; in the east, petitions linked to the capital (Berlin) are more likely to receive "victory" status, while in the west, winning petitions are distributed evenly.

Nevertheless, according to the results of the study, the historical heritage/separation factor is taken into account in the socio-economic problems of the regions, but it is not decisive in determining the values and civic activism of German residents.

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