



STRANGERS IN THEIR OWN LAND?

On the malleability of national narratives using
Political Laboratories (PoliLab)

Leipzig University
Political Science Department

Duration of the project: 2018–2021

The problem: Hardened debates on migration in Germany

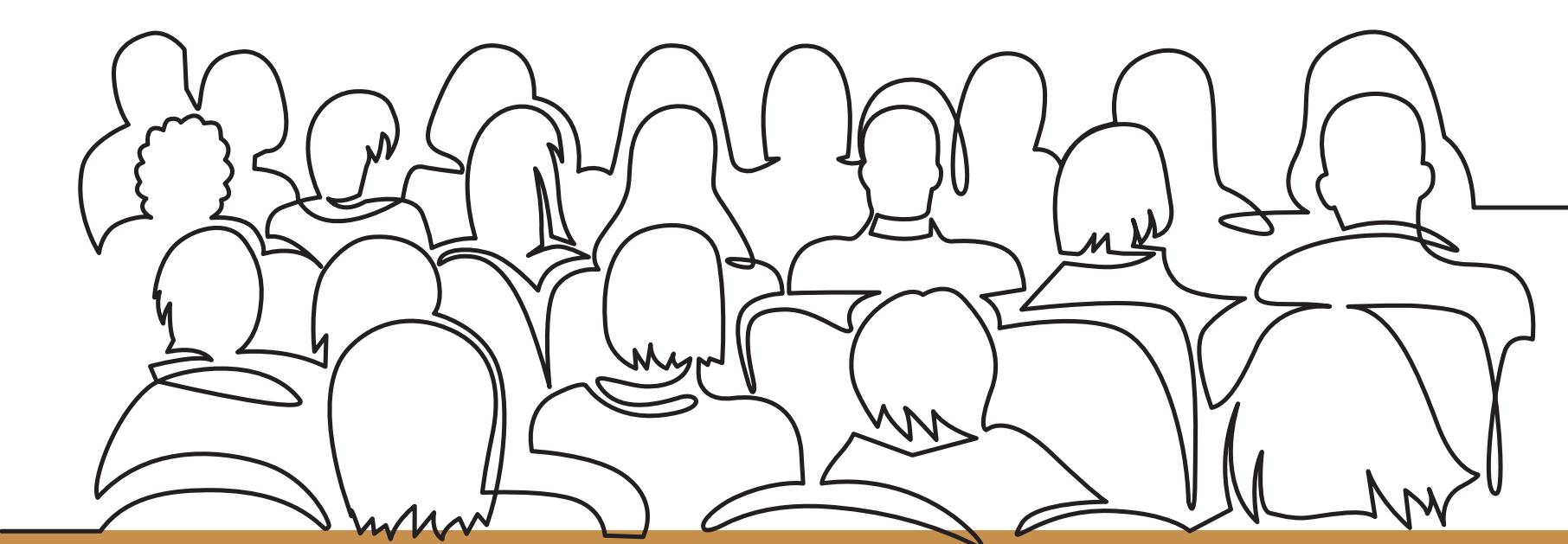
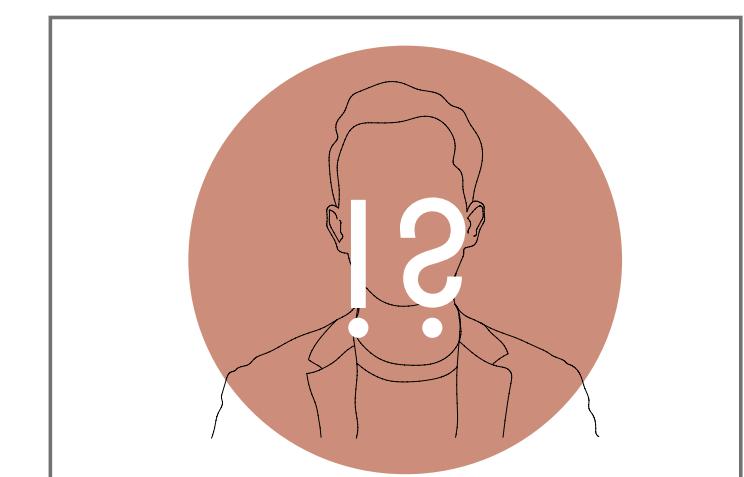
The summer of German 'Willkommenskultur' (welcoming culture) in 2015 caused some to hope for a new, diverse Germany, while fueling fears about a decline of the West for others. Both sides act as if they each represented the universal truth about Germany and the Germans. Thus, the public debate has become an arena of mutual denigration and disdain. Dissenters are not perceived as opponents in a political disagreement but rather as enemies in a political struggle.

The fundamental problem behind the dramatic increase in violent attacks, the strengthening of the nationalist civil society and the founding of terrorist organisations is one that is endemic to liberal democracy: a dualistic friend-foe mindset that supersedes democratic political debates.

The goal: Repoliticization of the public debate

What is at stake in the hardened debate on migration since 2015 is the national self-image of Germany. The research project 'Strangers in their own land?' (PoliLab) investigates these different ideas of Germany and the Germans. Using qualitative social research methods, the project offers detailed insight into opinions, emotions and interpretations of different groups in Germany.

The project aims at making a productive use of these positions for political education. It combines political science expertise with the experiences of political education to contribute to the repoliticization of the public debate in Germany and its hardened fronts. The means with which the project hopes to achieve this is through confronting both sides of the debate with the diversity of political positions.

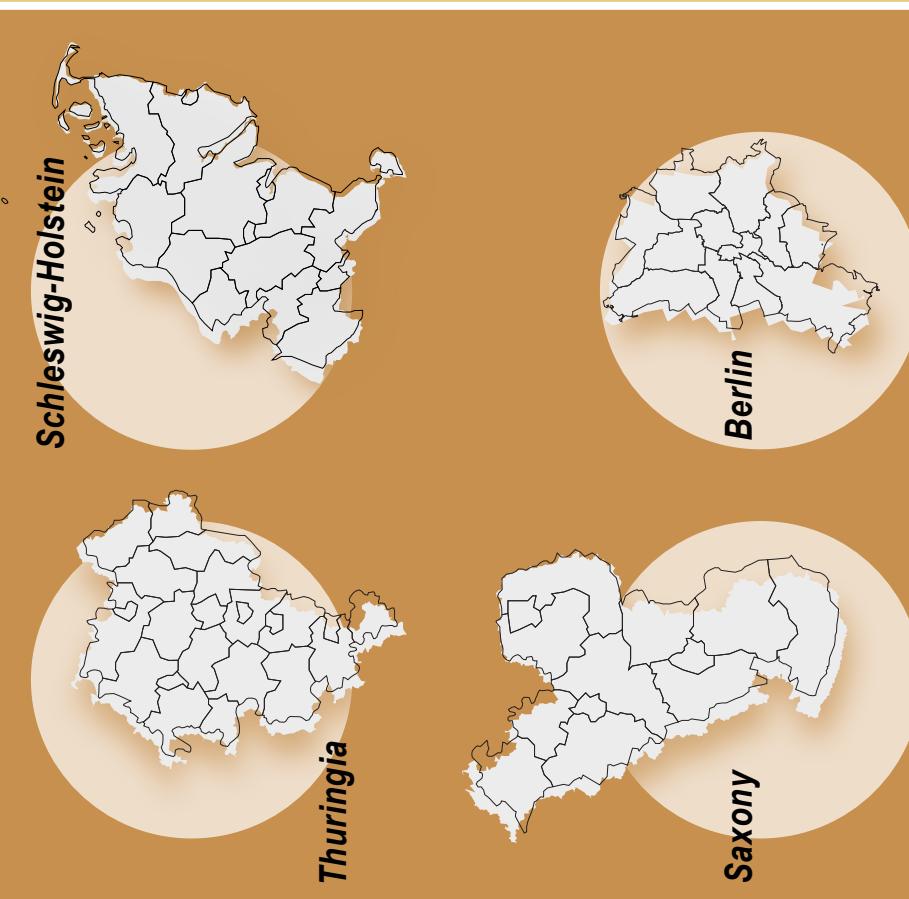


Germany and the Germans: Researching the nation

Empirical research (2018–2019) comprised of a total of 150 group discussions and individual interviews with more than 350 people in four federal states. The questions were: Are you German? What does it mean to be German? Who is German and who isn't? Can someone become German, and if yes, how?

The goal of the empirical research was to obtain a detailed and multi-layered picture of the positions and views on the discussion of belonging in order to better understand what is expressed in the emotional debates on being German.

The interviews were complemented by participatory observations of elections rallies, protests and political discussion forums to test the salience of the arguments stated in the interviews. The material was coded and evaluated using grounded theory. For continuous validation of the scientific findings, preliminary results were reviewed extensively in 2019 by seeking discussions with workshop participants in 25 different locations.



Preliminary results: The multiplicity of the German nation(s)

The analysis of the (group) interviews and participatory observations showed that 'the Germans' do not exist as such. On the contrary: Some feel they belong to Germany; others feel they do not belong to Germany because their identity as German is constantly being questioned, or because they simply feel national identity is meaningless. There are people who are proud of their heritage, and there are others who are ashamed of being German – some even vehemently reject Germany as a nation state.

In the interviews, who is considered German and who can become German are extremely controversial questions, especially because there is no consensus on what constitutes German culture or German values. With that made explicit, the hardened debate on migration can be transformed into a more nuanced and democratic debate: By making the underlying imaginaries of national belonging – including the wide range and contradictory nature of these imaginaries – visible, we can create an opportunity to renegotiate who 'we' are and want to be in Germany.

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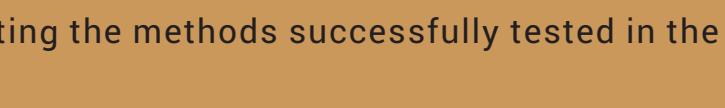
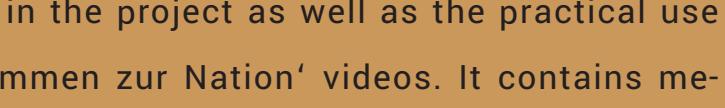
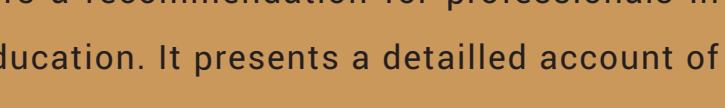
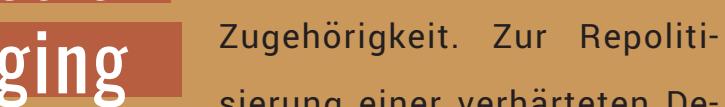
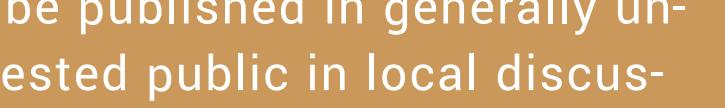
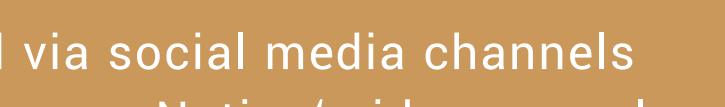
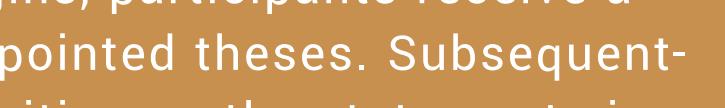
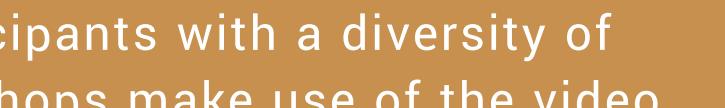
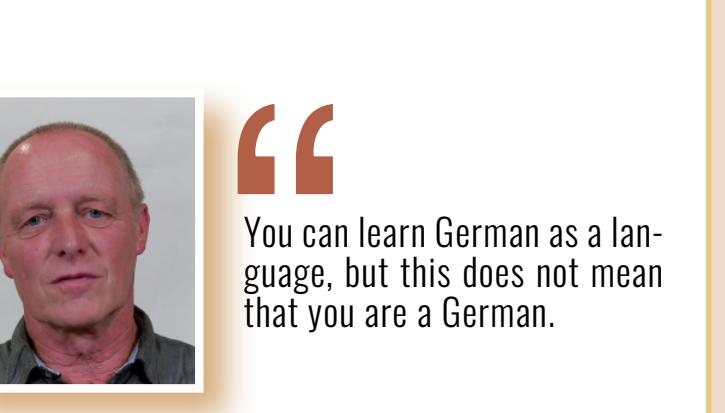
Our tool for political education: Video project 'Letting the nation speak'

The 'Stimmen zur Nation' is a PoliLab video project that confronts viewers with a variety of national narratives.

In the videos, 47 people express their views on questions of national belonging and address viewers directly. This gives the video portraits a special effect: A direct connection between speakers and viewers is established, which facilitates identification with the interviewees and their views. This makes it possible to compare one's own views with the different statements about belonging in Germany. Even hardened convictions and thought patterns can be irritated by such a confrontation with different views.

The video sequences have been developed explicitly for use in political education work and are available on the research project's homepage:

www.politische-laboratorien.de/stimmen-zur-nation



Method of political education: Video-based discussion workshops

The aim of the workshops is the transformation of emotionalised debates into constructive dialogues. To confront the participants with a diversity of statements about belonging in Germany the workshops make use of the video project 'Stimmen zur Nation'. Before the event begins, participants receive a handout that summarises the video statements in pointed theses. Subsequently, participants are asked to develop a common position on the statements in small groups. The challenge of having to agree on a common position contributes to the experience of diversity in political positions. The results of the small groups are collected and discussed in the plenary. The recurring confrontation with different opinions and the joint reflection enables the participants in the discussion workshops to change perspectives and thus contributes to the repolitisation of hardened debates.

Science Communication: Scientific impulses for practical application

The results of the research project will be published via social media channels and the project's own homepage, where the 'Stimmen zur Nation' videos are also publicly available. The central scientific results will be published in generally understandable language and discussed with the interested public in local discussion workshops.

Brochures, publications and digital stories to communicate the project's insights to a broader public include:

German ≠ German

The publication 'Deutsch ≠ Deutsch: Eine Typologie nationaler Narrative in Deutschland' presents the scientific results in pointed form. The different national conceptions are presented in a comprehensible way and scientifically classified.

Politics of belonging

The brochure 'Politiken der Zugehörigkeit. Zur Repolitisierung einer verhärteten Debatte' offers a recommendation for professionals in political education. It presents a detailed account of the format of the video-based discussion workshops developed in the project as well as the practical use of the 'Stimmen zur Nation' videos. It contains methodological-didactical tips and templates for further disseminating the methods successfully tested in the project.

Challenges: Political education in polarised times

In a social constellation in which one's own subgroup norm is elevated as a universal truth about Germany and the Germans, political education is challenged in a special way: If different perspectives develop into a conflict over the prototypicality and thus the hegemony of one's own views, political education cannot simply proceed in a mode of normativity. In polarised times, political education is constantly in the situation of becoming part of the conflict itself.

In order to defuse the conflict over prototypicality, the views of the participants must be deprived of their claim to universal validity. In polarised times, political education is successful if it enables participants to bear the empirical complexity and ambivalence as well as the multiplicity of national narratives in Germany.

Workshops 2019

In 2019, a total of 25 video-based discussion workshops were held in Saxony, Berlin, Thuringia and Schleswig-Holstein. The workshops were carried out in cooperation with local and regional partners whose expertise and local networks contributed to the success of the events.

Narrating the Nation

The web-based project 'Die Nation erzählen' offers a guided narrative along the video project 'Stimmen zur Nation'. It combines scientific findings with video sequences in a pointed and multimedia story. The narration shows how different mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operate in different ways.

For further information about the research project, events and the 'Stimmen zur Nation' visit the website:

www.politische-laboratorien.de