



# Socialised Under Different Regimes or Results of Economic Inequality? An Exploration of the Persistent Differences in Subjective Happiness, Social Values, and Political Attitudes Between the Former East and West Germany

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**Abstract.** The reunified Germany not only marked a significant turning point in recent world history but it has also been regarded as a natural experiment setting to explore the impact of two completely different political regimes and ideologies on a population that share the same culture and history. Although there is a growing discourse recognising the gap in social behaviours, political attitudes, and happiness between the former East and West Germans, barely any research has been conducted to compare differences in more than one aspect. Based on this, the article aims to evaluate whether the gap in multiple areas is largely caused by the influences of Communism or by the simple explanation of a poorer economic position. Key studies in this field will be reviewed, organising the literature into three threads: life satisfaction, social values, and political preferences. Through careful analysis and evaluation, it could be argued that the various gaps or differences between East and West Germany could mostly come under the umbrella of ‘communist legacy’, which not only subconsciously inculcated important views and values in its citizens but also resulted in a disparity in the economic outcome at the time of the reunification. Therefore, although a considerable proportion of the differences in any area studied are predetermined by individuals’ economic positions, the existence of the gap is fundamentally a consequence of the communist regime. Even though some differences are converging at varying paces, both relevant policies and societal inclusion are still vital in accelerating the convergence in Germany.

**Keywords:** German reunification, non-economic consequences, life satisfaction, social attitudes, political preferences

## 1 Introduction

Germany has been one of the most crucial players and drivers in global history as well as in the contemporary world. It is of exceptional importance in the last century when the division of Germany in 1945 signified an end of the Second World War, while the

reunification of it in 1990 marked the termination of the prolonged Cold War. The consequences of the reunification have received wide academic and societal attention in the immediate years after the reunification since the 45-year division was not only significant for the European continent or globally but even more so for the population of Germany. The Germans, despite having a shared language, culture, and history, were suddenly separated and ruled under strikingly different political regimes and economic systems, and again in a short period of time were brought together under the democratic, capitalist rule [1]. The impact and consequences of the reunification were not all instantaneous and as direct as the dismantlement of the Berlin Wall, rather, they could persist and permeate in the long-term and be felt in many forms in various aspects of life.

The consequences of reunified Germany have been extensively discussed in the related disciplines, notably through research around differences between East and West Germans. Many scholars from the economics-related disciplines have revealed important economic causes and realities that explain the wide-reaching differences [2], thus encouraging this article to focus on non-economic differences. Some scholars were particularly interested in uncovering the subjective, attitudinal differences, most notably by analysing the life satisfaction gap, political preference, and social attitudes [3–6]. Nonetheless, although the existing literature has discovered a range of insightful findings regarding the noneconomic differences and gaps between the East and West Germans, most of the articles and primary research focused on just one aspect of the differences, often only referring to other domains very briefly.

This article aims to build a more comprehensive understanding of the lived and experienced consequences of the reunification in terms of the fundamental causes of the persistent subjective and social differences between the former East and West Germans. To weigh up whether such differences are predominantly caused by economic reasons or predetermined by communist ideology, three perspectives will be evaluated, namely life satisfaction, social values and attitudes, and political preferences. These are chosen for the diverse but also distinctive insights they present, generating a multidimensional image across the most important aspects of people's social life that indicates their relationships with their own lives, with the wider society, and with the state.

This article proceeds with an overview of the context of German separation and their different political systems. Then the three perspectives will be discussed in separate sections in more detail, assessing and comparing the causes of the differences. Meanwhile, the main parts will show how they might interconnect and why any single one of them is not sufficient to account for the far-reaching non-economic differences between East and West Germans. Finally, all factors will be summarised in the discussion, where suggestions and implications for policies and future research will be provided.

## **2 The history of separation**

Understanding the fundamental differences during the separation period is of critical importance for further analysis which would be predominantly based on the historical and political context of East and West Germany. For this study, East Germans refer to

those born and raised in East Germany before and after the reunification, and vice-versa for those described as West Germans [4].

After the Second World War, Germany was initially divided into four zones, occupied by the Soviet Union, America, Britain, and France respectively. Amongst them, 19.1 million people subsequently constituted the population of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or East Germany, shorted after the merging of three western zones into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949 [7]. Especially after the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, it became almost impossible to move between East and West Germany [6], and thus people were more bounded to their current location as well as the political and economic system.

Over the years of separation, West Germany was governed under a liberal-democratic political system that promoted free competition between parties and individuals, whereas East Germany was ruled by a single, communist party [6]. Unlike the dominance of the market economy and private ownership in the FRG, East Germany adopted a central planning system [6], leading to very different economic outcomes. Most notably, there was a smaller income inequality gap in the GDR, where the income of university graduates was not even a-fifth more than that of manual workers while the disparity was 70 per cent in the FRG in 1988 [3]. However, according to the data from 1997 and 2002, there was also a significant gap in income per capita, in which the average income for East Germans was only minorly above three-quarters of that of West Germans, indicating an overall worse economic status among East Germans, even after the reunification [3].

The Soviet bloc refers to the nation-states under the influence and control of the Soviet Union both directly and indirectly during the Cold War. East Germany was one of the strictest regimes within the Soviet bloc with an extremely high level of infiltration by the secret police, Stasi, to such an extent that by 1995, it had 174,000 members of 'unofficial collaborators' accounting for 2.5 per cent of the entire population [3, 7]. The degree of censorship and surveillance is imaginable given the fact that all types of Stasi employees, including those collaborators, performed various censorship and observation activities as one major component of their daily duty [7]. Heineck & Süßmuth argue that this political and societal environment force East Germans to make immoral or selfish choices, burying a root for the differences between East and West Germans' social attitudes and behaviour [7].

Moreover, multiple scholars have emphasised the impact of Marxist ideologies on East Germans' tendency toward materialism and their achievement-motivated attitudes [6, 8]. This was manifested in two ways: on the one hand, valuing the material aspect of life suggests a possible stronger influence of income and employment status on East Germans' subjective happiness. Indeed, Van Hoorn & Maseland found a 60-per cent-higher effect of income on East Germans' overall happiness as compared to their west counterpart, while others suggest a link between lower consumption expenditures and higher life satisfaction [8, 9]. On the other hand, communist ideologies are often referred to as a philosophy of secularism and materialism, meaning that people under communist regimes are more likely to be indoctrinated into non-religious individuals which were backed up by various works [6].

### 3 Life satisfaction

The most frequently used database for research on Germans' life satisfaction is the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), which covers annual, longitudinal surveys for both West and East Germans since 1990 [1, 10]. Looking at the post-reunification period, the initial years between 1991 and 1997 witnessed a convergence in life satisfaction between East and West Germany, mostly owing to a decrease in life satisfaction for West Germans [5]. For example, in 1992, the mean satisfaction gap between the East and the West was over 0.9 points [5]. However, over the first 25 years, the average difference in life satisfaction is still 0.63 points (on a 10-point scale) with East Germans at the lower end [5]. Various interpretations have been raised. Some of the key economic explanations emphasise the roles of relative income, household income, and unemployment status [1, 5, 10]. Yet on a macro level, the argumentation has gradually evolved from mainly objective, economic causes to the inclusion of cultural, historical, and mentality-related explanations.

One important economic-oriented argument concentrates on the indicator of relative income, and especially satisfaction with household income [1]. The authors propose that this factor is most compatible with fluctuations in life satisfaction because their satisfaction level is not only determined by their absolute income but also by the reference point or the relative position that they see themselves on the social ladder [1]. This is evident in West Germany, where a 15-per cent increase in absolute income was accompanied by a decrease in life satisfaction between 1984 to 2004 [1]. While in the East counterpart, this relationship is shown through a mirrored decline in both life satisfaction and relative income when absolute income remained stable [1]. In other words, a significantly lower life satisfaction among East Germans is potentially caused by a change in their reference point, when West Germans, who were, on average, in a better economic position, were now included in the scales.

Similar in terms of their focus on economic determiners, Petrunyk & Pfeifer found that household income and unemployment status could explain part of the raw differences in life satisfaction between East and West Germany [5]. However, unlike Easterlin & Plagnol who recognised solely economic explanations for the gap, Petrunyk & Pfeifer also acknowledged that a significant 0.3-point gap remains when these objective factors were controlled for [1, 5]. The fact that the differences are reduced by around half indicates that economic-related factors do contribute substantially to people's subjective happiness, but the remaining half of the gap needs to be analysed from a different, non-economic angle.

Looking at a non-economic explanation for the remaining differences, Noll & Weick argued that the variances in life satisfaction are caused by East Germans' low levels of confidence in the welfare, political, and legal systems, which accounted for 33 per cent of differences against other socio-economic, socio-demographic, and health and safety factors [10]. Although their lack of confidence could not be discussed without recognising the overall worse economic positioning among East Germans, their lack of confidence in the capitalist system is closely connected to their expectations of the state and government. In short, a substantial proportion of subjective feelings of unhappiness

is closely related to individuals' political opinions and expectations of the government, which are inseparable from the legacy of the communist regime [6].

To further evaluate the conditional life satisfaction gap in East and West Germany, another explanation points to the different socialisation processes experienced by East and West Germans. Older East Germans, who have been mainly, or completely, socialised under the communist regime appeared to have the largest conditional life satisfaction gap (a 0.5-point gap for cohorts born before 1974 and 1945), which decreased systematically for younger cohorts and was no longer significant for those born after 1984 (0.1 points) – that is, those who went to school after the unification [5, 6]. Thus, from this perspective, the significant life satisfaction gap between East and West Germany is more caused by the socialisation process in the GDR, as the trend converged for those who were only six-year-old or younger in 1990. Indeed, both the subjective and objective-oriented explanations for differences in life satisfaction point toward the fundamental root of contrasting socialisation processes under the two regimes, such as materialism, only that such influences became apparent when arranging the data into birth cohorts [5, 6].

Adding on to the non-economic factors, one important finding in Biermann & Welsch's study is the negative correlation between the mentality-related gap in life satisfaction and people's religious affiliation as the gap became nearly invisible when church membership is controlled for [6]. They uncovered that people who are atheists appeared significantly less satisfied than those with religious beliefs [6]. This line of reasoning also includes an outstanding cultural or ideological role. In other words, over four decades of communist socialisation had resulted in East Germans absorbing materialist and secular values, most directly manifested by the sharp reduction in the proportion of Protestants among East Germans from almost exclusively Protestants in 1925 to about a-third after 1990, contrasting to a much more stable proportion of above 40% in West Germany over the years [6]. Therefore, people with no religious affiliation are more likely to have lower life satisfaction than people belonging to a religion, while the proportion of atheists or materialists is much higher amongst East Germans, thus somewhat explaining the differences.

To summarise, socio-economic and socio-demographic factors could not account for the total gap in life satisfaction between East and West Germany. Using the words of Biermann & Welsch, 'subjective evaluations complements circumstances-related explanations' with a proportion of 45: 55% [6]. Although the literature in the domain of the life satisfaction gap between East and West Germans contributes greatly to the overall discourse concerning the consequences of German reunification, it represents only one area of the differences, and, as acknowledged by some scholars, is inadequate to capture a more comprehensive picture of the consequences of German reunification.

#### **4 Political preferences**

People's attitudes towards social policies and the role of the state are of principal importance in society while such differences between East and West Germany years after

the reunification require vigorous analysis. Apart from that, as mentioned above, political preferences and attitudes are closely associated with life satisfaction, with the former often being referred to as a possible explanation for the latter.

Influential for recent scholars, Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln discovered that East Germans have significantly more expectations for state intervention in areas such as social welfare and public policies, especially on redistribution [3]. In addition, the differences were still systematically significant after controlling for economic effects [3]. Logically, lower-income groups benefit most from all types of social and welfare policies. Hence, as East Germans were, in relation to their Western counterparts, in relatively worse economic positions, it could be anticipated that they might favour more state intervention. However, the fact that the gap remained significant shows that economic-related effects alone could not explain the gap adequately. Therefore, East Germans' political preferences are linked to more complicated factors than pure personal financial conditions.

Indeed, the most apparent non-economic justifications could be regarded as linked to the effect of the previous communist rule in East Germany [6]. Specifically, East Germans might be simply accommodated to extensive state intervention [3]. This could be indirectly signified through the central-planning system in the GDR, where the individuals had little freedom and responsibility in improving their own economic status. Moreover, as suggested by Fuchs-Schündeln & Schündeln, those who spent more years under communist regimes appeared to have a set of preferences for state involvement that are more compatible with that of the communist doctrine [11]. In other words, their political preferences are more divergent from those used to a capitalist system.

Another justification suggested by Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln is the profound impact of the Marxist ideology [3]. Hence, not only that they think of the materialist side of life to be more important, but also that East Germans consider the structural, institutional factors to be determinable of individual achievement [3]. This means that East Germans are more likely to have higher expectations for the wider environment to provide them with more basic insurance, and services, while the West Germans, who have been influenced by capitalist ideologies, might believe more in personal hardworking, competitiveness, and ability.

However, a similar trend of convergence appeared in people's political preferences as in their life satisfaction. Specifically, in 1997 East Germans were approximately 15% more likely to favour state intervention, while the figure reduced by nearly 7% in 2002 [3]. In addition, East Germans born before 1930 are up to 49% more likely to favour policies of redistribution as compared to West Germans, whereas such difference was only around 10% for the birth cohort younger than 1975 [3]. Based on the evidence, Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln argue that a third of the convergence in people's political preferences was due to a transformation in the population composition, while the other proportion was due to genuine change in people's preferences [3].

Although they did not use the terms explicitly, what is implied to change people's preferences is a significant effect of socialisation. Indeed, the growing proportion of younger generations born around or after the reunification means that younger East Germans are now socialised in the reunified, capitalist Germany, while the interaction between the older East and West Germans after 1990 also has a socialisation effect that

might contribute to the transformation in people's views. This hypothesis is further supported by Heineck & Süssmuth who found a particularly visible preference for redistribution policies among those East Germans who did not move to the west after the reunification and thus were less likely and frequently to interact with West Germans [7]. In short, the same fundamental cause of different socialisation processes resulted in different political preferences, so once the socialisation process became growingly unified, the gap diminished accordingly.

Interestingly, Becker et al challenged earlier scholars' implicit assumption of no systematic differences in people's political preferences before Germany was separated [12]. They found substantial differences in voting patterns in 1924 among what later became East and West Germans [12]. Over 40 per cent of the total votes were given to left-wing parties (10% to the Communist Party of Germany) in East Germany regions, while the figures were approximately only half of that in Western regions [12]. Moreover, both the proportion of manual workers and heavy industries were remarkably higher in the regions of later East Germany, accounting for over 40 percentage points [12]. Thus, although they did not give any direct counterargument to invalidate the differences in people's preferences for policies after 1990, what is revealed in the work of Becker et al is the fact that attitudinal differences between East and West Germany have long been existing, at least in some indicators [12]. Therefore, the extent of the differences caused by different political regimes during the years of separation is rather hard to specify and conclude. Yet despite the pre-existing differences that would partly contribute to the significant differences after the reunification, it was 4 decades of communist rule and its ideological inculcation that enlarged and even 'perpetuated' such differences.

Through an exploration of people's expectations of the role of the government, it could be assessed that the effect of communism again played an important role in determining people's way of thinking. Whereas on the other hand, the long-existing structural differences, such as population composition that always contained more blue-collar workers, more industries and factories, and therefore worse socioeconomic status in East Germany could not be overlooked.

## 5 Social behaviours

Another strand of scholarship has found significant differences in social attitudes between East and West Germans. Through a solidarity game, Brosig-Koch et al concluded that the solidarity level is significantly lower for East Germans in both 1995 and 2009 experiments [4]. Moreover, the gap persists to be significant when economic and personal variables are controlled for [4], thus directing the possible justifications towards the cultural and political perspectives. In other words, the social norms in former East Germany, and very likely still for many East Germans, did not promote selflessness and social cooperation. This could be traced back to their immersion in an environment where the secret police and surveillance via numerous institutions were the norm [7].

One distinctive feature in the research of social behaviour differences is the absence of convergent tendency over time. Brosig-Koch et al predicted these differences to be

at a slower pace of convergence than other attitudinal differences such as political preferences because a change in social norms requires a societal, coordinated effort [4]. Likewise, Heineck & Süssmuth has found significantly different attitudes regarding social trust and views on fairness and cooperativeness, with East Germans being persistently lower than West Germans [7]. These again have less or no sign of convergence at the time of the study [7]. Heineck & Süssmuth explicitly relate such differences with the political system of East Germany which cultivated a culture and norm of scepticism among its citizens [7]. In other words, what these scholars are emphasising is a divergent changing pattern which is more independent of dramatic and abrupt political and economic transformations and harder to be overturned on an individual level from below.

Surprisingly, another more recent research conducted by Kistler et al found no significant differences between East and West Germans' donation behaviour, levels of cooperation, and property rights game [13]. This could be perceived from varying perspectives. Firstly, the experiment was conducted in the early 2010s, after the two articles discussed above have been published. Therefore, it is possible that the convergence trend accelerated, and differences indeed did disappear. Nonetheless, it should be noticed that the experiment is rather small-scaled with a maximum of 252 participants and some games with even lower numbers of participants, which means that such variation in results might be a consequence of different sample populations [13]. In addition, even though they concluded with no significant differences between people of the two parts, they do suggest a link between higher secular values and more trust in the property rights game [13]. Hence, if considering the association between stronger secular values and lower religiosity, an indirect link could be established as East Germans are more prone to atheism than West Germans [6].

It is acknowledged by multiple studies that the political legacy of communism contributed greatly to the outcome of differences in people's social behaviour, most specifically a significantly lower willingness to share, trust, and coordinate among East Germans. However, none of the papers could determine the extent to which the effect was solely attributed to communism, nor the time needed for such differences to converge.

## **6 Discussion**

Based on the literature, the article found that the differences between East and West Germans in all three aspects are mainly caused by a co-effect of economic disparity and communist legacy. In which the former often acts as the most significant precondition in restricting people's changes in attitudes and views, whereas the impact of the communist regime in East Germany is manifested in various forms and aspects. One categorisation of the legacy is related to the materialist, atheist ways of thinking, displayed in the differential life satisfaction between East and West Germany. In terms of political preferences, the longstanding impact of communism also takes a more subtle form in moulding people's expectations for extensive welfare, basic provision, and redistribution policies. However, such expectations are nevertheless unrelated to their trust in the



state or the society as the literature on social values shows significantly lower levels of social trust, selflessness, and cooperation among East Germans. These are, amongst other effects, closely connected to the protective and sceptical culture of the former communist regime. One common feature across those indicators is the role of socialisation, which acts firstly under separate regimes resulting in the existing differences, whereas it also acts to reduce or even close the gaps between the younger generations after the reunification. In short, it could be concluded that the communist legacy, or more generally the effect of socialisation under a certain political regime, is one of the most important contributors to the systematic and significant differences between East and West Germans in the three perspectives reviewed.

Despite at varying paces, a considerable proportion of the literature detects trends of convergence in the perspectives reviewed. Regarding life satisfaction, the trend was most rapid immediately after the reunification, whereas the long-lasting convergent pattern is largely attributed to the gradual and natural replacement of the older population by the younger cohorts who showed little systematic differences between the East and the West [5]. Interestingly, a similar tendency appears in the field of political preferences with the same significant effect of birth cohort on the results [3]. Initially, East Germans had significantly higher expectations for state intervention and provision financially, while the pro-state attitudes of East Germans reduced at an approximately 5-per cent rate every 5 years [3]. Nonetheless, little convergence was found in the studies on social values.

However, it is rather too perfunctory to suggest that policies are not needed as such differences will vanish sooner or later. On the contrary, people's views and values are not only influenced by the wider society and formal institutions, but also through primary socialisation within the family. As Heineck & Süssmuth revealed, people inherit the same social values from their parents and grandparents [7]. This means that even though the younger generations are entirely socialised in the reunified Germany, they are not free from the impacts of the previous regime. Additionally, many Germans still use the terms 'the East' and 'the West' in daily life, with the underlying assumption that they are different, especially with regards to their ability to accommodate the globalising and transforming economy, as well as their social values [14]. Moreover, notwithstanding the matching economic framework and massive policies and investments to equalise the economy in the East since the reunification, systematic disparities remain in many economic-related sectors [2]. Yet what might carry more problems and treats lies within people's unconsciously established ideas that there is a gap between the Eastern and Western regions in the current situations but also prospects for the future. This is manifested in the selective migration patterns that individuals who received higher education are most probable to move westwards [15]. Hence, diminishing ideological differences is one of the ultimate objectives and solutions to reduce social differences, which could not be accomplished through economic policies alone. Social policies to promote inclusiveness and equality are also essential. To achieve these aims, the collaboration between the government and a truly inclusive social environment is much required for those former East Germans to feel belong, as well as for a genuine arrival at a society with little systematic differences in subjective, social, and political attitudes in people's minds.

## 7 Conclusion

Unlike economic disparities that could be directed tackled, if not solved, by policies, social, cultural, and attitudinal differences are harder in finding solutions, which is why analyses and reviews of these non-economic domains are critical to contributing to the discourse.

This article concentrated on three crucial aspects of non-economic differences between East and West Germany after the reunification. It could be concluded that economic factors play a more important role in life satisfaction, while it functions more as a constraining force in people's social attitudes and political preferences. The causes of the communist legacy and different socialisation appeared as a more decisive factors in the latter two perspectives. In summary, compared to West Germans, East Germans have lower life satisfaction scores, lower solidarity behaviours, but higher preferences for extensive state support and intervention.

Finally, some of the most relevant papers reviewed are written around the 2010s, which demonstrates decreasing attention on this topic in academia in more recent years. Though this could be explained by a potential consensus that many gaps are now close to completely disappearing, many of the questions and persisting differences indeed remain unaddressed. This article, therefore, calls for future research to be conducted to assess the most up-to-date situations in corresponding aspects and to test the reliability of the predictions presented in the existing literature.

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