

# Electoral Reform in Germany: What Do Voters Think?

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## Abstract

This report presents the procedures and results of a survey about the preferences for electoral reform (proposals) among German voters. We find that the majority of participants support a reform that reduces the size of the Bundestag, even if the trade-offs inherent in such a reform are made transparent to them. Among a set of three different reform proposals, reducing the number of electoral districts to 225 is most popular. This holds for the supporters of every party in the Bundestag. Importantly, reducing the number of districts is more popular than the coalition parties' proposal of not allocating surplus seats. Parallel voting, as proposed by the CDU/CSU, is the least popular reform proposal, even if it is still more popular than the status quo. These differences are most pronounced among voters who have a good understanding of the workings of the current electoral law. Informed voters also perceive the greatest need for reform.

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## ***Introduction***

Beginning with the 2002 federal elections, the statutory size of the German Bundestag is 598 members. Yet, this number has always been exceeded. In 2002, the Bundestag had 603 members. By 2013, the number of MPs had increased to 631. Then, it started to explode. In 2017, the Bundestag had 709 members. The parliament elected in 2021 has 736. The increase in the size of the Bundestag is a direct consequence of the workings of Germany's mixed member proportionality system as well as changes in voting behavior. Specifically, the increase in the Bundestag's size stems from the growing number of surplus and compensation seats that have in turn been caused by the growing fragmentation of the German party system.

Against this background, there have been comprehensive, but so far unsuccessful discussions about a reform of the German electoral law since 2011. The last three presidents of the Bundestag – Norbert Lammert and Wolfgang Schäuble from the CDU as well as the SPD's Bärbel Bas – have urged the parties to agree to a substantive election reform. After the federal election of 2021, the Bundestag installed a commission with the mandate to make reform proposals.

While these reform discussions have so far not led to a consensus, they have generated a range of proposals. The advantages and disadvantages of these proposals have been widely discussed, both in the media and in political science (Decker and Jesse 2020; Sohnius et al. 2022; Weinmann and Grotz 2020; Behnke 2022, 2019; Pappi and Bräuninger 2018). However, there is relatively little evidence on how voters evaluate these proposals. Existing studies of voters' preferences focus on abstract goals such as concentration and representation, without directly studying preferences over specific reform proposals (Bytzek 2020; Jankowski et al. 2019). A recent study by the Bertelsmann foundation found that 8 out of 10 German voters support a reform of the electoral system. However, this study did not ask about the evaluation of the specific reform proposals currently being discussed (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023).

Our study seeks to fill the gap. We show that German voters strongly support a reform that reduces the size of the Bundestag. At the same time, the most popular reform proposal is currently not on the table in the political debate. When we ask respondents to evaluate different reform proposals and the status quo, a reduction in the size of districts emerges as the most popular reform option.

Our findings are based on evaluations of 3250 German voters, collected in October 2022. Even when being told that this would lead to an increase in the size of districts by about 33%, respondents significantly and substantially prefer a reduction from 299 to 225 districts over the status quo and all other presented reform proposals. The second most popular reform is the coalition's proposal of not allocating surplus seats. The least popular reform is the *Grabewahlrecht* (parallel voting) proposed by CDU/CSU. The preference for a reduction in the number of districts is shared by supporters of all parties: It is the most popular reform option among voters of all coalition as well as of all opposition parties.

The differences in preferences for specific reform proposals are mainly driven by a subgroup of respondents who have a high or very high understanding of the electoral system. These respondents – about half of the sample – care more strongly about electoral reform, and they have much more pronounced preferences. While a substantial share of our respondents is not willing or able to differentiate between the reform proposals, there is thus a non-negligible subset of respondents who are highly informed, care about the reform, and have clear preferences.

### ***Background***

The growth of the Bundestag has triggered a lot of criticism. Many critics emphasize the costs of a larger parliament: it is estimated that over the four-year period 2021-2025 the increased size of the Bundestag will cost at least an additional 400 Mio. Euros. Others emphasize more practical aspects: the Bundestag simply does not have enough space for all the additional MPs, their assistants, and the additional administrative staff (Ismar 2021). An additional concern is that the increased number of MPs may undermine the efficacy of the parliamentary processes (Deutscher Bundestag 2022; for a summary of these critiques, see Deutschlandfunk 2022).

So far, the debate about the different reform proposals has focused on the legal aspects of the election law and on the preferences of and incentives for different parties. By contrast, we seek to approach this question from the perspective of voters. Generally, voters' preferences have not been considered in this debate for at least two reasons. First, the literature typically argues that voters have little knowledge of the working of the German electoral system (Jankowski et al. 2022; Behnke 2015). Secondly, and as a result of this, electoral reform is considered to be a technical issue that is not very salient in mass politics. Hence, policymakers care little about public preferences when designing electoral reforms.

Nevertheless focusing on voter preferences for institutional reforms can be justified on normative grounds. In a representative democracy, elections are the main mechanism through which citizens participate in the political process. Hence, the rules that govern the electoral process directly affect how voters can make their interests heard. The legitimacy of the electoral rules thus underpins the input legitimacy of the system, thus requiring the acceptance of this system by voters (Jankowski et al. 2019).

Furthermore, the current debate about electoral reform in Germany fits into a broader global pattern of the politicization of political institutions. For a long time, there was an implicit agreement that the rules of the political game should only be changed with the consent of all or most parties, even if the German constitution allows the electoral law to be changed by simple majority. Yet, since all attempts for a consensual reform have failed, the coalition is now poised to push through a reform with their own parliamentary majority. However, this might be connected to a deeper problem: Politicizing the rules of the game turns party competition within

the institutional rules into competition about the institutional rules. In the extreme, politicization may undermine the losers' acceptance of parliamentary democracy if the electoral system is perceived as biased.

In our view, this raises the question whether voters agree or disagree with the most relevant reform proposals. In the following analysis, we focus on the three most prominent proposals currently discussed. These proposals are the coalition's proposal of not allocating surplus seats, the CDU/CSU's proposal of parallel voting, and the longstanding proposal to reduce the number of districts, that is currently not supported by any of the major parties (for a more detailed description of these proposals, see below).

All reform proposals seek to preserve the current system of two votes – no relevant political actor proposes to switch to a pure list system or to a pure first-past-the-post system. However, each reform proposal is willing to compromise on one of the underlying principles that the mixed-member system seeks to combine. The CDU/CSU's proposal is willing to give up on the goal of exact proportionality between parties. The coalition's proposal is willing to give up on the goal of guaranteed district representation by the district winner. Reducing the number of districts maintains this goal, but is said to reduce the quality of district representation by increasing the district size. The status quo, finally, preserves proportionality and district representation, but gives up on the goal of limited Bundestag size.

### ***Survey Design***

To study German voters' preferences over electoral reform, we ran an online survey in October 2022. For this survey, the firm Bilendi recruited 3250 German citizens between the age of 18 and 74. Respondents are representative to the German population on quotas for age, gender, and education. Nevertheless, our panel clearly does not achieve full representativeness of the German voting population. Hence, we caution against interpreting the percentage shares of specific responses as direct estimates of the prevalence of this opinion in the population. However, we are confident that significant differences in preference orderings should correspond to similar differences in the population. If one reform option is consistently more popular than another one in this panel, and this pattern also holds across different subgroups of respondents, we can conclude quite confidently that it is also more popular in the general population.

In the survey, we first described the crucial aspects of the current German electoral system. We then asked respondents about their evaluation of this system on a 7-point-scale (from very bad to very good), as well as about how strongly they perceived the system to need reform. In a second step, we randomly presented respondents with one of three reform proposals, which were described along the same dimensions. Respondents then had to evaluate this proposal on the same 7-point-scale.

In the design of the survey, we focused on two main concerns: the first concern was that most voters have very limited knowledge of the electoral system. The second concern was that it is easy to support a reduction in the

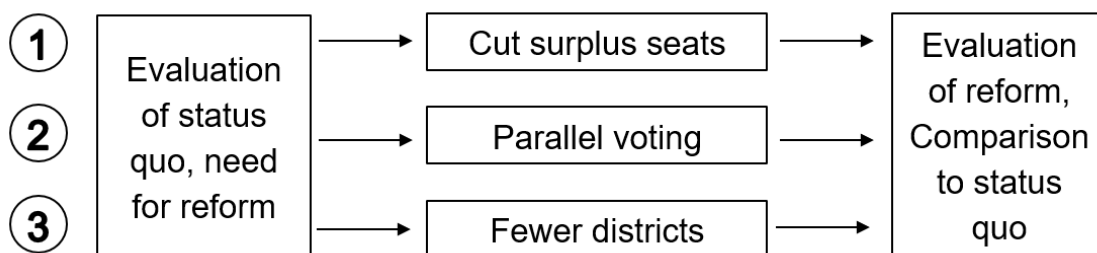
size of the Bundestag if voters do not see or understand the costs associated with any reform. To deal with the first issue, we directly measured people’s understanding of the current electoral system. To deal with the second issue, we explicitly emphasized the trade-offs inherent in each reform proposal.

To gauge people’s knowledge and understanding, we asked a battery of four factual questions about the workings of the current electoral law at the beginning of the survey (see Appendix). About a quarter of respondents selected the right answer on all four questions. Another quarter answered three out of four questions correctly, while the remaining half was evenly split between those who got two, and those who got one or zero questions right.

Moreover, we tried to accommodate for the limited knowledge of many voters when describing the current system and the reform proposals. In particular, we explained the building blocks of the current system and the mechanism by which the current system leads to the growth in the size of the Bundestag (see Appendix).

After evaluating the status quo, we introduced each respondent to one of three different reform proposals (see Figure 1). Table 1 depicts the three reform proposals aiming for as much comparability as possible in our description. The descriptions of all three proposals seek to make the trade-offs and costs associated with each reform proposal explicit. The coalition proposal accepts that not all district winners will receive a seat. The CDU/CSU proposal of parallel voting accepts (or rather intends) disproportionality in the translation from votes to seats. The reduced number of districts, finally, means a substantial increase in the size of individual districts.

As our main outcome variable, we asked about the evaluation of the reform. This allows us to compare the evaluation of the reform with the evaluation of the status quo on the same scale. Additionally, we asked participants directly whether they preferred the status quo or the reform proposal. The logic of the survey flow is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Logic of survey flow**

**Table 1: Description of reform proposals**

<i>Surplus seats not allocated</i>	<i>Parallel voting</i>	<i>Fewer Districts</i>
<p>As before, the share of second votes that a party wins determines how many seats that party receives in the Bundestag. A party that wins 20% of the second votes should therefore also receive about 20% of the seats in the Bundestag.</p> <p>As before, the federal territory is divided into 299 electoral districts, in which a candidate is elected with the first vote. However, not every person who wins one of the districts is guaranteed to enter the Bundestag.</p> <p>If a party wins more districts than it is entitled to according to the proportion of second votes, it may not fill these surplus seats. There will no longer be any surplus or compensation seats.</p> <p>The Bundestag will therefore no longer exceed 598 seats. However, not all candidates who win a district will receive a seat in the Bundestag if their party wins more constituencies than it is entitled to according to second votes.</p>	<p>Only half of the seats in the Bundestag (299 out of 598) will be divided among the parties according to the proportion of second votes. The other 299 will be determined exclusively by districts. A party that wins 20% of the second votes thus does not have to receive 20% of the seats in the Bundestag.</p> <p>As before, the federal territory is divided into 299 electoral districts, in which a candidate is elected with the first vote. Every person who wins one of the districts is guaranteed to enter the Bundestag.</p> <p>Since the second votes now only determine the other half of the seats, a party always receives one seat for each constituency it wins. There will no longer be any surplus or compensation seats.</p> <p>The Bundestag will therefore no longer exceed 598 seats. However, the share of seats that the party receives in the Bundestag will no longer correspond to its share of the second votes if it wins very many or very few districts.</p>	<p>As before, the share of second votes that a party wins determines how many seats that party receives in the Bundestag. A party that wins 20% of the second votes should therefore also receive around 20% of the seats in the Bundestag.</p> <p>However, the number of electoral districts will be reduced from 299 to 225, in which a candidate will be elected with the first vote, as before. Any person who wins one of the districts is guaranteed to enter the Bundestag.</p> <p>The reduction in the number of districts from 299 to 225 makes it extremely unlikely that a party will win more district seats than it is entitled to according to the proportion of second votes. There will no longer be any significant surplus or compensation mandates.</p> <p>The Bundestag will therefore probably no longer exceed 598 seats. However, the size of the districts represented by the directly elected members of the Bundestag would increase by an average of one third.</p>

## Results

In the following, we present the main results of our survey. We start with the perceived need for reform of the current system. Figure 2 presents the responses on a 7-point-scale, divided by respondents' knowledge of the current electoral system. As mentioned above, about a quarter of respondents were in each of the four knowledge groups.

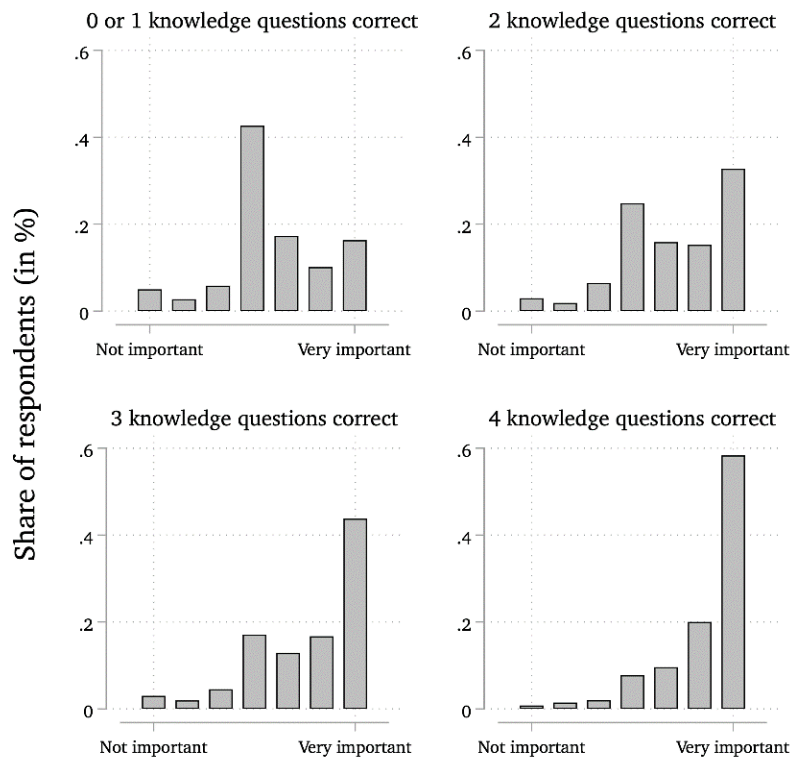
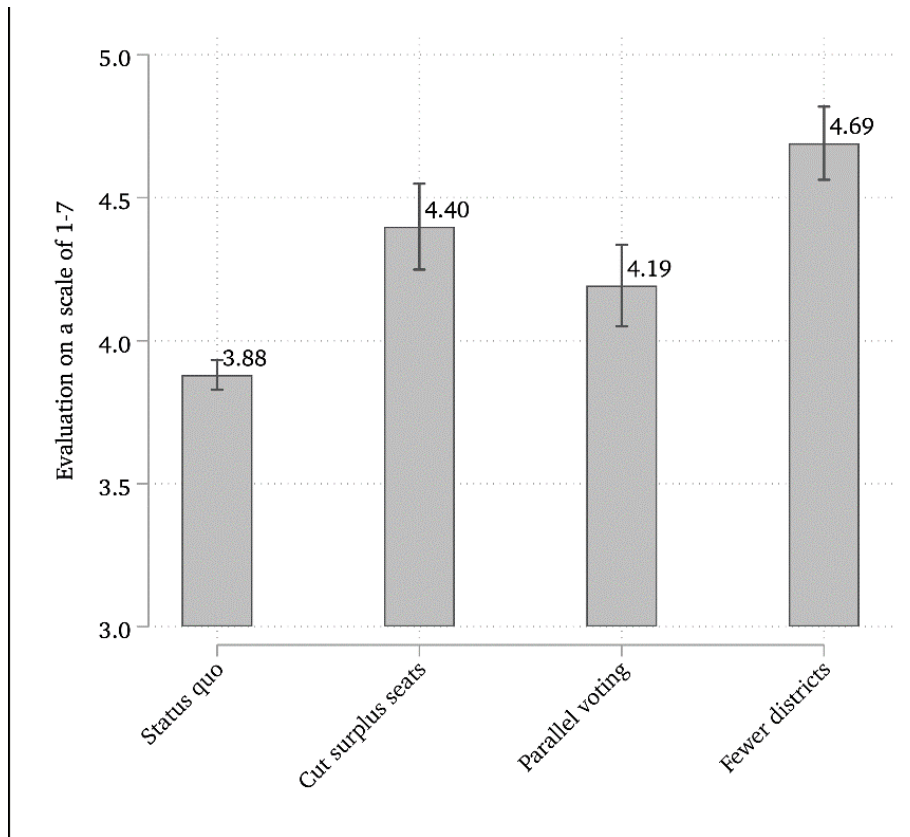


Figure 2: Perceived reform pressure, by knowledge group

The results demonstrate that there are sizable differences in the perceived need for reforming the current election law. Respondents with the lowest level of pre-existing knowledge tend to pick the middle category, probably as an equivalent to a don't know-option. In all other groups, a very high need of reform emerges as the modal answer. This widely shared perception of reform pressure is very much in line with the recent Bertelsmann study (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023). However, there are important differences between groups. Those with the best understanding of the current system also perceive the highest need of reform.

The question about reform pressure was unconstrained and did not point to any potential trade-offs of reform. Therefore, the strong support for reform might not be surprising. However, high support for reform also

emerges when we ask about specific reform proposals and point out the costs associated with each reform. Figure 3 presents the comparison of the mean evaluations of the status quo and our three proposals.



**Figure 3: Evaluation of reform proposals**

Two main findings stand out from this figure. First, all reform options are more popular than the status quo ( $p < .01$  for all comparisons between status quo and each reform proposal). Hence, even if we inform respondents about the trade-offs inherent in any reform proposal, they still support a reform. Second, a reduction in the number of districts is the most popular reform option and more popular than the proposals of the coalition and of the main opposition party ( $p < .01$  for both comparisons). Of these proposals, the coalition proposal is more popular than the proposal of CDU/CSU ( $p \leq .05$ ).<sup>2</sup> While average evaluations do not differ that much in absolute terms between the proposals (moreover, all reform proposals receive ratings above the midpoint of the scale and can therefore be considered as electoral systems that are evaluated more positively than negatively), we find stronger preferences in certain subgroups of our sample.

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<sup>2</sup> We also asked a fourth group of respondents to evaluate a slightly extended version of the coalitions proposal to cut surplus seats, additionally mentioning that the runner-up in each district would enter the Bundestag. The average evaluation of this proposal is 4.47, statistically not significantly different from the coalition proposal as stated in Table 1.



If we differentiate respondents by their level of knowledge (see Figure 4), we see that these results are mainly driven by the most informed quarter of respondents. Among respondents with very little knowledge of the current electoral system, there are no differences in the evaluation of the three different reform proposals and the status quo. Furthermore, each electoral system is statistically indistinguishable from the neutral answer category (4 on our 1-7 scale). Differences in the evaluation of the reform proposals only become visible for more knowledgeable voters. Among respondents who are able to correctly answer more than half of the four knowledge questions, the aggregate pattern from above emerges. Again, those with the highest knowledge also show the most pronounced differences in their evaluation of the different models.

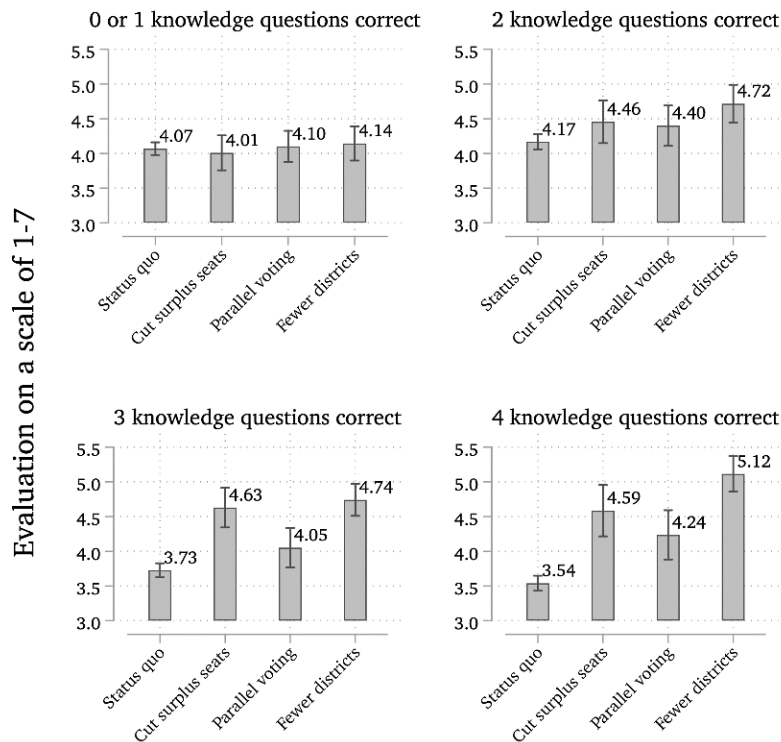
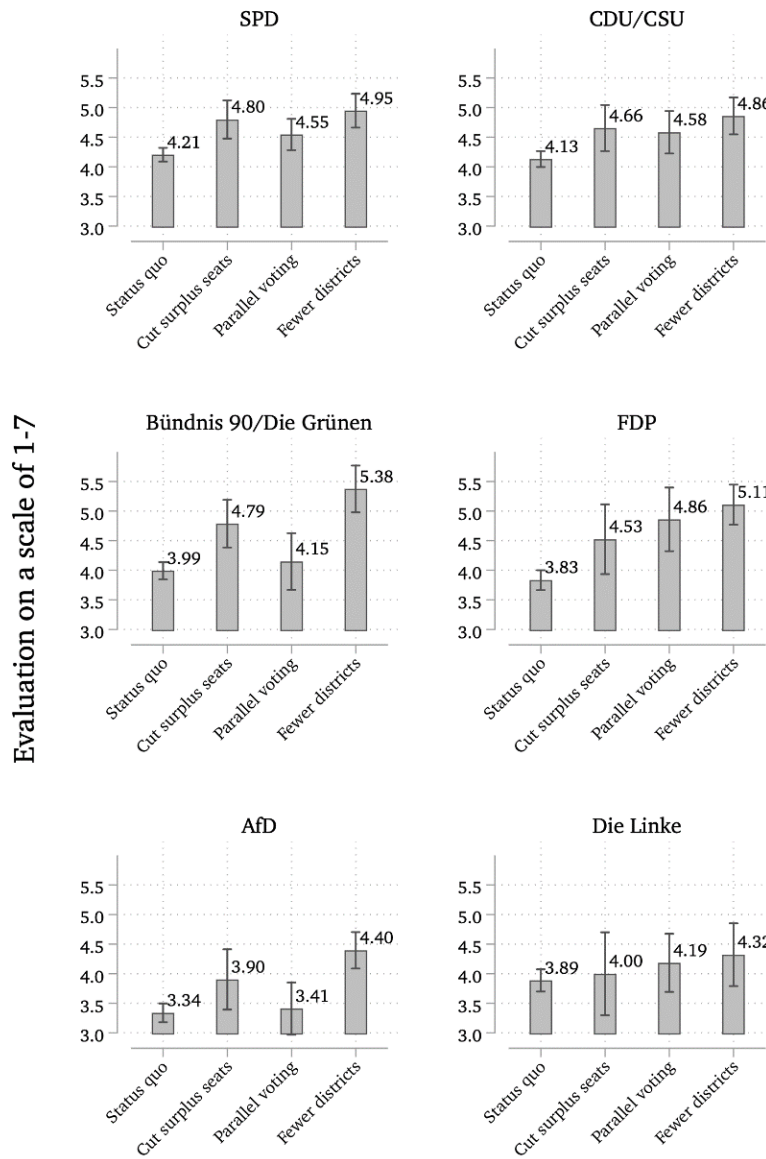


Figure 4: Evaluation of reform proposals, by knowledge group

To dig deeper into these results, we also differentiate respondents according to their political preferences, based on how they had voted in the federal election of 2021. As a result of the smaller number of observations, differences are often not statistically significant. As Figure 5 shows, the ordering of proposals is quite similar across all party electorates, even if there are differences in levels of support. Voters of all six parties have fewer districts as their most preferred option and the status quo as their least preferred options. The voters of four parties also prefer the coalition proposal to the CDU/CSU proposal. Not even the CDU/CSU's own voters

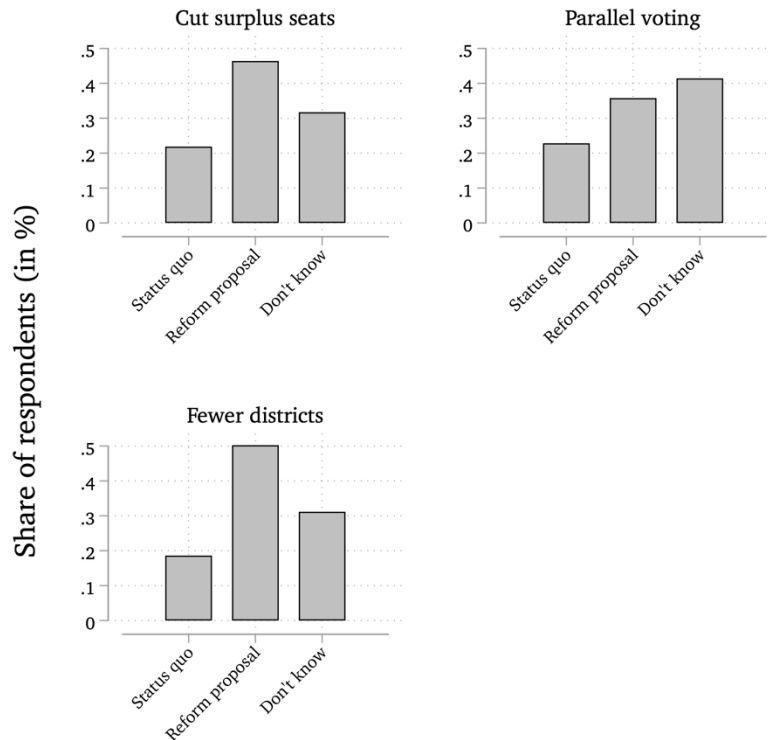
prefer their parties' proposal over the coalition proposal. Voters of the FDP and DIE LINKE prefer the parallel voting proposal to the non-allocation of surplus seats but this is, again, not statistically significant.



**Figure 5: Evaluation of reform proposals, by vote choice**

Finally, our results for the evaluations of the status quo electoral system and the reform proposals (on a scale from very bad to very good) are mirrored by the results we obtain from asking participants directly whether they prefer the reform proposal or the status quo. All reform proposals are preferred to the status quo also in this direct comparison. For the reduction of districts and the coalition proposal to cut surplus seats, the share of respondents opting for the reform proposal is more than twice as big as the share of respondents opting for

the status quo. The proportion of respondents who support the reform proposal of parallel voting to the status quo is significantly lower than the proportion of respondents who prefer either the reducing-districts-proposal or the coalition’s proposal to the status quo ( $p < 0.01$ , tests of proportion). Moreover, the high share of ‘don’t know’ answers suggests that many respondents found the parallel voting proposal hard to understand. By contrast, there is no significant difference between the two other reform proposals in terms of the share of people who prefer them to the status quo ( $p = 0.26$ , test of proportion).



**Figure 6: Choice between reform proposal and status quo**

### *Conclusion*

This report has demonstrated that German voters perceive a strong need for a reform of the electoral system. The preferred reform is a reduction in the size of electoral districts. These results hold for voters of all political stripes. They are mainly driven by the voters who are most knowledgeable about the existing electoral system. These voters also perceive the greatest need for reform.

We thus conclude that there is a non-negligible subset of voters who are well informed about the current electoral rules, have a strong interest in electoral reform, and have a clear preference ordering over the different

reform options. This subset of the population clearly prefers a reduction in the number of districts over all other proposals.

Cutting the number of districts thus emerges as the most popular reform option in our survey.<sup>3</sup> If we focus only on the two reform proposals that are currently supported by major parties and are being discussed as viable options, the coalition's proposal is preferred to the CDU/CSU proposal – even among voters of the CDU/CSU.

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<sup>3</sup> A prominent argument against such a reform is that the necessary enlargement of districts would weaken the links between voters and MPs. As a recent careful study by Sohnius et al. (2022) demonstrates, however, neither an increase in the number of voters nor an increase in the geographic size of districts leads to lower satisfaction with democracy or lower political efficacy.

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## ***Appendix***

### **Knowledge questions**

To gauge respondents' understanding of the existing electoral rules, we asked about their agreement with the following statements:

- The second vote is more important for the final election outcome than the first vote
- With my second vote I vote for the person that I want to be chancellor
- With my first vote, I can vote for the candidate of a party that I do not support with my second vote
- Every party that can be voted for in the federal election also receives seats in the parliament

### **Description of status quo**

We described the current system as follows:

*"The current electoral law for the Bundestag works as follows:*

*The share of second votes that a party wins determines how many seats that party receives in the Bundestag. A party that wins 20% of the second votes should therefore also receive about 20% of the seats in the Bundestag*

*The federal territory is divided into 299 electoral districts, in which a candidate is elected with the first vote. Every person who wins one of the constituencies is guaranteed to enter the Bundestag.*

*Sometimes, a party wins more constituency seats than it is entitled to according to the proportion of second votes. These additional seats are called surplus seats. To ensure that this party's share of seats corresponds to its share of second votes, all other parties receive additional seats in this case, so called surplus seats.*

*As a consequence of the surplus and compensation seats, however, the Bundestag regularly exceeds the size of 598 MPs. This is why the Bundestag has grown significantly in recent years to its current 736 members."*