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## The narrative of 'equality of chances' as an approach to interpreting PIAAC results on perceived political efficacy, social trust and volunteering and the quest for political literacy

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### Abstract

*The article focuses on the theoretically and empirically addressed question of whether workforce literacy strategies in research and policies may tend to exclude relevant fields of literacy, which have emancipatory chances for participants, but which regularly fail to include low qualified or literate adults (Hufer, 2013), namely the area of basic civic education or political literacy. First, a theoretical discussion makes use of recent publications. The relevance of basic civic education will be discussed using contemporary theories, which point at a crisis of democracy and explain this by the spread of income and capital (Piketty, 2014) and its legitimation (Rosanvallon, 2013). Further detail is provided by using Rosanvallon's criticism of the term 'equality of chances'. The everyday unfairness, covered by the narrative of equal chances, leads to peoples' disengagement from reciprocal relations and disintegration of solidarity within a society. This theoretical approach will then be supplemented by empirical data. The empirical research question is: Do adults with low literacy skills agree less often on feelings of political efficacy and social trust than adults with high literacy skills? Do they engage less often in volunteering than adults with high literacy skills? This is based the PIAAC 2012 dataset which relates literacy on the one hand with variables of political efficacy, social trust and volunteering on the other hand. Results will be compared with volunteer and youth surveys. Furthermore, the connection of a "Nouvelle Droite" (contemporary right-wing populism) and peoples' low feelings of political efficacy will be reflected in order to refute the stereotype that marginalized groups automatically become voters of right-wing populists.*

**Keywords:** basic citizenship education; citizenship education; literacy; political literacy; PIAAC



## Introduction

National strategies for literacy<sup>1</sup> have often been launched as an answer to large-scale assessments, like the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) or the German Level-One Survey (LEO). The strategies focus on employment and employability, workplace and family literacy.

Literacy is a value on its own, without needing legitimization via employability. Indeed, the Austrian scientist Ribolits points out that literacy is relevant for humanistic reasons and also potentially enables people to act in a non-alienated, emancipated way (Ribolits, 2009). The economic argument, however, is not the only one driving national strategies for literacy. As the French economist Thomas Piketty (2014) and the French philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon (2013) discuss (see below), societies are losing their cohesion. Financial and social inequalities and the narrative of equal chances may lead to the instability of democracies. By not addressing countries as economies but as democracies, the attention shifts remarkably.

Therefore this article discusses what empirical data tell us about political and social participation among low and highly skilled adults. Thus it fuels the discussion whether national strategies for literacy should have a broader approach, including both employability and citizenship as their aim, instead of prioritizing employment.

As the current databases do not offer variables on literacy and *political participation*, this analysis will draw on variables about literacy and *political efficacy*<sup>2</sup> from the current PIAAC survey (Rammstedt, 2013). Feelings of *political efficacy* are not the same as real *political participation*, but they correlate (see below). Further indicators will be *social trust* and *volunteering*.

Descriptions of adults with low skills, detailed in four chapters (work and family, reading skills, literacy practices and participation in adult education) have recently been published by the OECD (Grotlüschen, Mallows, Reder & Sabatini, 2016). This article complements these recently published chapters by focusing on the three variables *political efficacy*, *social trust* and *volunteering* and by comparing low-literate adults with high-literate adults across the countries participating in PIAAC. The statistical method followed the above mentioned publications' scheme. The literacy scale has been divided into *low* literacy competence, defined here as 'below 225 points on the PIAAC scale', which equals PIAAC level one and below - and *high* literacy competence, defined as 'above 375 points on the PIAAC scale', which equals PIAAC level four and above. The first round data have been used (all countries' datasets, data collection from 2012) with the statistical software 'Stata' and the 'PIAAC repeat module' co-developed by Francois Keslair from OECD. This module allows for fully taking into consideration all ten plausible values for the literacy variable as well as the sample weights.

Crosstabulations have been calculated between literacy levels and the three variables *political efficacy*, *social trust* and *volunteering*. Low literate and high literate subgroups then are compared and compiled into a graph showing results on international level. The significance is expressed by standard errors. While the graphs show all results, the interpretation of results in this article only refers to statistically significant differences. Because of the large sample even small differences of a few percent points are significant in PIAAC. Controlling for sociodemographics and performance variables like education and employment would definitely reduce the correlation and show how strong the influence of literacy is onto *political efficacy*, *social trust* or *volunteering*—if the influences of education and others are kept aside (which would be a causal relation that would require strong theoretical background—and which obviously is too linear to meet the reality).

But this is not the research question here—the question is to describe the *low-literate population* in contrast to *high-literate adults* with literacy being a result of formal education as well as literacy practices and many other factors.

The reason to crosstabulate *literacy* instead of *formal education* (as it is reported in regular surveys on volunteering and youth, see below) is that the current political attention focuses low-literate adults and not low formally educated adults. Thus it makes sense to use the literacy variable even if it has a high correlation with education.

It was decided to fully report all countries' results in the graphs but focus on three special countries in the interpretation. The reason is twofold. On the one hand, an interpretation needs sound knowledge about the political system and its recent development which would take much longer discussion and explanation than is provided here. On the other hand, the three countries in focus experienced shifts to the right wing in their political landscape shortly after the PIAAC data collection and the shifts were discussed in mass media with high concern. Meanwhile, many other countries face the same problem (or always had before). But this was not yet clear when this article was computed and the shifts now take with more and more distance to the year of data collection (2012). Thus, three countries are selected here: *Germany* newly saw right wing populism in the streets as well as a new political party at the same time when the borders were open for refugees in September 2015. France had strong Front National results in regional elections in December 2015. Poland voted for a nationalist government in October 2015. All this took place in or close before this article was compiled. Thus, the interpretation of results keeps a special look onto these three countries.

### Workforce literacy programs versus basic civic education: the German case

Via the Level-One Survey, published in 2011, it became clear that more than seven million German adults (14,5% of the adult population aged 18-64) read and write on a level that equates the international UNESCO definition of functional illiteracy (Grotlüschen & Riekmann, 2012). Follow-up programs funded by the federal ministry of education, the federal laender and the European commission prioritize literacy programs addressing the workforce and their needs in the workplace.

The international PIAAC survey confirmed the results: According to PIAAC, 17,5% of German adults aged 16- 64 belong to reading literacy competence level I and below, the international average being 15,5% (OECD, 2013; Rammstedt, 2013). The description of this level does not equal the LEO descriptions, so this subpopulation should not be called *functionally illiterate*— for this article we will consider this subpopulation as *adults with low literacy skills*. Still, there are substantial concerns about this group, and these concerns drive the development of national strategies and educational programs to improve adult literacy.

This article focuses on the relevance of basic civic education for adults with low literacy skills, whether they are excluded from political participation and how the theoretical explanations for differences in political and social participation of population subgroups have developed. Therefore the research question is:

- Do adults with low literacy skills agree less often on feelings of *political efficacy* and *social trust* than adults with high literacy skills?
- Do they engage less often in *volunteering* than adults with high literacy skills?

If so, it may be discussed whether low-literate adults' higher agreements to feelings of political efficacy and engagement were desirable (actually political efficacy can be performed by joining extremist groups as well which is not desirable from the standpoint of democratic states). It is also relevant to take into consideration whether national literacy strategies then also should focus on the theoretical and practical improvement of basic civic education.<sup>3</sup>

To answer these questions, the following sections will analyse recent theoretical approaches which give the three variables a broader sense and meaning. The approaches do not follow the rational-choice approach, partly underlying the PIAAC theoretical framework (OECD, 2011), but substantially exceed the idea of a 'homo economicus'. We prefer a recent French philosophers' discussion of a 'homo reciprocans' (see below, Rosanvallon, 2013).

### **Economic inequalities (Piketty) and their ideological legitimization via the narrative of equal chances (Rosanvallon)**

Current assumptions about the situation of economies and societies—especially in the U.S.A. and France—are strongly influenced the most recent publications in political sciences and economics. Highly relevant discussions have followed the publication of *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by French economist Thomas Piketty (Kaufmann, & Stützl, 2015; Piketty, 2014). Piketty analysed tax data over two centuries and concluded: Firstly, capital grows faster than income—his famous formula ' $r > g$ ' (revenue exceeds growth) receives some criticism, especially because of the database. Although interesting, this first conclusion is not so relevant for this article, so I do not discuss it further.

Secondly, Piketty concludes that the economic gaps in France and the US have increased since the 1980s, after having decreased for roughly 200 years because of revolutions, democratic developments, war and socio-political change. Piketty's second conclusion can be confirmed at least for Germany from regular reports on poverty and wealth [*Armut- und Reichtumsberichte*]<sup>4</sup>.

Piketty suggests global tax policies as well as higher taxation of the richest sections of societies (Kaufmann, & Stütze, 2015). His core focus is the 'equality of distribution', pointing at financial and economical inequalities.

While Piketty has been much discussed in the US since 2014, he was known much earlier in France for his analyses. The trade-unionist and scientist at the Collège de France, Pierre Rosanvallon, uses Piketty's results as a starting point for his theoretical approach in *Society of Equals* (Rosanvallon, 2013).

Rosanvallon uses the economical '(in)equality of distribution' and asks about the legitimization of this kind of (in)equality in modern societies. He asks about the assumptions about communities and relations which allow inequality to be understood as fair. A core narrative in modern societies seems to be the idea of 'equality of chances'. This narrative assumes that economic distribution is fair, as long as all members of a society have the same chance to climb the socioeconomic ladder by relying on their own performance and thus qualify for the income they receive.

According to Rosanvallon, the model has three consequences (2013):

Firstly, the idea of equality of chances delegitimizes instruments that rearrange economic possessions such as taxes, social insurances and social benefits. Thus, unsuccessful individuals are interpreted as responsible for their lack of success and income (blaming the

victim), while at the same time non-meritocratic, structural effects and exclusions from labour markets or respected societal positions become invisible. (pp. 303- 304)

Secondly, the idea of equality of chances has no upper limit for an annual income that can legitimately be received because of high performance. This may even lead to accepting spectacular forms of income, as long as it is taken for granted that the income relates to individual performance (ibid). Even CEO incomes that sometimes exceed more than two hundred times the income of an average employee (cf. Mishel & Davis, 2015) seem to be legitimate in this narrative.

The third aspect is the lower limit of what people need to be able to live in a society. Charity and humanity become the legitimation of defining the minimum social benefit, but not solidarity among members of a states' population (ibid, p. 304). This also means that social benefits can always be lowered or cut – and those who receive them feel ashamed about their status. Andrea Liesner, a Hamburg-based educational researcher, quotes Stéphane Hessel (*Indignez-vous!*) and states that average indignation in Germany is not focused on the *cutting* of social benefits, but the fact that some social benefits still remain, stating benefits would lead to passivity and lack of discipline amongst those who receive them (Liesner, 2012, p. 59).

Equality of chances is an idea and a narrative, but the real distributions follow many other aspects, like family background and social heritage.<sup>5</sup> The consequences of this non-fulfilment of the narrative lead to *dismissed reciprocity* (2013, p. 325), which I will understand here as *disengagement from solidarity*. Reciprocity is part of a larger theory of equality in Rosanvallon's approach. The three parts of a theory of equality consist of singularity, reciprocity and communality which he suggests for a better legitimation of the distribution of income. But as this paper does not use the complete sociological theory of Rosanvallon, the other aspects are not discussed here.

The reason for this disengagement is – according to Rosanvallon – the assumption that balanced participation on the one hand and the common refusal of free-riding are no longer the moral bases of the majority in contemporary societies. In exaggerated terms, upper, middle and lower classes would each have their own reasons to disengage by thinking the others do not show solidarity anymore:

- Celebrities and the super rich face the temptation to quit their country and pay tax in other (cheaper) areas of the world, if they do not feel they belong to their country anymore.
- Recipients of benefits experience disrespect and disdain (*Verhöhnung*, Butterwegge, 2015) of their status, instead of receiving solidarity from others towards their social group and ask themselves whether they would do better to adapt to the stereotypes that are told about them and in fact avoid controls and become deviant.
- Middle classes wonder whether they are the only ones sticking to the rules between those who might be avoiding taxation and those they assume to receive more benefits than they should. In case middle classes then fight back, their aims are to attack political and economic elites and as well as refugees or migrants.

The political consequences of low solidarity and reciprocity may well fuel the rise of populism as Rosanvallon states:

In sociological terms, the crisis of reciprocity is reflected in the malaise of the middle and working classes. Members of these groups who are employed see themselves as doubly penalized: their situations are not bad enough to receive the benefits of the welfare state,

yet they are not wealthy enough to enjoy the fiscal and other advantages available to the rich. Politically, their resentment has fueled the rise of the extreme right in Europe. Extreme right-wing parties have capitalized on frustrations due to the diffuse feeling that reciprocity has broken down, directing their fire at both the privileged elite and immigrants said to be taking advantage of the taxpayers' generosity (Rosanvallon, 2013, p. 275).

This line-up of three social classes struggling with each other for solidarity and distribution of chances and economic goods (as provided by Rosanvallon) is not yet complete. According to Jacques Rancière's „Disagreement“ (Rancière, 2002), there are always groups that do not even have the opportunity to negotiate, as they are not recognized as members of society. Rancière points at the fact that politics does not happen among those who sit at the table, but only when poor (2002, p. 26), illegitimate groups start claiming their rights. He states that it is especially the poor who benefit from politics (whether precarious workers, benefit recipients, teenage parents, workers in monotonous jobs or retired people who cannot live from their pension alone).

Rancière concludes that this is why poverty has been denied by dominant, prevailing groups for centuries (2002, p. 27). Politics start to happen when the part that has no part (*Anteil der Anteillosen*) finds their names and language, claims their part<sup>6</sup> and step by step gets recognized as a legitimate part of society and solidarity.

Silke Schreiber-Barsch used this approach with regard to participation in adult education (Schreiber-Barsch, 2009), while Nora Sternfeld used it for overall educational and transformative procedures (Sternfeld, 2009). Earlier works by Rancière focus on citizenship (1992, 2007) have been used by Vandenaabeele, Reyskens & Wildemeersch to challenge mainstream concepts of active citizenship and lifelong learning (2011, p. 193).

A subgroup of adults that in recent times left their invisible position in industrialized societies is the so-called group of functionally illiterates<sup>7</sup> or – in less stigmatising terms – adults with low literacy skills.

### **Sociopolitical disengagement: PIAAC variables**

Adults on PIAAC competence level I and below (adults with low literacy skills or low-literate adults) are the focus of national literacy strategies. To describe them and their sociopolitical engagement or disengagement, it is better to use literacy variables than formal education or socio-economic status for two reasons: First, formal education does not necessarily guarantee sufficient literacy competences throughout the adult lifespan. Second, adults without formal education can easily have a good literacy proficiency, especially in reading.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we use literacy (as defined in the narrow way according to international large-scale assessments like PIAAC) in order to look closer at the subpopulation which is addressed by the „Literacy Decade“ (2015-2025) in Germany.

We assume that the tendency to disengage from a solidaritarian society may be higher for low-literate adults than for high-literate adults. This is specified as:

- (1) low feelings of “political efficacy”
- (2) low expression of “social trust” and therefore
- (3) less voluntary work than high-literate groups.

All three aspects (political and social engagement or disengagement and consequently high or low readiness for volunteering) operationalize the theories discussed above. But

we do not focus on lower, middle or upper classes: This article focuses on literacy, not class (even if both correlate).

The variables used in PIAAC need some specification. PIAAC is an economic survey based on human-capital and rational-choice theories. The latter seem to be the theoretical base to the variables political efficacy and social trust, even if the theoretical framework only mentions very few aspects of the theoretical discussion underlying the variables.<sup>9</sup> Literacy and Education is said to predict economic outcomes as well as wider benefits on all sections of life:

There is good empirical evidence that education not only affects labour market outcomes but is also a strong predictor of outcomes in other life domains. The [background questionnaire, AG] includes indicators of family formation (...), health (...), voluntary work (...), political efficacy (...) and social trust (OECD, 2011, p. 46).

The assumptions about political efficacy and social trust rely on the idea of rational choices (*homo oeconomicus*), which mean humans vote or act socially as long as they think this makes sense because either it has an effect (political efficacy) or social acts will be reciprocated by others (social trust). Rational choice theories have often been criticized, mostly because they cannot explain altruism, friendship, morals, co-operation or solidarity in larger, functionally differentiated societies. Contemporary criticism comes from Pierre Rosanvallon, who prefers the idea of a *homo reciprocans* (2013, p. 319-320), who belongs to others and does not only individually or cognitively make rational decisions. In line with Rosanvallon, I prefer to interpret the PIAAC variables and results from the theoretical standpoint of reciprocal relations which make a society relevant for its members.

Rosanvallon also clarifies his position by stating that a lack of social cohesion allows the Nouvelle Droite (contemporary right-wing populism) to expand and use the feelings of disengagement for introducing their egoistic ideology.

The variables therefore have a connection with each other and can be read as indicators giving information about the democratic stability of societies and the dangers of right wing populists making use of social instability.

I will now check the variables with the PIAAC dataset and compare international and intra-national results. Data have been computed because of a Thematic Report "Adults with Low Skills", which was initiated by the OECD and has recently been published as OECD Education Working Paper 131 (deleted for anonymity). All countries have been included and all computations have been carried out with weighted datasets and plausible values, using the PIAAC repest module for the Stata software (designed by Francois Keslair, OECD). The English version of the questions reads as follows:

- Volunteering: "In the last 12 months, how often, if at all, did you do voluntary work, including unpaid work for a charity, political party, trade union or other non-profit organization?"<sup>10</sup>
- Political Efficacy: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does."<sup>11</sup>
- Social Trust: "There are only a few people you can trust completely."<sup>12</sup>

The analysis has been carried out by country and by literacy level. The results of the OECD partners Cyprus and Russia are shown in the graphs but will not be interpreted. Interpretation focuses on the OECD countries.



### Findings by country and literacy level

The analysis tries to describe the subpopulations of low-literate adults compared to high-literate adults and specified by country. This does *not* mean literacy is the cause for political efficacy, social trust or volunteering. The question is how people with low literacy skills act and feel in their societies and how this differs from high-literate adults. Further discussion may take place and clarify whether the gaps should be seen as a reason for offering possibilities for political and social participation for them, including adult education.

### Findings and discussion: adults performing at literacy level I and below assume they have little political efficacy

*Political Efficacy* has to be understood as one's own feeling of having the capacity to understand politics enough to participate, and as the feeling of responsiveness of governments. The question has been operationalized negatively, asking about a lack of influence on governments. Critics state this might be a narrow definition of politics, as it is reduced to governments, political institutions and elections, while many other expressions of political activities – like demonstrations, petitions, ecological awareness, struggles against class, gender and race inequalities are left out of this definition.

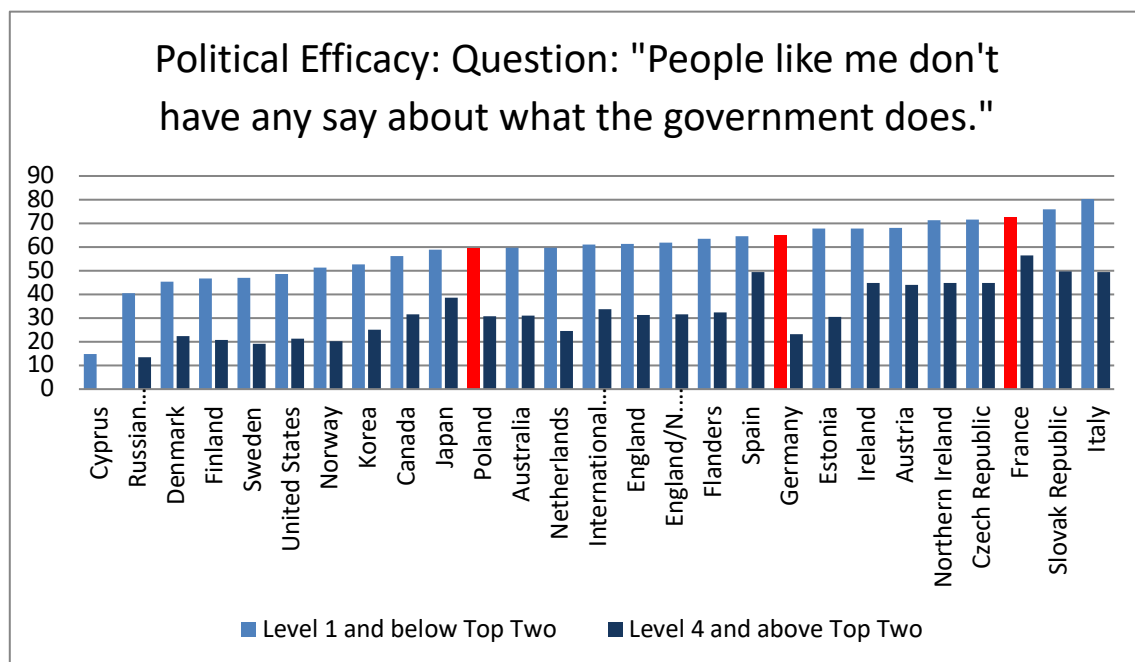


Figure 1: Political Efficacy (Top Two Negative Answers) by Literacy Levels and Country (Quelle: PIAAC, 2012 data).

Roughly two thirds of the German population at or below literacy Level I (65%) assume not to be able to influence their government. The gap between low and high-literate adults (23%) is rather large (more than 40 percentage points) and larger than the gaps of all other countries.

A closer look at Poland and France, two large but historically very different neighboring countries, shows interesting differences. While Germany has a large gap in 2012 (when the data was gathered), the northeastern neighbor Poland finds better feelings of political efficacy in the low subpopulation (59%) and worse for high-literate adults (31%). Poland changed their economic system to capitalism and their government to a democracy in an ongoing process in the 1980s. Four years later a nationalist government took over, but the data represent the situation in 2012.

Geographically on the southwestern side, France faces nearly three quarters of low-literates agreeing to the statement of feeling politically ineffective (73%). More striking, however, is the group of roughly 56% of the high-literate adults feeling disengaged from their government, this figure being the highest of all participating countries in 2012. Neither French conservative nor French socialist governmental actions seem to convince the contemporary French population of their political efficacy: Politics obviously disconnects with voters.

The international results are robust and confirm the Mathew Effect, which is known for *formal education*, holding true for *literacy competence* as well. All countries' low-literate populations report lower political efficacies than the high-literate adults. These data do not mean low-literate adults are to be blamed for. The explanation by German political scientist Christoph Butterwegge seems more convincing: precarious groups and lower classes vote less often than others. So politicians, who depend on voters, organize their activities towards middle classes (Butterwegge, 2015). Therefore, the most precarious groups actually do not receive any response from their politicians, and thus the statement of being politically ineffective is simply true. This does not mean low-literate adults were politically uninterested; they still may protest or enjoy satirical shows. And they also may feel understood by nationalist and populist agitators – which is an expression of political thoughts and wills as well, even if it has nothing in common with democracy, solidarity or social cohesion.

### **Findings and discussion: adults performing at literacy level I and below express low social trust**

Social trust is – for this analysis – an indicator representing the social cohesion of societies, as Rosanvallón claims. The question of whether to trust not only one's government but also other members of society is – as explained above – most important for legitimizing monetary distributions within these societies. In case middle classes suspect upper classes of avoiding taxation and lower classes of illegally receiving more benefits than they have a legal right to, the middle classes feel exploited by others who do not stick to the rules. This would increase the tendency of social disengagement and a loss of solidarity.

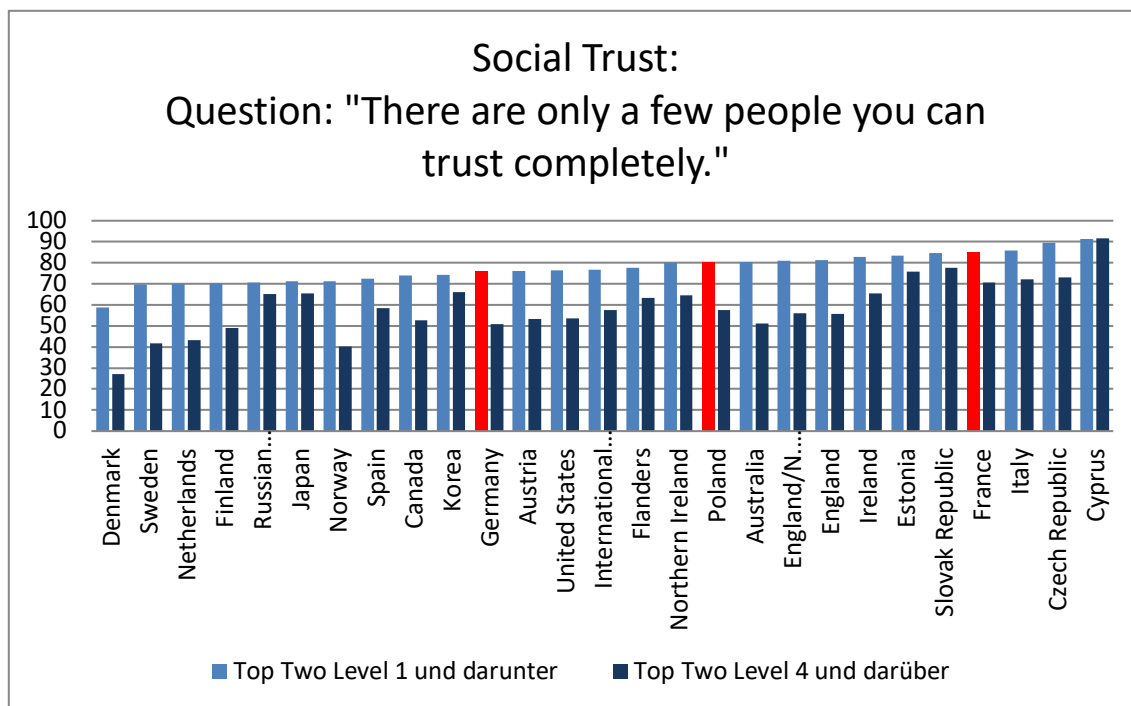


Figure 2: Social Trust (Top Two Negative Answers) by Literacy Level and Country (Source: PIAAC 2012 data).

Compared to other countries, Germany can build upon a rather good structure of social trust. Real solidarity seems to be most widespread in the Nordic countries, with the lowest values for mistrust for both high and low-literate adults.

The international comparison shows again that Germany has quite a large gap between high and low-literate subpopulations and their feelings of social trust (25 percentage points). However, in contrast to the other Nordic countries, Norway has the largest gap, with 30 percentage points. This surprising position in the *international* comparison could perhaps be explained by the recent extreme right terrorist act (Utoya, 2011), but this does not explain the large gap *within* Norwegian society.

Some 80 percent of low-literate Polish adults express social mistrust. This is higher than in Germany (76%) but lower than in France (85%).<sup>13</sup> Rosanvallon, who explained his theories on a lack of social cohesion based on French and American history, can thus be confirmed for the case of France. The U.S.A. in the year 2012 does not show similarly severe difficulties regarding social trust (76% low-literate adults vs. 53% high-literate adults), but still a considerable number of low-literate adults seem to disconnect with their society. This may have become much worse in the past four years since the data were collected.

Intra-national gaps are in all cases much larger than the international differences.

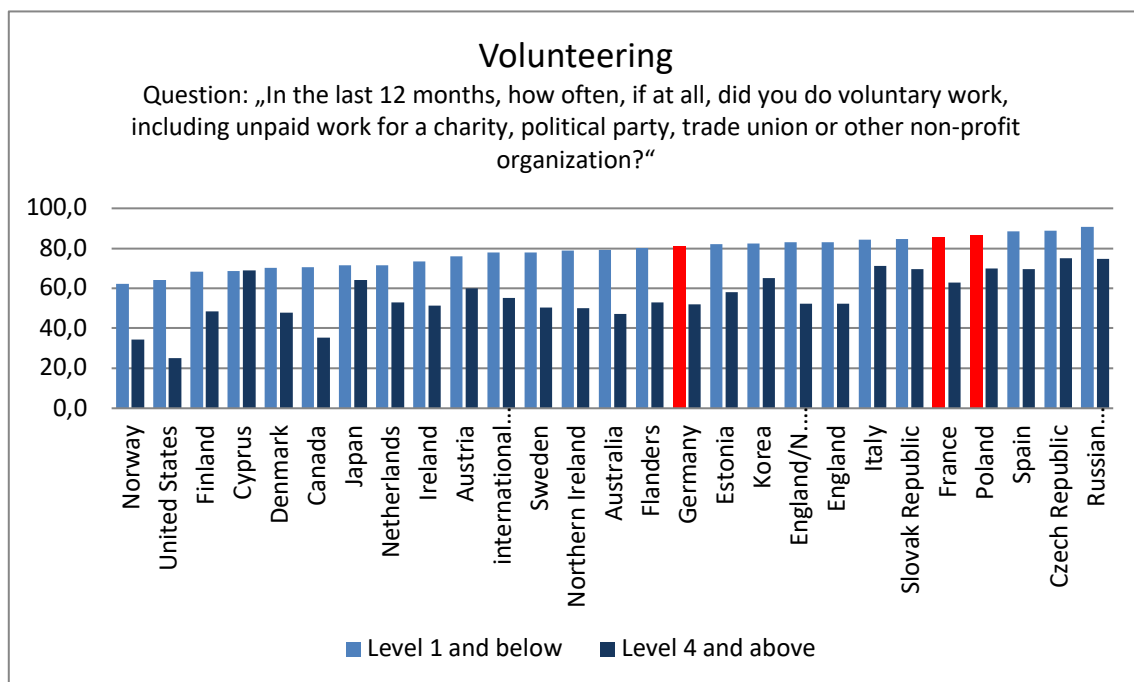
### Findings and discussion: adults performing at literacy level I and below participate less in volunteering

Low feelings of social trust and political efficacy will be mirrored in lesser engagement for the society and community. It can be assumed that low-literate adults participate less often in non-governmental, non-profit organizations.

It is important to keep in mind that inclusion and exclusion play a role here. Lower formal education or a migration background correlate with low integration in social organizations in Germany (Albert, Hurrelmann, & Quenzel, 2015). Literacy is not necessarily the most relevant factor. We also cannot conclude that low-literate adults are responsible for less volunteering, as they are sometimes smoothly excluded from non-profit organizations by dominant, well-educated groups.

Furthermore, the welfare regime of the economies and societies respectively is a relevant factor. The question as to whether social security is guaranteed by social law and transfer, or whether it has to be provided by the citizens themselves, does have an impact on the readiness to participate in voluntary work and engage for others in need.

In fact, the two extremes, the traditionally neo-liberal, Anglo-American states, with their charity approach on the one hand, and the sociodemocratic Nordic countries, with guaranteed social welfare on the other can be found side by side in the higher ranks of the table. Roughly two thirds of low-literate adults state that they never volunteer (Norway: 62%, USA: 64%), or looked at the other way around, roughly one third do participate in voluntary work. At the other end of the scale, we find France (86%) and Poland (87%), indicating that only some 13 or 14% of their low-literate populations get in touch with voluntary activities.



*Figure 3: Volunteering (Answer: Never) by Literacy Level and Country (Source: PIAAC 2012 data). Differences between Germany and Poland/France are significant. Differences between Poland and France are not significant.*

Of Germany's low-literate adults, some 81% state that they never volunteered, compared to high-literate adults, where about half of the group (52%) never entered non-profit organizations. The mechanisms of self-exclusion and external exclusion are not only relevant with regard to employment but also in non-profit organizations, as well as in global and local community activities. The findings are robust across countries.

Adults performing at level IV and above are most often found volunteering in the US, Norway, Canada, Australia, Denmark and Finland. We assume that Anglo-American

societies with a more neoliberal tradition, who give responsibility for social aid to charity and volunteering structures, mix in the ranking with more egalitarian sociodemocratic welfare regimes, which offer public services (and therefore need less volunteering) but also face less social exclusion in their non-profit organizations. The findings for the level I and below subpopulations and the level IV and above subpopulations are quite similar to each other.

### **Further discussion with regard to contemporary right-wing populism**

Calls for more civic education always become louder when populist, xenophobic and similar groups and parties are founded or elected. Civic education – especially for adults - cannot solve these problems alone, but it is still a relevant factor for prevention and for throwing light onto simplifying populist mechanisms and worldviews. Faced with the increasingly louder voice of nationalism in the political arena, this would seem to be quite necessary these days.

However, by way of an explanation for nationalism and right-wing world views, often a special pattern is reproduced, claiming that economic losers, high unemployment, lack of perspectives for youth, low education and feelings of exclusion would lead to xenophobia (Heitmeyer, 2002). These explanations are tempting, but they ignore the fact that populists who act willingly to spread their right-wing ideology and try to recruit members for their movement or parties from such socioeconomic losers are needed. Thus, Heitmeyer's unpolitical interpretation of neofascist activities in Germany has been fundamentally criticized (Dierbach, 2010).

Sociological indicators, like an increasing divide between incomes, as well as the delegitimization of social transfers, which are shown above, can only be interpreted as the soil where neofascist or populist, xenophobic or nationalist seeds can grow. But it always needs people who willingly want to spread their right-wing ideology. Indeed, socially losing groups may equally feel attracted to left-wing approaches like Syriza or Podemos, who may listen to their needs and bring them to the political arena. That is the reason why political or civic education can be successful.

Furthermore, the Leipzig Surveys on the *economic middle classes* and the *political centre* (so-called „Mitte-Studien“, Decker et al., 2016) point at the fact that right-wing populism becomes dangerous *when* and *because* it is accepted by the middle and center of societies.

But nevertheless, the decrease of social cohesion always shows up a paradox regarding the lower classes and their participation in elections. Butterwegge (2015) argues: People who belong to lower classes or receive social benefit are underrepresented in elections, that is, many of them do not vote. Politicians then learn that lower classes seldom vote, so acting towards their needs would not result in winning elections – as a consequence, politicians care more for the middle classes and their claims and disregard the lower classes. If this assumption is true, lower classes, receivers of benefits as well as the low-literate among them were quite right in assuming they do not have any say in what the government does.

### **Conclusions: relevance of political literacy and basic civic education?**

Conclusions here rely on two aspects of the article. The *theoretical* discussion informs about the mechanisms of material spread of income (Piketty) and its legitimization

(Rosanvallon) in current societies – and their impact on different classes within the social distribution. The *empirical* results about adults and their feeling of *political efficacy* and *social trust* as well as their participation opportunities in *voluntary activities* show large gaps between low-literate and high literate adults in all countries.

The question as to whether all social classes can influence their societies' politics and whether governments and societies can rely on a certain degree of social cohesion and solidarity, seems highly relevant in times of refugees and migrants coming to Europe or at least trying to do so. Disengagement and decreasing solidarity, as Rosanvallon states, develop because of the feeling of having too little influence on the government. The narrative of equal chances delegitimizes taxation and social benefit and leads to conflicts regarding the spread of income and capital. Each social class can have the feeling that the other social classes take too much out of the commons and give back too little:

- At the top end of the social hierarchy, spectacular cases of tax avoidance, extreme CEO incomes and corruption are reported.
- Those who receive social benefit are shamed (by governments!) as unemployed *lazybones*<sup>14</sup> or migrants only *simulating their will to integrate*<sup>15</sup> into German society.
- Parts of the middle classes try to keep together what they understand as theirs, protecting it against others by voting for populist parties and fighting against elites and migrants.

The core question is whether these activities are carried out by a few people (and just made visible via mass media) within a solidarity society, or whether these few are already the majority. The parts of a society who agree to fund social benefits through their taxes are rather relevant for welfare regimes. The findings about political efficacy, social trust and volunteering thus can be read as indicators, pointing at the quality of social cohesion and solidarity in western societies.

For the question of literacy and its correlation with political efficacy, social trust and volunteering, the findings confirm the thesis that all three indicators show lower results for subpopulations with low literacy skills. This is confirmed by qualitative research recently carried out in Germany with low-literate adults (cf. Pape, 2011). This situation is dissatisfying for democratic societies with a tax-paid social welfare system. But it is also dissatisfying because the results can be interpreted as rather fewer possibilities for political participation for low-literate adults. Feelings of political efficacy correlate with taking political action (both in conventional ways, like voting, as well as in unorthodox ways, like the blockading of crossroads or public areas), as the political scientist Angelika Vetter shows (1998, p. 34 et seqq.). Relatively small parameter values for political efficacy – which can be shown for low-literate adults in all participating OECD countries – indicate restricted possibilities for political participation.

This brings us back to the question asked at the beginning of this paper: if less participation in employment and work life, a higher risk of exclusion from the labor market, and low incomes in menial jobs are a reason to start programs on workforce literacy, shouldn't the findings of this analysis lead to a discussion on political literacy? Shouldn't the terms (political literacy, civic education, basic civic education) be discussed and didactical approaches be offered?

Apart from this sociological reason for political literacy provision, several scholars claim for an emancipatory approach anyway (cf. Ribolits, 2009, p. 175 et seqq.) – without needing any statistical base for this, the starting point is normative, not empirically driven. The idea is that basic education cannot only help people *adapt* to social realities, but also

has to make an effort to teach people to understand and *change* the situation. Mere adaptation would lead to defensive learning, as German learning theorist Klaus Holzkamp states (1993), which appears in combination with unreflected *learning reluctancies* (Lernwiderstände, Faulstich, & Bayer, 2006). On the other hand, expansive learning (Holzkamp, 1993) aims at an expansion of one's own sovereignty, both in material as well as in immaterial terms (deleted for anonymity).

This would lead to adults who learn to clarify their interests, claim them and expand the areas where they can decide according to their values, interests and needs. This may be decisions about work and leisure time, for and against starting a family, long-term job security, knowledge of trade unions, tariffs and rights as workers, better income and affordable housing – all these aspects being more or less material improvements of one's life. But expansive learning may also lead to better participation and embeddedness in political structures, in non-profit organizations, in better quality of friendships and personal relations as well as better understanding of contemporary aspects of life by reading weblogs or newspapers – just to name some examples for immaterial outcomes of expansive learning, especially with regard to political literacy.

Thus it is from both perspectives (sociological and emancipatory) quite relevant to offer political literacy and workforce literacy side by side, instead of giving one of them full attention and neglecting the other. But it will be necessary to develop didactical settings for civic education that really attract low-literate adults by allowing them to clarify their interests and needs and to articulate them – and this may include the deconstruction of the narrative of equal chances – and find legitimizations for solidarity which understand and scrutinize the dominant neo-liberal ideology.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this case we understand literacy as literacy competence in terms of the Programme of the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), because we want to use PIAAC data for the analysis. Our reflection of the controversy on literacy relies especially on the New Literacy Studies (Grotlüschen, Heinemann & Nienkemper, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See below for the theoretical concept of political efficacy and for the PIAAC theoretical framework.

<sup>3</sup> A rather well known construct can be seen in the international approach of basic, critical political education which relies on Oskar Negt's notion of societal competences Zeuner (2013). This approach led to an international project under the leadership of Christine Zeuner (Dvorak, Zeuner, & Franke, 2005). So far, the relationship between Basic Education (Grund-Bildung) and Basic Competence (Grund-Kompetenz) seems rather unclear.

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from: [www.armuts-und-reichtumsbericht.de](http://www.armuts-und-reichtumsbericht.de)

<sup>5</sup> Early studies show that the core selection mechanism in the German educational system, the transition to different school types after grade 4, is much more influenced by parents' socioeconomic status than by the performance of the student (Lehmann, Peek, & Gänsfuß, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> When middle classes start claiming that refugee homes should not be built in their neighbourhood, the lack of a *voice* that would be *heard* by powerful groups becomes clear. Refugees' possibilities to make a claim are not verbal – they consist of self-vulnerating actions like starting fires in their own camps, going on hunger strikes, risking dangerous flight routes and vulnerating practices like stitching up ones' own lips.

<sup>7</sup> Labeling groups of people always contains the dialectics of homogenizing and essentializing the group according to a single characteristic and thus reducing them to the label. On the other hand, the claim for compensation cannot be made without precise distinctions between those who have a right to receive compensation and those who do not. This dilemma cannot be overcome by more euphemistic (politically correct) words. It must be taken into consideration each time a group is characterized. A common approach is to distinguish between the *person* and the *issue* (low-literate adults) instead of making the issue a label (low-literates).

<sup>8</sup> Roughly 80% of those considered to perform on a level called functional illiteracy hold a school qualification. The definition of functional illiteracy corresponds with UNESCO-Definitions: "A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective

functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development" (sources and discussion: deleted for anonymity).

<sup>9</sup> The framework then points at the work by Tom Schuller and Richard Desjardin's who, under the idea of rational choice approaches, stand for the approach of *Wider Benefits of Learning*.

<sup>10</sup> I\_Q 05f About yourself - Cultural engagement - Voluntary work for non-profit organizations. Answers: Never, Less than once a month, Less than once a week but at least once a month, At least once a week but not every day, Every day.

<sup>11</sup> IQ06a About yourself – Political efficacy – No influence on the government, Answers: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.

<sup>12</sup> IQ 07a About yourself – Social trust – Trust only few people, Answers: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree. The Variable "IQ 07b About yourself – Social trust – Other people take advantage of me" has not been used here, because it is part of a construct made of two variables (IQ07a, IQ07b), which tests social trust. As the others are not constructs but merely single variables (IQ05, IQ06) it felt fairer to use one variable each and not two for social trust, one for political efficacy and one for volunteering.

<sup>13</sup> All differences are statistically significant.

<sup>14</sup> Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (social democrats) claimed in 2001, job agencies should show more strictness against those unemployed who are unwilling to work. The tabloid press (BILD) quotes him stating "There is no right to laziness in our society".

<sup>15</sup> Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel (social democrats) stated at a press conference in April 2016 concerning the new immigration law (SZ 15.4.2016) Germany would not want "Integration simulators" ("Integrationsimulanten"), he meant refugees who would only pretend they would want to integrate.

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