

Weekly Report

Value Change: More and More Germans Showing a Postmaterialistic Orientation

A popular theory of value change states that “postmaterialistic” values such as emancipation and personal development are steadily replacing traditional “materialistic” values such as social advancement and economic security as a result of the ongoing improvement of living conditions since the Second World War. Post-materialism is thus seen as a phenomenon directly linked to economic affluence.

Based on the Socio-Economic Panel data, it can be shown that between 1986 and 2006, the percentage of individuals displaying a postmaterialistic value orientation has risen among West Germans. Surprisingly, East Germans have become distinctly more postmaterialistic in the last ten years, and have virtually reached the West German level. In general, each generation tends to be somewhat more postmaterialistic than the one before. Particularly postmaterialistic population groups are the self-employed, people with a high level of education, and Alliance 90/Green Party supporters.

An analysis of value orientations within families shows that adult siblings display strong similarities to one another with regard to their values, which suggests a process of value formation taking place during childhood and adolescence. The results also show that it is not the economic situation in parental households but rather the parents’ value orientations that most crucially shape their children’s values.

The theory of postmaterialistic value change was formulated by American political scientist Ronald Inglehart in the wake of the sweeping societal changes of the early 1970s.¹ It states that the vast improvement in economic living conditions in many western democracies since the end of the Second World War has resulted in the replacement of traditional “materialistic” values, with new “postmaterialistic” values. Inglehart regards materialistic values as being expressed by an individual emphasis on security, social advancement, and prestige, while postmaterialistic values emphasize self-development, quality of life, emancipation, and civic participation.

¹ Cf. Inglehart, R.: The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies. *American Political Science Review* 65, 1971, 991–1017; Inglehart, R.: *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*. Princeton 1977; Inglehart, R.: *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton 1997; Inglehart, R., Welzel, C.: *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*. Princeton 2005.

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The social and political consequences identified as resulting from this value change are significant, starting from the student protests of 1968, through the growing environmental, women's, and peace movements, and on to the founding of the Green Party. At the same time, cohabitation and attitudes toward work have also been influenced by value change. Labor market participation no longer focuses solely on securing a living, but increasingly on the opportunities available for professional development and individual advancement. The theory of postmaterialistic value change assumes its occurrence with a time lag of one generation and not simultaneously with the increase in affluence. According to the theory, people who grow up in economically or politically uncertain times remain materialists throughout their lives and those who experience economic excess and security during their childhood and adolescence advocate postmaterialistic values in their lives. Therefore, the newly established security and the economic wonder of the 1950s were only expressed in the social changes during the 1970s. According to Inglehart, value change does not take place through individual change of opinion, but rather, through the constant moving up of birth years with new values, which influence majority opinion little by little.

"Maintaining order" versus "freedom of speech"

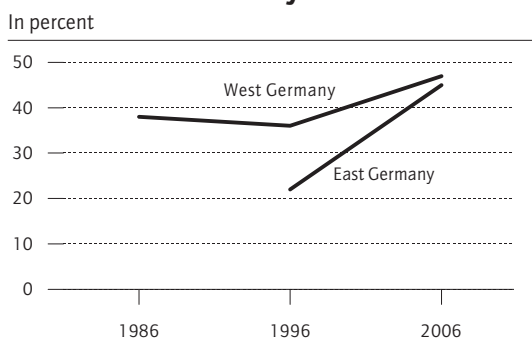
Values of materialism and postmaterialism were surveyed in the Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) carried out by DIW Berlin, in cooperation with Infratest Sozialforschung in 1986, 1996 and 2006, using the standard survey instruments developed by Inglehart.² Those surveyed are asked to rank the four possible goals of state action "maintaining order in the nation", "fighting rising prices", "protecting freedom of speech" and "giving people more say in important government decisions", according to individually perceived importance. If those surveyed give preference to the first two political goals over the last two, in terms of importance, they are classified as materialists. If they give preference to the last two political goals, they are described as postmaterialists.³

² Cf. Frick, J. et al.: 25 Wellen Sozio-oekonomisches Panel. Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung of DIW Berlin, No. 3/2008.

³ The assumption that the ranking of the political goals provides information about the orientation of those surveyed toward materialism/postmaterialism is shared in a large part of social science literature; however, it is not without criticism. It is argued that "fighting rising prices" depends on the relevant inflation rate and is therefore unsuitable for measuring stable value orientations, cf. Clarke, H. D., Dutt, N.: Measuring Value Change in Western Industrialized Societies: The Impact of Unemployment. *American Political Science Review* 85, 1991, 905-920. Furthermore, it is criticised that the goals "protection freedom of speech" and "giving people more say in important government decisions" are indicators of democratic standards and not the postmaterialism concept

Figure 1

Persons with Postmaterialistic Values in West and East Germany



Sources: SOEP; Calculations by DIW Berlin **DIW Berlin 2008**

In West Germany, the share of postmaterialists has risen during the past twenty years, from 38 to 47 percent, whereby the emphasis on postmaterialistic values was slightly lower in the mid-1990s than in the mid-1980s (Figure 1).⁴

In East Germany, a distinct increase in postmaterialism, virtually to the West German level, can be identified between 1996 and 2006: In just ten years, the share of postmaterialists doubled from 22 to 45 percent. This comparably rapid development cannot be explained entirely by generational replacement in the newly-formed German states, and it indicates a periodic effect that contests Inglehart's theory of value change. The strong emphasis on material needs and security in East Germany in the mid-1990s was presumably a result of the economic collapse and system transformation. Ten years later, East Germans supported the postmaterialistic goals of free expression of opinion and political co-determination to a similar extent as individuals from the former West German states.

Figure 2 reflects the deviation in proportions of postmaterialists from the average for different birth cohorts. The spread of materialism/postmaterialism within the birth cohorts is highly stable over the twenty year period. This finding, which applies equally to all groups of cohorts, indicates that people do not change their values systematically in a particular direction over the life course, as conventional life course theories such as "aging conservatism"

within Inglehart's meaning.

⁴ The trend toward postmaterialism can be observed in West Germany, as well as in other Western European societies on the basis of Eurobarometer data and general population surveys since the early 70s.

would expect.⁵ For example, the generation born between 1960 and 1969 is comprised of an above-average number of postmaterialists, both at the age of 20 (survey year 1986) and at the age of 40 (survey year 2006). Similarly, the share of postmaterialists in the generation born between 1910 and 1919 is around 20 percentage points lower than the average, both at the age of around 70 (survey year 1986) and at the age of 90 (survey year 2006).

It is also noticeable that each generation studied is more postmaterialistic than the preceding one. The clearest changes in the shift from materialistic values to postmaterialistic values are in the shift from the war generation (born up to 1929) to the post-war generation (born 1930 to 1949) and later generations (born since 1950). This result largely corresponds to the forecasts by the theory of postmaterialistic value change. The births since 1950 tend to differ less widely in West Germany with respect to the proportion of postmaterialists.⁶

Postmaterialism in Different Groups of the Society

The previous results indicate that the population is becoming increasingly postmaterialistic with each successive generation. To an increasing extent, personal development and social emancipation are seen as being more important than social advancement and economic security. Table 1 shows the proportion of postmaterialists in various groups of the population in 2006.

When looking at occupational status, we see an above-average share of post-materialists among the self-employed and management executives (each above 55 percent). A below-average share can be seen for laborers (44 percent). In line with the findings by birth cohorts, pensioners are particularly materialistic (68 percent) and persons in education are particularly postmaterialistic (60 percent).

Furthermore, a relationship is seen between postmaterialism and education: the higher the educational degree, the higher the share of postmaterialists (56 percent for high school graduates). Only a weak relationship is found for income. The twenty percent of the population with the highest household income—the upper income quintile—is comprised of the highest share of postmaterialists, at 50

⁵ Cf., e.g., Glenn, N. D.: Aging and Conservatism. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415, 1974, 176–186.

⁶ When looking at West and East Germany separately, the findings show each new birth year is more post-materialistic than the previous one on average in East Germany as in West Germany. However, the clearest difference between two subsequent generations occurs somewhat later in the East, between 1950/1959 and 1960/1969.

Figure 2

Persons with Postmaterialistic Values by Birth Cohorts

Deviations from the average in percentage points



Sources: SOEP; Calculations by DIW Berlin.

DIW Berlin 2008

percent. Among recipients of Hartz IV, the share of postmaterialists is significantly higher than the average of the population. However, it should also be noted that the average recipients of Hartz IV are younger working-age persons.

With regard to marital status, the share of postmaterialists in non-married partnerships is higher, at 55 percent, than in married partnerships, at 43 percent. The strongest difference in the share of materialists and postmaterialists is related to individual party affiliation. A distinct majority of Alliance 90/Green Party supporters are postmaterialists (74 percent), while a distinct majority of CDU/CSU voters are materialists (65 percent).

If we replicate our analysis of postmaterialism in various population groups based on data gathered in 1986 in West Germany (not documented in the form of a table), a very similar distribution is found as in the 2006 data for Germany as a whole, but at a lower level. In individual areas, the differences have even declined between the population groups. For example, the share of postmaterialists among persons with an elementary school/primary school diploma was 30 percent in 1986, compared with 62

Table 1

Postmaterialists by Occupational Status, Education, Income, Marital Status, and Party Affiliation 2006

Shares in percent of the respective population group

Occupational Status	
Unemployed	50
Pensioners	32
Other non-employed	41
Training	60
Unskilled or non-trained workers	44
Skilled workers	44
Unskilled or non-trained employee/civil servant	47
Management employee/civil servant	55
Self-Employed, freelancers without employees	61
Self-Employed, freelancers with employees	56
Highest Educational Degreee¹	
Primary/elementary	36
Secondary school	48
University entrance qualification	56
Household income²	
1st Quintile	45
2nd Quintile	42
3rd Quintile	45
4th Quintile	48
5th Quintile	50
Hartz IV recipients	
No receipt of Hartz IV	46
Receipt of Hartz IV ³	54
Marital status	
Living alone	49
Non-marital partnership	55
Marital partnership	43
Party affiliation⁴	
SPD	48
CDU/CSU	35
FDP	54
Alliance 90/Green Party	74
Die Linke.PDS/WASG	60
No party affiliation	46
Total	46

¹ Without pupils and people without a school diploma.² Equivalence-weighted net household income.³ Including recipients of social benefits.⁴ Question in the SOEP: "Many people in Germany are inclined toward a certain political party, although from time to time they vote for a different political party. What about you: Are you inclined, generally speaking, toward a particular party?" Other party affiliations not stated.

Sources: SOEP; Calculations by DIW Berlin.

DIW Berlin 2008

percent for those with a university entrance qualification. The difference between Green Party supporters and supporters of the Christian Democrats was still 81 to 25 percent in 1986, compared with 74 to 35 percent in 2006.

In general it can be said that differences between population groups can be identified according to occupational status, marital status, and income, but

these differences are moderate and therefore do not indicate a value change exclusively in specific social structural groups.

How formative are experiences during adolescence for individual values?

A central hypothesis of the theory of postmaterialistic value change is the formation of values during childhood and adolescence, whereby Inglehart emphasizes the significance of the economic environment during adolescence for the development of materialistic/postmaterialistic values.

A conventional method of assessing the influence of experiences during adolescence on later individual attitudes and conduct lies in the investigation of siblings. To the degree that adult siblings are more similar in terms of their values than purely randomly selected persons, it can be concluded that value formation results from commonalities between siblings during their childhood and adolescence. In fact, data on families surveyed in the SOEP show that the tendency toward materialism/postmaterialism is also shared over the long term by the majority of the 948 adult siblings studied. But what types of common experiences lead to the high similarity in values between siblings?

Inglehart argues that experiences of economic scarcity during childhood and adolescence lead to the formation of materialistic values, while experiences of affluence lead to postmaterialistic values. In Table 2, the change in individual probability of advocating materialistic values rather than postmaterialistic values is portrayed in dependence on the parental employment and income situations. While the value orientations was measured by the SOEP for respondents as adults, the parental characteristics relate to a point in time when those surveyed were around the age of 15. Here, we look at parental unemployment, income poverty, and the receipt of social benefits.

In the case of unemployment and poverty, the positive effect identified corresponds to the expectations. The probability of being a materialist as an adult rises by seven respectively three percent, if the person grows up in poverty or in a household with unemployed parents. Under consideration of poverty and unemployment, the probability of holding materialistic values declines somewhat in cases where parents have received social transfers, by two percent. However, it is important to note that none of these three effects lie within the realm of statistical significance. Due to the sampling error, it cannot be stated with certainty that the effects differ from nil.

In contrast to Inglehart's theory of postmaterialistic value change, an insecure environment during adolescence is not a particularly good predictor for materialism in adults. A parental characteristic that remains largely disregarded by the theory of postmaterialistic value change, but that shows a statistically significant influence on the development of values according to this study, is the value orientation of the parents. Individuals whose parents advocated materialistic values have a 17 percent higher probability of also being materialists as adults.

The finding that economic environment during childhood and adolescence has a minor influence on the development of postmaterialistic values appears to require further explanation from a theoretical perspective. This result appears not to correspond to the findings of an increase in postmaterialistic values among younger birth cohorts, and the high incidence of postmaterialistic values among people with above-average education and income. A precarious economic situation during childhood may possibly not have the same meaning today that it did up to the Second World War due to the availability of welfare state programs. However, it is also possible that expansion of the educational system and not increasing affluence is responsible for the higher proportions of postmaterialism in younger birth cohorts.

Another problem with Inglehart's theory of postmaterialistic value change is the finding of a positive relationship between values of the parents and their children. If each generation is not only influenced by economic conditions in the development of their values but also by the value orientations of their parents, value change does not take place in a linear relationship to economic development, with a time lag of one generation, as presumed by Inglehart.

If the majority of the parental generation has a materialistic orientation—as was the case in Germany for many years—but the majority of their children grow up in relative affluence, the value change to postmaterialism tends to be slower than assumed based on the tendency of parents to bring up and educate their children in a materialistic way. However, if the majority of a future parental generation itself is included among the postmaterialists and if the economic situation of the population also improves over the long term, affluence and parental upbringing will both positively influence the share of postmaterialists in future birth cohorts. In this case, the value change to postmaterialism would take place even more quickly than economic development would lead us to expect.

Table 2

Change in the Probability¹ for Materialistic Values According to Parental Characteristics

In percent²

Unemployment	+7
Poverty ³	+3
Social benefits	-2
Materialism of parents	+17

¹ The details relate to marginal effects, which were determined in a binary logit regression.

² Data was used from 420 persons surveyed who already lived in SOEP households, and their values were observed as adults over a period of at least ten, in several cases, even 20 years. The number of observations amounts to 903.

³ The equivalence-weighted net household income amounts to less than 60 percent of the median income.

Sources: SOEP; Calculations by DIW Berlin.

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Conclusion

The SOEP data show that the slow change in value orientation that can be observed in most countries since the 1970s is continuing until today. However, the increasing share of postmaterialists cannot be explained exclusively by generational replacement. The data verify in particular a strong transmission of value orientations from parents to their children.

If this trend toward postmaterialism continues, it will require socio-political adaptation processes. This form of value change will result in demands for politics beyond order and security, and political parties will be confronted increasingly with questions of distributional justice and environmental issues as well. Employers will be required to invest more in the professional development of their employees than in their pure monetary security. A social order that has previously been orientated toward traditional life models and role distributions must adapt more to the requirement for personal development. Current efforts to improve the situation of professional women, the movement for equality of non-marital and same-sex partnerships, and the more intensive participation of migrants in all areas of social life are evidence of this development.

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