

# The Cosmopolitanism of Elites In Many Countries, the Population as a Whole Tends to Be Nationally Minded

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The rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the British vote to leave the EU, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States are increasingly interpreted as consequences of the opposition between a nationalist-minded population and a cosmopolitan elite. Can this really be seen in such sweeping terms? To answer this question, we have compared attitudes in the population at large with those of elites and international leaders in Germany, Mexico, Turkey, and the United States. We focused particularly on differences in attitudes towards globalization issues such as migration, free trade, supranational integration, and the fight against climate change.

By cosmopolitan attitudes we understand positive attitudes towards these globalization trends. Our study is based on a comparison of attitudes and values from an international WZB survey among more than 1,600 top leaders in the economy, public relations, politics, administration, justice, the military, science, media, trade unions, church, and civil societies with the attitudes and values from mass publics in international social surveys.

Research clearly shows that European political and economic elites take a very positive view of European integration whereas the population at large is split in its attitudes towards the EU. An earlier WZB study, too, had shown that this divide exists in Germany not only with respect to European integration but also on other globalization issues (this study was present in the *WZB-Mitteilungen* in December 2013). Our new study permits us to expand these research findings to include data from industrial and newly industrialized countries outside Western Europe. For example, we can show that not only in Germany do elites take a far more positive attitude than the population at large towards transferring national sovereignty to supranational institutions—and thus towards supranational integration.

## Unity of globalist elites

The index scores shown here reveal how large a proportion of respondents in social surveys and our elite survey wish to allow national governments to decide not alone but together with regional or international organizations in certain policy areas. The figure shows that not only in Germany but also in Poland, Turkey, and the United States (but hardly at all in Mexico), elites are more favorable towards such division of sovereignty than the overall population. In our study we also noted such a difference in attitudes towards migration, free trade, and global warming. Thus elites favor migration and free trade more than the population at large and give greater priority to combating climate change. Although divergence between citizens and elites varies from issue to issue and country to country, in all five countries under study the holders of top positions are more cosmopolitan-minded than the average citizen.

How has this gap arisen? One frequent argument is that elites benefit from globalization while the average citizen and especially the workers have to bear the costs alone. Those at the top benefit from economic growth, which is promoted by free trade and migration, while those at the bottom suffer from greater competition on the labor market.

**Summary:** Important current political events in different countries are explained by a gap between cosmopolitan elites and more nationalistic mass publics. But are elites everywhere more cosmopolitan than the average citizen? And if so, why? We base our analysis on a comparison of data from an elite survey conducted at the WZB and such from mass surveys. We come to the conclusion that elites are more cosmopolitan than the masses on a global scale and that this can rather be explained by socialization than by economic self-interest.



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Our analysis produces little evidence to support this thesis. In the first place, people with little school education in the leading industrial countries Germany and the United States differ hardly at all from those in less industrialized countries such as Mexico, Poland, and Turkey, even though the lower classes in the latter countries have benefited much more from globalization than those in the leading industrial countries. Second, it is a contradiction to accuse elites of economic egoism because they are not only in favor of immigration and free trade but also give far higher priority to combating climate change than the population at large. The elites are not more strongly affected by the consequences of climate change than everyone else.

A better explanation would therefore be to understand cosmopolitan attitudes as cultural capital. With their cosmopolitanism, elites indicate that they belong to a certain, high-status social group. This cosmopolitanism is limited not solely to political attitudes but also to an identity as “citizen of the world” and to a specific taste and lifestyle.

Cosmopolitan attitudes result largely from a corresponding socialization—be it in the family, at an international school, an elite university, or in transnational social networks. This is indicated by the finding that elites are quite homogeneous in their attitudes across all countries and economic sectors. According to the American social scientist Robert Putnam, interaction within the elite can explain this homogeneity. Personal communication networks and friendship nurture consensus in values and opinions. These networks are generally not limited to influential people within the same institution in the same country but cover elites from other areas and other countries. We find the strongest cosmopolitan attitudes among elites that particularly often foster transnational contacts.

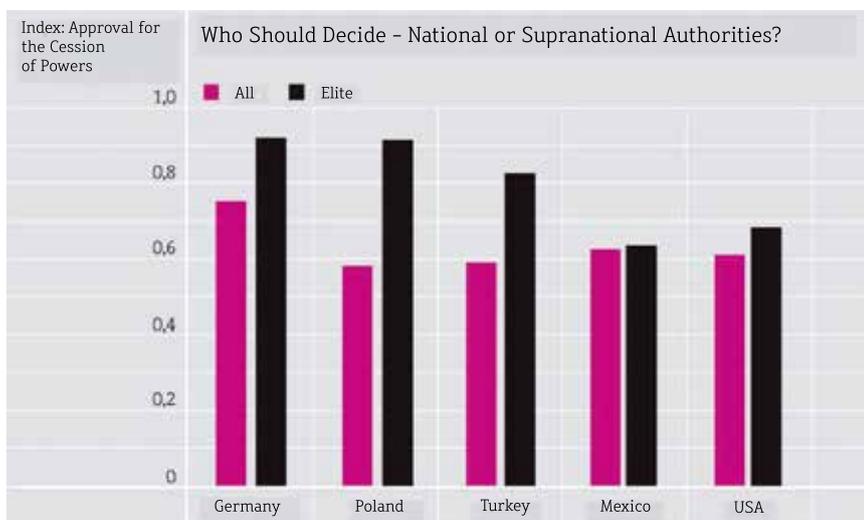
## An important role for education

The strong acceptance of cosmopolitan attitudes is therefore likely to serve at least to some degree to secure the status of elites. In addition, they have to do with the higher level of education among this section of the population: education plays a decisive role in shaping liberal and progressive political opinions. A propensity for cosmopolitanism among elites may therefore well be legitimate. However, their cosmopolitan attitudes should not serve to isolate themselves from other sections of the population: they should seek to convince others that cosmopolitan thinking is the right path to take.

But let's return to the original question: can such different events as the rise of the AfD, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump really be explained by a gap between cosmopolitan elites and a national-minded population at large? The



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Sources: WZB International Leader Survey; World Value Survey (Wave V)  
 Note: The index shows the average for five policy areas on the question whether decisions should best be made at the national level (= 0) or together with a regional organization (e.g. EU) or the United Nations (= 1).

conclusion to be drawn from our analysis is that this is indeed the case. Obviously political actors are also needed who can mobilize opponents to cosmopolitanism. However, it is quite clear that the lack of agreement between population and elites on globalization issues such as migration and free trade has created a niche for new political movements and parties.

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