

# The hidden capital: Trust in museums in Germany

## The German public's view of a cultural institution in transition



**A population representative study  
by the Institute for Museum Research –  
Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin**



**Institut für  
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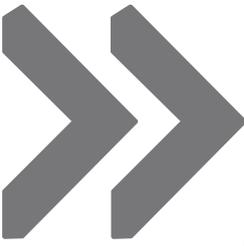
# Foreword

Numerous studies on public trust in democratic institutions, the media and science are currently dominating the headlines, reminding us in these crisis-ridden times how important social and institutional trust is for preserving and sustaining our democracy. It is therefore all the more surprising that trust in museums, the oldest and most enduring cultural institutions in our society, has never been the subject of extensive empirical research in the German context.

Museums have the potential to be a force for social cohesion and a source of confidence in cultural institutions as a whole. Trust in museums has a very positive effect on the credibility of museums as educational and cultural institutions. This in turn promotes visitor loyalty, cultural exchange and participation in cultural education programmes. The aim of this study is to bring this often hidden capital to the forefront of the current debate on social cohesion, beyond the museum landscape and its actors, and to provide empirical evidence of the socio-political dimension of museum work.

Berlin, June 2024

The authors



## At a glance

### Trust in Museums

Museums enjoy the highest level of trust in the personal and institutional environment, after family and friends and ahead of scientists and the media. They are the most trusted of all public institutions, well ahead of political organisations, for which trust ratings were also collected.

Overall, museums enjoy a much higher level of trust than competing museum-like institutions and experiences. This shows that it is the institution of the museum itself rather than the specific experience that is the reason for the high level of trust. This seems to be linked to a very specific idea of what a museum is, up to and including public funding.

Trust is consistently high across all museum types. Within the spectrum, science and technology museums and botanical gardens are at the top of the trust scale, closely followed by natural history museums.

### Socio-demographic background

Viewed in isolation, age, gender, migration background and the size of the place of residence do not appear to have a significant impact on trust in museums.

The level of trust placed in museums also appears to increase as net household income rises. Those who are highly affluent tend to exhibit slightly higher levels of trust overall, although the correlation is less pronounced than that for trust in political parties.

Unemployed people trust less. Unemployment seems to slightly reduce trust in museums, although the overall variation by employment status is relatively small.

Education makes a difference. The more educated an individual is, the higher the trust in museums, although the overall correlation remains weaker than for trust in scientists.

The high level of trust in museums among people living in rural areas, despite a lower propensity to visit, is clear evidence of the positive contribution these institutions make to socio-cultural services of general interest in rural areas. In the light of the current challenges to social cohesion in sparsely populated regions, this untapped potential should be brought more into the debate in the future. This is the only way in which passive trust can be transformed into active visitor behaviour by means of targeted measures, the social effectiveness can be further strengthened and the hidden capital of museums can be leveraged.

Trust in museums among people with a migration background is exactly average, and their propensity to visit museums in the last 12 months is even slightly above average. There is enormous potential here to develop specific programmes and measures that are actually taken up by people with a migration history. This seemingly under-recognised trust capital of museums should definitely be taken into account in future discussions about improved integration capacities and supportive approaches.

## Political attitudes

The greater the interest in politics, the greater the trust in museums. This correlation is very pronounced.

Supporters of the 'traffic light' coalition parties (Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens) and the Left Party have above-average trust in museums; supporters of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) have average trust; supporters of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and people who do not identify with any party have slightly below-average trust.

The correlation between trust and party preference is much weaker for museums than for scientists or public broadcasting. So far, museums have not become the target of radicals and populists nationwide, and they continue to enjoy a high level of trust even among representatives of the far right who are hostile to the media and sceptical of science.

Trust in museums is based on the perception of neutrality. People who perceive museums as neutral and impartial trust them much more than those who do not recognise this neutrality. In an age of increasing polarisation, the museum may therefore be one of the last remaining 'institutions of the social campfire', now that public broadcasting no longer fulfils this role.

Museums should be able to take a stand and make recommendations. However, they should be cautious about the responsible role they have been given and be aware that the trust that allows them to act is based on a fundamental perception of museums as neutral authorities.

## Frequency of Visits

For the first time since 2013, the study provides population-representative data for Germany on the frequency of museum visits. 5.3 per cent of respondents do not visit museums at all. The share of those who visited a museum at least once per quarter last year is only slightly higher at 6.0%. Just over a third (35.1%) have visited a museum at least once in the last twelve months, and almost half (47.7%) have done so more than a year ago.

Even among 'never visitors', museums enjoy abstract trust in the form of an advance of trust. At the same time, trust increases with the number of actual visits. The higher the frequency of visits, the higher the reported levels of trust. This clear correlation cannot be established for any of the other institutional items. Clearly, there is scope for museums to make a positive impact through good performance in the form of appealing exhibitions, events and other offerings. Even if they are already starting from a comparatively high level of trust, they can further increase trust through targeted and well-considered measures.

## Museum performance

Approval of the various dimensions and facets of museum work is consistently very high and correlates with high levels of trust. Museums are particularly trusted for the functions that the classical canon ascribes to them, such as the preservation of cultural heritage and the facilitation of cultural education. The museum's function as a place for social debate and dialogue is less well received. Implications for specific aspects of museum work would need to be worked out through further research. The statement that museums carry out research in the public interest is also somewhat more controversial. It is crucial to monitor the current discourse, as doubts about the non-profit nature and neutrality of museum work could undermine trust in museums in the medium term.



# 1. Introduction: Trust in museums in Germany

The question of trust in museums does not arise in a social vacuum. Trust is the glue that holds democratically organised societies together. And that glue is currently in danger of eroding.

## **Without trust, there is no democracy**

Democracies are particularly dependent on the trust of the population, while at the same time a healthy level of mistrust protects against the abuse of power by political elites. General mistrust, on the other hand, which is fuelled by populists for their own purposes, is one of the most destructive forces for the politics of democratic states today (Best & al. 2023: 10).

For example, the study 'Confidence in Democracy in Times of Crisis' published in April 2023 diagnosed a rapid decline in confidence in the future. The question of whether future generations in Germany will be better or worse off than today was answered much more negatively than a few years ago. While just under two-thirds were pessimistic in 2019, more than four-fifths are now pessimistic about the future (Best & al. 2023). Political actors and institutions, the media and the scientific community have also been experiencing a decline in confidence for some time, as numerous media-effective studies have repeatedly shown.

This is hardly surprising in the context of multiple global conflicts and crises. The resulting uncertainty, the late-modern trend towards 'singularisation', but also the increasing polarisation and radicalisation, often unleashed in social media, are reinforcing the centrifugal forces in society (see Reckwitz 2016; Mau & al. 2022).

## **Trust in museums strengthens social capital**

Trust is a complex concept. As a 'mechanism for reducing social complexity' (Luhmann 1968), it draws on existing codes and forms of communication and helps to reinforce them. Trust allows us to reduce risk by relying on certain expectations and assumptions about the behaviour of others. As human beings, we therefore trust others who we know personally and who are like us. In addition to this **individual social trust**, there is a general social trust in people we meet for the first time. We absolutely need this **social trust** in order to live together in complex societies with people who have very different backgrounds from our own (Decker & al. 2019: 8; Zmerli & Newton 2011: 171). The present study, however, explores a further dimension of trust that is directed less towards specific individuals than towards actors who hold office within a political, economic or cultural institution. This **institutional trust** is thus fed by the values and professional standards of the respective institutions, which guide the behaviour of these actors (Warren 2018: 88).

Social and institutional trust are two important dimensions of social capital. **Social capital** refers to the network of social relationships, norms and values within a society that promote trust, cohesion and mutual support (Putnam 1993). A high level of trust at both levels is crucial for the functioning of a society and its institutions. It promotes cooperation, information sharing and the willingness to work together across social and institutional boundaries. Strong social capital, characterised by high levels of social and institutional trust, therefore contributes significantly to the stability, resilience and development of a society.

For Germany, there are countless studies on trust in democratic institutions, the media and the government, as well as regular surveys of trust in science and scientists in the form of the science barometer. However, the extent to which museums also enjoy institutional trust and the extent to which they are affected by the crisis of confidence in society is a question on which there is very little empirical data. As far as museums are concerned, a high level of trust has a positive effect on the credibility of museums as educational and cultural institutions. This in turn promotes visitor loyalty, cultural exchange and participation in cultural education programmes. Museums can therefore act as important agents of social capital, strengthening the sense of social cohesion and promoting trust in cultural institutions as a whole.

The aim of this study is to bring this often hidden capital to the forefront of the current debate on social cohesion, beyond the museum landscape and its actors, and to provide empirical evidence of the socio-political dimension of museum work.

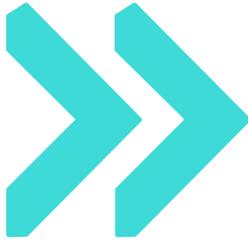
### **About the study**

*The hidden capital: Trust in museums in Germany* is the first population-representative study of its kind to be conducted in Germany with the objective of providing empirical data on the trust potential that lies in the approximately 7,000 museums in Germany. It was largely inspired by a study on trust in museums published in 2021 on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums (Wilkening 2021), but the question of trust in museums has also been addressed in other countries for some time. The Swedish Museums Association has been conducting annual surveys on public trust in museums since 1986, with a notable increase in trust levels reported in 2023 (Ardelius 2023). Similarly in Canada, the museum association of the province of Alberta has been collecting comprehensive data since 1974, with a particular focus on the social value, role and relevance of museums (Dickenson 2021).

In order to adapt the survey to the political and institutional situation in Germany, the survey items were slightly modified compared to the US model study. Not only was the broader **institutional and social environment** of museums analysed (section 2.1.), but in a second step trust values for **museums and museum-like institutions** were also surveyed (section 2.2.). As with other trust studies, it can be assumed that trust in museums varies according to the socio-demographic, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the respondents. Therefore, across a number of **assessment dimensions**, significant differences were found in trust

scores compared to other institutions and the personal environment. These include **socio-demographic** characteristics such as gender, age, level of education, migration background, employment, household income and size of residence (section 3), **attitudinal characteristics** such as political interest, party preference and perceived neutrality of museums (section 4) and **behavioural characteristics** such as frequency of museum visits (section 5). In addition, one question was devoted to perceptions of the **role and performance** of museums (section 6).

In addition to a comparison with US findings, the analysis of the data focused primarily on the performance of museums in relation to other political, cultural and economic actors that make up the social capital of German society. This contextualisation is important in order to determine the relevance and future role of museums for social cohesion and to explore what hidden capital can still be tapped. The American study also found that the neutrality of museums determines the level of trust placed in them. The more neutral museums are perceived to be, the more trust is placed in them. The extent to which this can be applied to Germany is extremely interesting in the light of current debates. Finally, it will be analysed to what extent the museum as a positively connotated 'concept' is still anchored in the population, even if visiting a museum is not or no longer part of the respondents' own cultural practice.



## 2. Overview: Trust in museums

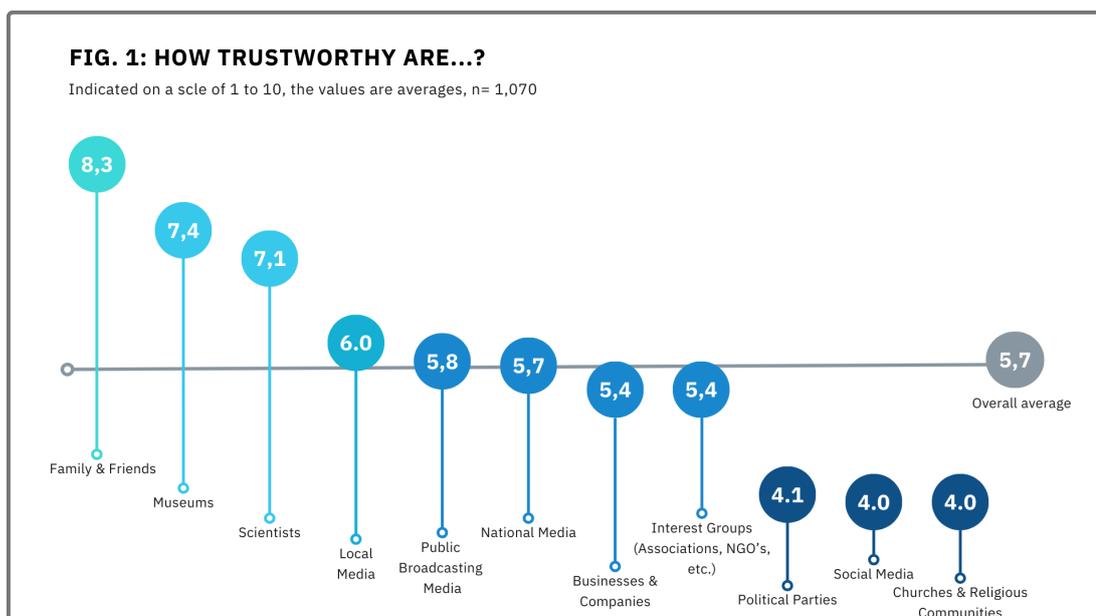
As with other trust studies, it can be assumed that museum trust scores vary according to the socio-demographic, attitudinal and behavioural characteristics of the respondents. Significant differences in trust scores compared to other institutions and the personal environment have therefore been identified in various assessment dimensions.

These include socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, level of education, migration background, employment, household income and size of residence; attitudinal characteristics such as political interest, party preference and perceived neutrality of museums; and behavioural characteristics such as frequency of museum visits.



## 2.1. Trust in museums in relation to the social environment

As in the US study (Wilkening 2021), trust in museums was first measured in relation to other institutions and the personal environment. In addition to the category 'museums', the following were included Friends and family, Researchers/Scientists, Companies and Businesses, Social Media. Other items were partly modified and supplemented in order to adapt them to the political and institutional conditions in Germany. For example, trust in political parties was asked instead of trust in the government, non-profit organisations and NGOs were supplemented by trade unions and associations, and churches and religious communities were added as a new item. Local media (local newspaper, local radio, local television), national media (national newspaper, radio, television) and public broadcasting media (radio, television) represent the German media system in. Respondents were shown the 11 items in random order and given a confidence rating between 1 and 10. The overall average of all ratings given for all items was 5.7.



### Museums rank second after family and friends

Friends and family are the most trusted (8.3). This comes as no surprise, as the more specific and familiar the object or representative of trust, the higher the level of individual trust (Zmerli & Newton 2011: 74).

Museums come second (7.4), ahead of scientists (7.1) and the media (local 6.0; public 5.8; national 5.7). All other institutions received below-average trust scores. Political parties (4.1), social media (4.0) and churches (4.0) were at the bottom of the list.

In a cross-institutional comparison, museums therefore enjoy an above-average level of trust among the German population, ranking just behind the immediate personal environment. The results hardly differ from those of the US study. There, the first three places were identical (friends and family 6.6; museums 6.4; academics 6.1). However, Germany shows a greater variation. Here the difference between the highest and lowest scoring items was 4.3 points (family and friends 8.3 vs. social media 4.0), while in the US study it was 2.8 points (family and friends 6.6 vs. social media 3.8). The average score for overall trust is also 0.5 points higher in Germany (5.6) than in the US (5.1).

It is hardly surprising that scientists in the German study received only slightly lower trust ratings (7.1) than museums (7.4). The results of the Science Barometer 2023 point in the same direction, even if the personalisation of the item 'scientis', inspired by the US study, makes a direct comparison difficult: 56 percent of respondents stated that they trust science and research rather or completely (WiD 2023:12). The other side of this trust has also been well researched. The 'Mitte' study conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in 2020/21 found that around a third of Germans have a sceptical attitude towards science, stating that they trust their own feelings more than 'so-called experts' (Lamberty & Rees 2021: 289). Trust in the media is also the subject of numerous studies that support the findings of this survey, although trust here appears to be eroding. For example, 59 per cent of respondents in the Mitte 2022/23 survey considered the public media to be 'an important pillar of democracy', down from 69 per cent two years earlier (Best & al. 2023: 109). This may have something to do with recent scandals in the public broadcasting media (e.g. the Schlesinger affair at rbb [1]), which again shows that assessment of data becomes more meaningful when several data sets can be compared over time.

[1] See for example <https://www.dw.com/en/corruption-allegations-shake-germanys-public-broadcasters/a-62770664>; see also Grotz, Florian & Schroeder, Wolfgang 2023: Anker der Demokratie? in: FAZ 13 November 2023, p. 6.



## 2.2. Trust in museum types, museum-like institutions and experience formats

The US study (Wilkening 2021: 10) not only looked at the broader institutional and social environment of museums, but in a second step also focused on the museum landscape as such by surveying trust values for different types of museums. In the present study, this research dimension was defined more broadly for Germany in order to include not only the museum landscape in the strict sense, but also museum-like institutions and experience formats [2]. The battery of items was revised and expanded accordingly.

For this purpose, six **types of museums** were identified by the Institute for Museum Research: historical and archaeological museums, cultural history and ethnological museums, art museums, natural history museums, palace and castle museums, and science and technology museums (Rahemipour & Grotz 2023a: 19). In addition, memorial sites were listed separately as a special form of historical museums in view of their special role in the political-democratic education of the Federal Republic of Germany (Rahemipour & Grotz 2023b: 41ff.). Zoos and botanical gardens, as collection-keeping institutions with exhibition and research activities, were also listed as independent museum types according to the membership criteria of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) [3].

In addition to the national park visitor centres already listed in the American study, **museum-like facilities** and experiences included in the survey were exhibition centres, science centres, panorama and multimedia shows, amusement parks, trade fairs and sales exhibitions. Similar to museums, all of these places are open to the public and provide an experience for their visitors through exhibitions and displays. However, they do not hold a collection and therefore do not meet the Institute for Museum Research's minimal definition of a museum (Rahemipour & Grotz 2023b:159ff.).

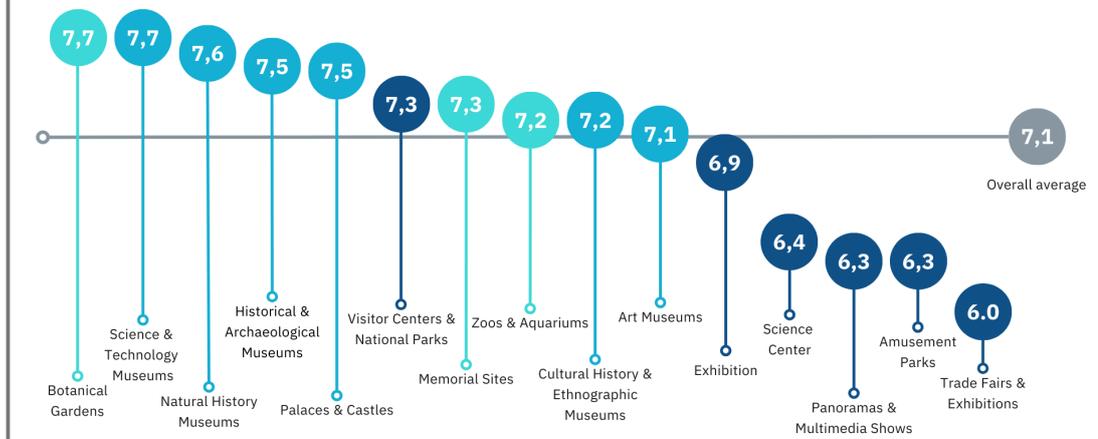
Participants in the study were randomly shown the 15 items about museums and museum-like institutions and experiences, and were asked to rate each one on a scale from 1 (not at all trustworthy) to 10 (completely trustworthy). The overall average of all ratings given for all items was 7.1.

[2] By experience formats, we do not mean events or individual interactive elements/stations in exhibitions, but rather complete, physically and spatially manifested offerings such as adventure parks or panoramas that use a specific scenography and (interior) architecture and are open to the public, usually for a fee.

[3] Zoos and Botanic Gardens are explicitly mentioned in the criteria for ICOM membership, see <https://icom-deutschland.de/de/mitgliedschaft.html> (last accessed 1 April 2024).

**FIG. 2: HOW TRUSTWORTHY ARE...?**

Indicated on a scale of 1 to 10, the values shown are averages, n= 1,070



### Natural history, science and technology most trusted

In the United States, there were no significant differences in trust values among museum types (the average values for all nine items ranged from 6.5 to 6.8). In Germany, where trust values were also collected beyond museums in the narrower sense for museum-like institutions and experiential formats, a much more differentiated picture emerges: the values of the individual items show a variance between 7.7 and 6.0. In the comparison of all 15 items, museum types rank at the forefront and perform above average to average (variance from 7.7 to 7.1). All museum-like items except for visitor centres in national parks (7.3) perform below average.

When comparing museum types, botanical gardens (7.7) and science and technology museums (7.7) lead the ranking, followed by natural history museums (7.6). Art museums (7.1) come last among the museum types, but are still within the average. According to the survey, science and technology museums, which emphasise collection-related research activities in their exhibitions, enjoy a particularly high level of trust. The very positive performance of botanical gardens should also be highlighted, as they seem to be able to successfully position themselves as special places for recreation, science and education at the same time.

Art and culture museums, which also carry out intensive research but do not make this the central message of their outreach activities as often, score slightly lower than science and technology museums. This could be an indication that trust in museums is particularly boosted by public awareness of their research activities - and could be seen as an incentive for art and cultural history museums to increase public awareness of their research activities in the future.

The particularly intense debate about colonial restitution in Germany probably explains the lower ranking of cultural history and ethnology museums (7.2). In comparison, however, the trust scores for this type of museum are still relatively high, given a relatively narrow range of 0.6 points between the highest and lowest

rated museum types. The debate about collections of colonial origin thus seems to have met with relatively little public resonance, which has so far had little impact on trust scores.

In the ranking of museum-like facilities and experience formats, exhibition spaces (6.9), which are very museum-like in their presentation logic, are at the top of the list. In contrast, panoramas and multimedia shows (6.3), which work intensively with immersive and staged elements, are at the bottom of the ranking. The fact that these experience formats often refer to themselves as 'museums' in their external communication does not seem to have played a role in the allocation of trust values. Rather, it can be assumed that the overall below-average trust scores and poorer performance of museum-like facilities is also due to the fact that, with the exception of exhibition spaces and visitor centres in nature parks, they are predominantly privately run and sometimes commercial enterprises. This finding is also supported by the significantly poorer performance of science centres (6.4), which, although they present research results and allow visitors to experience them, are predominantly private or mixed-ownership facilities.



## 2.3. Conclusion

Museums enjoy the highest level of trust in the personal and institutional environment, after family and friends and ahead of scientists and the media. They are the most trusted of all public institutions, well ahead of political organisations, for which trust ratings were also collected.

Overall, museums enjoy a much higher level of trust than competing museum-like institutions and experiences. This shows that it is the institution of the museum itself rather than the specific experience that is the reason for the high level of trust. This seems to be linked to a very specific idea of what a museum is, up to and including public funding.

Trust is consistently high across all museum types. Within the spectrum, science and technology museums and botanical gardens are at the top of the trust scale, closely followed by natural history museums.



## 3. Socio-demographic background and trust in museums

### 3.1. Age and gender

The age of the respondent did not seem to play a role in the assessment of trust in museums, as the score remained between 7.3 and 7.5 across all age groups. There were also no significant differences between age groups when it came to placing museums in their personal and institutional environment. Museums always ranked second behind friends and family and ahead of scientists. Only the range between the highest and lowest levels of trust is particularly small in the group under 30 (family and friends 8.2 vs. churches & religious communities 4.3 = 3.9 points) and particularly large in the group 60-69 (family and friends 8.2 vs. social media 3.5 = 4.7 points).

This is consistent with the findings of other studies that younger people are slightly more optimistic about the future (Best & al. 2023: 15) and therefore place more trust in museums than older people. This observation may also hold potential for improving the loyalty of younger audiences to museums in the future. Trust in museums among people aged 60 and over does not seem to be affected by their significantly lower frequency of museum visits in the last 12 months. Compared to 16-29 year olds (39.4%) and 30-59 year olds (39.4%), only 25% of all respondents aged 60 and over have visited a museum in the last year. This is ten percentage points lower than the overall average (35.1%). These low figures are probably still due to the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused older people in particular to withdraw from cultural life out of concern for their health.[4] However, possible follow-up studies should monitor whether this withdrawal has an impact on confidence in museums in the medium term.

Gender as a single factor does not play a role either, as women's (7.3) and men's (7.4) trust in museums differs only slightly, and the ranking of museums in the personal and institutional environment is the same for both sexes [5].

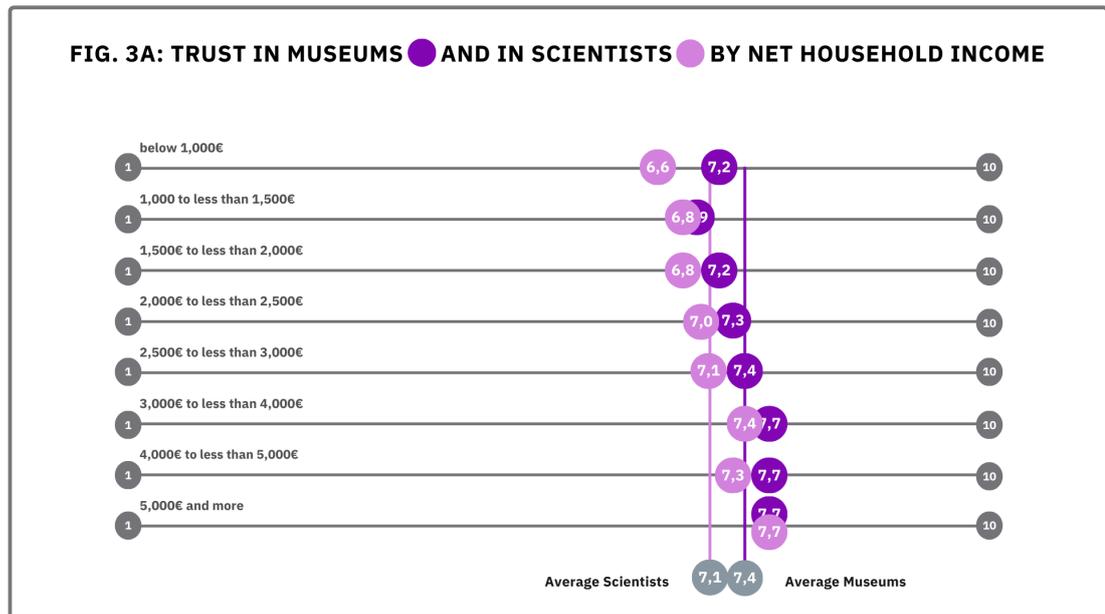
[4] For example, in a study on cultural visits in times of COVID-19 carried out in March 2023 in collaboration with the German Museum Association, 57% of people over 65 stated that they visited cultural institutions less often for fear of infection (see L'Oeil du Public 2023: 11).

[5] The survey asked about 'male', 'female' and 'diverse'. 'Diverse' was only reported in two cases (n=1,070). It was therefore not possible to analyse the three items separately. Therefore, 'diverse' was added to the 'female' item in the analysis.



## 3.2. Income and employment status

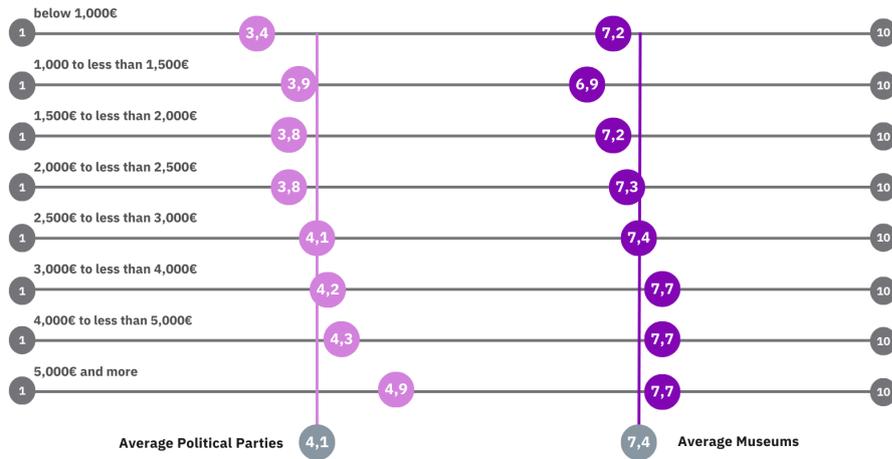
Of particular interest is the correlation between trust in museums and the socio-economic status of the respondents. Does this confirm the so-called 'winner hypothesis'? According to this hypothesis, the 'winners' of a society, i.e. those with higher levels of education, higher incomes and secure employment, have higher levels of trust overall than socio-economic 'losers' with lower levels of education, below-average incomes and employment (Decker & al. 2019:9). A differentiated analysis of trust in museums by net household income and employment status (section 3.2.) and education level (3.3.) should show the extent to which these correlations can also be clearly identified for the present survey data.



### The rich trust a little more

A breakdown by net household income actually reveals slightly greater differences in trust in museums. The group of respondents with a net household income of 1,000 to 1,499 Euros expressed 0.8 points less trust in museums (6.9) than people with a net household income of 3,000 Euros or more (7.7). When it comes to trust in scientists, the variance between the lowest (6.6 at less than 1,000 Euros) and the highest trust levels is somewhat more pronounced at 1.1 points, while the highest trust level (7.7) is only reached in the income bracket of 5,000 Euros and above.

**FIG. 3B: TRUST IN MUSEUMS AND POLITICAL PARTIES BY NET HOUSEHOLD INCOME**



Overall, however, the relationship between net household income and trust in museums and scientists is less pronounced than for trust in political parties. Respondents with a net household income of less than 1,000 Euros give parties an average of only 3.4 trust points, while those with a net household income of 5,000 Euros or more give an average of 4.9 trust points. This is in line with the findings of the Hans Böckler Foundation's 2023 study on income inequality and trust in democracy, which found a clear link between income level and trust in democratic institutions. According to the study, 56 per cent of the permanently poor and 50 per cent of middle-income people, but only 38 per cent of the rich, expressed low levels of trust in political parties (Brülle & Spannagel 2023:16).

**FIG. 4: TRUST IN MUSEUMS AND POLITICAL PARTIES BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS**



### Unemployed trust less

When differentiating between employment status, similar variations in trust scores emerge. Those in full-time employment expressed 0.8 points more trust in museums (7.6) than those who were unemployed or undergoing retraining (6.8). Similar patterns emerged at a lower level for the trust of different employment groups in political parties. Students were very close to the overall average in their expressions of trust in both political parties and museums.



## 3.3. Level of education

Of particular interest is the correlation between trust in museums and the socio-economic status of the respondents. Does this confirm the so-called 'winner hypothesis'? According to this hypothesis, the 'winners' of a society, i.e. those with higher levels of education, higher incomes and secure employment, have higher levels of trust overall than socio-economic 'losers' with lower levels of education, below-average incomes and employment (Decker & al. 2019:9). A differentiated analysis of trust in museums by net household income and employment status (section 3.2.) and education level (3.3.) should show the extent to which these correlations can also be clearly identified for the present survey data.

Of particular interest for museums is the variable education/training [6], which correlates strongly with the two variables income and employment status. The higher the level of education, the more privileged the individual's opportunities for social and cultural participation. In this sense, the above-average level of education of museum visitors compared to the population as a whole has already been highlighted in numerous studies (see, for example, Thoma & al. 2022: 85; Wegner 2016).

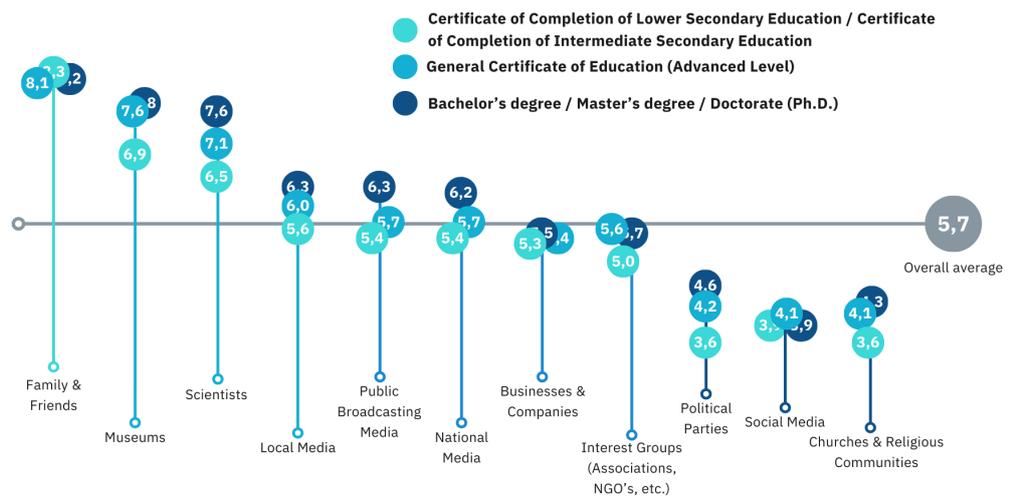
Against this background, it is all the more interesting to ask to what extent 'less educated' groups also have a positive attitude towards museums in the form of trust and would therefore potentially be willing to make use of the integrative capacities of these cultural institutions under favourable conditions.

[6] In the present study, respondents were asked about their highest level of education in relation to their general school leaving qualification. This was recorded in seven items in the survey and summarised as follows:

- (1) left school without qualification; (2) primary school leaving certificate/ lower secondary school leaving certificate/ polytechnic secondary school leaving certificate/ 8th grade; (3) intermediate school leaving certificate/ specialised secondary school leaving certificate/ polytechnic secondary school leaving certificate/ 10th grade
- (4) higher education entrance qualification (Fachhochschulreife); (5) university entrance qualification (Abitur/Hochschulreife/ Fachabitur/ Erweiterte Oberschule (EOS))
- (6) University degree
- (7) Other

**FIG. 5: HOW TRUSTWORTHY ARE...?**

Indicated on a scale of 1 to 10, the values shown are averages



### Education makes a difference

As expected, there are larger differences in trust scores when we differentiate by highest level of education compared to net household income and employment. People with no more than a 10th grade secondary school leaving certificate have a significantly lower level of trust in museums (6.9) than people with a high school diploma (7.6) or a university degree (7.8). The large gap of 0.7 points between those with and without a high school diploma is striking. This clearly shows that museums have some catching up to do when it comes to integrating and accommodating different levels of education.

When it comes to ranking museums within the personal and institutional environment, there are again hardly any significant differences according to the level of education. Across all levels of education, museums are always in second place, behind friends and family and ahead of scientists. However, the extreme gap of 1.4 points between the trust scores for friends and family (8.3) and the second-placed museums (6.9) among people with no more than a 10th grade education is striking. For almost all items, people with a university degree generally give higher trust scores than those with a lower level of education. This correlation between a higher level of education and above-average overall trust has already been shown in the relevant studies on trust in democratic institutions (see e.g. Best & al. 2023: 14f.). The results of the Science Barometer 2023 also support the assumption that trust increases with the level of education, although the correlations here are somewhat stronger than for museums: 79 percent of respondents with a high level of formal education (high school diploma and above) stated that they trust science and research. Only 31 per cent of respondents with a low level of formal education (lower secondary or primary school) supported this statement (WiD 2023: 13f.).



## 3.4. Place of residence

The spatial context of the living environment is of special importance for social cohesion and trust in institutions. Numerous studies have shown that in peripheral rural areas, where the challenges of socio-demographic change are particularly evident, mistrust of social institutions, especially established political organisations, is particularly high (Siedentop & Stroms 2021: 12).

Almost forty per cent of all museums in Germany are located in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (Rahemipour & Grotz 2023b: 52ff.). These are therefore institutions that provide cultural services of general interest and have a very strong local presence. Museums provide local spaces in which a local civic public can be constituted. In this respect, the trust that rural residents place in museums is of paramount importance in assessing their importance for social cohesion as a whole.

Against this background, the finding that trust values *do not* differ significantly according to the **size of the place of residence** is particularly remarkable. Whether the respondent lives in a large city or in a small rural community makes little difference to the attribution of trust scores. The value for large cities (7.6) is only slightly higher than for medium-sized towns (7.3) and small towns and rural communities (7.4). In contrast, there is a very clear difference in trust in political parties between residents of large cities (4.7) and small rural communities (3.5), which is in line with other studies of trust in institutions in rural areas.

Although the study does not differentiate between museums in general and museums in the personal environment in particular, it can be assumed that, in addition to tourist experiences, experiences with museums in the local and regional environment also contribute to the high level of trust among citizens in rural areas. This is despite the fact that significantly fewer people living in small rural communities (29.3%) have visited a museum in the last 12 months compared to city dwellers (46.6%).

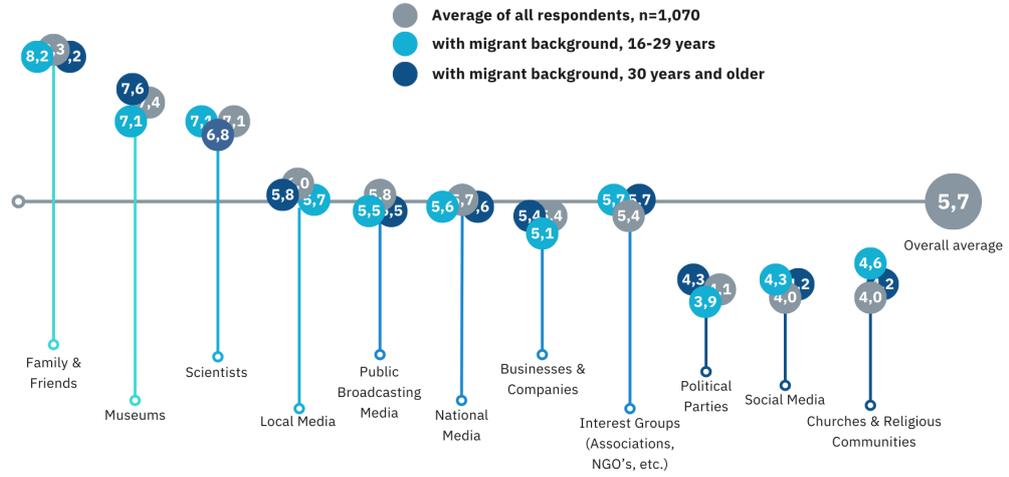
The high level of trust in museums among rural residents, despite a lower propensity to visit, is nevertheless clear evidence that museums are among the institutions that make a significant contribution to the provision of practical socio-cultural services of general interest in rural areas. The (as yet) untapped potential of museums should therefore be at the centre of the relevant debates. Only in this way will targeted measures help to transform passive trust into active visitor behaviour, to further strengthen the social impact of museums and to successfully tap the hidden capital of this special cultural institution.



## 3.5. Migration background

**FIG. 6: HOW TRUSTWORTHY ARE...?**

Indicated on a scale of 1 to 10, the values shown are averages



It is essential for the integration capacity of pluralistic societies that people with a migration background have the widest possible access to public institutions and are thus able to participate quickly and fully in social life. A key aspect of this is that the people concerned feel empowered and able to make active use of the services and thus experience a sense of self-empowerment in their environment. Trust is a basic category on which all other possible programmes and measures are based. In this respect, museums also offer great potential for integration, even if they are often not at the centre of discussions about improved integration capacities and supportive approaches.

All the more remarkable is the finding that trust in museums among people with a **migration background** [7] is not significantly different from that of other social groups. Both the trust score for museums (7.4) and the ranking within the personal and institutional environment are identical to the results for the population as a whole. An analysis by age group reveals small differences: While the trust score for friends and family remains stable regardless of age (8.2), people with a migrant background who are older than 30 actually place slightly more trust (7.6) in the second-ranked museums. Those younger than 30 trust museums less, at the same level as scientists (7.1).

[7] For reasons of comparability, the term 'persons with a migration background' was used for the survey, which was collected in this form until 2020 for the microcensus of the German Federal Statistical Office, but has since been replaced by the term 'persons with a migration history' (see <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Methoden/Erlauterungen/einwanderungsgeschichte-hintergrundpapier.html> (last accessed on 1 April 2024)). In this study, a person with a migration background is therefore defined as someone who has a personal experience of migration or has a parent who was born in another country or has foreign citizenship. A migration background can be identified by the country of birth of the interviewee (1st generation) and their parents (2nd generation).

Museums have enormous potential to build on this trust and develop additional programmes and activities that are actually taken up. At 37 per cent, the proportion of people with a migration background who have visited a museum in the last 12 months is even slightly above the average (35.1 per cent). Passive trust is therefore already reflected in active visiting behaviour, in contrast to people living in rural areas. On the one hand, it seems that the right programmes have already been put in place, but on the other hand, there is clearly still some untapped capital that should definitely be given more attention in future discussions about improved integration capacities and supportive approaches.



## 3.6. Conclusion

Viewed in isolation, age, gender, migration background and the size of the place of residence do not appear to have a significant impact on trust in museums.

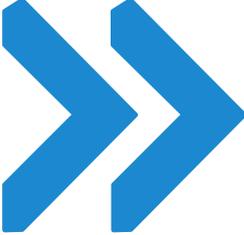
The level of trust placed in museums also appears to increase as net household income rises. Those who are highly affluent tend to exhibit slightly higher levels of trust overall, although the correlation is less pronounced than that for trust in political parties.

Unemployed people trust less. There is some evidence to suggest that unemployment may have a slight negative impact on trust in museums, although the overall impact on trust levels according to employment status is relatively limited.

Education makes a difference. The more educated an individual is, the higher the trust in museums, although the overall correlation remains weaker than for trust in scientists

The high level of trust in museums among people living in rural areas, despite a lower propensity to visit, is clear evidence of the positive contribution these institutions make to socio-cultural services of general interest in rural areas. In the light of the current challenges to social cohesion in sparsely populated regions, this untapped potential should be brought more into the debate in the future. This is the only way in which passive trust can be transformed into active visitor behaviour by means of targeted measures, the social effectiveness can be further strengthened and the hidden capital of museums can be leveraged.

Trust in museums among people with a migration background is exactly average, and their propensity to visit museums in the last 12 months is even slightly above average. There is enormous potential here to develop specific programmes and measures that are actually taken up by people with a migration history. This seemingly under-recognised trust capital of museums should definitely be taken into account in future discussions about improved integration capacities and supportive approaches.



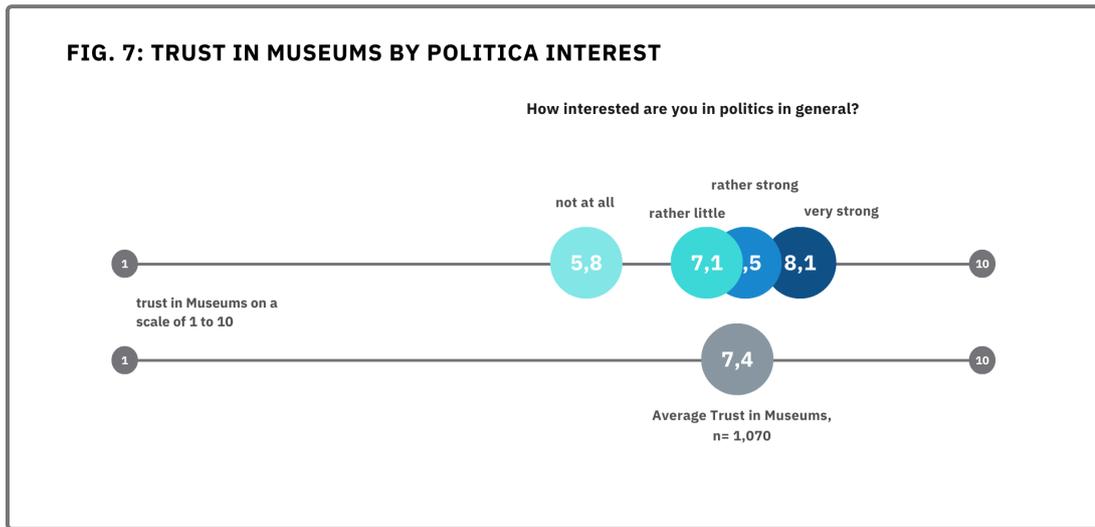
## 4. Political attitudes and trust in museums

As part of public services of general interest, museums are located in the pre-political sphere. Similar to public broadcasting, they are shared places in society where different social groups can participate, share knowledge and exchange opinions. In an era of increasing polarisation, these 'institutions of the social campfire' (Aigner & al. 2017: 52; Grotz & Schröder 2021: 412) are increasingly being called into question. In particular, although the majority of people still accept public broadcasting media, their perceived credibility is on the decline (Hirndorf & Rose 2023: 1). Against this background, the question arises as to the extent to which museums could be another possible connecting link for contemporary society, beyond individual political attitudes.

For this reason, the political attitudes of the interviewees were given particular attention in this study. The first question is to what extent general political interest correlates with trust in museums. In a second step, identification with political parties is analysed. Finally, the extent to which a possible political perception of the museums themselves is related to trust in them is analysed.



## 4.1. Political interest

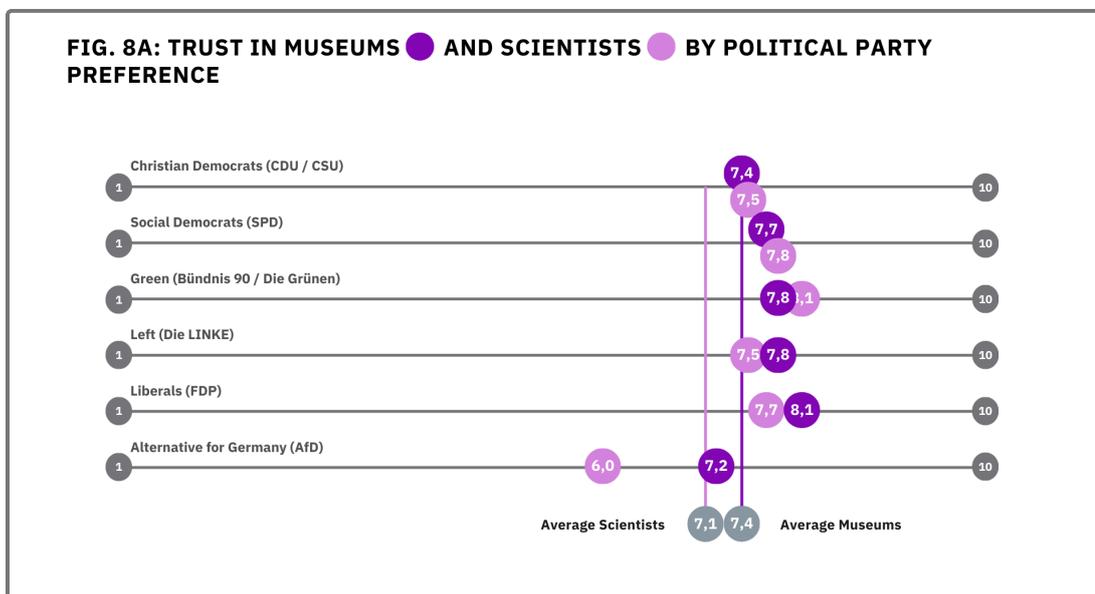


There is a very strong correlation between the level of general interest in politics and trust in museums. Between the twenty per cent of respondents who expressed a very strong interest in politics (8.1) and the 6.5 per cent who expressed no interest at all (5.8), the variance in trust in museums was 2.3 points. Even between those who had little interest in politics (7.1) and those who had no interest, the variance was still 1.3 points. Differences of this magnitude were not observed in any of the dimensions previously analysed.

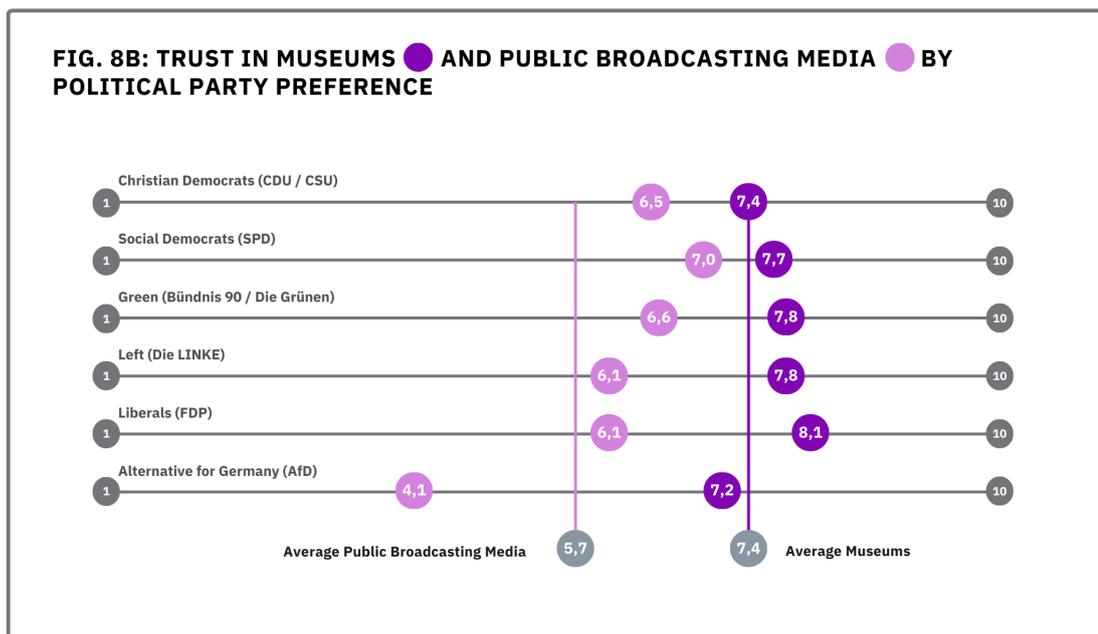
The problem that museums seem to be less effective in reaching people with no political interest is shared by all other institutions. All trust scores are below average for the small group of people with no interest in politics, but even in this case museums still have the best potential at a lower level, coming second in the ranking behind friends and family and ahead of academics.



## 4.2. Party identification



Party political identification [8] also played a role in the allocation of trust values. Supporters of the Liberal Democrats FDP (8.1), followed by Green Party Die Grünen (7.8), Left Party Die linke (7.8) and Social Democratic Party SPD (7.7) supporters expressed above-average trust, while Christian Democrats CDU/CSU (7.4) and extreme right Alternative for Germany AfD (7.2) supporters scored slightly below average. Those who did not associate themselves with any party expressed the least trust (7.0). Among AfD supporters, the pendulum did not swing as far downwards with regard to museums as it did with regard to trust in scientists (6.0; average score 7.1) or in public broadcasting (3.86; average score 5.8). The extent to which this can perhaps be explained by a lack of interest in museums remains to be seen.



Overall, a much smaller range of variance (1.1 points) was observed for trust in museums according to party identification than for trust in scientists (2.1 points) or trust in public broadcasting (3.6 points). This is an important and remarkable finding, as all party supporters are relatively close when it comes to trust in museums. The AfD's anti-establishment attitude towards the media and scepticism towards science, which is also reflected in the party's manifesto [9], does not (yet) seem to have an impact here. Interestingly, museums have not yet been targeted by radicals and populists nationwide [10], and continue to enjoy a high level of trust among representatives of the far right, which is presumably due to the overarching perception of museums as neutral (see section 4.3.).

[8] The question was: 'Which party do you like best at the moment?'

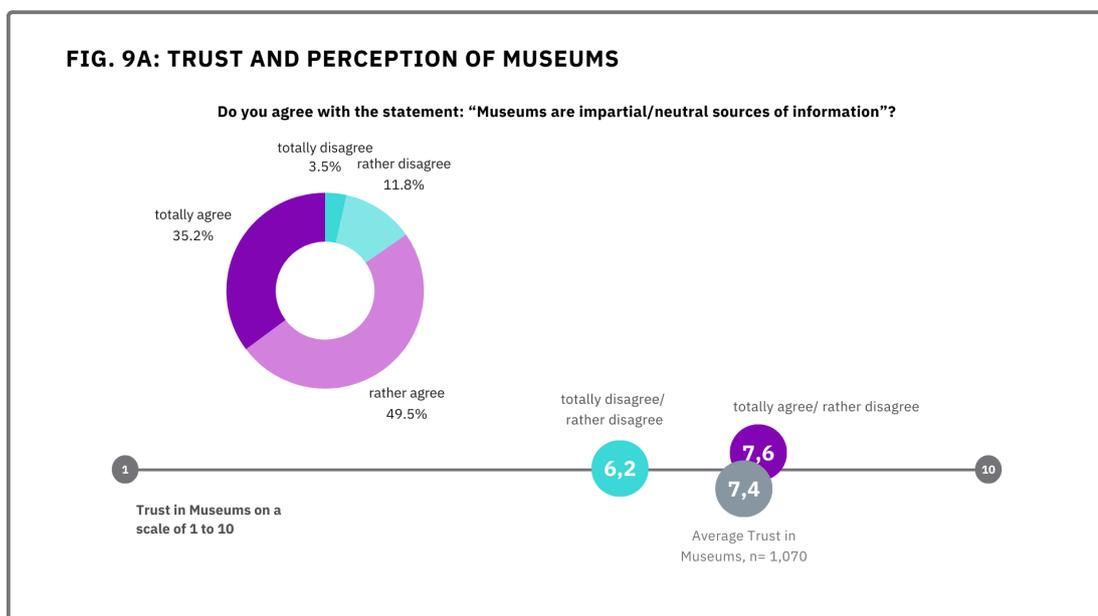
[9] In its current policy manifesto, the AfD calls for the abolition of the 'compulsory financing' of public broadcasting and its transformation into pay-TV, and fundamentally questions the statements of the World Climate Council on climate change.

[10] One example of how museums can become the focus of far-right aggression is the case of the LWL Museum Zeche Zollern in Dortmund. For the exhibition 'Das ist kolonial!' (18.3. - 13.10.2023), a safe space for people of colour was set up there once a week - the AfD turned this into a discrimination scandal against white people. See <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/museum-safer-space-kommentar> and <https://www.ruhrnachrichten.de/dortmund/rechter-shitstorm-und-drohungen-gegen-zeche-zollern-dortmunder-staatsschutz-ermittelt-w776953-2000922271/> (last accessed 1 April 2024).



### 4.3. Perception of museums as neutral institutions

This section explores the extent to which a possible political perception of museums themselves is related to the trust placed in them. Accordingly, three statements were presented on perceptions and wishes regarding the social role of museums. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree on a four-point scale. The first of the three statements on which respondents were asked to comment related to their perception of museums as a neutral social authority: (1) 'Museums are impartial/neutral sources of information'. The second statement was about positioning in debates: (2) 'Museums should take a stand on important issues, even if they are controversial'. Finally, the third statement related to the form of social action: (3) 'Museums should recommend behaviours or actions to the public'.

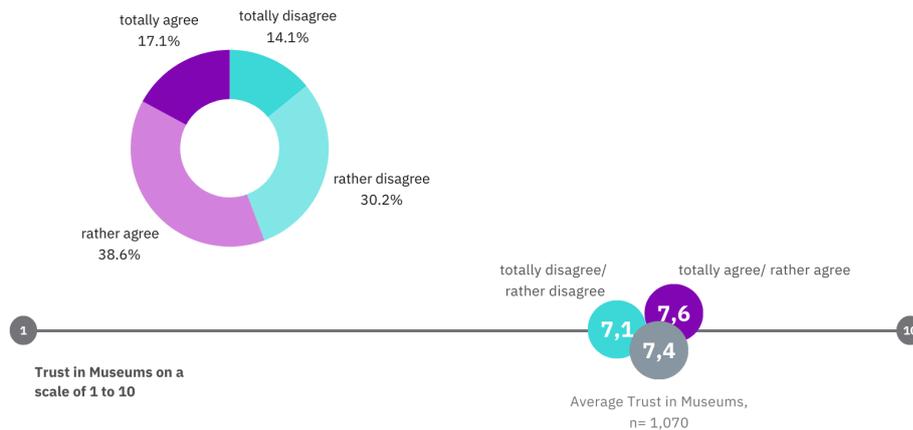


The analysis of statement (1) 'Museums are impartial/neutral sources of information' clearly shows that the overwhelming majority (84.7%) agree completely (35.2%) or somewhat (49.5%) with this paradigm. Only 3.5% strongly disagree with the statement. The results are even more conclusive than those of a Canadian study in which 70 per cent agreed that 'museums should be neutral and unbiased in the presentation of materials' (Dickenson 2021: 10), or a US study in which only 48 per cent agreed that 'museums should always be neutral' (Wilkening 2021: 16).

Thus, museums are perceived as neutral by the vast majority, and this perception feeds into trust in museums themselves. Individuals who perceive museums as neutral and impartial trust them much more (7.7) than those who do not or only somewhat acknowledge this neutrality (6.2). Although the latter group's trust is significantly lower, they still rank museums second only to family and friends and ahead of scientists. It seems, therefore, that the envisaged function as a neutral social institution or 'campfire' for social exchange is something that museums could further embrace and claim for themselves.

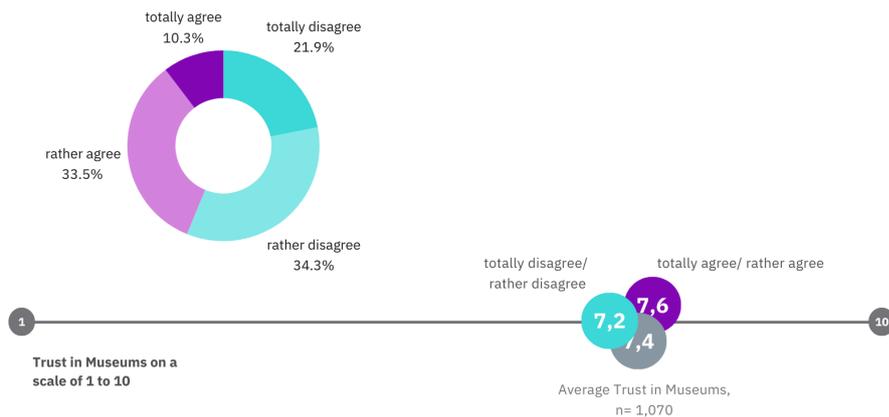
**FIG. 9B: TRUST AND PERCEPTION OF MUSEUMS**

Do you agree with the statement: "Museums should take a stand on important issues, even if they are controversial"?



**FIG. 9C: TRUST AND PERCEPTION OF MUSEUMS**

Do you agree with the statement: "Museums should recommend behaviour or actions to the public"?



However, the paradigm of neutrality does not mean that respondents do not allow museums to take a stance or make recommendations. This is clear from the analysis of the two statements (2) 'Museums should take a stand on important issues, even if they are controversial' and (3) 'Museums should recommend behaviour or actions to the public'. Although both statements generate a degree of controversy, this does not significantly affect the trust scores, which vary only slightly between disagreement (7.1 and 7.2) and agreement (7.6).

Both items with their normative statements are conceptually related, and the percentage distribution underlines their strong empirical connection. 55.7 per cent completely or somewhat agree with statement (2), while 44.3 per cent somewhat or completely disagree. For statement (3) the ratio is reversed, with 43.8 per cent agreeing and 56.2 per cent disagreeing. In both cases, the extreme positions represent a much smaller percentage than those respondents who seem to struggle to take a clear stance. The combined percentage of 'somewhat agree' and

'somewhat disagree' for statement (2) was 68.8 per cent and for statement (3) it was 67.8 per cent.

The results indicate that museums are indeed allowed to take a position and give recommendations. They appear to have the competence and credibility to do so, even more so in the case of taking a stand than in the case of giving recommendations. However, museums should be cautious about the responsible role they have been entrusted with and be aware that the trust that allows these actions is based on a fundamental perception of neutrality. This perception should not be fundamentally shaken, for trust is a hard-earned but easily lost asset.



## 4.4. Conclusion

The greater the interest in politics, the greater the trust in museums. This correlation is very pronounced.

Supporters of the 'traffic light' coalition parties (Social Democrats, Liberals, Greens) and the Left Party have above-average trust in museums; supporters of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) have average trust; supporters of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and people who do not identify with any party have slightly below-average trust.

The correlation between trust and party preference is much weaker for museums than for scientists or public broadcasting. So far, museums have not become the target of radicals and populists nationwide, and they continue to enjoy a high level of trust even among representatives of the far right who are hostile to the media and sceptical of science.

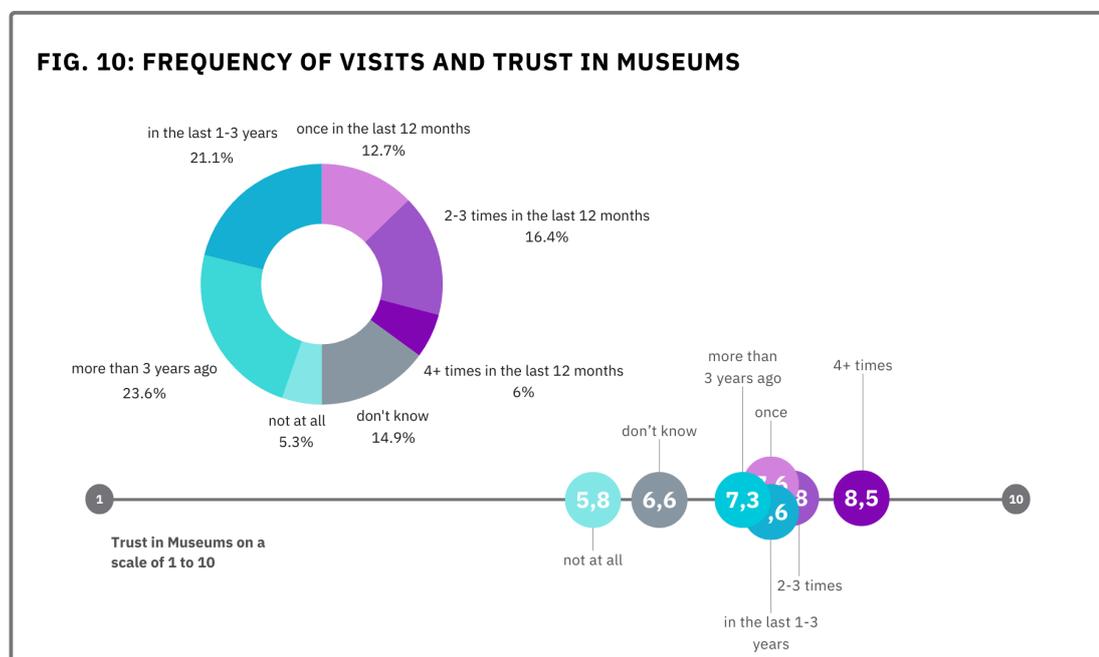
Trust in museums is based on the perception of neutrality. People who perceive museums as neutral and impartial trust them much more than those who do not recognise this neutrality. In an age of increasing polarisation, the museum may therefore be one of the last remaining 'institutions of the social campfire', now that public broadcasting no longer fulfils this role.

Museums should indeed allow themselves to take a stand and make recommendations. However, they should be cautious about the responsible role they have been given and be aware that the trust that allows them to act is based on a fundamental perception of museums as neutral authorities.

## 5. Museum visits and trust in museums

In addition to socio-demographic background and political attitudes, trust also depends on behaviour. In the context of museums, this obviously means that the frequency of contacts in the form of museum visits presumably also has an impact on the level of trust. In the following, we will analyse how strong this assumed correlation actually is, against the background of the empirical findings of this study.

### 5.1. The influence of frequency of visits



The purely descriptive measure 'frequency of visits' was deliberately chosen because the usual categories of visits/non-visits are hardly justifiable in an exploratory study such as this, especially as the special effects of the pandemic years 2020-22 may still be reflected in this snapshot. [11] In this respect, the data should also be interpreted with some caution, although there are clear patterns in the frequency distribution.

[11]For example, the figures on museum visits in Switzerland collected in 2019 before the pandemic (these data were used as a reference because there are no publicly available figures for Germany after 2013) are strikingly higher than the results of this survey. Here, 70.6% said they had visited a museum in the previous 12 months, of which 35.1% had done so occasionally (1-3 times), 17% regularly (4-6 times) and 18.6% frequently (7 times or more). <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/kultur-medien-informationsgesellschaft-sport/kultur/kulturverhalten.assetdetail.17464015.html> (last accessed on 1 April 2024).

Respondents were asked about the frequency of visits. In addition to the answer option 'don't know', seven further items were asked that are compatible with the current wave of the Leibniz Visitor Structure Analysis [12]: (1) never, (2) more than three years ago, (3) in the last one to three years, (4) once in the last 12 months, (5) two to three times in the last 12 months, (6) four to five times in the last 12 months, (7) more than five times in the last 12 months. [13]

5.3 per cent of respondents said they did not visit museums at all. For 23.6 per cent, the last time they visited a museum was more than three years ago (perhaps due to the pandemic), while 21.1 per cent last saw the inside of a museum between one and two years ago. The group of those who have visited a museum in the last 12 months represents 35.1 per cent of respondents. Of these, 12.7 per cent said they had visited once and 16.4 per cent said they had visited 2-3 times. The proportion of people who have visited a museum at least once a quarter (6.0%) is almost as low as the proportion of people who say they never visit a museum.

A categorical distinction between museum visitors and non-visitors is made in a very differentiated way, depending on whether one approaches it from the close-up perspective of museum research or the broader perspective of cultural participation research (for an overview see Allmannritter 2018, Reuband 2018). The US model study defined museum visitors as follows: "'museum visitors' are those who reported having been to a museum in the past two years (25% of the sample)" (Wilkening 2021: 23). By contrast, in 2019 the Swiss Federal Statistical Office counted as museum visitors only those who had visited a museum in the previous twelve months. All others fall into the category of 'non-visitors' (Federal Statistical Office of the Swiss Confederation 2020). The voluntary survey on time use conducted by the Federal Statistical Office and the statistical offices of the Länder in Germany in 2016 also used this categorisation. [14] The distinction between those who have been there in the last year (visitors) and those who have not been there in the last year (non-visitors) has been developed in cultural participation research, which also applies this classification to theatre and other cultural visits. "However, 'non-visitors' [...] are not necessarily the same as 'never-visitors'... [T]he reason for not having visited in the last 12 months is not necessarily a lack of interest in theatre offerings. (Mandel 2020: 13f) In addition to the data from the Federal Statistical Office from 2016, there are other selective surveys on cultural use [15], but so far no continuous reporting that refers exclusively to the frequency of visits to museums. In this respect, the study also

[12]The results of the ongoing Leibniz Visitor Structure Analysis are currently being evaluated (as of April 2024) and are expected to be made available on this page: [https://leibniz-bim.de/forschung/forschung\\_leibniz-bsa/forschung\\_leibniz-bsa\\_studie2022-23\\_ergebnisse](https://leibniz-bim.de/forschung/forschung_leibniz-bsa/forschung_leibniz-bsa_studie2022-23_ergebnisse) Items (5) and (6) were combined as 'four times+' due to the small number of cases of item (6) (n= 22).

[13]Items (6) and (7) were combined as 'four times+' due to the small number of cases of item (7) (n= 22).

[14] Data from 2013 from more than 5,000 private households with more than 11,000 people aged 10 and over were analysed. According to this, 55% were non-visitors (visited more than 12 months ago) and 45% were visitors, of whom 30% visited once, 51% 2-4 times, 15% 4-10 times and 3% 11 times or more (cf. Liersch & Asef 2016: 23).

[15] Long-term studies such as SOEP or ALLBUS have included information on cultural participation since the 1980s, but these are summarised as 'attendance at events such as opera, classical concerts, theatre, exhibitions'. The Allensbacher Markt- und Werbeträgeranalyse (AWA) of the Institut für Demoskopie, which is subject to a fee, also links museum visits with visits to art exhibitions or galleries (see Reuband 2018: 27f.).

makes a valuable data contribution as a side effect by providing the first population-representative data on the frequency of visits to museums after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The question about the frequency of visits is also a purely quantitative gradation. Due to the limited scope of this pilot study, the quality of the visit experience was not assessed through accompanying questions, such as the duration of contact or the intensity of engagement. This would also be a worthwhile undertaking for a follow-up study, in order to gain a better understanding of the relationships between museum visits, personal predispositions, the actual visit experience and trust.



## 5.2. The influence of frequency of visits

Overall, museum-goers are more trusting than non-visitors. For museum-goers, museums are the #1 trusted source of information; they remain #2 for non-visitors, behind friends and family. (Wilkening 2021: 24). This finding from the US model study also applies to the German resident population. Here, at least those who have visited a museum four or more times in the last twelve months trust museums more (8.5) than friends and family (8.1). Among those who said they never visited a museum, trust in museums (5.8) slipped to third place behind family and friends (8.0) and scientists (6.1), but was still above the overall average (5.7; see section 2.1.).

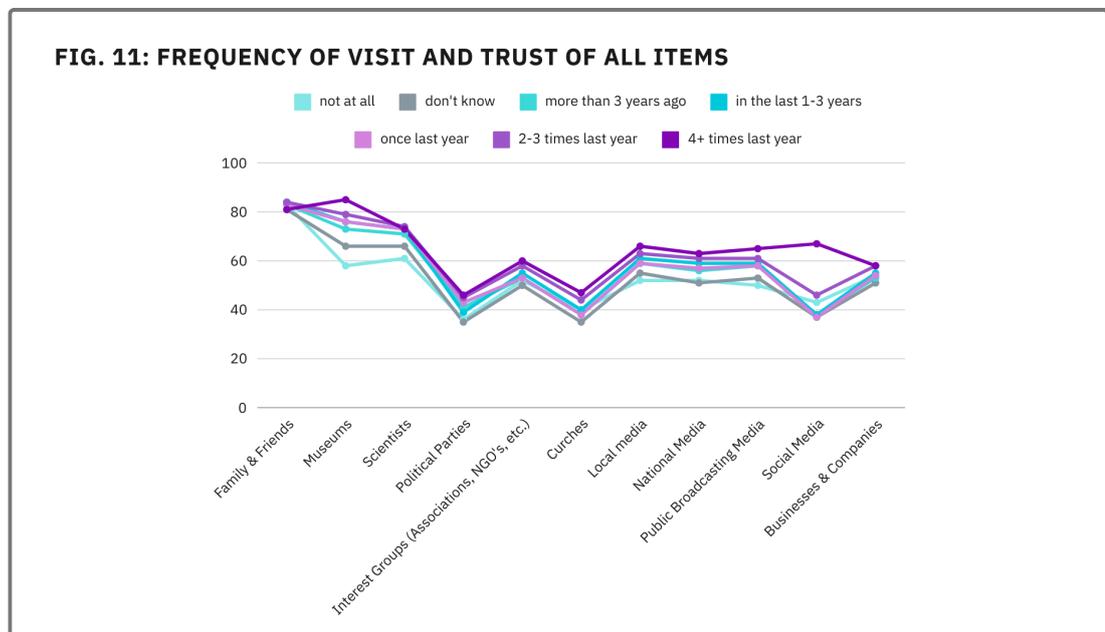


Figure 11 clearly shows how visit frequency varies systematically with trust in museums. The higher the frequency of visits, the higher the reported levels of trust. This clear correlation cannot be observed in this form for any of the other social items examined here.

The data can be interpreted in such a way that museums apparently already enjoy an abstract level of trust in the form of a priori confidence. Even people who personally refuse to visit museums still rank them third on their trust scale. At the same time, trust increases the more specific contacts people have with museums. Obviously, there is room for museums to make a positive impact through good performance in the form of appealing exhibitions, events and other offerings. They can further increase trust through targeted and well-considered measures, even if this is already based on a comparatively high level of trust.

Although the traditional perception and broad appreciation of museums as institutions, which is evident in all the survey data, provides a solid foundation, trust also seems to be systematically influenced by the presence of museums in people's lives. People who visit museums have higher levels of trust, and this is reinforced by frequency.

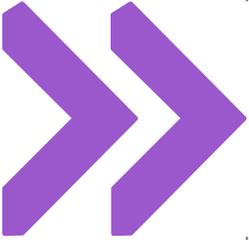
However carefully the data should be interpreted, it is clear that museums are already doing a good job in terms of content to reach their regular visitors. However, there is a need to consider how to bring the occasional visitor to the museum more often and how to convince the hard core of 'never visitors'. Follow-up studies with more data points, over time series and, above all, qualitative data should therefore focus even more intensively on how this great potential can be better utilised. The results of the visitor structure analysis in eight Leibniz Research Museums should also be taken into account, according to which people who already prefer to visit museums due to their better socio-economic situation, their high level of education and a particularly pronounced personality trait of openness (Thoma & al. 2022: 87), especially since these people assign higher trust values due to their favourable socio-economic and psychological conditions (cf. Chapters 3.2. and 3.3.).



## 5.3. Conclusion

For the first time since 2013, the study provides population-representative data for Germany on the frequency of museum visits. 5.3 per cent of respondents do not visit museums at all. The share of those who visited a museum at least once per quarter last year is only slightly higher at 6.0%. Just over a third (35.1%) have visited a museum at least once in the last twelve months, and almost half (47.7%) have done so more than a year ago.

Even among 'never visitors', museums enjoy abstract trust in the form of an advance of trust. At the same time, trust increases with the number of actual visits. The higher the frequency of visits, the higher the reported levels of trust. This clear correlation cannot be established for any of the other institutional items. Clearly, there is scope for museums to make a positive impact through good performance in the form of appealing exhibitions, events and other offerings. Even if they are already starting from a comparatively high level of trust, they can further increase trust through targeted and well-considered measures.



## 6. Museum performance and trust in museums

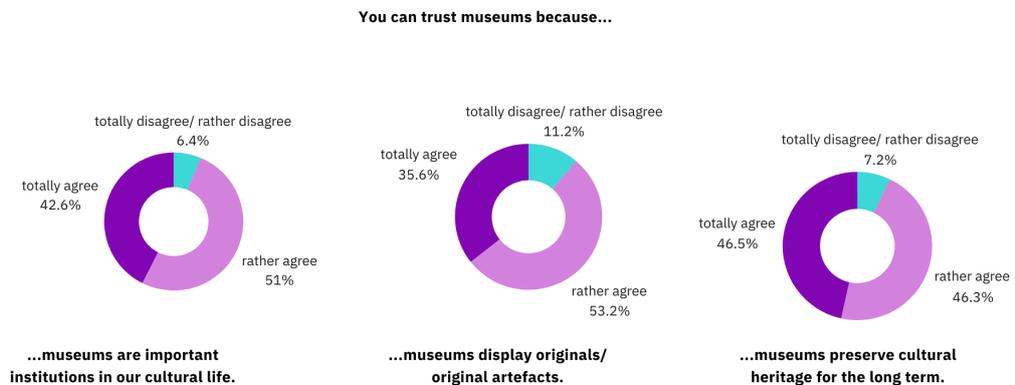
In addition to the frequency of visits, the way in which respondents perceive the functions attributed to museums is also important for individual attitudes towards museums. Performance in the sense of efficiency means in this context the assessment of the extent to which museums fulfil the functions ascribed to them.

Performance was already a topic in Chapter 5, but there the focus was mainly on the museum activities that are predominantly perceived by visitors, such as exhibitions, events or other outreach activities. This chapter, on the other hand, is not about performance in relation to activities, but in relation to all facets and functions of museum operations. Instead of focussing on objective performance, respondents were asked whether they consider the performance criteria to be important and to what extent this perception influences their attitude of trust towards museums.



## 6.1. Cultural representation

FIG. 12: CULTURAL REPRESENTATION



The first battery of items focuses on individual assessments of the cultural representation function of museums. Respondents were asked to rate the following statements on a four-point scale (strongly disagree - somewhat disagree - somewhat agree - strongly agree):

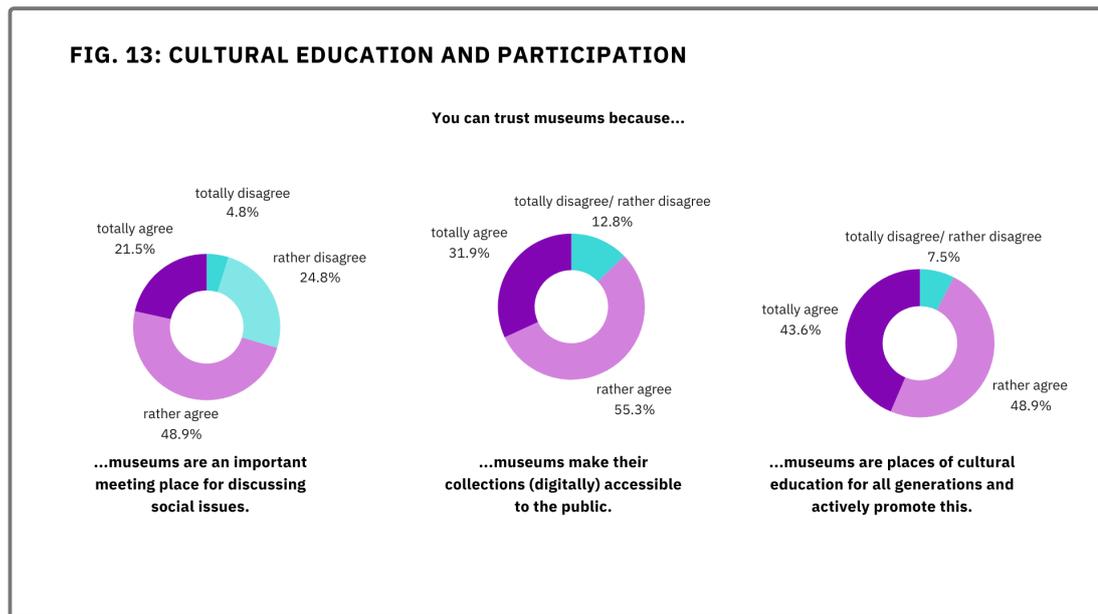
- (1) Museums can be trusted because they are important institutions in our cultural life.
- (2) Museums can be trusted because they preserve cultural heritage in the long term.
- (3) Museums can be trusted because they display originals/original artefacts.

All three items deal with different facets and levels of abstraction of the classic interpretation of museums as guardians of cultural heritage, which should be preserved in its original form as far as possible. The levels of agreement are very high across all three items, with a maximum of 11.2 per cent disagreeing with these statements. The results are very consistent across the board, as the overwhelming support for the classical and ideal functions of museums correlates with high levels of trust. This is also supported by EUROSTAT survey data. More than 80 per cent of all respondents in 28 European countries completely or somewhat agreed with the statement 'How important do you think cultural heritage is for you personally?' (Beck-Domžalska, Marta & al. 2019: 40). As banal as it may sound, the reason why museums are valued is precisely for what they were built and should do according to the classical narrative and in a systemic context.



## 6.2. Cultural education and participation

**FIG. 13: CULTURAL EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION**



The second battery of items focusses on individual assessments of the functions of cultural education and participation. Respondents were asked to rate the following statements on a four-point scale (strongly disagree - somewhat disagree - somewhat agree - strongly agree):

- (1) Museums can be trusted because they are an important meeting place for discussing social issues.
- (2) Museums can be trusted because they make their collections (digitally) accessible to the public.
- (3) Museums can be trusted because they are places of cultural education for all generations and actively promote this.

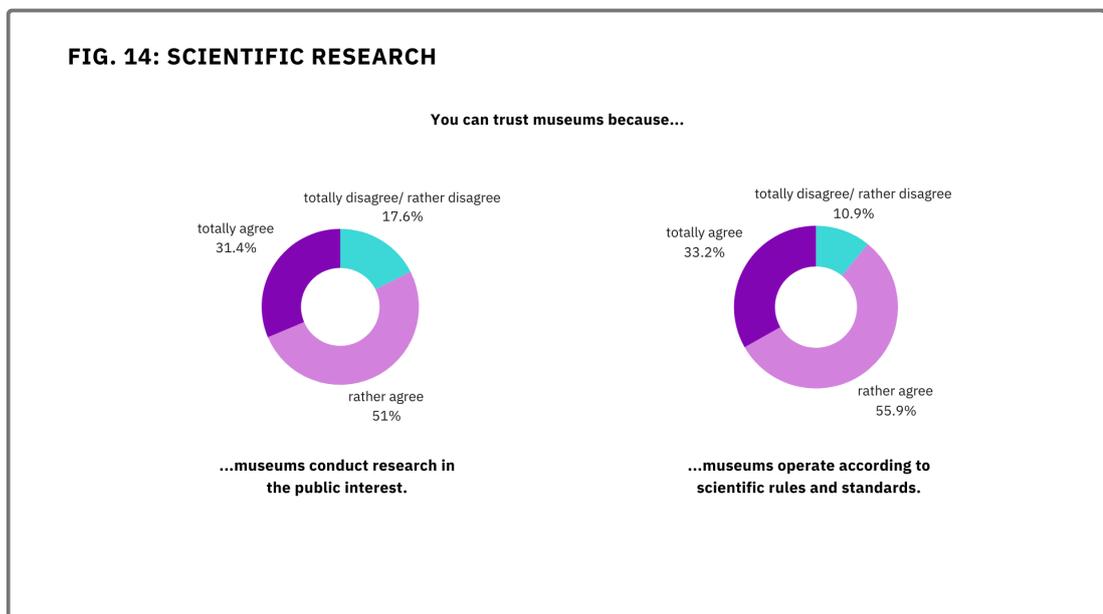
The three items focus on very different aspects of cultural education and participation that play a role in the contemporary museum debate. While (3) focuses on classical educational work, (2) stands more for (digital) access and participation to knowledge about objects, while (1) covers the much discussed function of the museum as a 'third place' [16] for social interaction and exchange. The results show that the classical educational function is least rejected (7.4%) and has the highest proportion of those who fully agree (43.6%). Access and participation in object knowledge is also very popular and is rejected by only a few (12.8%), although the proportion of respondents who strongly agree (31.9%) is significantly lower.

[16] In 1989, US sociologist Ray Oldenburg first introduced his concept of the third place in 'The Great Good Place'. In his view, the first place is dedicated to work and the second to family life. The third place offers a balance between the two and is a meeting place for the neighbourhood community.

The museum's function as a place of social exchange still has a relatively high approval rating (70.4%), but also the highest rejection rate (29.6%). Obviously, in the field of cultural education and participation, the longest established, classical educational functions are considered particularly trustworthy and receive the most support. Item (3), which emphasises the function of museums as places of social exchange, received considerably less support than items (1) and (2). Just under a third of respondents seem to have little sympathy for the role of museums as a forum for discussion. This attitude is somewhat at odds with the current efforts of museums to shape and develop their work transparently and in an ongoing dialogue with their audiences. Much more research is needed to draw concrete conclusions for the work of museums.



## 6.3. Scientific Research



The individual appreciation of scientific research in museums is the focus of the third battery of items. Respondents were asked to rate the following statements on a four-point scale (strongly disagree - somewhat disagree - somewhat agree - strongly agree):

- (1) Museums can be trusted because they conduct research in the public interest.
- (2) Museums can be trusted because they operate according to scientific rules and standards.

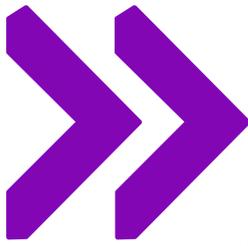
The multiple crises of our time have massively changed the public perception of science and research. Central questions of social life and cohesion depend on how flexibly and resiliently we can respond to them. All the experts agree that museums, with their enormous repositories of object-based knowledge, will play a key role in the future. It is evident that this awareness has also been reinforced among the general public, as the approval ratings for both items in this battery, which assess research in museums from the perspective of the public good (1) and compliance with rules and standards (2), are consistently high.

However, the comparatively high rejection of the statement that museums conduct research in the public interest (17.6%) is striking. Disagreement with this statement is particularly strong among supporters of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) (23.7%) and those who show little or no political interest (24.4%). It is important to keep an eye on this aspect, as it indicates slight doubts about the non-profit and neutral nature of museum work, which could undermine trust in museums in the medium term.



## 6.4. Conclusion

Approval of the various dimensions and facets of museum work is consistently very high and correlates with high levels of trust. Museums are particularly trusted for the functions that the classical canon ascribes to them, such as the preservation of cultural heritage and the facilitation of cultural education. The museum's function as a place for social debate and dialogue is less well received. Implications for specific aspects of museum work would need to be worked out through further research. The statement that museums carry out research in the public interest is also somewhat more controversial. It is crucial to monitor the current discourse, as doubts about the non-profit nature and neutrality of museum work could undermine trust in museums in the medium term.



## 7. Conclusion: The hidden capital

Many findings have already been presented in detail and are summarised at the beginning of the study. The concluding remarks should therefore be used to categorise these initial findings and to point out the resulting perspectives for research and action. It has become abundantly clear that museums represent **valuable social capital** that has not yet been sufficiently recognised in the general political debate. However, this study is only a first snapshot and should therefore be continued at regular intervals as a **monitoring programme**.

Measured against political polarisation, museums appear to be institutions that enjoy very broad social and societal trust. The systemic importance of the museum as an institution on which all interviewees can agree in principle. Measured against political polarisation, museums appear to be institutions that enjoy very broad social and societal trust. The systemic importance of the museum as an institution on which all interviewees can agree in principle - regardless of whether they are rich or poor, old or young, with or without a migration background, with or without a history of visiting museums, and regardless of their personal party-political orientation - is much more evident than in the case of science and the media.

Are museums perhaps too 'harmless', or is their quality as institutions of consensus exactly what a polarised society ultimately needs? Museums, like public broadcasters, are institutions where different groups in society can participate, share knowledge and exchange opinions. In an age of increasing polarisation, these 'institutions of the social campfire' (Aigner & al. 2017: 52; Grotz & Schröder 2021: 412) are increasingly being called into question. There is enormous potential here, which is why the approximately 7,000 museums in Germany should also be treated as what they have always been: countless building blocks of a socio-cultural infrastructure that can obviously appeal to people in and across the country beyond their respective specifics.

However carefully the data should be interpreted, it is clear that museums are already doing a good job in terms of content to reach their regular visitors. But we need new approaches on how to bring the occasional visitor to the museum more often and how to convince the hard core of 'never visitors'. Follow-up studies with more data points, time series and, above all, qualitative data should therefore look more closely at how this huge potential can be better exploited.

The finding that museums also seem to enjoy a high level of trust among people with a migration background is certainly not a simple confirmation of the status quo that the museum landscape is already optimally prepared for the challenges of a pluralistic society. But the consistently high level of trust in museums across all social groups also highlights the hidden capital that museums can contribute. Consequently, there is a special social and political imperative to meet this high level of trust with an appropriate museum infrastructure and to develop it further in line with the times.

It is unlikely that this enormous potential will be preserved, let alone realised, in the medium term if the status quo is maintained. This is where museum managers, funding organisations and politicians need to step up to the plate, so that this hitherto little-known but nevertheless central social resource can continue to be used for integrated measures of social cohesion. Museums should therefore be considered and anchored in the concept of public services of general interest even more than before, also and especially through targeted investments by the public sector.

However, as the follow-up questions show, this neutrality should not be seen as absolute, but rather as a kind of guardrail within which there is room for individual attitudes, positioning and actions.

However, how exactly this **scope for neutrality** is measured, where its limits lie, and what factors exactly play a role in the perception of museums as neutral authorities would be an essential desideratum for further research. Once trust has been lost, it is difficult to regain, so it would be very important to explore this scope for neutrality even more thoroughly in order to be able to use the trust capital that is currently attributed to museums in a responsible and targeted way.

Last but not least, an observation of a more museological nature. The high level of trust in museums certainly has its roots in a specific public perception of museums in Germany as part of **public services of general interest**. Since the days of the German Empire, the establishment and maintenance of museums in the sense of cultural participation of the citizens has been a task of the local authorities, although it has remained a voluntary task until today. In this context, a study by the German Civil Servants' Association (Deutscher Beamtenbund) on the evaluation of public institutions in 2023, which gave museums and libraries a good grade, surpassed only by rubbish collection, is also relevant (Forsa 2023: 11). However, public funding is only one facet of the apparently deeply rooted ideas in the German public about what a museum is and should be.

The **abstract concept of 'museum'** seems to be clearly preconceived in the public mind and is apparently not easy to overcome. A similar observation comes from Canada: 'Even those people who rarely or never visited museums still liked the idea of the museum: A large number of respondents strongly support the concept of the museum, while largely avoiding the reality.' (Dickenson 2021: 4) We should take this as an opportunity to analyse the public's existing perceptions of what a museum is or should be, and its possible future, as the subject of a major representative study. The findings would certainly make a valuable contribution to the debate, which is often confined to the circle of cultural professionals and museum makers.



# Appendix



## A. Methodology

The survey was conducted between 6 and 19 December 2023. It was a nationally representative online survey of the German-speaking resident population aged 16 and over. Ad hoc online interviews were conducted (also on mobile devices), which lasted on average 8.3 minutes. The survey language was German. A sample size of 1,070 complete interviews was achieved.

Participants were recruited via online panels. Each sample was drawn randomly (Simple Random Sampling, SRS), stratified by age, gender and federal state, from the database of active panelists in Germany. During the fieldwork period, the sample size and the avoidance of bias in the sample were continuously monitored for representativeness. The socio-demographic characteristics were collected in accordance with demographic standards [17] that allow comparability between individual studies and the overall social situation.

In order to make full use of the information from the survey, which is representative of the population, and to make it transparent in terms of individual visitor behaviour, attitudes to museums and identification with museums, spatial classification systems were used in the analysis, for example to work out the differences between densely populated metropolitan areas or, in individual cases, large cities with communities or towns in rural areas. The residence of the respondent was determined at the beginning of the interview using the five-digit postcode. Within the federal states, cells were therefore formed according to the BIK region types. [18]

The results obtained can only be extrapolated to the population as a whole with the error tolerances that are possible in all sample surveys.

[17] Cf. Beckmann, Katharina; Glemser, Axel; Heckel, Christiane & al 2016: Demographische Standards. eine gemeinsame Empfehlung des ADM, Arbeitskreis Deutscher Markt- und Sozialforschungsinstitute e.V., der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Institute e.V. (ASI) und des Statistischen Bundesamtes. Wiesbaden.  
[18] Cf. Behrens, K. und Wiese, K. 2019: BIK-Regionen. In: Arbeitsgruppe Regionale Standards (Hrsg.): Regionale Standards, Ausgabe 2019. GESIS Schriftenreihe Band 23: 114-126.



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