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## **Who can participate?**

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND EXPERIENCES  
OF RACISM OF PEOPLE WITH MIGRATION BIOGRAPHIES IN GERMANY





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## Executive Summary

In Germany, there are many debates about people with a "migration background". Often these debates revolve *around* people with migration biographies rather than including them. At the same time, it is often claimed they are not sufficiently politically and civically engaged. In a multilingual, representative survey with people with and without migration biographies, conducted in May 2021, d|part examined how people with migration biographies experience this "participation" themselves and what role the factor "migration background" plays in this. This yielded the following core findings:

- People with a statistical migration background experience structural barriers to political and civic participation in Germany.
- For the most part, they are as much civically engaged as the average population, e.g. by volunteering, participating in demonstrations and petitions, or in neighbourhood support.
- However, they are less likely to participate in elections. But this is not due to a lack of political interest. On the contrary, people with a statistical migration background stated more often than average that they want to get more involved civically.
- In particular, those who have already experienced racism would like to become more politically and civically involved.
- At the same time, those who have already experienced racist discrimination are also significantly more likely to say that they have stopped their previous engagement because of discrimination.
- A majority of people with migration biographies would like to see more inclusive voting rights and more representation in politics.
- People with a statistical migration background, who also identify themselves in this way (and even more so if they have also experienced racism), would like

people with migration biographies and people of colour to receive more political attention and would also like to see a higher representation of these groups in German parliaments.

- However, this wish does not come at the expense of other underrepresented groups. On the contrary, they would also like to see more political attention, for example, for young people and women.

Thus, in order to enhance this existing potential for participation among people with migration biographies, it is crucial to eradicate structural barriers for participation for them. It is therefore up to the political parties, institutions, and civil society organisations to mobilise these motivated people and maintain their engagement.

The research project “Who can participate” was funded by the Open Society Foundations.

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## 1. Different migration biographies instead of one “migration background”

In Germany, there are many public debates about the so-called “migration background”. Most of these discussions, however, fall short due to at least two reasons. First, they often presume a history of migration to be homogenous. This can thus be used as a homogeneous category in order to overall characterise one group in the population. However, it is clear, that these groups are very diverse and heterogenous.<sup>1</sup> Second, it is often assumed that this so-called migration background is the deciding factor for people in their political and civic engagement. Here, other intersecting factors such as gender, socio-economic background, or experiences of discrimination are ignored as potentially equally important factors.<sup>2</sup>

The “statistical migration background”<sup>3</sup>, i.e. the category used by the Federal Statistical Office, is increasingly faced with as much criticism in public discourse as the notion itself. Some argue whether this category still makes sense today and even go as far as to demand they – the statistical category and the notion – should no longer be used.<sup>4</sup> Also a special commission by the federal government recommends dismissing this category and proposes alternative wording.<sup>5</sup> The term is problematic because it is imprecise. For example, there are people in Germany who do not fall under the statistical definition of the migration background, since their families have lived in Germany for many generations, yet they experience racism. Moreover, the notion seems outdated and discriminatory, since it separates groups of people from a majority population which is mis-portrayed again as homogenous and undifferentiated. Moreover, it does not consider whether the people falling into this category of the statistical migration background actually identify with it, if the notion is being used uncritically and set as absolute. There are indeed some people who would be

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1. Ahyoud et al. (2018), Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen (2021)

2. See Müssig (2020), Spies et al. (2020), SVR (2020)

3. “A person has a migration background if s/he or at least one of his/her parents did not acquire the German citizenship at birth” (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2021).

4. Ataman (2018), Supik (2017), Mediendienst Integration (2021), Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen (2021), Will (2016, 2018, 2019)

5. Fachkommission der Bundesregierung zu den Rahmenbedingungen der Integrationsfähigkeit (2020), Will (2021)

considered to have a “migration background” according to the definition of the Federal Statistical Office, but do not identify with this category.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the statistical category “migration background” does not cover all people who have a migration biography and forcibly unifies very diverse experiences into one category. This differentiation, however, is extremely important when analysing the political participation of people with various migration biographies and experiences.

There are several existing studies on the political and civic engagement of people with a statistical migration background in Germany.<sup>7</sup> These predominantly find that – among others – due to structural barriers, people with a so-called migration background are less likely to participate in elections as well as in different forms of civic activities beyond elections.<sup>8</sup> While some studies focus primarily on personal motivations, others have shown that it is crucial to also address structural barriers such as socio-economic disadvantages or limited political rights rather than only looking at the individual level for causes of (non-)participation.<sup>9</sup>

This project therefore aims to critically reflect the category “migration background” regarding political participation and the barriers people with migration biographies face in Germany.

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6. d|part Think Tank für politische Partizipation (2021)

7. Bausch et al. (2011), Müssig & Worbs (2012); Sauer (2020), SVR (2020), Wilmes (2018)

8. Müssig (2020), SVR (2020)

9. Müssig (2020)



### 2. Methodology

Initially, we conducted an expert scoping. We talked to multiple experts from academia, civil society, politics, and media who have all critical expertise on the topics of political participation, people with migration biographies, and racism. The survey design as well as the final analysis were both informed by this crucial exchange with these experts.

We use the term “migration background” as an analytical category when we refer to and work with the measurement of the Federal Statistics Office and the corresponding statistics for Germany. However, it became clear through several discussions with experts, that alternative expressions were preferred when analysing and contextualising study results. This is why, in this research project, we will use the term “people with migration biographies” to reflect the diversity of various migration experiences.

The results presented here are from the survey we conducted in collaboration with the research company Bilendi. In total, 3012 persons participated in the survey, of which 2009 did have a statistical migration background and 1003 did not. The survey was conducted online between 7 and 22 May 2021 and is representative for people between 16-74 years old in Germany (with and without a migration background). A thorough sampling design ensured that the survey participants represented the population in Germany based on the variables gender, age, education, federal state (Bundesland), occupational group, as well as migration background. The survey was available in German, Arabic, Turkish, and Russian to ensure more accessible and greater participation.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Details on the methodology can be found in an overview on the [project website](#).



### 3. The role of the statistical migration background, self-identification, and experiences of racism

Due to the extensive discourse on whether the term “migration background” is still appropriate today and if it should remain in use, a central question of this study was to assess to what extent people in Germany self-identify as having a “migration background”. A previous d|part youth study yielded that many youths who would fall under the category to have a statistical migration background do not necessarily identify with it.<sup>11</sup> Our current research yielded a similar result. We asked the following question: Which of the following groups do you identify with? Participants were able to select as many answers as they found appropriate:

- Young people
- Non-graduate employees
- Persons with migration background
- People of colour
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual and/or queer people
- Parents
- Children
- Foreigners<sup>12</sup>
- People with disabilities
- Women
- Retired
- Others, namely: (please insert)
- With none of these groups

We considered all respondents having selected “persons with migration background” and “foreigners” as categories of self-identification. The differentiation between different groups of people with migration biographies is crucial here. Only about one

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11. d|part Think Tank für politische Partizipation (2021)

12. The answer option “foreigner” (in German: “Ausländer”) was deliberately included, although the term is often perceived as stigmatising. However, especially people with migration biographies from older generations use this term amongst each other to describe themselves or other people with migration biographies (especially the Turkish term “yabancı”) (see O’Brien-Coker, 2020).

third of the people with a statistical migration background identifies with this category or with the one of “foreigner”. More precisely: of those having a statistical migration background, 11% state they identify with the group “people with migration background” but not with “foreigner”, while this applies to 8% the other way around. Moreover, 15% identify with both terms. There is only a limited overlap between the statistical categorisation and the self-identification.

In addition to the categories “statistical migration background” and “self-identification”, we also took into account “experience of racism”. Previous research has shown that people without statistical migration background can also experience racism.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, experiencing racism cannot be generalised to all people with a “statistical migration background” who identify with several of the groups mentioned above.

Thus, we examined to what extent respondents with a statistical migration background who also identified with it, had ever experienced some form of racism.

We compared the following groups:

- People without statistical migration background
- People with statistical migration background, who identify with it
- People with statistical migration background, who do not identify with it

Our survey yielded that of those without a statistical migration background, 12% stated that they had experienced racism at some point.

## Figure 1

### Experiences of Racism among people without statistical migration background (% , N=1003)

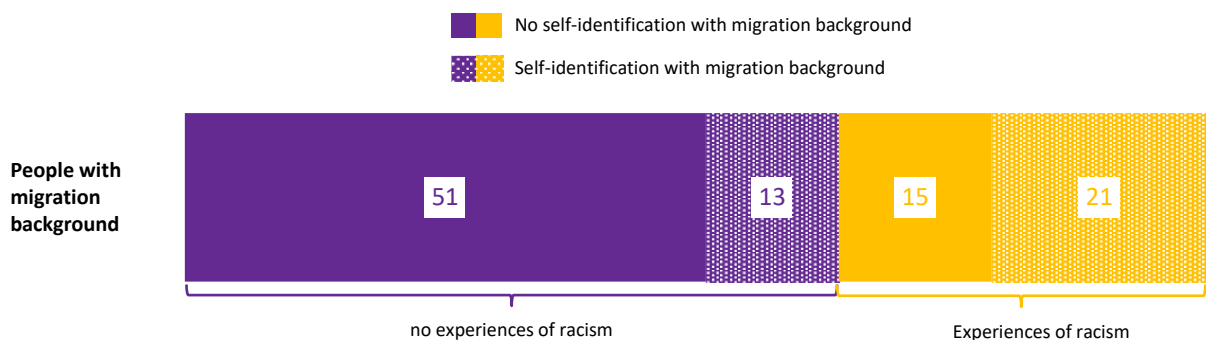


13. Abdul-Rahman et al. (2020)

People with statistical migration background are three times more likely to have experienced racism, namely 36%. Among those who have experienced racism, there are more people who identify with their migration background than those who do not, while it is the other way around for those who have not experienced racism.

## Figure 2

### Experiences of Racism and self-identification of people with statistical migration background (% , N=2009)

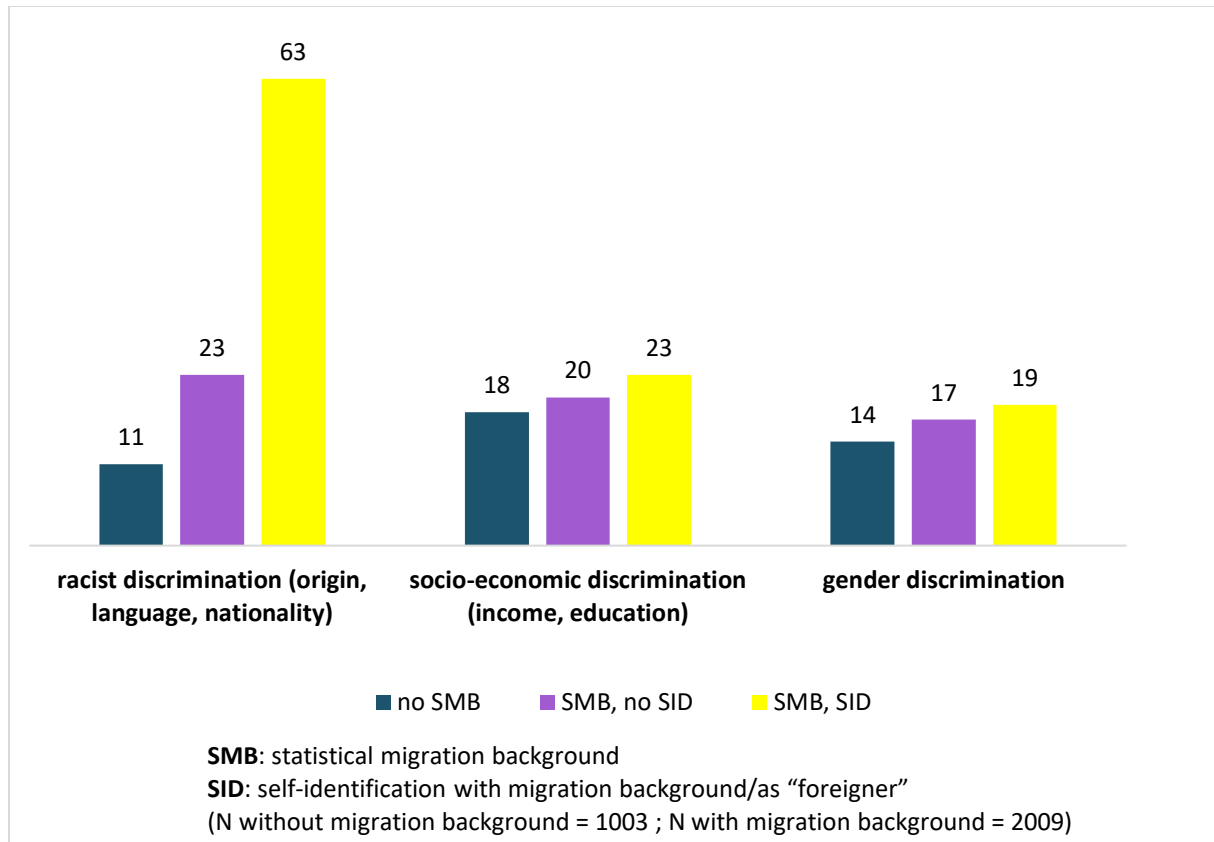


As discrimination can take place at the same time on different levels<sup>14</sup>, i.e. be intersectional, we analysed, how often people with various migration biographies had experienced discrimination based on gender, socio-economic factors (i.e. income or education), or racism (i.e. colour of skin, language, nationality, or country of origin). Here, discrimination based on gender or socio-economic background is more likely to be experienced among those with migration biographies, but not significantly more than among others.

<sup>14</sup> See Müssig (2020), Spies et al. (2020), SVR (2020)

**Figure 3**

**Experiences of discrimination in different areas by statistical migration background and self-identification (%)**



*Have you ever been treated differently based on the following grounds and felt uncomfortable?*

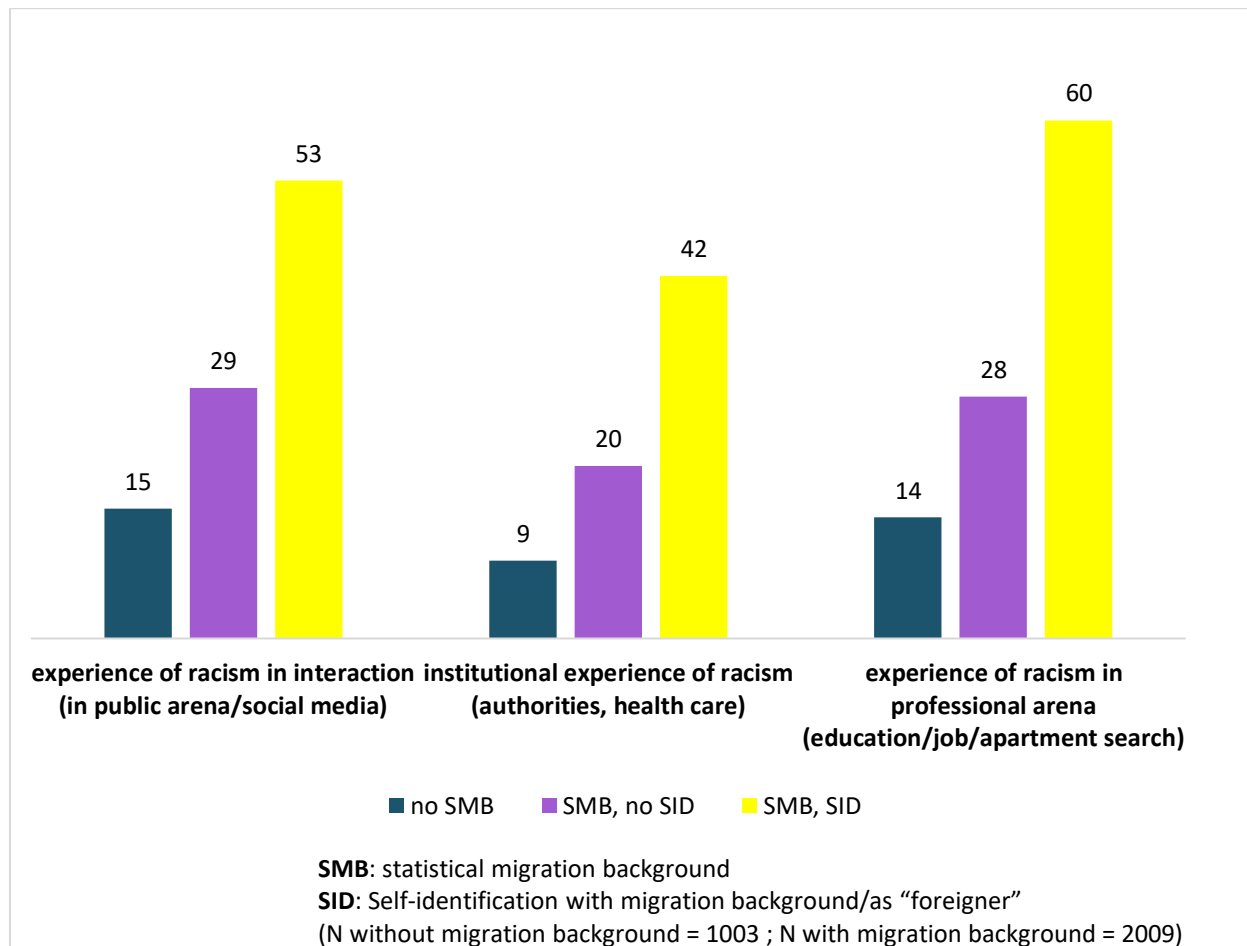
As shown in Figure 3, there is a stark difference in experiences of racism. People with a statistical migration background are significantly more likely to have experienced racism. The likelihood is more than twice as high among those with migration background who do not identify with it compared to those without a migration background. Those who have a migration background and also identify with it are even six times more likely to have experienced racism than those without a migration background.

This implies that racism is not only connected to classical factors such as the socio-economic situation, as allegedly people with a migration background are on average less well-situated. On the contrary: racist discrimination plays a significant and additional role.

This racist discrimination is experienced in different areas of life: in the public space, in social media, in encounters with authorities or in health care, in education, at work, or in search of an apartment.

### Figure 4

**Experiences of racism in different areas by statistical migration background and self-identification (%)**



*Have you ever experienced racism in the following areas or situations?*

Figure 4 shows: there is a substantial difference in the experiences of racism between the groups with and without migration background. Those who have a migration background but do not identify with it, are twice as likely to have experienced racism in all areas of life listed; among those with migration background who also identify with it the likelihood is 3.5 to four times as high. Thus, self-identification and status of migration are connected to experiences of racism in general as well as in many situations of everyday life. It shows that both categories – migration background and self-identification – should be analysed together.

The results in this section emphasise that using the statistical category “migration background” leads to a lack of differentiation. The statistical category needs to be used in combination with self-identification and the lived experience of racism. The criticism of the inaccuracy of the category is hereby underlined again.

In the following analyses, we always differentiate whether people have experienced racism, whether they have a statistical migration background, and if so, whether they identify with it.

**Table 1**  
**Groups of Analysis**

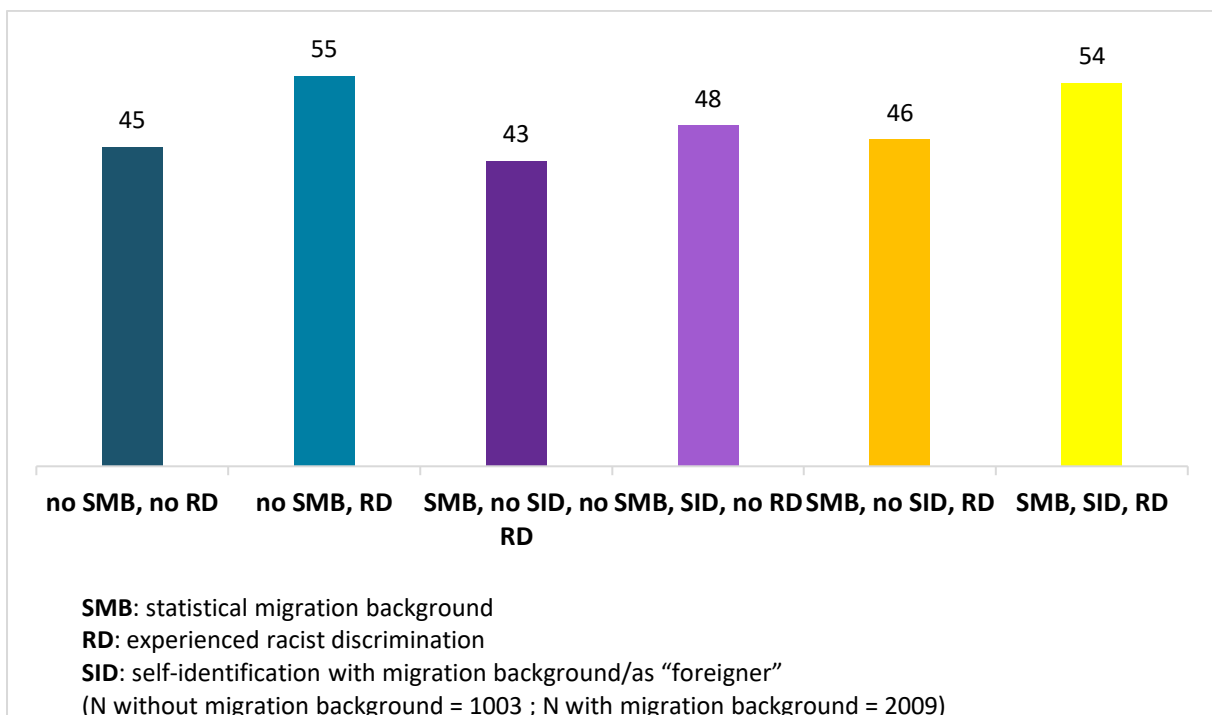
	explanation (for following graphs)	Survey participants	respective share without and with migration background
	no statistical migration background, no experience of racism	1003	88%
	no statistical migration background, but experience of racism		12%
	statistical migration background, no self-identification, no experience of racism	2009	51 %
	statistical migration background, self-identification, no experience of racism		13%
	statistical migration background, no self-identification, experience of racism		15%
	statistical migration background, self-identification, experience of racism		21%

## 4. Political Participation

In order to measure political and civic participation we asked about a broad range of formal (e.g. involvement in a club, association, or party) and informal (e.g. neighbourhood support, participating in protests, boycotts, and petitions) ways of participation. Our survey shows that people with migration biographies are on average similarly engaged civically as those without migration biographies (see Figures 5-10). When asked in which activities the respondents have already participated, there are hardly any differences between people with and without a statistical migration background. People with migration background participate in citizens' initiatives, for example, through petitions and demonstrations, in voluntary work or in neighbourhood associations at least as much as people without migration background. In addition, the former tend to make greater use of online media to share or exchange political contents.

**Figure 5**

**share (%) of respondents, who have ever volunteered in an organisation**

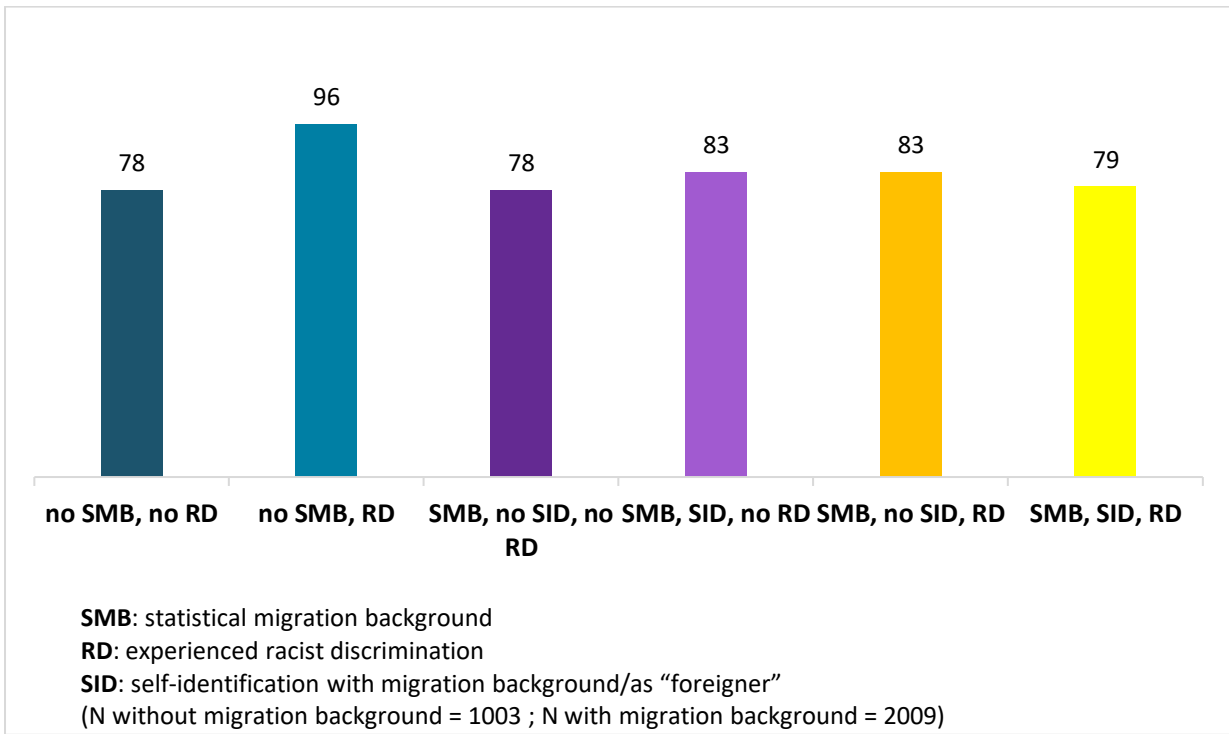


Figures 5-10: *Have you ever been involved in...?*



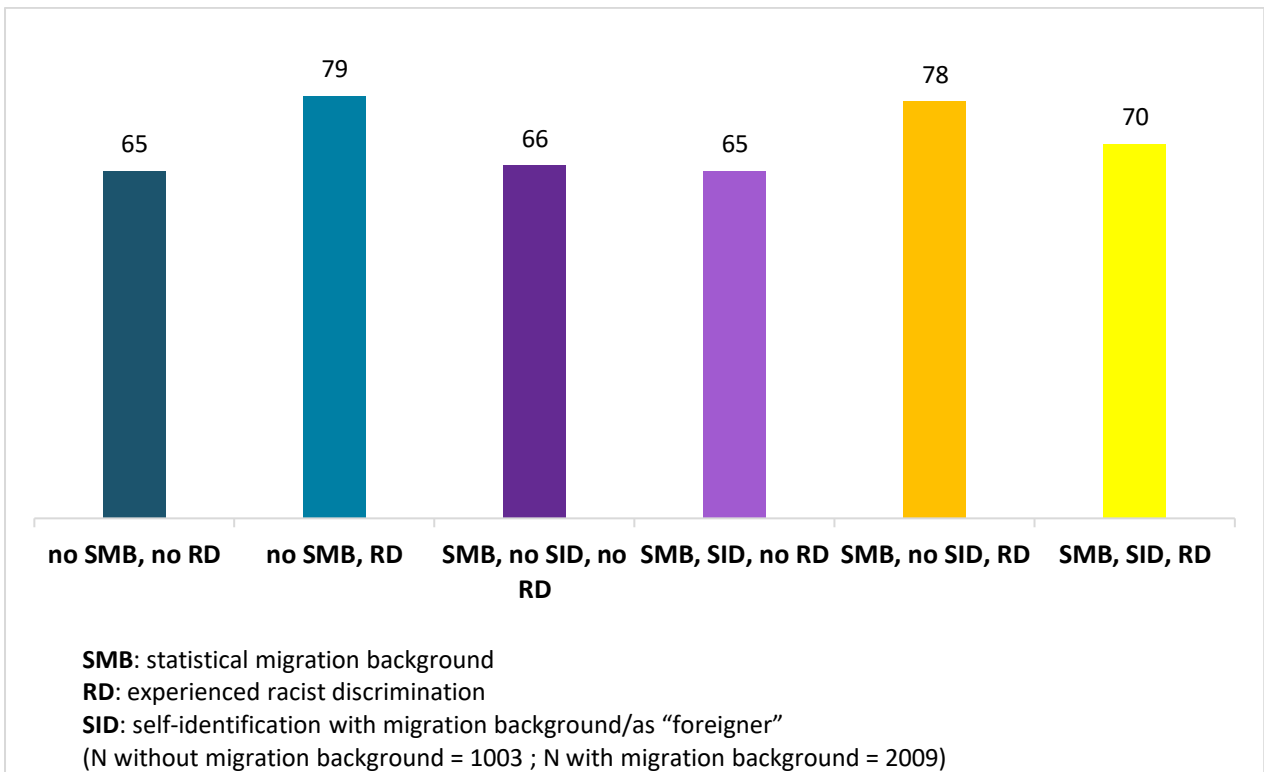
**Figure 6**

share (%) of respondents, who have ever supported people in the neighbourhood



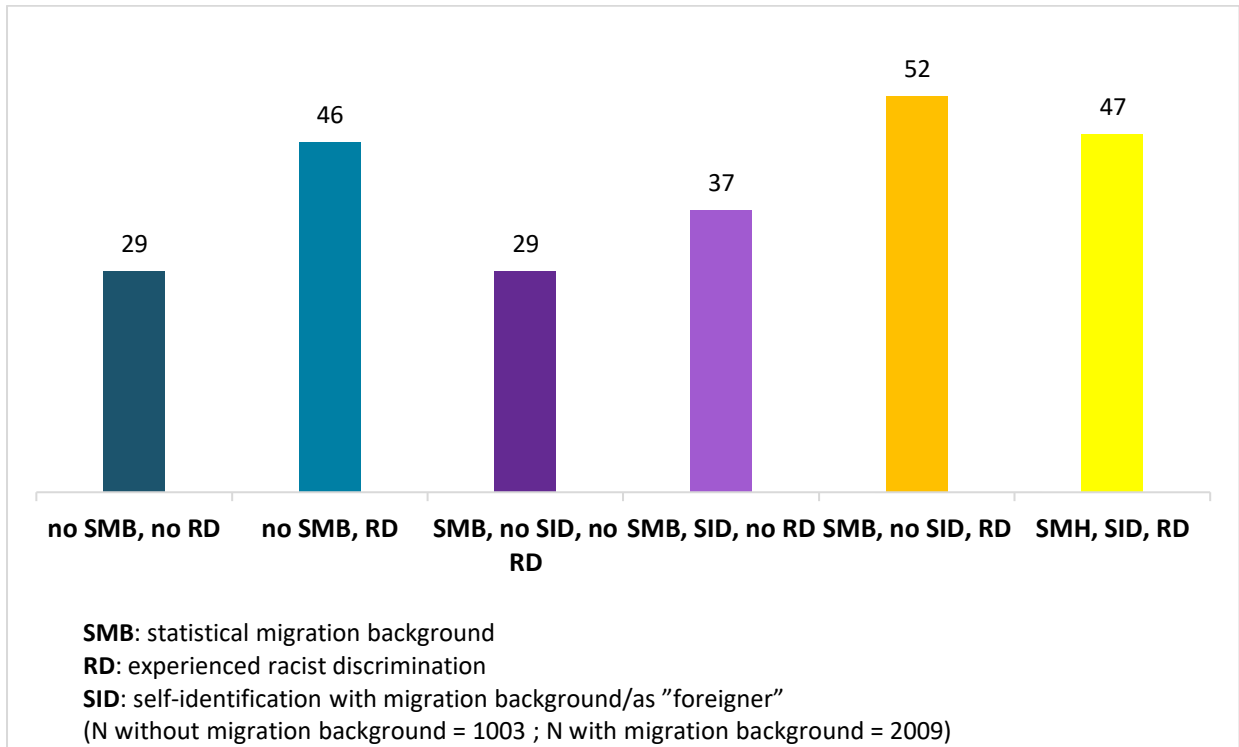
**Figure 7**

share (%) of respondents who have ever signed a petition



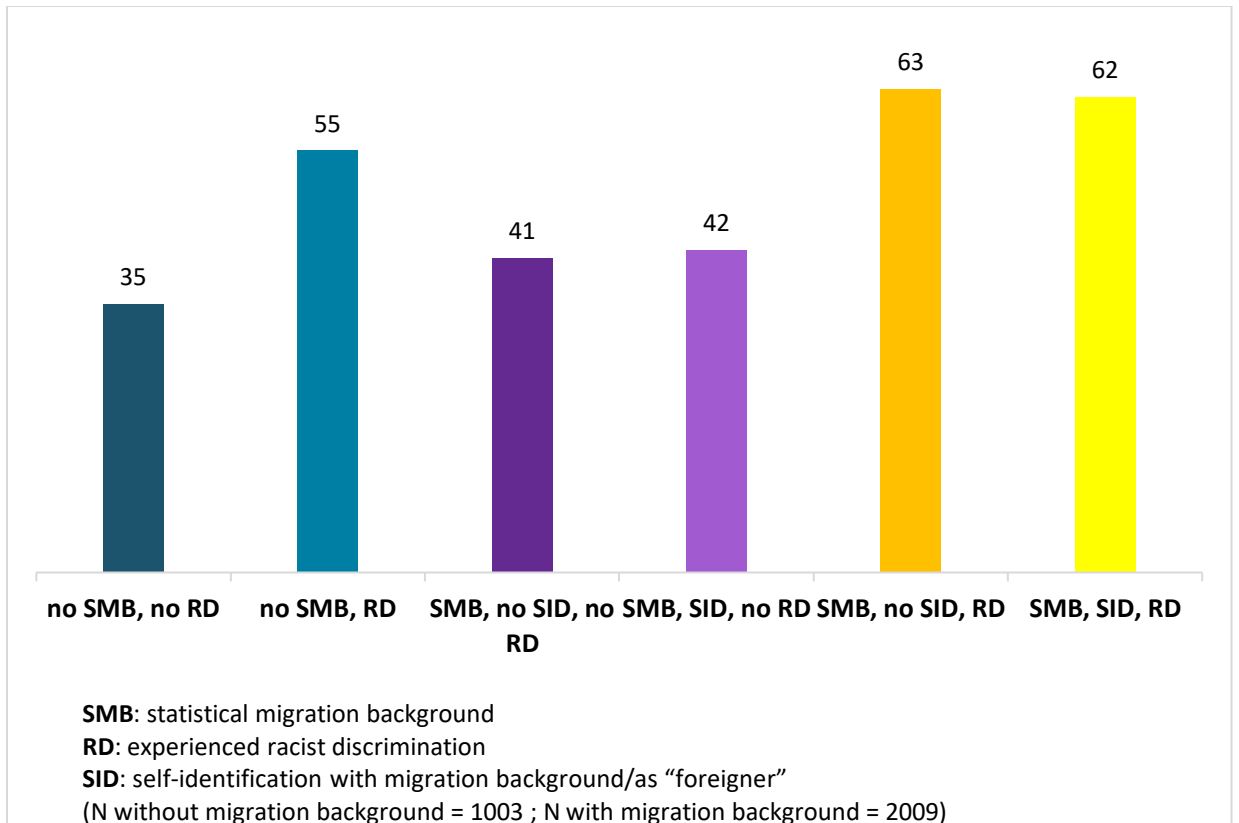
**Figure 8**

share (%) of respondents who have ever marched in a registered protest



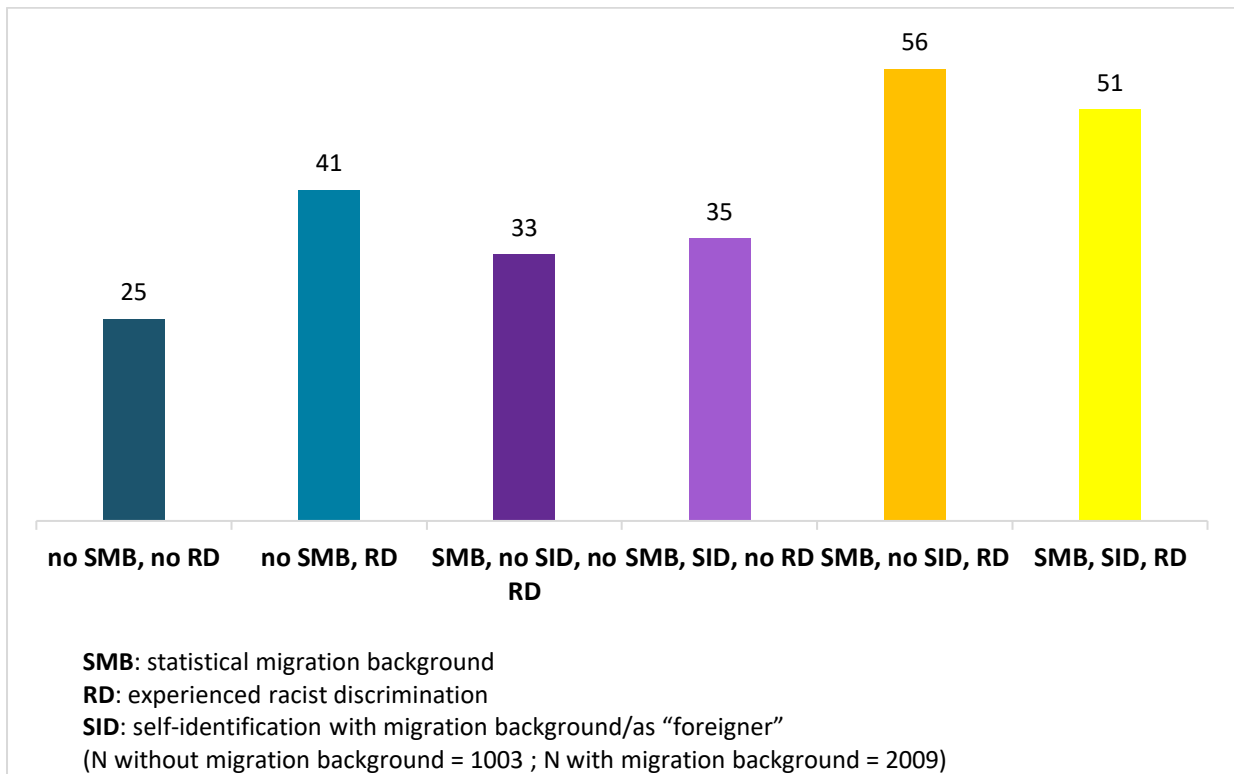
**Figure 9**

share (%) of respondents who have ever shared or forwarded political contents online



**Figure 10**

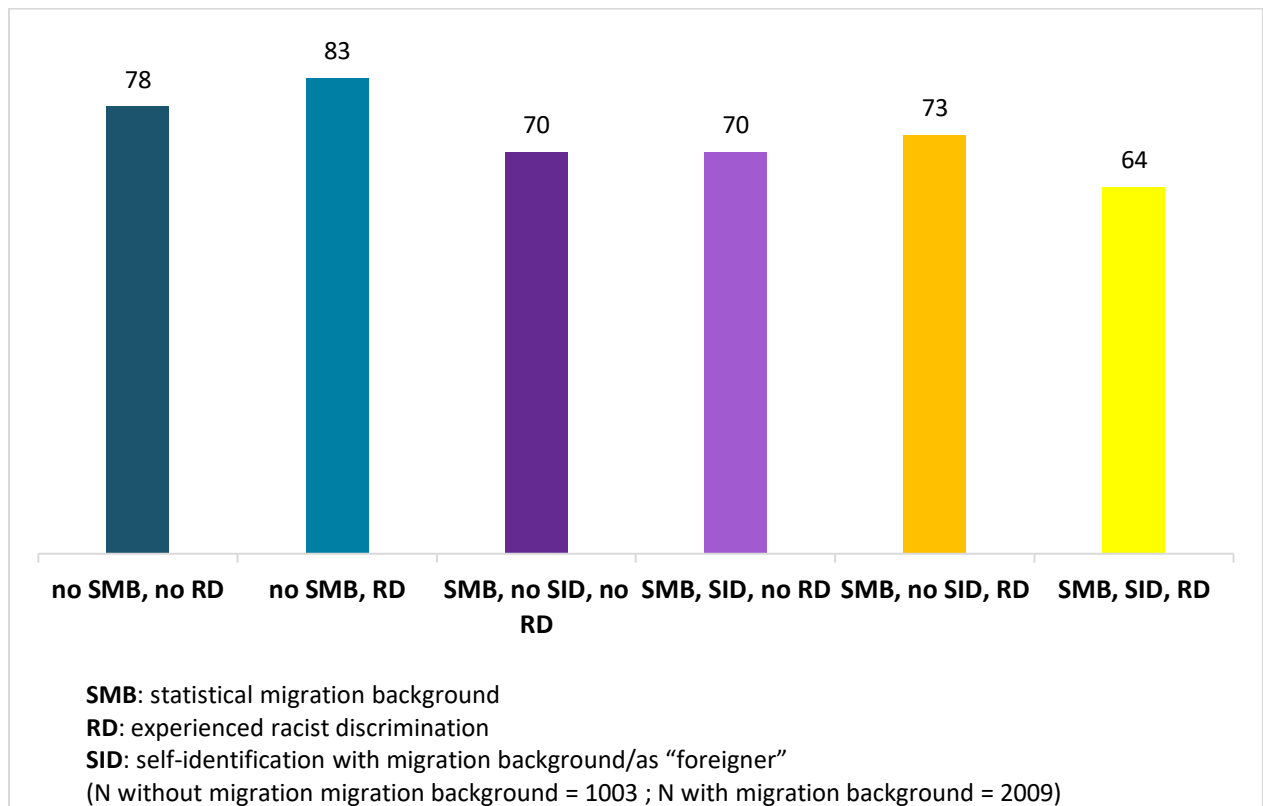
share (%) of respondents who have ever followed a politician's online-channel



One difference between the two groups, however, is evident in voter turnout, as already known from other studies: Respondents with a statistical migration background are less likely to participate in elections.

**Figure 11**

share (%) of respondents who definitely intend to participate in the next federal elections (of those eligible to vote)

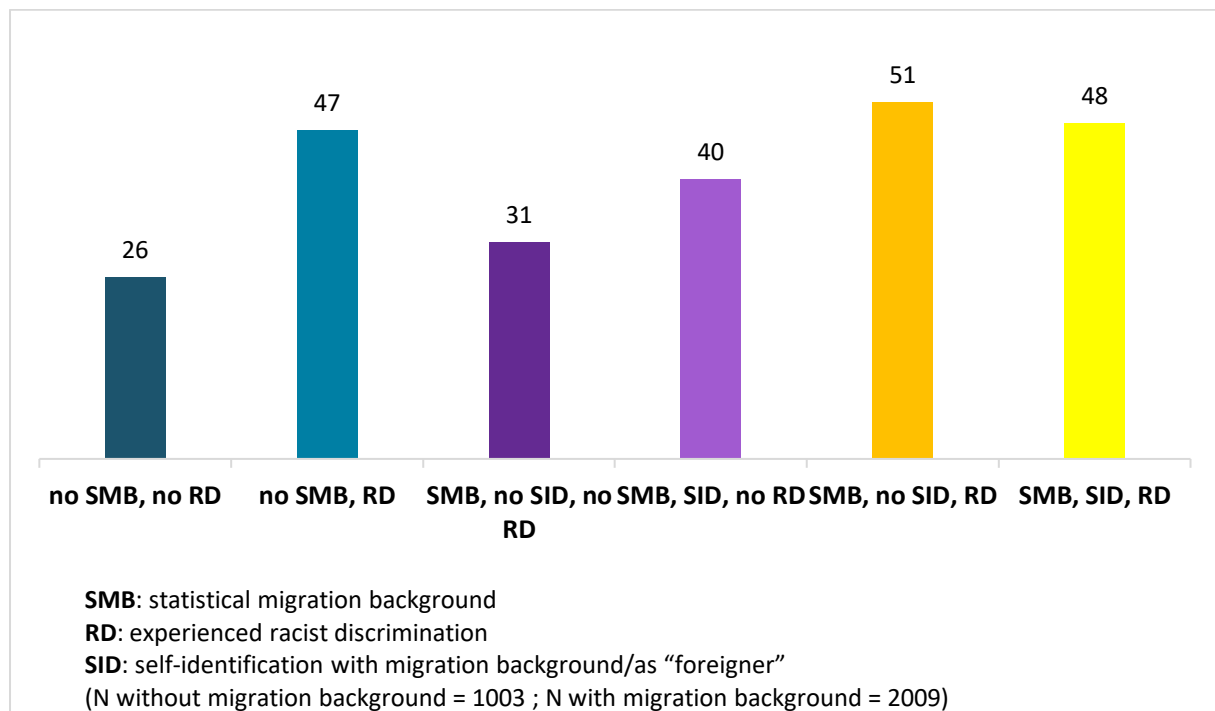


*If there were an election for the Bundestag next week, how likely is it that you would participate?*

A simple conclusion would now be that this lower likelihood of voting can be attributed to political disinterest. However, the survey revealed the opposite: people with a migration background express an above-average number of times that they want to be more politically and civically involved (see Figure 12). This is particularly true for people who have already experienced racism. Here they differ in their political attitudes and participation from respondents who have a migration background but without self-identification or experiences of racism.

**Figure 12**

share (%) of respondents who would want to become more politically involved

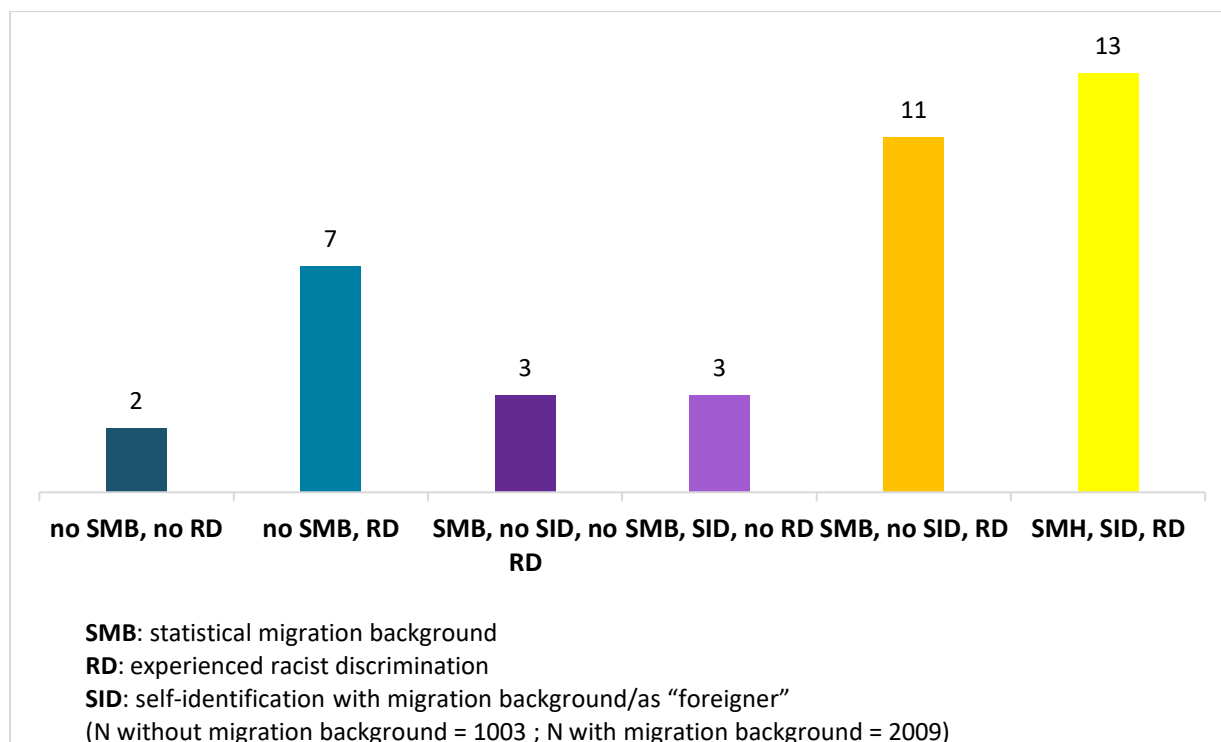


*Would you like to be more politically involved (in your free time)?*

People with a migration background (with and without self-identification) and experiences of racism are also much more likely than the general population to say that they have tried to get civically involved but experienced discrimination and stopped because of it (five to six times as often as people without a migration background and experiences of racism) (Figure 13).

**Figure 13**

share (%) of respondents who have experienced discrimination in their political engagement



Are there reasons that have stopped you from becoming more politically engaged?

→ I have tried to become involved but experienced discrimination

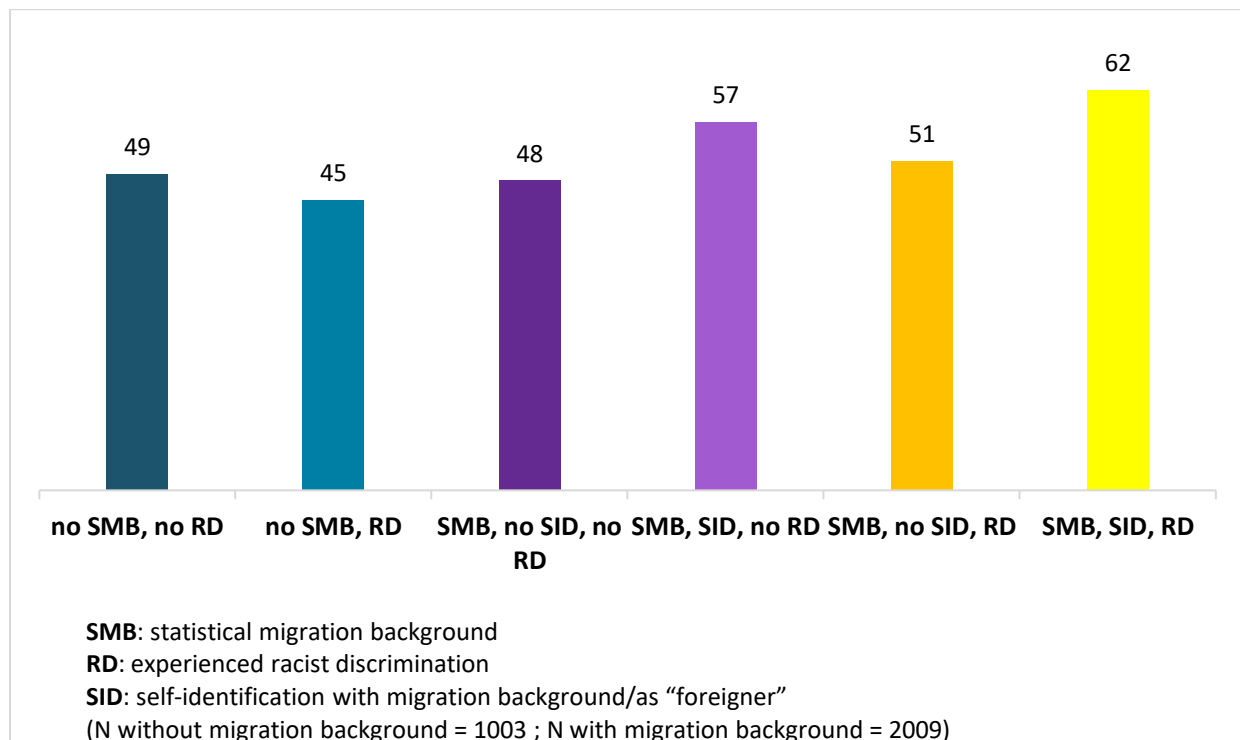
Our findings show that people with a statistical migration background experience more frequent racist discrimination in participation, in everyday life, and by state institutions. Because of the more frequent discrimination, they face additional barriers to participation. It is imperative to consider these structural barriers when we talk about the political and civic participation of people with migration biographies. While they are highly involved civically, such structural barriers mean that the existing potential for greater participation, even in elections, is not fully realised.

## 5. What should change in policy?

The existing desire for more participation is also reflected in the support for more inclusive voting rights. In Figure 14, we see that in particular those with a statistical migration background who also identify with it are most clearly in favour of all adults living in Germany having the right to vote, with 57% and 62% respectively.

**Figure 14**

**Support for more inclusive voting rights (%)**



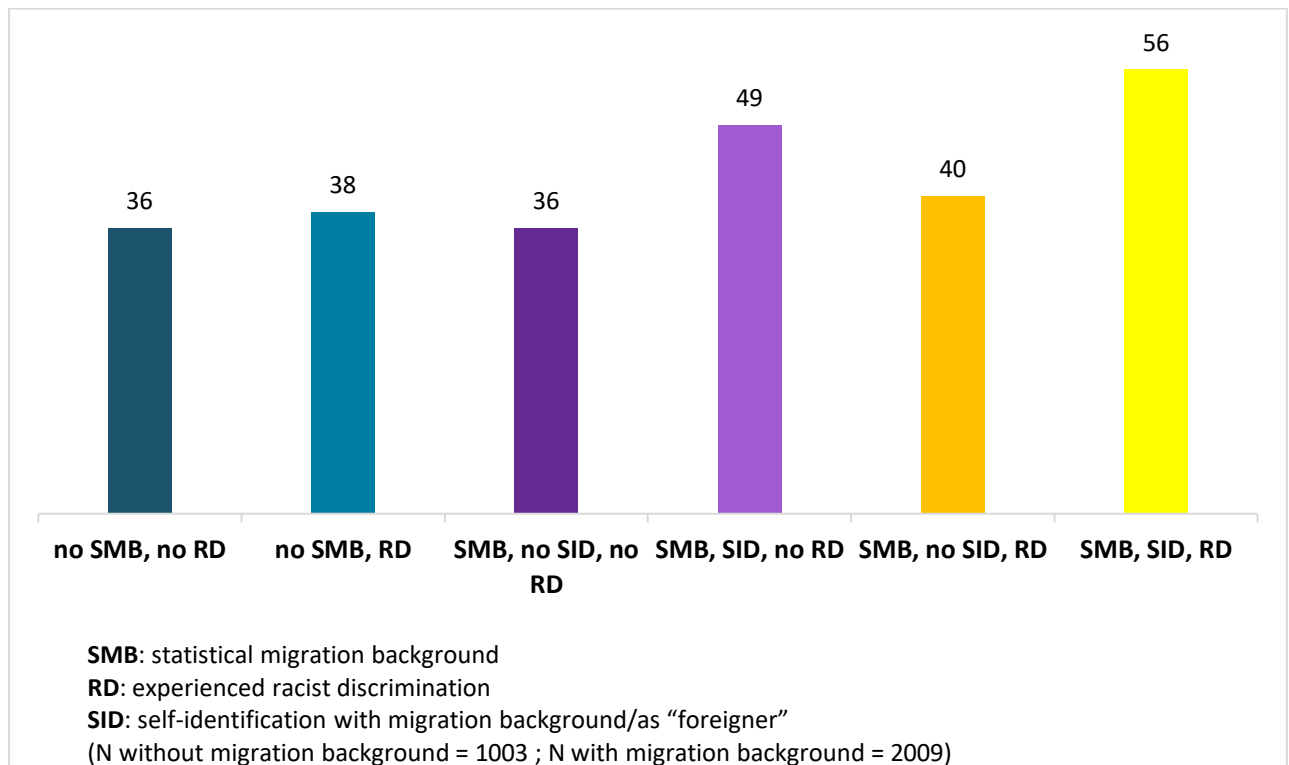
Agreement with statement: *All adults living in Germany should be allowed to vote.*

The support for better political access also continues in the desire for more political representation. Again, there is a clear majority among respondents with a statistical migration background who also identify with it (Figure 15). They feel that people with a migration background are underrepresented in parliaments. This is most pronounced among those who have experienced racism (56%).



**Figure 15**

share (%) of respondents who stated that people with migration biographies are underrepresented in parliaments



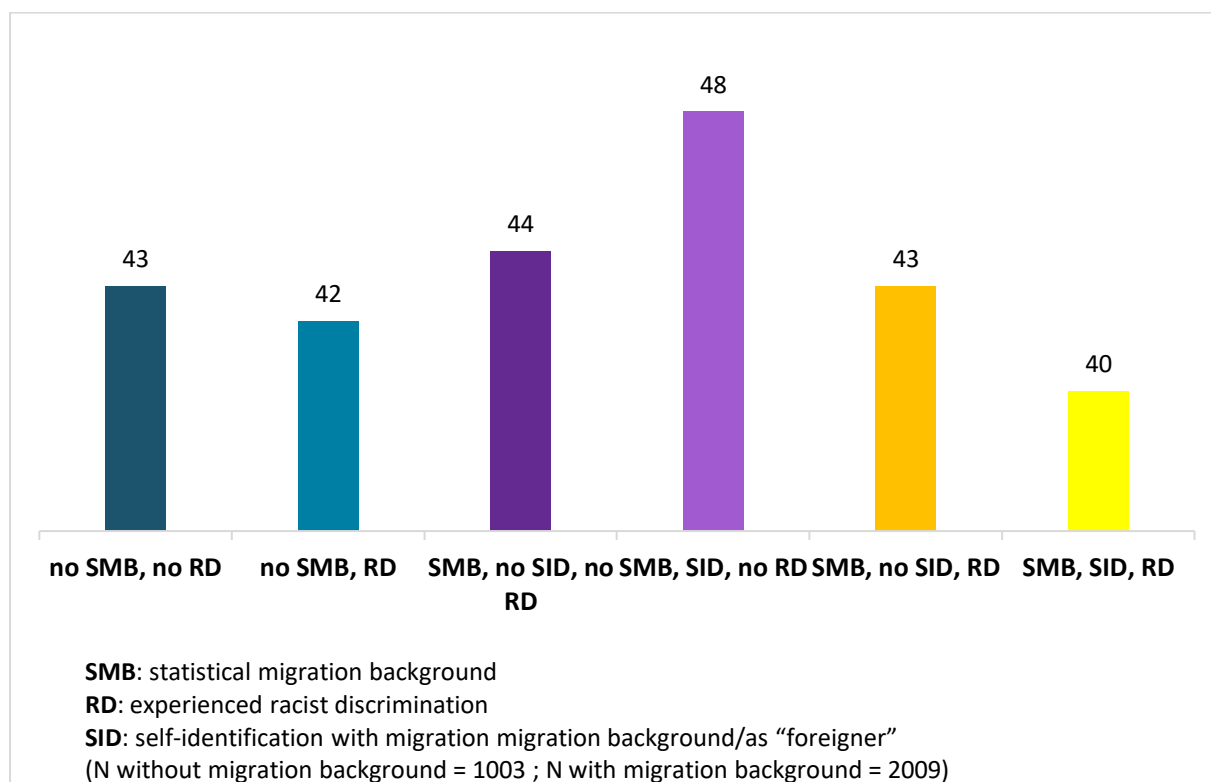
Figures 15-20: Do you think there is too little, too much, or enough representation of the following groups in the federal and state parliaments?

→ Too little representation

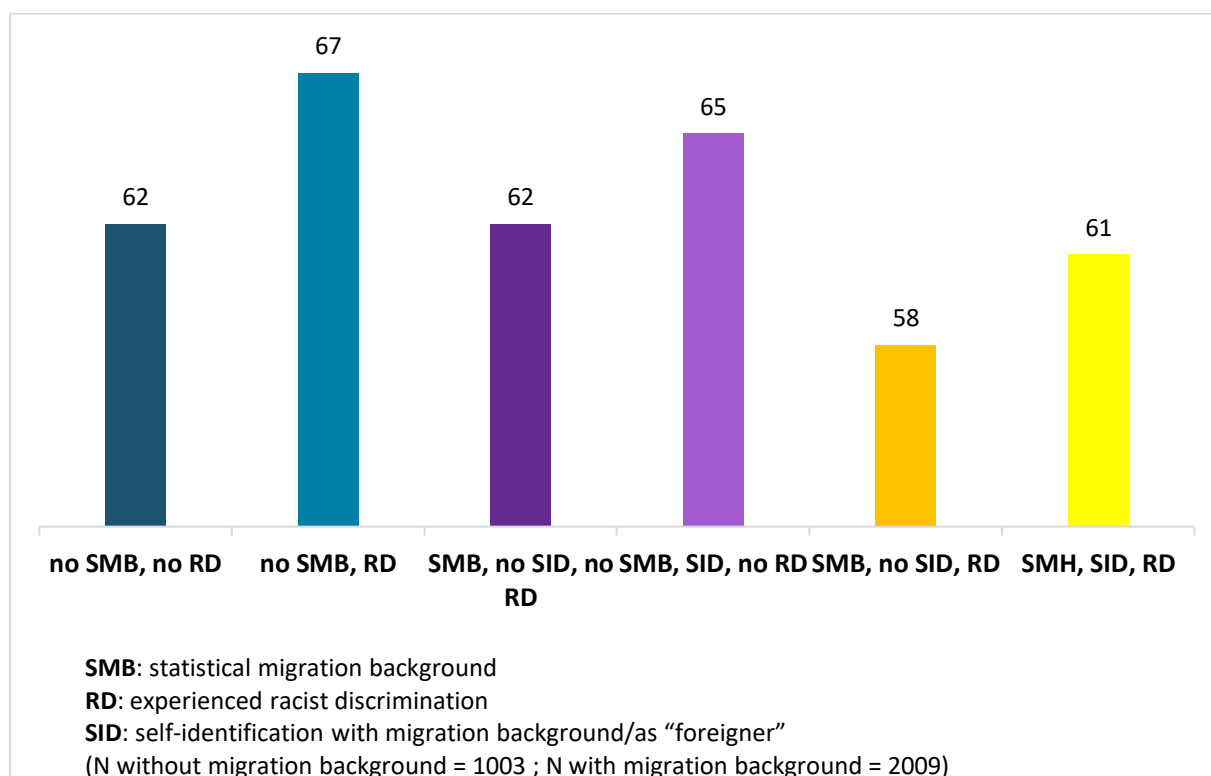
However, this wish is not limited to this group. It was possible to give multiple answers for this question, and so respondents in all groups were also in favour of more representation of other groups, for example women (Figure 16), young people (Figure 17) and (slightly weaker) non-graduate employees (Figure 18).

**Figure 16**

share (%) of respondents who stated that women are underrepresented in parliaments

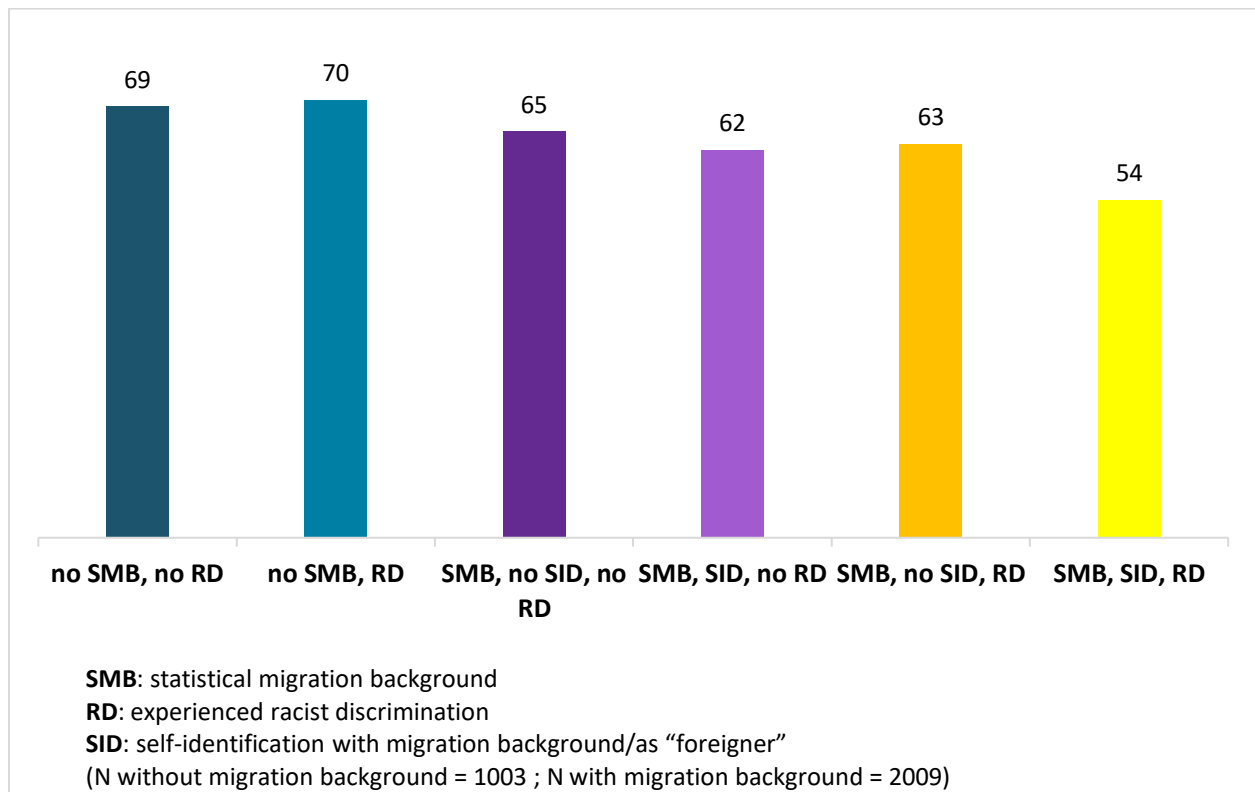
**Figure 17**

share (%) of respondents who stated that young people are underrepresented in parliaments



**Figure 18**

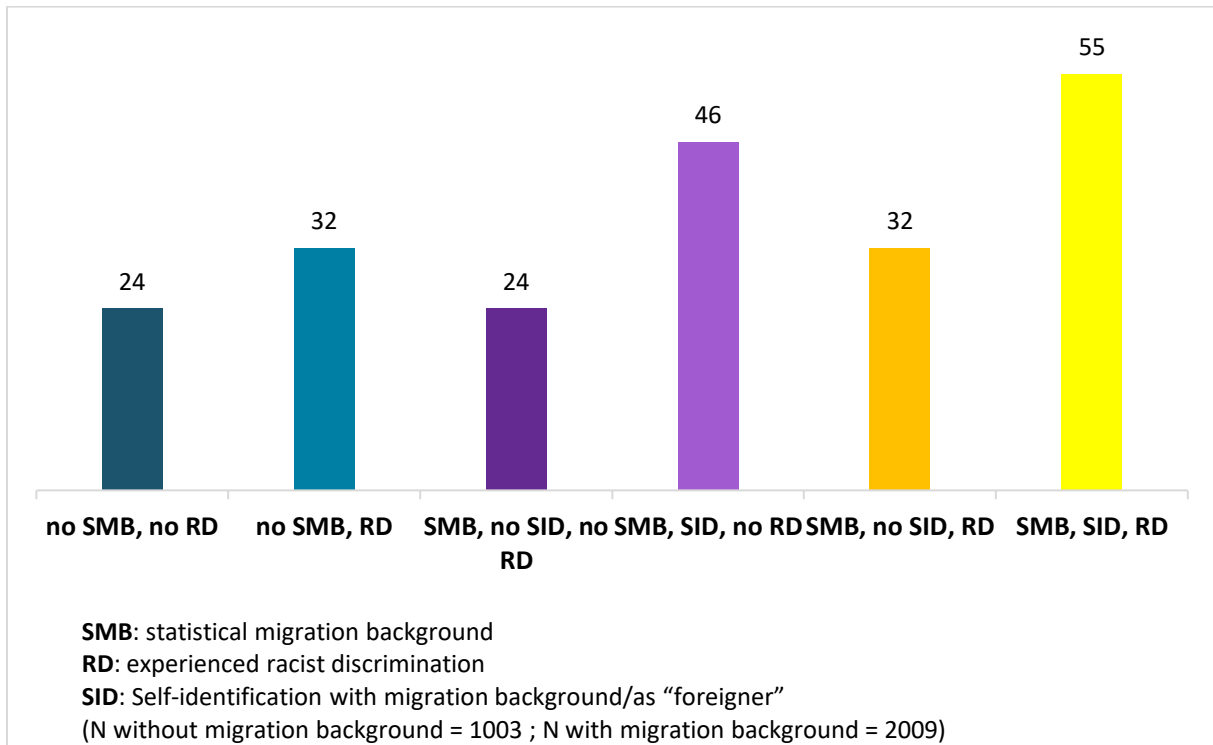
share (%) of respondents who stated that non-graduate employees are underrepresented in parliaments



We see similar distributions in the question of which groups should receive more attention from policymakers (see Figures 19-22). Here, too, people with a statistical migration background who also identify with it (and even more so if they have experienced racism) would like policymakers to pay more attention to people with migration biographies. Again, however, respondents in this group also want other groups such as women, young people, and non-graduate employees to receive more political attention.

**Figure 19**

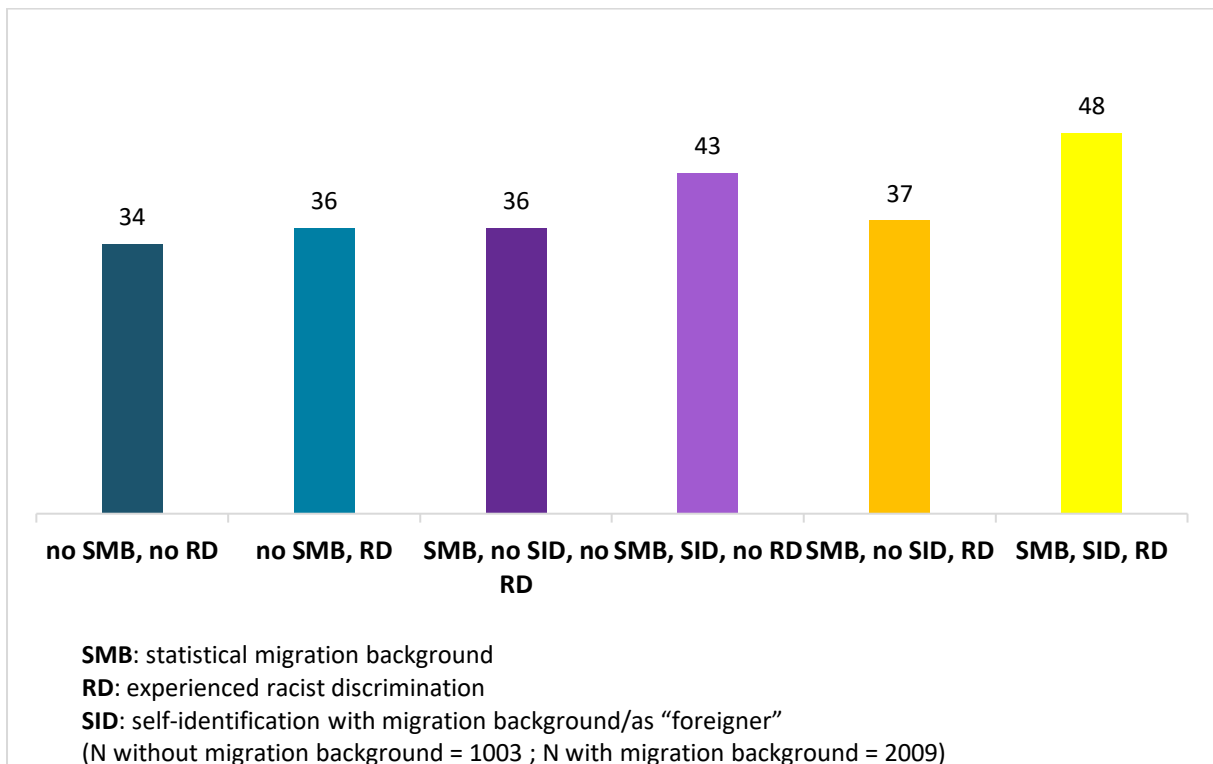
share (%) of respondents who want more political attention to people with migration biographies



Figures 19-22: Which of these groups do you think should receive more political attention?

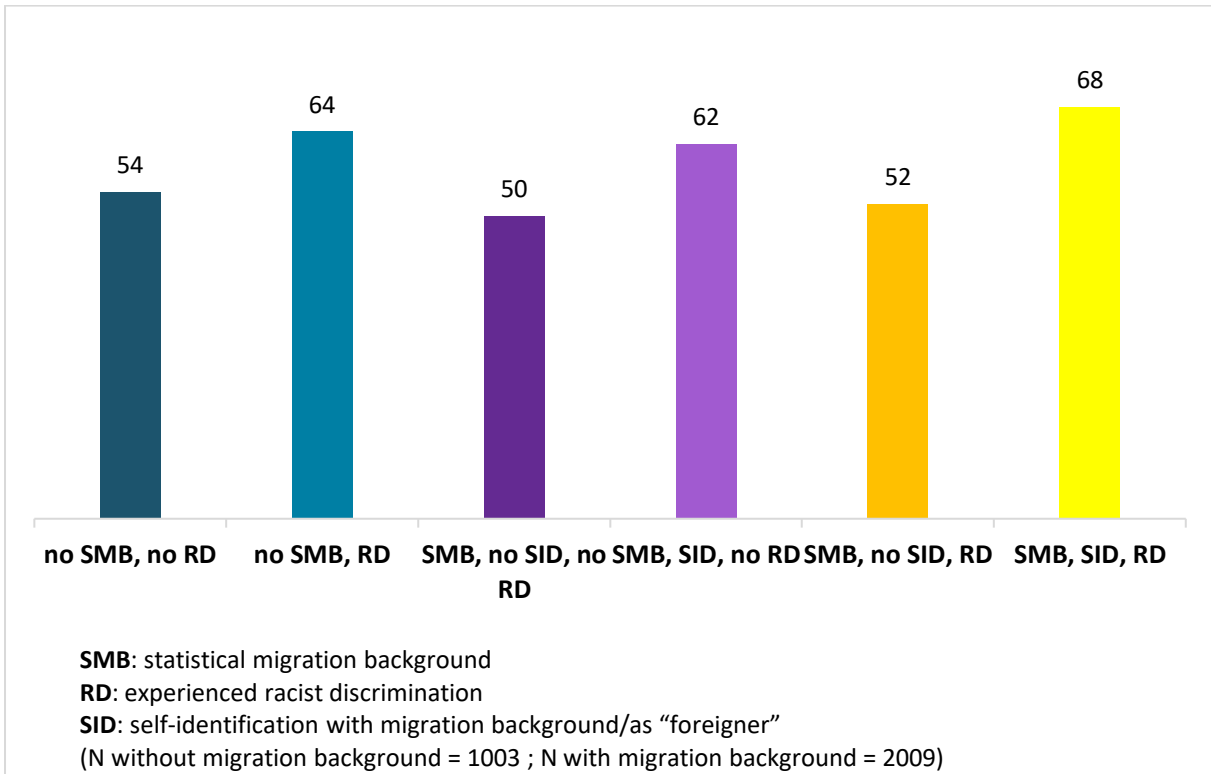
**Figure 20**

share (%) of respondents who want more political attention to women



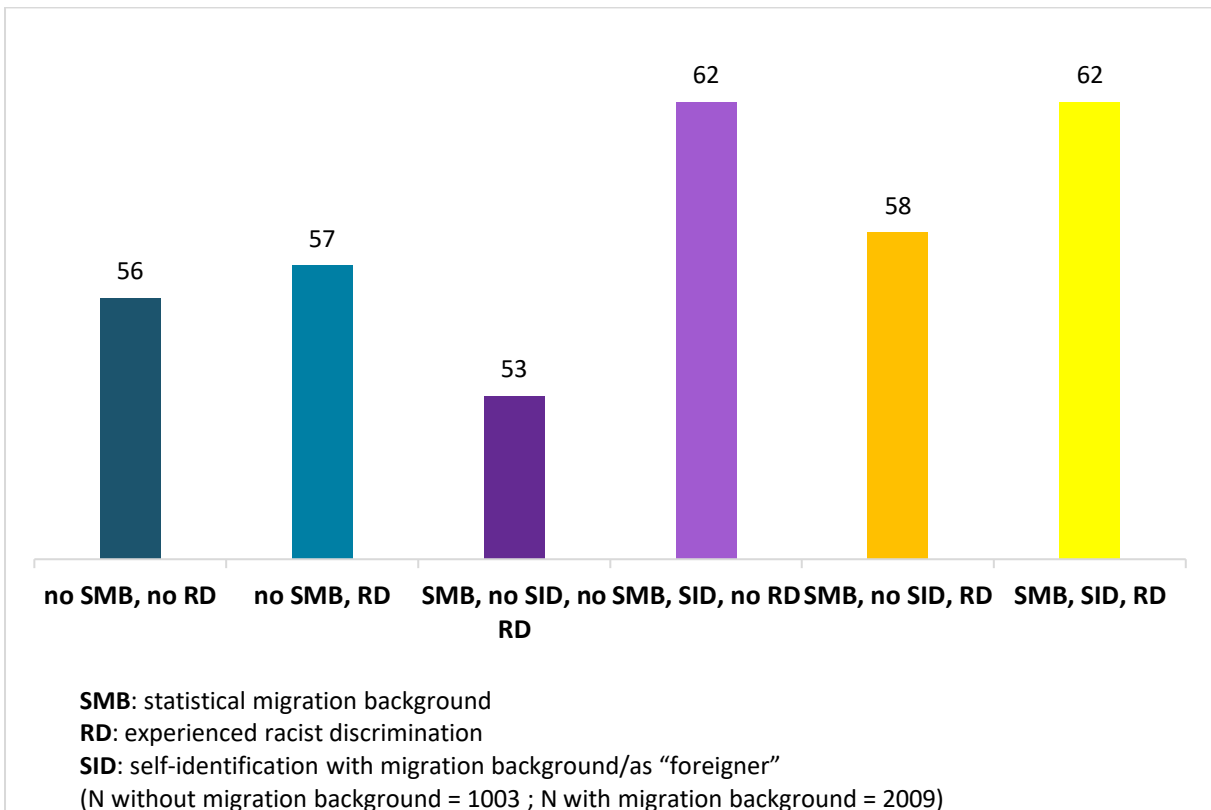
**Figure 21**

share (%) of respondents who want more political attention to young people



**Figure 22**

share (%) of respondents who want more political attention to non-graduate employees



The desire for more attention and representation for people with migration biographies, especially among those who have experienced racism, is thus not at the expense of other underrepresented groups. The desire for more diversity in politics and in the focus of political decisions is thus based on solidarity.

## 6. Conclusions

The research project "Who can participate?" is based on extensive data collection. This report takes a critical look at the category of the statistical migration background and shows what role it plays with regard to self-identification, experience of discrimination, political participation, and wishes from policymakers.

The results confirm that the statistical migration background as a category alone does not allow for a differentiated view, which is absolutely necessary for such analyses. Therefore, the category must be analysed together with self-identification and experiences of racism.

The differentiated analysis reveals that people with migration biographies experience more often structural barriers to political and civic participation. For the most part, they are similarly civically engaged as the average, but are less likely to participate in elections. However, people with statistical migration background are more likely than average to want to get more involved, especially if they have had experiences of racism. Some, however, have stopped their civic engagement due to such discriminatory experiences. Structural barriers, for example in the form of experiences of discrimination, must therefore be dismantled if these groups' existing potential for political and civic participation is to be fully realised.

The desire for more participation is also reflected in the support of more inclusive voting rights. The majority of people with migration biographies not only want all adults living in Germany to be able to vote, but also miss direct political representation by people with migration biographies. Furthermore, they would like people with migration biographies to receive more attention from policymakers. At the same time, they also harbour this support for other groups, such as women, young people, and non-graduate employees. This shows that the desire for more attention is not exclusive, but in solidarity with other underrepresented groups.

Removing structural barriers to the participation of people with migration biographies is therefore important in order to provide greater support for the existing potential for participation. However, it is crucial to take into account the extremely diverse experiences within groups of people with a statistical migration background. Whether



someone identifies in this way plays just as important a role as whether people have experienced racism. Since people with migration biographies want to be more involved, it is up to political parties and institutions, as well as civil society organisations, to mobilise these motivated individuals and proactively encourage their engagement.

We will continue to present in-depth analyses of these questions of participation and engage in further dialogue with other actors from policy, civil society, academia, and the public.

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d|part is a non-profit, independent, and non-partisan think tank based in Berlin. The focus of our work is to research and support different forms of political participation. With our research, we seek to contribute to a democratic society in which all people can voice their opinion as well as participate and contribute to political processes. Thus, we need to better understand, strengthen, and enhance political participation.

In our work, we use evidence-based research and scientific expertise to gain new insights to inform policy and social debates and to actively disseminate to different target groups. These include state institutions, politicians, and political parties as well as civil society organisations, the media, and public administrations. We want to engage with and advocate with our research for social groups that are otherwise reached less frequently or with greater difficulty by "the politics".

We have particular expertise in working on the participation of social groups that are often politically underrepresented. As such, we focus on addressing and enhancing the political participation of young people, people with migration biographies, and people with lower socio-economic status.

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