



Future of Democracy | 06.2018

## The G20 is turning 20. Time to take stock of multilateralism

**The vast majority of people expect countries to work together to solve global problems. But they only reluctantly support the G20 and its role in this effort. People don't know enough about it, and many haven't formed an opinion of its work.**

International cooperation is under pressure: Populists in various countries are calling for a return to nationalism and withdrawal from international organizations. The Brexit campaign and calls for “America first!” are merely the best known examples.

However, one does not sense among the people that the end of the era of multilateralism is imminent. Instead, the vast majority (83 percent) of people expect their governments to work together to solve global problems. In fact, they are even willing to push the interests of their own country onto the back burner if this kind of collaboration produces results that are good for everybody. By itself, no single state can solve the most pressing problems facing our interconnected world. Climate change, migration and (cyber-)terrorism: To find convincing responses to these and other problems, international organizations and collaboration are more important than ever.

While the idea of international cooperation is popular, there is only reluctant support for the way the G20 translates this idea into reality. Less than half of people (45 percent) have a favorable opinion of the G20. What's more, the fact that many haven't even formed an opinion of its work yet should come as no surprise, seeing that there isn't much knowledge about, awareness of and public debate about the G20.

Two findings clearly stand out here: First, President Trump is leading the United States away from multilateralism – with the support of his backers and the opposition of Democratic voters. And, second, the biggest supporters of international cooperation and the G20 are the so-called “winners” of globalization.

There needs to be a more intense public debate about international organizations. And one more thing: Those who wish to strengthen multilateralism have to make globalization fairer – including for the current “losers” of globalization.

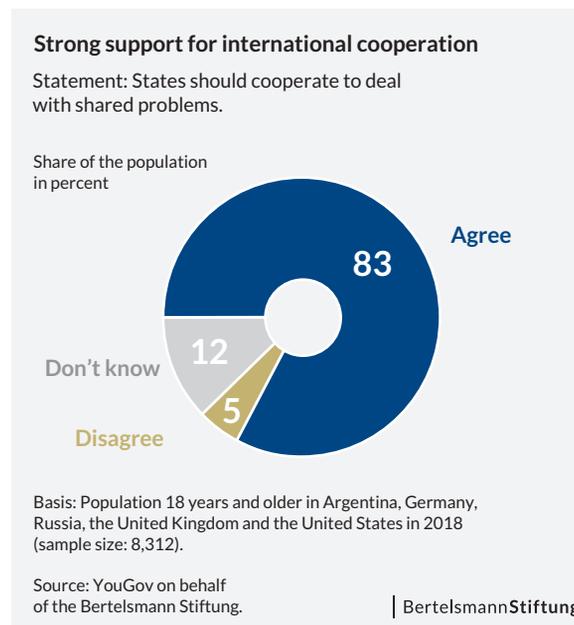
## Stronger together: Fervent support for international cooperation

According to a representative survey conducted in five countries, one can say that there is no sign that an end to the era of multilateralism is imminent, at least among the populace. Instead, there is fundamentally very strong support for international collaboration, as 83 percent of citizens call on their governments to work together to solve shared global problems. Climate change, migration and (cyber-)terrorism – by itself, no single state can come up with effective responses to these and many other cross-border challenges. Even in the United States – the country with the lowest level of support for international cooperation – nearly three-quarters (73 percent) believe that states should engage in collective action. In the United Kingdom and Germany, more than 80 percent of the populace shares this belief (82 and 85 percent, respectively). And the approval rate even surpasses the 90-percent mark in Argentina and Russia.

This fundamental approval can be found in all societal groups. In fact, no single attribute by itself – whether age or gender or education level – correlates with a difference in attitudes toward multilateralism. On the other hand, one can see in all countries that the so-called “winners” of globalization are bigger supporters of international cooperation than the “losers” of globalization are. One can say that the more people are convinced that globalization has a positive impact on their life, the more likely they are to support international cooperation.

What’s more, such support doesn’t automatically switch to opposition if one’s country has to make sacrifices instead of numbering among the winners. To be sure, the approval rate is lower. But the majority of people (58 percent) believe that it is sometimes necessary for their own country to accept short-term

drawbacks and to (temporarily) prioritize a “global common good.”



In the political debate, opinions about what form exactly such cooperation should take seem to be at odds. For example, while some believe it should be rooted in fixed, formalized institutions with clear rules and structures (like the UN), others would prefer to have changing, flexible ad hoc alliances (like the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement between Canada, the EU and its member states). However, this polarization is not reflected in the population. People prefer having both options available rather than choosing one. Almost two-thirds fundamentally support both cooperation within international organizations (61 percent) and cooperation within changing alliances (62 percent). Furthermore, people do not seem to view either of the two forms as being fundamentally better or worse than the other. In general, there is a large degree of openness toward both paths. What’s most important to citizens is that states do cooperate to solve shared problems.

Thus, support for the idea of multilateralism is strong. But can this high level of approval persist when the idea has been transformed into reality? What do people think about the G20 as one of the key forums for international coordination? The G20 is just about to celebrate its 20th anniversary – which seems like a good occasion to take stock. Has the G20 successfully managed to fully exploit the support that exists for international cooperation? How well known is it,

## Sources:

The survey data cited in the text comes from an online public opinion poll conducted by YouGov in September 2018 in five G20 countries (Argentina, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States). The results are representative for the population age 18 years and older and entailed a total sample size of 8,312 respondents.

The figures on media coverage cited in the text derive from a media resonance analysis for the year 2017 conducted by Argus Media Insights® in 18 of the 19 G20 member countries. This involved evaluating 3,973,699 articles from 67 print and online media sources. Turkey was not taken into account due to a lack of available data.

and how do people rate it? As was impressively demonstrated by the riots at the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg, these meetings of heads of state and government are often accompanied by protests. Do the demonstrators represent the opinion of the entire populace? Or is there a silent, more satisfied majority?

## Reluctant support for the G20

On the whole, citizens have a rather positive image of the G20: While a bit less than half (45 percent) have a fundamentally favorable opinion of it, only one in five (20 percent) has an unfavorable opinion of it. In other words, the images of protests at the summits show only a small – albeit vocal – segment of society. What is striking, however, is that a third of respondents are not sure what they think of the G20, as they have not formed an opinion of it at all.

A similar picture emerges when people are asked to assess the quality of the G20's work: When asked whether the G20 actually fulfills its pledge to contribute to solving global problems, 41 percent of respondents say they agree while over a quarter (27 percent) say they do not. But here, as well, almost a third of respondents cannot provide an assessment on this question, as they have not formed an opinion of it.

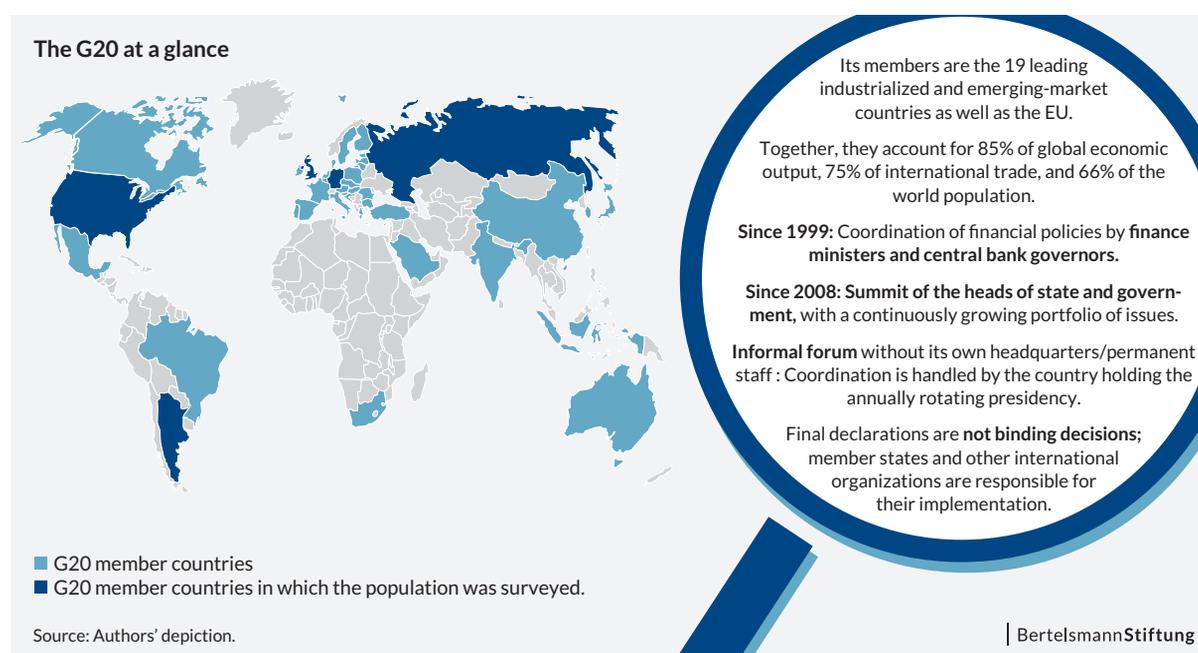
Two things stand out when comparing countries: Germans are more skeptical toward the G20 than people in the other countries, and four out of ten res-

pondents believe that it does not help solve problems. This represents by far the largest share in a single country. In contrast, Argentines and Russians are particularly positive about the G20, with a third of their respective populations having a favorable opinion of it (Country profiles and additional information can be found in a [factsheet](#) for this policy brief).

What can help us put this finding into context? The analysis reveals that the question of whether globalization has a positive impact on one's own life also plays a key role in how one assesses the G20. Globalization's winners consistently rate the G20 more favorably than globalization's losers. Indeed, more than half (58 percent) of globalization's losers tend to have an unfavorable opinion of the G20, while only 9 percent of globalization's winners have an unfavorable opinion of it. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of Argentines and two-thirds (66 percent) of Russians count themselves among globalization's winners, while this figure is only a bit more than half (56 percent) for Germans.

The assessment of the G20 is therefore fundamentally positive, especially among globalization's winners. However, many people have not yet formed an opinion of it, and the share of such people is especially large in the United States and the United Kingdom (44 percent each).

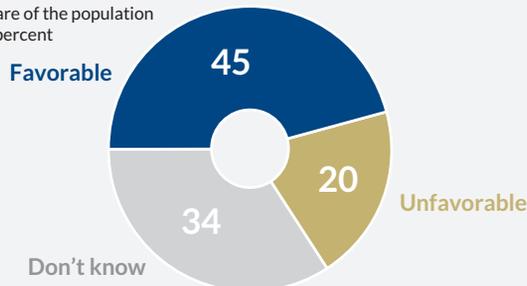
Why is it that so many people are still unable to form an opinion of the G20? Do they know too little about



## Reluctant support for the G20

Question: What opinion do you have of the G20?

Share of the population in percent



Basis: Population 18 years and older in Argentina, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States in 2018 (sample size: 8,312).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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the G20, about how it works and on what? Is the G20's presence in people's awareness and media coverage so small that they hardly have any opportunity to give it some serious thought? The answer to both is: yes.

### “G20 ... what's that?” Low awareness of the G20 leads to questions regarding acceptance

A survey on the knowledge about and awareness of the G20 is sobering – but this should come as no surprise. People know extremely little about the G20. Three-quarters (74 percent) say they have heard of the G20 before, and more than one-third (36 percent) even think they can explain it.

But if they tried to do so, many would falter. Indeed, if you compare what people think they know with what they actually know, you will find a large disparity. Only a little more than one in a hundred (1.4 percent) can correctly answer four factual questions about the G20. What's more, the picture doesn't fundamentally change if you lower the bar a bit, as only one-quarter (26 percent) knows enough about the G20 to correctly answer three of the four questions. In fact, a quarter of all respondents had never heard of the term “G20,” and this was even the case for a majority of people in the United States (58 percent).

However, this should come as no surprise, seeing that the media hardly cover the G20 at all and that there is hardly any shaping of public opinion of it or debate about its work. This is shown by the results of a media resonance analysis in 18 of the 19 member countries of the G20 for 2017: Of all articles in the G20 countries, only 0.35 percent touched on the G20 – a microscopically small proportion of the overall reporting. Germany, which held the presidency in 2017, and Argentina, which followed it in 2018, have the highest scores. In contrast, in the United States and the United Kingdom, where many people haven't formed an opinion of the G20 yet, the G20's media presence is below average (USA: 0.20 percent; UK: 0.19 percent).

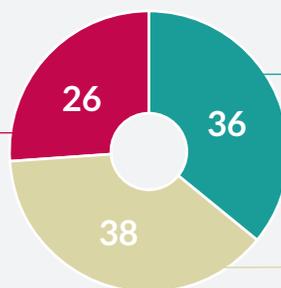
But even the 0.35 percent share of reporting across all countries is still inflated by something that is substantively separate from the G20 itself and doesn't

## People overestimate what they know about the G20

Share of the population in percent

### I never heard of the term G20 before.

0 questions answered correctly 78 %  
1-2 questions answered correctly 10 %  
3-4 questions answered correctly 12 %



### I know the term G20 and can explain what it means.

0 questions answered correctly 27 %  
1-2 questions answered correctly 35 %  
3-4 questions answered correctly 38 %

### I heard of the term G20, but cannot explain what it means.

0 questions answered correctly 42 %  
1-2 questions answered correctly 32 %  
3-4 questions answered correctly 26 %

Questions/factual statements: The G20 is a forum of states that ...

- makes binding decisions for its member countries,
- deals with the regulation of financial markets,
- engages interest groups from civil society and business,
- consists primarily of countries from the southern part of Africa.

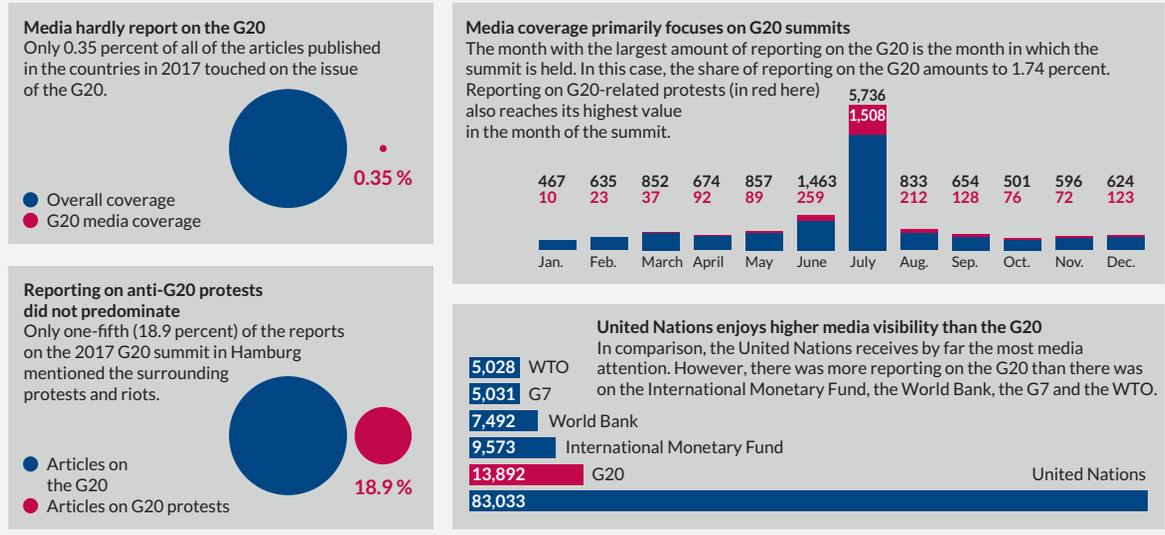
Basis: Population 18 years and older in Argentina, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States in 2018 (sample size: 8,312).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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## Media Resonance Analysis on the G20

As part of a media resonance analysis, reporting on the G20 in the leading national media was examined in 18 of the G20 member countries. A total of 3,973,699 articles from 67 print and online media sources were examined to determine when and how much the forum of states was reported on.



Source: Authors' depiction.

BertelsmannStiftung

help people learn more about it or form an opinion of it: In the coverage of the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg, the vast majority of media sources and countries focused on the meeting between US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin. And this coverage was dominated by reporting on some incriminating information that had recently become public regarding a possible conspiracy between Trump and Russia to sway the US election.

In any case, this much is clear: People have little factual knowledge about the G20, and the media coverage of it is even smaller. Neither the G20's low profile nor its low public visibility are proportionate to the importance of the issues that it addresses.

Thus, it is not surprising that people are undecided about whether their government should follow the recommendations of the G20 – regardless of whether it would be in the interest of their own country. This question provides important clues about whether the G20 enjoys public acceptance. However, people who know little about the processes, structures and procedures of the G20 and who also hear practically nothing about it in public discourse can hardly form an opinion regarding whether it should be deemed fair and is bringing about good results. Survey results reveal

the fracturing within the population: While one-third (34 percent) of people are in favor of following the recommendations of the G20 quite independently of their own national interests, one-third (33 percent) are against doing so and one-third is uncertain (33 percent).

On this question, as well, American respondents showed great indifference and indecision. This mirrors a pattern that runs through many individual questions and that seems to paint a critical overall picture of debates about multilateralism in the United States. And this is reason enough to take a closer look at this former champion of multilateralism and major supporter of the liberal, rule-based world order.

### “Successor sought!” – America’s withdrawal from multilateralism

“America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.” With these words, US President Donald Trump made his stance toward multilateralism clear before the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2018. He sees structures of global cooperation as a threat to American sovereignty and is implementing his “America First” campaign slogan

by withdrawing from many agreements (e.g., the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Iran nuclear deal framework) and organizations (e.g., UNESCO).

Do Americans share his opinion and support his efforts to walk the United States away from multilateralism? The stronger the support for and anchoring of this view in the populace, the greater the probability that the United States will continue pursuing this course for the foreseeable future – regardless of who is sitting in the Oval Office.

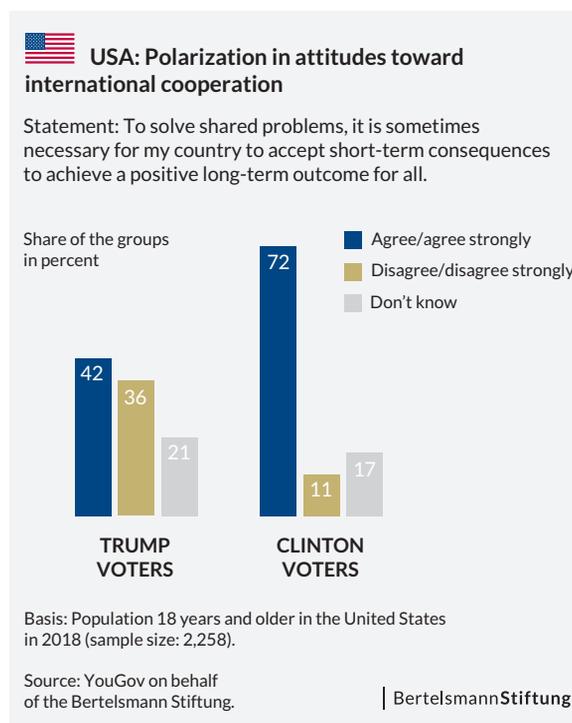
Three findings supply additional clues about this issue: First, fundamental support for multilateralism is also high in the United States. However, the United States usually trails all other countries in terms of support for multilateralism and is more critical of it, as well. Whereas the average for the five countries examined was 83 percent, only 73 percent of Americans call for states to cooperate in solving shared problems. Slightly over half (52 percent) would agree to have national interests temporarily take a back seat when cooperating with other countries if it could bring about positive results for all parties. While this admittedly is a majority of Americans, it is still the lowest level of support among all the countries examined.

Second, an especially large segment of the American population has yet to form an opinion of international cooperation in general or the G20 in particular. They either have a cautious or indifferent attitude toward it, and it appears to be a “non-issue.” One in five (20 percent) does not know whether they think multilateralism is good or bad. Roughly a quarter (28 percent) cannot assess whether it is sometimes all right for their country to accept short-term negative consequences when solving global problems, and four out of ten don’t know what they should think of the G20 and whether its recommendations should also be followed if they go against their own country’s interests.

Third, the frequently described polarization of American society clearly manifests itself when it comes to this issue, as well. People who voted for Trump in 2016 are noticeably more critical of international cooperation than those who voted for Clinton.

While almost three-quarters (72 percent) of Clinton voters are fundamentally willing to accept good long-term solutions despite all the short-term advantages, only four in ten (42 percent) Trump voters would do so.

More than twice as many Clinton voters believe that the G20 contributes to solving global problems as Trump voters do (48 percent to 21 percent); and while nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Clinton voters are in favor of working together in formalized international organizations, only 39 percent of Trump voters share this opinion. The latter are more open to changing coalitions and alliances.



What emerges is a mixed picture marked by great indecision and uncertainty. In principle, the idea of international cooperation is firmly anchored among the American populace, even if it is often more reserved about it than the populations of other countries. Attitudes toward multilateralism are also divided in American society, as Democrats have a favorable stance toward it while Trump backers are critical of it. This polarization will continue to be a challenge regardless of the course that the president and other American political decision-makers take in the future. However, the fact that many people have yet to form an opinion of this offers an opportunity to shape public opinion. Anyone who wants to counter nationalist discourse should do something soon and decisively.

At least for the time being, America’s withdrawal will leave a void that others will have to fill. But which options are available for strengthening international cooperation and organizations?

## A contribution to the discussion: Two ideas for strengthening international organizations

First, it should be said that important levers for boosting public confidence in international organizations can be found within them. How inclusive is its membership structure (e.g., how well is the Global South represented)? How participatory is opinion-formation and decision-making (e.g., are actors from global civil society involved)? Are the rules on voting fair and “democratic”? How transparent and efficient are its internal processes? What structures are in place to monitor results and ensure quality? These are only a few of the key questions that can be asked.

Of course, each organization has its own particular shortcomings. What’s important is to identify them and work to remedy them. In this way, international organizations can boost their legitimacy by themselves and create the basis for acceptance by their stakeholders. This, in turn, will trigger a debate about how democratic principles that apply to nation-states can be “translated” to the global level.

This policy brief and the survey results suggest two additional approaches that are important for effective and legitimate international organizations.

### 1. Explain yourself and own the debate

The media resonance analysis has convincingly shown just how meager the coverage of the G20 and other international organizations is. In fact, they hardly appear in the public debate at all. People are not very familiar with them, they have hardly any practical knowledge about them and, more importantly, they are often unable to form their own opinions of them. This is also reflected in the fact that people are uncertain and in disagreement about which issues are handled best on the international level. The public opinion survey shows that people do not believe that there is any issue or political challenge that should clearly and inarguably be assigned to international organizations. This makes it all the more pressing for these organizations to justify why they are active in their field and how they contribute to solving global problems.

International organizations must work on bolstering their presence in the public debate. They themselves should communicate their goals and working methods to the public. If they don’t, people will either remain

uncertain about whether to accept the organizations or become vulnerable to populist cries for withdrawing into the national sphere. Both responses would complicate the work that international organizations do to solve the important problems of our century. Instead of allowing others to shape the debate about who they are, how they work and what their goals are, they should become more active themselves.

### 2. Make globalization fairer

The biggest fans of international cooperation and the G20 are the so-called “winners” of globalization. There is a clear correlation between the assessment that globalization has a positive impact on one’s own life and support for multilateralism. As a general rule, the more people are convinced that globalization has a positive impact on their own life, the more likely they are to support international cooperation.

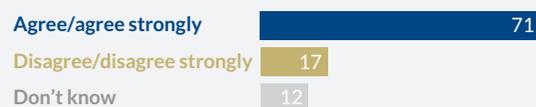
If people have the impression that they benefit from globalization, they have a more favorable view of international organizations and cooperation. In fact, of the people who believe that globalization has a very positive influence on their life, only 3 percent reject multilateralism.

#### Globalization’s winners are supporters of international cooperation

Statement: To solve shared problems, it is sometimes necessary for my country to accept short-term consequences to achieve a positive long-term outcome for all.

Share of the groups in percent

##### GLOBALIZATION’S WINNERS



##### GLOBALIZATION’S LOSERS



Basis: Population 18 years and older in Argentina, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States in 2018 (sample size: 8,312).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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They are more open to accepting even negative short-term impacts on their country if they bring about long-term results that are good for everyone. This trade-off is supported by 71 percent of globalization's winners but by less than half (47 percent) of globalization's losers. In line with this, globalization's winners are more likely than its losers to believe that the G20 helps solve global problems. On the whole, the winners have a more positive image of the G20.

Those who are convinced of the advantages of international cooperation or who experience them directly are more likely to support multilateralism. "Advantages," on the other hand, can mean rather different things. In Germany, one can see that socioeconomic status is not the only factor to determine whether people classify themselves as winners or losers of globalization. Other influential factors include values and basic orientation.

For example, the more one has a traditional world-view based on clinging on to and preserving, the sooner one counts oneself among globalization's losers and the more reluctant one is to support the G20 and international cooperation.

Nation-states and international organizations should ensure that globalization not only works for cosmopolitan avant-gardes, but for as many people as possible. The final declaration of the heads of state and government after the 2017 summit in Hamburg shows that the G20 also recognizes this. "The G20 is determined to shape globalization to benefit all people," it states, adding: "Most importantly, we need to better enable our people to seize its opportunities."

Overall, international organizations are well advised to not lose sight of today's losers of globalization. Their challenge is to work for them, too, and to make globalization fairer.

## Author:



**Christina Tillmann**  
christina.tillmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81335

Christina Tillmann is Director of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's "Future of Democracy" program.

## Further reading:

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Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
D-33311 Gütersloh · [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Dr. Robert Vehrkamp, Christina Tillmann

Editorial assistance and inquiries:  
[gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81105

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