TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies
2023-2025
European Commission Grant No 101095237

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK PAPER ON IDENTITIES AND POLARIZATION

Deliverable number:	D5.1.
Due date:	30 September 2023
Type:	Report (methodological paper)
Dissemination Level:	PU (public)
Work Package:	WP5.
Lead Beneficiary:	MUP-CZ
Contributing Beneficiaries:	All partners
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Purpose and scope of the deliverable:
Methodological framework paper elaborates the theoretical and methodological approach to the analysis of identities and polarization as well as the state of the art and scope of relevant issues to be addressed. Alongside this, the report shows the interconnection between political polarisation on one hand, and trust and trustworthiness on the other.

Citation: Cabada, L., Charvat, J. (2023). Methodological framework paper on identities and polarization *Working paper no.5.1*. TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies Project (www.truedem.eu).

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TRUEDEM is a 3-year multinational research project funded by the Horizon program of the European Commission with several core objectives. TRUEDEM aims to design and implement a complex research effort to collect comprehensive evidence on the perceptions of trust and judgments of trustworthiness in a range of European states. The project will create a robust and comprehensive knowledge base on long-term dynamics and predictors of trust in political institutions of representative democracy (parties, executives, parliaments, judiciary etc.) in the EU. TRUEDEM will examine the role of new patterns of electoral behaviour, impact of socioeconomic transformations, the erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages for the inclusiveness, representativity and legitimacy in European democracies, and political trust. TRUEDEM will identify strategies to address the demands and needs of citizens expressed via both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation as means to enhance active engagement and inclusion and thus booster inclusive and responsive decision-making and governance in Europe. TRUEDEM will distinguish clusters of values that can hinder or foster pro-democratic values and attitudes and thus contribute to the barriers and opportunities to re-invigorating and enhancing representative democratic systems. Finally, TRUEDEM will develop a comprehensive and transparent toolbox of policy interventions including recommendations, toolkits and methodologies for enhancing trust in political institutions, boosting transparency inclusiveness of representative systems. TRUEDEM is coordinated in Austria with partners in Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, and Ukraine. The three-year program runs from January 2023 to December 2025.

Report summary

The aim of this theoretical and methodological paper is to present the current Political Science and, more broadly, Social Sciences and Political Sociology debate on the contemporary development of identities and cleavages, and their impact and consequences of this development on political polarization. Alongside this, we seek to show the interconnection between political polarization on the one hand, and trust and trustworthiness on the other.

In the first part of the paper, we reflect on the composition of the most important “post-Rokkanian” cleavages in contemporary Europe and the Western world. Our analysis reflects three levels, i.e. national (looking for specific national cleavages embedded in specific national heritages); (macro)regional (reflecting the assumed specificities concerning the East-West axis, but also North-South); and European. On the basis of previous work, we suggest that current forms of polarization within European societies and the societies of the EU Member States emerge as a set of new and reshaped cleavages. Based on the continuity of crises (fiscal and financial, migration, COVID-19, etc.), which are generally referred to as poly-crisis, we can observe the emergence of two “ideal-typical” social groups, referred to as “cosmopolitan liberals” and “counter-cosmopolitan traditionalists”. Such development is accompanied by the polarization of European and, more generally, Western societies. In particular, some of the aforementioned crises have exacerbated such polarization between the “winners” and “losers” of the transformation from (post)modern industrial society towards a knowledge and information society.

Finally, we show how the above-mentioned transformations of identities and polarization can be captured by research. Here we specifically highlight the paradigmatic tension between socio-economically and socio-culturally based approaches and explanations.

1 Introduction

It is generally assumed among political scientists that institutions matter. And within the range of current democratic institutions, competitive elections enjoy a prominent position. For many authors, competitive elections are the cornerstone of contemporary democracy, as they allow ordinary citizens to engage periodically in the political process. Moreover, their votes determine both who is elected and the overall composition of the legislature and, more importantly, they may affect who will have influence over the political agenda and who will govern.

However, to understand electoral politics (and its changes), we need to look at the underlying foundations on which electoral choice is based. Since contemporary democracies are based on the values of competition and pluralism, democratic representation requires comparisons between various options. Democratic elections thus represent a mechanism that helps to crystallize the conflicting interests that exist within a society and take the form of a competition between rival (societal) groups, in particular political parties that compete for citizens' vote, which often grew out of long-standing social conflicts that gave rise to political cleavages (Lipset – Rokkan 1967), and on which they based their appeals. As a result, political parties seem to be the central means of political representation in contemporary democracies. Furthermore, research have repeatedly demonstrated that in established democracies party identifications acted as long-standing psychological predispositions that constituted a cognitive mechanism for orienting individuals to politics.

However, more recent research suggests that the importance of long-term party predispositions for electoral choice and cleavage-based appeals has been declining in last decades, resulting, inter alia, in the growing importance of issue-based voting (at the expense of the formerly predominant class-based voting), but also in increasing political polarization, and that party competition is also changing in line with these developments. As this trend has been repeated in several European democracies, it deserves increased attention to examine the broader societal changes that have led to these developments. The aim of this paper is to present a framework for analysing the current development of identities and political cleavages, and the impact and implications of this development on political polarization.

2 Cleavage Theory and Political Parties as the Agents of Polarization

There exists a consensus in the Social Sciences that identity belongs to the key determinants characterising individuals and social groups. It is a determinant that is shaped by educational and socialisation processes and that fundamentally influences the behaviour of individuals and social groups in cultural, economic, social and political processes. Different identities at the individual, and even more so at the social level, are one of the most important sources of polarization. As we will show below, despite the relative stability of identities, we can observe transformations and the formation of new or modified identities both historically and in the present time. Such modification or transformation of identities can then also lead to changes in polarization.

The study of democratization and modern democracy considers the Enlightenment and its emphasis on individual freedom and equality, the emancipation of the modern state from theology, i.e. secularization, and the building of new political institutions derived from the principle of legitimacy and mutually controlling and limiting each other, to be a key stimulus to the formation of the identities of the so-called Western democracies. It is precisely on these foundations that the auto-stereotype of Western democracies is built, in contrast to other civilizational circles or – in purely political science terms – non-democratic regimes or non-Western democracies. Indeed, one

of the key theoretical concepts related to the construction of a new, modern identity of individuals and societies, including new polarizing elements and stimuli, is based on this assumption of the specific development of modern democratic systems – the theory of cleavages, or the historical-conflict theory of the emergence of political parties representing these modern cleavages and social groups that have emerged as part of the modernisation and democratisation processes.

Although the 1960 study The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960) had already revealed that voters have stable affective attachments to political parties, bringing the issue of party alignment to the forefront of contemporary political analysis, it was not until Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) study that the topic was addressed in a more systematic way. The well-known cleavage theory implies two revolutionary changes in Western societies and creation of the stable set of contradictory societal groups based on their shared interest. The cleavage theory assumes the relative stability of these socio-political cleavages that created the pre-conditions for the foundation of (West) European party politics. "The approach emphasizes the interrelationships of various structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions of political conflicts. In addition to the class cleavage, state–church, rural–urban, center–periphery, or communist–socialist cleavages have shaped political decision- and coalition-making. In comparison with theoretical approaches that originate in the analysis of class relations and conflicts, cleavage theory is more oriented towards the multidimensionality of political inequalities and conflicts, today termed intersectionality" (Sass – Kuhnle 2023: 188).

The above-mentioned basic set of cleavages constitutes a framework that also finds its irreplaceable place in contemporary political science discussion, not only because one of the basic axioms associated with the genesis of contemporary pluralist democratic systems is the assumption that political polarization is primarily institutionalized in the environment of political parties or party-affiliated structures. Therefore, below we will discuss the process of "defreezing" of cleavages since the 1960s, especially in relation to greater polarization, or the transformation of party competition towards an increase in the number of relevant subjects in party systems.

From the point of view of our analysis, cleavages theory is particularly noteworthy because it considers interest antagonism growing out of conflicting demands and expectations as a key and characteristic feature of democratic societies. At the same time, it presents the key questions to which antagonistic social groups ("fundamental oppositions within a territorial population", (Flora 1999: 34-39/) offer different or outright contradictory answers, thereby shaping and reinforcing their social and political identities. The stabilising element of modern democratic systems is the search for consensus between opposing social groups, which is the basis of the welfare state (the issue of social reconciliation), decentralised decision-making based on multi-level governance (easing tensions between centres and peripheries, or urban and rural regions), or neo-corporatist elements (key corporations as partners of the state). Stability is provided also by the matter of fact that they are "characterized by comparable importance and durability compared to other sources of conflict. Cleavages have structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions." (Sass – Kuhnle 2023: 189).

Nevertheless, the relatively broad (liberal) consensus regarding these socio-political groups and their interests embodied in the post-WWII catch-all parties "concert" and centripetal orientation started to deteriorate already in the 1960s with the appearance of new challengers (niche parties), settled in the radical/extremist position or growing from the new social movements. Norris (2023) highlights that party competition "has been transformed by multiple developments, including the changes in grassroots electorate, as intermediary organizations connecting citizens and the state,

and at the apex in legislatures and government". This development has been intensively analysed and described by the social sciences, predominantly sociology and political science, and the general (post)modernisation of Western societies has been detected as the main reason for the indicated change (cf. e.g. Inglehart 1997). As far as the development of political parties is concerned, in addition to the parties "preferring economic issues", niche parties have gradually established themselves since the 1960s, some of which have worked their way to the position of relevant actors on the basis of electoral results. The niche parties rejected the traditional class targeting of politics and socio-economic cleavages in society (Meguid 2005: 347-348) and developed a different strategy based on the politicisation of selected issues and/or policies; they "compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues" (Wagner 2012: 848) – hence they were also often labelled "single-issue parties" from the beginning, and these terms have been wrongly confused.

In Western political science, or with a foothold in research on so-called traditional democracies, Communist, environmental ("green") and extreme-nationalist parties have generally been identified as niche parties (Adams et al 2006: 513), while Meguid (2005: 347) also adds ethno-territorial parties to the above ideological groups or families of parties. According to the researchers, the niche parties are more faithful to their ideology and programmatic than is the case with the mainstream parties, usually all-embracing parties that prefer a strategy aimed at gaining government positions (office-seeking). "The leadership of niche parties often emphasizes long-term (long-run) support, whereas the leadership of 'mainstream' parties maximizes support in the short term ... Gap party activists are strongly agenda-oriented (policy-seeking – author's note) and therefore more resistant to ideological "compromises in their parties' policies" (Adams et al 2006: 515). In their comparative analysis of the development of the niche parties', their electoral performance and their position in the party systems of Western democracies over two decades (1976-1998), Adams et al (2006: 525), among others, formulated the Costly Policy Moderation Hypothesis and came to a clear conclusion: "Compared to ´mainstream´ parties, niche parties are electorally penalized for moderating their programmatic positions ... Niche parties – and not mainstream parties – suffer electoral losses once they weaken their programmatic positions".

The outlined interpretation of the development of cleavages, polarization, political parties and its transformation grows out of a general view of the development of society and social cleavages in these societies between the 1920s and 1960s, based on the famous "freezing" hypothesis of S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan, i.e. that "European party systems stabilized and ´froze´ during the 1920s and continued in this basic constellation of socially defined schemes and political competition (and sometimes in a situation of competition between identical political parties) until at least the 1960s" (Amorim Neto – Cox 1997: 150; Lipset – Rokkan 1967). This freeze cannot be seen as identical for all Western democratic systems. On the contrary, as Lipset and Rokkan and other authors point out, we observe different meanings of each cleavage and different interactions and interdependencies in each particular society (Lipset – Rokkan 1967). Similarly, Dalton (2021) stresses that several forces can shape party system polarization, including the ideological identity of parties and nation´s political history. Furthermore, also party alignments can change over time. As the author stresses, the "mix of centripetal and centrifugal forces makes it difficult to predict how polarization has evolved across time and nations in recent decade". This means that in each society we observe a different cleavage configuration that creates a unique cleavage structure (Flora 1999: 7). "Cleavages can mutually reinforce, superpose, or cut across each other. They can vary in intensity, so that some become salient and dominant, while others remain latent. The political weight of cleavages and their position in a hierarchy of cleavage bases can change over time" (Sass – Kuhnle 2023: 190).

The changes in the structure and logic of party systems outlined above have also led to increased fragmentation. "Not surprisingly, the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) has generally grown in each country across Western democracies, from an average of around 3.5 parties in the 1960s to 5.1 during the last decade" (Norris 2023). On the other hand, a causal link between increasing fragmentation and polarization has been demonstrated in some individual cases, but not in others: "Party system polarization may reflect the degree of fractionalization in some cases – but the relationship is not as clear cut as commonly assumed" (ibid.). Therefore, we want to reflect this uncertainty in our research methodology, based on the assumption that "party system fractionalization and polarization should be treated as two distinct and unrelated dimensions of party competition" (ibid.).

3 Identity

Berger and Luckmann present identity as one of the key elements of social reality; according to them, there is a dialectical relationship between identity and society. Identity is created or shaped in the course of social processes. The identity thus created is then maintained but also continuously transformed by social relations. The social processes within which identities are formed and maintained are determined by the social structure, which they in turn influence, maintain and renew. Societies thus "have a history in the course of which identities are definitely formed" (Berger – Luckmann 1999: 170-171).

According to Berger and Luckmann, identity is a phenomenon that is the resultant of the dialectic of the relationship between the individual and society. However, identity types are exclusively social products and represent relatively stable elements of objective social reality. It is identity types, then, that are the subject of theoretical consideration in the social sciences. Identity theories always grow out of a more general interpretation of reality, they are embedded in the symbolic world and its theoretical legitimations, and their differences are related to the differences between these legitimations. Without embedding from a particular world, identity remains unintelligible. The authors point to the specific importance of so-called adequate (in principle adequate in the sense of the possible use of a generalising approach of theory in relation to the nature of society) psychological theories in the study of identity types. (Berger – Luckmann 1999: 171-177).

In social psychology, we can find several important theoretical schools reflecting on the issue of identity formation, but the limited space of this material does not allow us to deal with them more. This does not mean that, in addition to studying (new identities) and their influence on polarization, we should not also research how these (new) identities are formed, from which (altered) social structures, processes and relationships they grow. However, let us stress the importance of the coexistence and overlapping of different types of identities, where individual identity (self-identity) meets significant identities of a collective nature. These include in particular cultural, religious, ethnic, or national, spatial/geographic, professional/class, gender, generation, or disability identities.

Identity studies differentiate between two main basic typologies: 1) essentialists understand identity as given and unchangeable. Such unchangeable, "natural" identity has a fundamental importance for each individual. The thinking and behaviour of each individual reflect their identity; 2) constructivists conceptualise identity as something that is "constructed" on the basis of direct external effects. Essentialists understand identity as permanent, constructivists as malleable; essentialists stress the primacy of national identity, constructivists also emphasise other types or

levels of identity creation. As Johansson notes: "an ethnic group can exact some form of non-territorial cultural autonomy, particularly if its habitat is geographically diffuse; this proved important to the internal debate in the Habsburg monarchy." In the process of creating European national states, the "identity formation on the pre-existing elements," states, but also regions, could be observed. Johansson provides the following summary: "In the political sphere, ethnic and regional identity are often bound together, with political consequences." (Johansson 1999: 7-22). The ethnocultural component of identity can we understand as the "constructed past" (Thomka 2007: 173).

Slocum and Van Langenhove differentiate two "cluster of meanings" about identity in social sciences. One refers to "what constitutes the individuality of something, that is what makes a single individual entity distinct from another one," the second "is focused upon what kind of common characteristics a class of entities might have, that is to what extent there are similarities between members of a group." We can think of identity "when talking about people, but also when referring to groups of people, to societies, objects, geographical regions and so on." (Slocum – Van Langenhove 2005: 137).

Cerutti identifies two main moments of identity: the mirror-identity and the wall-identity. In the mirror-identity, "people look on themselves in an internal mirror and find in the shared ideas, values and principles something that gives a meaning to their communal as well as to their individual life, which are to an extent interconnected." The wall-identity "is marked by the ambivalence of having two faces: the wall is a boundary, but it is also load-bearing." (Slocum – Van Langenhove 2005: 138).

With its reference to a common cultural identity and common cultural heritage, the idea of the homogeneous "We-Society" is constructed with a strongly accentuated demarcation towards other nations and collective identities (Wodak et al 1998). As Hauswedell (2010:1) emphasises, "in recent years, the binary model 'Self'-and-'Other' has become a key operating concept in academic fields ranging from philosophy, psychology and anthropology to social sciences, literary studies and critical theory." "Other-talk" is then the tool for self-definition: "Proximity and presence of the Other acts as a mirror held up to ownSelf." Gifford (2010: 13) evaluates the historical, traditional, "Darwinist" identification of ownSelf as the "essentialised and demonized version of the excluded Other." Nevertheless, there exist many other elements which contribute to identity; Storey (2012: 11) writes about the myriads of such elements, "and place may be one of these, reflected in a sense of belonging in a certain place or of a feeling of affinity with a place."

3.1 Excursus 1 – The spatial dimension of identity

It is certainly worth recalling that we also emphasized the key role of territoriality, or territorially determined communities, when presenting the concept of cleavages. The way we perceive the space in which we live can be reflected in identity in very different ways – some people prefer a local identity, while others prefer a regional or even global one. During the process of nation-building, however, political parties and electorates transformed into national parties and national electorates due to political conflicts shifting from local or regional to national levels (for more details, see Caramani 2004; see also Kriesi et al. 2012). Undoubtedly, the so-called nation state has become a fundamental actor working with the spatial framework of cultural and political identity in the modern period. Nonetheless, Kriesi et al. (2012) interpret the recent transformation in the understanding of territorial boundaries as a new "critical juncture" resulting from globalisation. Postmodernity and its different perceptions lead to different attitudes both with regard to the question of multi-identities and in relation to preferred identity. In political science, these different

perceptions can be very well presented precisely in the field of new – or revitalised – political identities on a scale from (ethno-)nativism to world/global citizenship.

The traditional/historical "placism" was challenged and often suppressed in modern times with the emergence of the Westphalian state. In the process of constructing the modern state, the "ideological belief emerged that people born and living within the boundaries of a sovereign state have a 'shared identity'." (Slocum – Van Langenhove 2005: 138). Gifford (2010: 15-20) labels the national state the "sponsor of officially promoted 'top-down' Identity". During the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, the European states pointed to the "negative Others" and even "Demons" among themselves. Such demonisation is strongly interconnected with the romantic view of the terrifying alien. Only after the World War II and the launch of the integration process was the space for de-demonisation also opened.

In contrast, with the post-World War II "processes of regional integration, other territorial identities – such as Europe – have gained importance … Concomitant to globalisation, regional integration has been seen as a process that challenges the concept of sovereign nation-state and, along with it, these corresponding 'national identities'" (Slocum – Van Langenhove 2005: 139-140). Nevertheless, postmodernity also brought the de-territorialisation of new political actors and identities. In view of the processes of globalisation, Europeanisation and the creation of international and European institutional frameworks and (quasi-)polities, "the coincidence of governance and territoriality is being questioned. While some of the new actors can simply be identified with a different geographical scale, others defy geographical borders or are completely non-territorial" (ibidem: 141).

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(Post)modernity presents a challenge for identity, as the individual is placed in a situation of changing and/or different identities. National identity itself is challenged by other types of identities. Some authors stress the importance of integration processes (Europeanisation, globalisation, etc.) and describe not only the positive, but also the negative influence of such processes on the national states and/or the undermining of the national state (Gallus 2004: 55). Other scholars emphasise the regionalisation processes and local contexts (Keating 1998). A combination of both these phenomena, described as glocalisation, can often be observed (Khondeker 2005; Robertson 2012).

However, identity transformations are manifested in a number of dimensions. In this context, current research highlights a group of cross-pressured voters. As a result of conflicting values and identities many voters are torn between their progressive economic views and their conservative cultural views. Research has established that cross-pressured voters are more supportive of radical right populist parties since they ultimately attach more importance to cultural values than to economic values (Gidron 2022). These conclusions are confirmed by the results of other research in recent years, which show the increasing importance of the cultural dimension compared to the (socio-)economic dimension (Hall 2020). As a major report reflecting the changing and intensifying polarization in European societies notes: "The shift in values has been accompanied in many countries by the rise of polarization, Identity politics and populism, questioning the conventional political establishment and sometimes the entire concept of the EU" (Scharfbillig et al 2021: 25).

If we mentioned above the "competition" of very different political identities based on (not exclusively) spatially anchored collectivities, we can demonstrate this dispersion in one of the most prominent "new" political identities – (neo)nativism. As an excursus, we will present below the

transformation of historical/"traditional" nativism into the contemporary neo-nativist forms, alongside, for contrast, "eco-nativism", which in turn grows out of the principles of world citizenship. We also consider this presentation to be a useful transition to a general discussion of the most significant processes and forms of contemporary political polarization in European democracies.

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3.2 Excursus 2: (Neo)-nativism

Let us stress two important facets in the basic definition of nativists – xenophobia and the idealisation of the traditional pre-modern society rooted in agrarian and a rural/small town lifestyle. Nativism is centred on the 'us first' idea, it is rooted in the fear that strangers will undermine the traditional way of life (Crepaz et al. 2014: 943). Generally, nativism is then most often associated with anti-immigrant sentiments motivated by ethnic or racial bias. "The term clearly suggests prejudice and intolerance towards immigrants" (Bosniak 1994: 442–443).

Let us also acknowledge the second above mentioned moment – traditionalism and idealisation of pre-modern societal structure. Nativism evinces typical conservative positions stressing the degressive development of humankind. Often, we can observe the idealisation of the 'Golden Age', romanticization of the past, idealisation of peasantry and rurality, and rejection of modernisation including also the idealization of authoritarian traditions (Kaufmann 1999: 255–456; Pirro, 2014: 603; Tismaneanu, 1998: 3).

If we analyse the contemporary debate about nativism through the lenses of philosophy, we can find an important overlap of this 'nostalgic' concept with a selected environmental stream, especially deep ecology and ecopolitics (Mathews 1999: 253–255). Namely, in many aspects the nativist stance rooted in deep ecology shares the criticism against the modernity and (post)modern society. To distinguish the 'reactionary' political nativists and the ecopolitical nativist, we will use the term 'eco-nativists' for the latter. Eco-nativists present the 'ideal of the native self' related to small rural or semi-rural sustainable communities. In Matthews' opinion (1999: 263), such an ideal is rooted in the 'organic quality of place-centred life'. Such an ideal is very similar to the ideal of the nativists reflecting the 'Golden Age'. Furthermore, eco-nativists stress the necessity of spatial identity related to geographically small units, the necessity to belong to a place, "to have one´s identity shaped by the place to which one belongs" (Mathews 1999: 245). The idealised 'home' presenting the small community should develop the eco-nativist self-identity (Storey 2012: 11) rooted in care and maintenance of nature.

Again, the nativists and eco-nativists share the contempt for (post)modernity: "In modern societies, in which intersubjective relations with place are not accounted part of the process of identity formation, and are thus either ignored, denied, or systematically severed, the self is no more integrated into the 'psychic' fabric of the world that a self-deprived of primary bonds with human others.' Modernity ignores our primordial relation to the world" (Mathews 1999: 246). Both types of nativism negate the modernity related to the creation of open society in a political but also broader societal and cultural sense. As one of the inherent characteristics of an open society is the opening and removing of the borders, nativists defend the juxtaposition and promote the 'ideal' of closed society. Next to open borders, mobility is also considered a negative sign of modernity and is attacked. The nativists especially deny 'immigration', while the eco-nativists deny mobility, especially tourism, "one of the paradigmatic pursuits of modernity" (Mathews 1999: 247), entirely. Indeed, eco-nativists propose the voluntary limitation of mobility accentuating that the new communication technologies create the 'awareness of a larger frame' and prevent the ecological

nativists from 'narrow-minded parochialism, xenophobia, or exclusionary thinking' (Mathews, 1999: 267). In contrast, the 'traditional' nativists promote (neo)parochial political culture as the ideal (Katerberg 1995: 501-508).

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4 Post-modernity, identity, and polarization

As already stressed, the "silent revolution" (Inglehart 1977) that resulted in the post-modernisation of societies represents a fundamental impulse to disrupt or weaken the petrified cleavages and initiated a process of greater individualization of electoral and, more generally, political behaviour. Together with other significant factors – in particular the transformation of the tools and means of political communication – this process has heralded the phenomena of strengthening volatility, declining membership in political parties, weakening of ties between political parties and their allied social organisations, the emergence of new social movements, etc. "Yet, while partisanship is an influential group identity, there are other important identities that cut across partisanship and influence these attitudes" (Klar 2018: 610).

The impulses arising from the transition of Western democracies and (parts of) their societies to postmodern concepts of statehood, society and politics have also fundamentally affected identity construction and polarization. New social movements and newly formulated issues and policy priorities included the environmental agenda, feminism and, in later periods, the broader issue of gender, inclusion, including the issues of migration and multiculturalism, the democratisation of foreign and security policy, which was to become the subject of the least restricted social debate and also of much more pronounced social control, among many others.

Today, this development, linked to the big themes of climate change or full equality for all individuals regardless of their identity, can be reflected through the prism of two visible social groups and political concepts that often refer to each other pejoratively, e.g. as "pioneers" and "laggards", but also as "progressives" and "reactionaries". The dispute between these antagonistic groups is both economic (e.g. the disagreement related to the promotion of the European Green Deal, where supporters see it as an opportunity for technological innovation and economic empowerment, while opponents often refer to it as "economic suicide") and cultural; here it is basically about issues related to value schemes, usually linked to identity. Needless to say, such polarization at the level of elites and mass public leads both to destabilization of the political and legal environment (e.g. by repeatedly changing the basic parameters of some public policies after the former opposition takes over the government after the elections) and to the subsequent weakening of trust in political institutions and politics as such.

Research on these complex processes, linked to increasingly institutionally complex political systems, necessarily faces fundamental limits in terms of theoretical reflection, i.e. generalizations with the ambition of universal validity. This also applies to research limited to the group of so-called Western democracies. Recall the long-standing debates on the difference between (Western) European and other democracies, framed both in socio-economic terms (European/continental welfare state vs. British and North American or East Asian models /Esping-Andersen 1990/) and in terms of values or identity. The building of the so-called new democracies in Central Eastern Europe after 1989 is undoubtedly part of this debate – even today we use the distinction between old and new member states, or EU-15 and EU-12 in the European setting, based on the assumption that (post)communism is an element that reaches a high intensity both in terms of new identities and with regard to political cleavages.

All of these differences naturally give rise to polarization as the increasing gap between partisan, ideological or income groups. This means that polarization applies to different individual as well as combined issues made salient by political cleavages. Thus, to situate the reality of different types of democracy, new democracies, hybrid regimes, different conceptions of the welfare state, different approaches to the heterogeneity of societies or differences graspable along the lines of the modern (Lockean) vs. the postmodern (Kantian) state (Sørensen 2001) in an unified theory is a very difficult challenge. We will present below several theoretical approaches that overlap to some extent. Some are based on primarily economic positions, others on socio-cultural, political or even philosophical ones. Specifically, we try to present both those that work with binary models of polarization (which is typical, among others, of studies working with the concept of cleavages) and those that assume the existence of more than two "poles", i.e. multipolarity, and which then offer typologies or classifications of these "poles". We then conclude by attempting to postulate challenges and opportunities for further research on identities and polarization from the sub-theoretical approaches, particularly in the relation to the central question of trust and trustworthiness within the current research programme

If we have repeatedly mentioned post-modernisation as one of the key impulses for the transformation of identities and polarization in Western societies and political systems, it seems logical to begin the presentation of theoretical reflections by introducing the concept of the so-called neo-modernisation theories. For example, Antonio and Brulle (2011: 198) present "a family of related neomodernization theories (NMTs), framed in response to globalization, economic and cultural change, the collapse of communism, and decline of labor-centered left politics. Suggesting taints of Deweyan-like democracy, NMTs implied that representative democracy and its political dynamics are being vitalized by much more citizen-based, civil society-centered, participatory, plural, critical networks, institutions, and communications."

In their analysis of the polarization surrounding the climate change debate and the need for adaptation policies in relation to this challenge, the authors stress that this is only one dimension of a broader and more general polarization that could be reflected through the prism of the tension between the modern national welfare state and the postmodern globalising or globalised state and society. As they note: "The split over global warming is part of a wider polarization over today's version of market liberalism—neoliberalism" (Antonio – Brulle 2011: 196). This paradigmatic conflict can be perceived, among other things, through the lens of promoting the ideal of the small state and, in contrast, the perception of the state (or a supranational entity that takes over part of its role) as a strong regulatory and caring actor. "Drawing from Chicago School and Austrian Economics, neoliberals equate democracy with ´economic freedom´ or ´free enterprise´ –property rights, contracts, and consumer choice. They attack the idea of public goods and oppose regulation, taxation, and other state policies, which do not serve the short-term corporate bottom line and investor accumulations" (Antonio – Brulle 2011: 196-197).

Although the presented approach of neo-modernization theories prioritizes the economic/rational choice nature of polarization, we should not overlook the fact that it also mentions other dimensions – it explicitly links the changes in the structure of society in Western democracies with cultural change, i.e. values. In addition, it reflects the fundamental change associated with the weakening of the link between the working class (which is shrinking or undergoing a transformation towards a new form: the precariat) and left-wing politics. This change has both an economic and a socio-cultural dimension. In this sense, in the contemporary debate on the motivations for new forms of polarization in social sciences we can reflect both the proponents of primarily economically based discontent of major social groups and researchers, who prefer more culturally based explanations.

In this sense, the contemporary debate on the motivations for new forms of polarization can reflect both the proponents of primarily economically based discontent of major social groups and researchers who prefer more culturally based explanations. These studies focus primarily on the rise of illiberal tendencies in contemporary democracies, democratic backsliding and hybridization of democratic political systems, the strengthening of radical and extreme right-wing political parties, anti-integrationist attitudes in the European environment, nationalism, cultural backlash etc. (see e.g., Cianetti– Dawson – Hanley 2019; Krastev 2019; Norris – Inglehart 2019; Tucker 2020). These and other sub-polarizing impulses are very often integrated under the term populism, which is possibly supplemented by various adjectives (e.g. right-wing, illiberal, Authoritarian, anti-European, etc.) and which is reflected not only at the national but also at the European and even global level (c.f. Ágh 2019; Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021).

The discontent of significant social groups, often associated with the rise of populism and the strengthening of polarization, including extreme attitudes, is systematically reflected in the so-called 'grievance theory', which argues that major changes in voter behaviour that lead to significant transformation of the party system usually arise not from an external cause, but from more fundamental social changes that trigger feelings of dissatisfaction or discontent among voters (Ivarsflaten 2008). As Schmitz (2022: 60) notes: "The rise of populism is often explained with either economic or cultural grievances". However, the author of this current study perceives grievance as a complex phenomenon, including both economic and cultural or value aspects: "I argue that it is not just either-or; they both explain the recent success of right-wing populism with its anti-democratic tendencies in the mature democracies of the West. It is the combination of the two that matters, because economic grievances strongly shape cultural attitudes." (ibid.).

The grievance theory distinguishes between three separate models used by political parties to mobilize their electorate: (1) grievances as a result of economic change; (2) ethnic grievances and grievances caused by increase in immigration; (3) grievances resulting from political elitism and corruption (see e.g., Snow 2004; Ivarsflaten 2008; Kriesi 2012; Beissinger – Sasse 2014). In the case of economic grievances (the most commonly used grievance model), the austerity and reform efforts of the ruling government are often seen as a significant impetus for public outrage and voter mobilisation (but also purely protest mobilisation). The most important impetus for mobilizing economic discontent is (rising) unemployment, or government actions that lead to rising unemployment and are perceived as such by voters (Kriesi 2012). Another model of mobilising grievances relates to the issue of immigration. The rise of new political parties (especially far-right populists) in Western Europe has occurred at a time when there has been significant immigration or a significant increase in immigration over time. Moreover, in most West European countries it was quite difficult to employ immigrants, and their unemployment rate was much higher than that of the rest of the population. This resulted in antagonism between immigrants and the native population. This was compounded by cultural conflicts and the reluctance of the "old inhabitants" to accept the newly arrived minority (Ivarsflaten 2008).

Elites, and not only political elites, play a significant role in reinforcing polarisation. On the one hand, by emphasizing the irreconcilability of the positions of different political actors and ideologies and generally questioning the credibility of governments, they mobilize citizens to be more active (as is evident, among other case, on the example of Czech presidential and parliamentary election in 2021 and 2023). At the same time, however, the extremizing vocabulary and the labelling of the political opponent as "the enemy" leads to the disintegration of consensus and mainstream and the perception of politics not as a space for finding good solutions, but rather as a gladiatorial arena in which there does not exist the win-win strategy, but only a zero-sum game.

As Lee (2013: 90) summarises: “Elite polarisation is likely to stimulate mass political engagement if such positive effects as increased information and mobilization are predominant over negative alienating effects. Although citizens become more informed and are increasingly mobilized with growing elite polarisation, we are still likely to observe less engagement or disengagement among voters if they are increasingly disenchanted from polarized elite politics”.

4.1 Excursus 3 – Affective Polarization

The binary opposition described above is very accurately reflected in the studies devoted to the issue of affective polarization. This is a type of social polarization in which the adherents of two antagonistic parties “increasingly dislike the other, are biased against each other, are ready to defeat the other, feel anger towards each other, and all this without any direct or conditional connection to an ideological difference in position on a topic or issue” (Mason 2015: 6).

Affective polarization is considered as one of the key processes in the development of contemporary Western democracies, in the case of the United States even a “defining feature” (Druckman et al 2021: 28). “To capture the extent to which citizens hold both positive ingroup affect and negative out-group affect towards parties, researchers have coined the term ‘affective polarisation’. In extreme cases, we can also speak of ‘partisan prejudice’ and ‘interparty hostility’ among partisans. However, the concept of affective polarization has so far mainly been applied to what is arguably the most straightforward case: the American two-party system.“ (Wagner 2021). Nevertheless, the research on selected European cases “has shown that affective polarization is widespread outside the United States, is not a simple by-product of ideological polarisation and alters perceptions of party competition.” (Wagner 2021).

Affective polarization is based on a strong psychologically motivated trust towards members of one's own group (in-group identity), and, on the contrary, a strong distrust towards members of the out-group. As Klar (2018: 611) notes: “common identities might increase trust across partisan rivals, a concern that is particularly prevalent during times of increased social distance and affective polarisation.”

In bipartism, it is usually a situation in which trust in members of one's own group (party), as well as distrust in representatives of the opposite camp/party, significantly or almost completely suppresses rational argumentation. However, even in the multipartism that is typical of continental party systems, one of the distinctive manifestations of affective polarization is the division of societies into two “irreconcilable” camps. “Affective polarisation in multiparty settings should be defined and assessed as the extent to which politics is seen as divided into two distinct camps, each of which may consist of one or more parties“ (Wagner 2021). As Wagner demonstrated in his recent analysis: “the size of parties matters for levels of affective polarisation. Hence, a citizen's perception of the political system is more affectively polarized if they feel negatively towards a large competitor than if they dislike a minor party“ (Wagner 2021).

In this sense, the presence of a strong protest, radical, or even anti-system party with a tendency to populistically divide society into two antagonistic groups clearly represents a significant impulse to reinforce polarization, including the motive of distrust of state and political institutions – supporters of this party distrust institutions because they are not administered by their favoured party, and opponents of this party distrust institutions if this party comes to power. Thus, the distrust of the two antagonistic political camps is not only related to their perception of each other, but more generally to their a priori perception of the government exercised by their political opponents as untrustworthy in the case of their own electoral defeat.

"When parties and candidates that are more extreme than their competitors become relevant in democratic societies, observers regularly raise concerns about the consequences for public discourse and for societal norms more generally … The theory implicit in these observations is that voters become more ideologically polarized when extreme views are publicly and broadly expressed by parties and candidates who are endowed with some level of political legitimacy" (Bischof – Wagner 2019: 888-889).

According to the analysis presented by Bischof and Wagner, the polarization is most pronounced at the very beginning, i.e. at the moment when the polarizing actor - the protest political party - establishes itself or becomes relevant: "Ultimately, the institutional presence and relevance of such new, more radical competitors is thought to increase ideological polarisation among citizens. In this context, we mean by polarisation that ideological views become more distant from the political center: The variance of positions increases. The polarisation caused by the rise of radical voices is also often believed to occur on both sides: those who sympathize with the new party and those who oppose it" (Bischof – Wagner 2019: 889).

Such a statement would be in line with the idea of the domestication of protest parties, virtually the centripetal character of European or Western democratic systems and their ability to include the new challenger parties into the mainstream. Recent research (Wagner – Praprotnik 2023) suggests that an important tool for mitigating polarization is primarily the reduction of tensions between political parties, i.e. de-polarization at the level of political elites. Cooperation between rival parties, demonstrated among others in the form of coalition signals, thus plays an important role in reducing affective polarization. Again, such an instrument has only limited possibilities within bipartisanship; we cannot overlook the fact that a number of studies point to the fact that, especially in the last two decades, a bipolar configuration based on the strong antagonism and affective polarization has been stabilising in a number of countries.

Furthermore, in addition to party polarization, we can observe strengthening polarization in relation to the other, primarily "non-political" institutions such as science, education, media etc., as well as regarding the institution directly related with politics such as military, police, medicine, religion, law. "In addition to significant declines in confidence, there have been substantial increases in partisan polarisation in confidence in which the partisans of one party have more confidence in an institution than the partisans of the other party, merely because of perceptions about which party controls the institution" (Brady – Kent 2022: 50).

Brady and Kent's current research on polarization has focused exclusively on the situation in the United States, but many of their conclusions can undoubtedly be applied to the development of Western democratic systems more generally. Let us therefore present a key part of the conclusion of the above-mentioned study concerning the pervasive polarization that affects not only political institutions but also primarily non-political ones: "The rise of a social/cultural dimension of American politics in addition to the pre-existing New Deal economic cleavage suggest how polarisation could have gone beyond business and labor to other institutions by implicating many of these institutions in fundamental political debates, often exacerbated by concerns about increasing inequality and diversity. Issues such as abortion, prayer in school, gay marriage, racial equality, gun rights, and language and immigration policy often involve the knowledge- and information-producing institutions (the press, TV news, science, higher education, public schools, and education) and the norm-enforcing institutions (the police, religion, and the military) on different sides of debates about these issues … Part of the story may be that people have selected into these institutions based upon values and perspectives that put them on one side or the other of

the cultural divide. The rise of talk radio, then cable television, and more recently the internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle have amplified these political identifications and debates“ (Brady – Kent 2022: 59-60).

These conclusions again confirm the assumption, already made above, that the economic and socio-cultural causes of polarization cannot be separated from each other, but instead represent an interrelated complex. At the same time, affective polarization adds another element to this mixture, which is a distinctly subjective perception of one's own position, including categories of success, and not only the economic ones. Nevertheless, the reasons for the deepening polarization and de-democratisation are much more complex, including important cultural factors concentrated in the axiological cleavage between the ‘liberals’ and ‘neo-illiberals’. As Tucker (2020: 137) stresses: “All the countries where neo-illiberals won democratic elections . . . were theoretically too rich to have had such challenges to democracy. … Obviously, there is no rational economic reason for Norwegian or Danish populist neo-illiberalism. Some suggest welfare anxiety, fear of competition over welfare transfers with poor immigrants.”

In the tradition of great cycles in economy, politics or societal development, he observes the recent anti-democratic or anti-liberal wave accompanied by the strengthening polarization and deepening mistrust as the set of partial cases integrated into the general phaenomenon of democratic backsliding. He stresses the snow-ball effect of populist neo-illiberalism that awoke the ‘passionate archaic demons’ and ‘atavistic mechanism’ in the form of a “vicious cycle of economic decline, breakdown of trade and mobility, economic and political hostilities, possesses the body politics, spreads, and infects the whole world” (Tucker 2020: 131). In this situation, the clear socio-economic definition of class disappears and a more complex set of determinants that identify individuals politically come into play. As Schmitz (2022: 63) points out: “Class is a social context as much as it is an economic construct. It is a lifestyle and an attitude.”

Schmitz also reflects the growing polarization through the prism of a weakening civic culture with its ability to control politicians and generally create an environment for good governance. As she points out: “it is not ideological polarisation between the social classes that has the greatest negative effect on civic culture, or general civic attitudes and behavior, for that matter. It is the increasing dissent in society about whether the country’s elites are still to be trusted with making the right decisions to increase the average citizen’s quality of life. This difference in opinion manifests itself in a decline in some civic attitudes” (Schmitz 2022: iii).

However, we should not neglect the critical reflection on the role of (new or social) media, as Brady and Kent have emphasized. The possibility of choosing as an information source a medium whose mode of presentation corresponds to our own subjective vision has been brought to a qualitatively new level of “parallel societies” by the existence of social or even “alternative” media and the construction of highly polarized social bubbles. Tucker refers to social media as the tool of ‘unmediated politics’. “New information technologies, mostly social media, dismantled the barriers to direct communications from leader to followers. Social media reconstructed the ancient public square in cyber space, thereby weakening the power of the press to constrain politics” (Tucker 2020: 58). Furthermore, “the populist media gives narrative form to the passions, most notably fear” (Tucker 2020: 61). Fear is naturally one of the most significant sources of emotional and irrational evaluation, i.e. a source of affective polarization.

5 Traditionalism, counter-cosmopolitanism, and cultural backlash

In the context of the earthquake elections, the rise of populist challenger parties, often in the form of personalised business parties, as well as the transformation of some mainstream parties into national-populist entities, political science after 2010 began to address these de-democratising tendencies and processes of democratic backsliding. Within the European studies, attention has focused primarily on the Hungarian case and the continuous deconstruction of the rule of law under the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, but studies have gradually included a number of other cases of regimes or actors with de-democratising and/or anti-liberal tendencies. Gradually, the assumption that the Orbán regime might be more of an exceptional case has shifted towards the view that it is in many ways a role model. This attitude was, in fact, matched by the fact of how positively Orbán's way of governing was reflected both within the Visegrad Group and East-Central Europe more broadly, as well as in a pan-European context. A portrait of Viktor Orbán even appeared on the cover of P. Norris and R. Inglehart's book Cultural Backlash (2019), alongside portraits of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen.

It is more than evident that the tendency to reflect on some of the problematic phenomena destabilising the liberal consensus primarily or only through the lens of post-communism, as the developments in Hungary, Romania and Poland have encouraged (Blokker 2012), has been weakened or abandoned over the last decade, and that the reflection on "post-communism" as a specific cleavage or rather legacy cannot be seen as the only explanation for the disruption of democratic processes. On the contrary, what we see nowadays is rather a tendency to look for a more general theoretical explanation of the processes for which authors use many labels (besides the term cultural backlash, let us mention, among others, the terms traditionalism, anti-globalism, neo-illiberal populism or counter-cosmopolitanism) and which are also linked to other legacies and characteristics, both in terms of the political elites growing out of these legacies and the social groups that associate their values and political preferences with them.

Let us stress again at this place the negative consequences of poly-crisis and growing disillusionment and also fear in the Western societies in the last decade/s. Such development seems to be similar to the notion of anti-modernity in the second half of the 19th century that grew primarily out of disillusionment with Europe's industrial revolution. Nowadays, we observe similar processes regarding the globalisation processes, negative consequences of neoliberal reforms and the transition toward an information society (Industry 4.0 etc.). In our opinion, in such a poly-crisis the return of traditionalism, anti-modern and anti-liberal narratives is logical despite the question of whether we face and observe the new anti-modern revolution or a new version of traditional conservative (counter-)revolutions. Specifically, some of the mentioned crises even deepened the polarization between the "winners" and "losers" of transformation from the (post)modern industrial society towards the knowledge and information society (Sass 2020).

Nevertheless, a common feature of 'traditionalists' belief is the criticism of the 'ultraliberal progressivism' that should dominate the political institutions presented as overall disillusionment with the development values. Nativist and radical right-wing parties "demonstrate some similarities across Europe, displaying a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism" (Pirro 2014: 601). They focus on "sources of identity such as the ethnic community, they are anti-establishment and thus anti-corruption by definition and they champion anti-Western orientations" (Pirro 2014: 606).

The ideological profiling of these political parties and their value background is often linked to the phenomenon of 'Christian allusions'. The national conservative and nativist groups in

contemporary Europe stress the 'Christian Europe' concept, while this group of 'defenders' of Christian roots of Europe often includes such divergent actors as the ultraconservative 'mystic' J. Kaczyński and the former Social Democrat declaring his liberal orientation M. Zeman that developed after 2013 as the President of Czechia into the new 'national-conservative' role of 'defender of Christian Europe'. As Weidinger (2017: 63–65) stresses analysing the switch of Austrian FPÖ from liberal-national towards 'belonging without believing' and 'Christendom above Christianity' positions, Zeman and similar politicians (mis)use the rhetoric of defending the Christian values to win the support of nativist-minded voter groups: "Presenting Christianity as a pillar of occidental culture also proved beneficial in terms of appealing to the large target audience of Christian belongers-not-believers" (Weidinger 2017: 66). As his analysis showed, paradoxically the Islamophobic tendencies are a stronger impulse for such cooperation than Christianity: "The attitude nativist parties and organizations in Europe display toward Christianity is drawing considerably less interest than their attitude toward Islam" (Weidinger 2017: 42).

If we are looking for a simple generalizing framework for the above-mentioned clash between two value-different social groups profiling contemporary political institutions and processes in Western democracies, several other typologies or concepts, in addition to the repeatedly mentioned Cultural Backlash study, also work with binary opposition. We will present two in this paper – firstly, one of the first and, in our view, very successful contributions reflecting on the specifics of voting behaviour and value orientations in the post-Communist area of Central Eastern Europe, offered in 2012 by Lars Rensmann, and then an equally helpful analysis by Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty (2022), which focuses directly on reflecting on the transformations of cleavages over the long period 1948-2020. The contribution of the above-mentioned approaches can be seen, among others, in the fact that Rensmann focused on the research of three countries, or parts of countries with a Communist past (Czech Republic, Poland, and former East Germany, or the new Bundesländer), the second study presented here focuses on the longitudinal research of the so-called traditional or old democracies of Western and Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Despite the different geographic focus and especially the different legacies, we can nevertheless observe a striking similarity of conclusions, suggesting both the possibilities for theoretical generalization and the usefulness of the chosen methodological approaches.

5.1 Polarization in East-Central Europe

There exists a very large analytical base on the issue of social cleavages in the new democracies of Central Eastern Europe, and this study has neither the space nor the ambition to address it. Let us therefore state only in very general terms that the democratization and Europeanization, or more generally socialisation processes in the post-communist area, the "zone of great transformation", cannot be generalised and that we observe very significant differences between individual nations or groups of countries. Institutionally, these differences can be represented, among other things, by the fact that some have become member states of the European Union, some have candidate status, some are still striving for it, and others remain very far from integration into the group of democracies.

Nevertheless, the general observation holds true that after 1989, the debate about the party dealignment and defreezing of Rokkanian cleavages included also the emerging new democracies in East-Central Europe and reflects specific (macro)regional and also national perspectives. Because party systems and political parties in Central Eastern Europe often differ in their characteristics from the "role-models" of Western democracies, both political rhetoric and many scholarly studies tend to see them as special cases or outright deviant cases. Contemporary studies

emphasize that – as in the case of Western democracies, where we observe attempts at generalization, which nevertheless perceive substantial differences and offer typologies or classification scales to distinguish between two or more ideal-types – in the case of Central Eastern Europe we have to seek an appropriate equilibrium between "aggregate uniformity" and "idiosyncratic diversity" (Rovny 2015).[1]

Based on Rensmann (2012), if we analyse the important social and political cleavages related with the segmentation of East-Central European societies into the visible political camps, at least three important cleavages should be mentioned, playing important and even decisive roles in the polariz ation of these societies.

Table 1: Structuring cleavages in CEE democracies

support of post-national political institutions (for example, EU)	opposition to post-national political institutions (for example, EU)
free (global) market allocation	economic redistribution or protectionism
liberal-cosmopolitan values and recognition of cultural diversity (secularism)	authoritarian conformism, social cohesion and cultural homogeneity (including clericalism)

Source: Rensmann, 2012: 77.

All these cleavages are directly related to the above-discussed nativist question. While the proponents of the stances presented in the first column might be understood as 'cosmopolitan liberals', the defenders of positions described in the second column tend to national or even nativist postures. Rensmann (2012), analysing the electoral successes of Central European parties with nativist tendencies, suggests labelling them as 'counter-cosmopolitan'. In his opinion, this term better describes the basic position of anti-modernist societal groups in Central Europe and also opens the possibility of reflecting the nativist tendencies outside of a concrete ethnical/national environment. As he stresses, both the "nativism and counter-cosmopolitanism are generally non-inclusive orientation", but there exist some differences. While nativism is "limited to territorial substrates", counter-cosmopolitanism "can also be grounded in religious … or broader cultural references" (Rensmann, 2012: 75). Below (part 5.2) we show that the introduced dimensions of polarization are falsified by current research as too one-dimensional.

Counter-cosmopolitanism "refers to the general opposition to all social processes associated with existing globalization. Counter-cosmopolitanism is neither limited to welfare protectionism nor ´single-issues´ such as anti-immigrant policy; rather, it combines opposition to: 1) socioeconomic globalization and the global capitalist market economy; 2) cosmopolitan cultural transformations, signified by increasing cultural diversity and hybridity …; and 3) political transformations associated with global and post-national governance" (Rensmann, 2012: 74). In fact, the author reflects counter-cosmopolitanism as the contemporary, but in historical legacies rooted position with clear nativist features. Generally, it reflects critically the globalisation that represents the 'highest stage' of open society. Thus, the globalisation should be rejected or at least modified based

[1] Let us recall that people from less developed and poorer nations are way more inclined to seek for protection and accordingly support statist economic views, while at the same time endorsing the traditional cultural values prevailing in their society. This reflects into party competition, especially in CEE countries where the mainstream political parties combine conservative cultural stances with statist economic stance, while challenger parties rather combine progressive cultural stances with pro-market stances (cf. Tavits – Letki 2009).

on the counter-revolution revitalising the national/nativist character of societies. Furthermore, the counter-cosmopolitans often tend to conspiracies and black-and-white thinking, which is also one of the typical signs of nativism, butmore generally also affective polarisation. "Counter-cosmopolitanism tends to reduce multi-faceted globalization and cosmopolitanization processes to a single, unified and monolithic threat, often identified with actual or perceived 'global agents' who presumably 'pull the strings'" (Rensmann, 2012: 74).

Let us commemorate, that Rensmann's study reflects the change in voting behaviour of Czech, Polish and East German societies in the context of the impact of the post-2008 fiscal and economic crisis, which is considered the first of a series of crises linked under the term poly-crisis. At the same time, however, its conclusions, in our opinion, have also accurately captured other developments, which have been reflected in the migration crisis (2015 and beyond), the coronavirus pandemic, and last but not least, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, coupled with economic and security challenges (energy emergency, inflation, etc.) and general anxiety. At the same time, in our view, it is clear that the three key cleavages or polarizing factors that Rensmann presents need not to be limited to the specifics of the post-communist area, but on the contrary have proven to be a shared developmental feature of democracies over the last decade. In this respect, the so-called new democracies of East-Central Europe have complemented the traditional West European democracies regarding the current key cleavages. As Sass and Kuhnle (2023: 192) summarised in their analysis: "Some recent studies of the oppositions resulting from European integration, globalization, immigration, or educational expansion, and the growth of parties of the far right and new left have attempted to build on Rokkanian cleavage theory. A 'transnational cleavage', a 'libertarian/authoritarian cleavage', or a 'universalism–particularism cleavage' have been identified".

5.2 Social inequalities and polarization

The genesis of social groups and political actors rejecting the "precipitousness" of globalisation and integration processes, or offering various forms of conservative revolution or nativist revitalisation, has also influenced the research perspective with which Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty have approached the questions of contemporary polarization and party competition. Like Rensmann, the aforementioned authors also work with a binary concept that more or less overlaps with the concept of cleavages. However, while Rensmann, from the position of political sociology, prioritizes distinct or oppositional social groups, Gethin et al primarily focus on political parties as the bearers of agenda and conflict. Their study is based on the distinction between the two large groups of parties: 1) social democratic, socialist, communist, and green parties ("left-wing" or "social democratic and affiliated" parties), labelled as the "Brahmin left"; and 2) conservative, Christian democratic, and anti-immigration parties ("right-wing" or "conservative and affiliated" parties), labelled as the "Merchant right"; (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 3). However, this simplistic approach is later relativized by the authors themselves by introducing several different party families – liberal, conservative and Christian democratic – left – green – anti-immigration; these party families are the measured regarding the economic-distributive score and sociocultural score (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 31).

As the most important outcome of the analysis of the development of polarization in Western democracies, the authors present "the existence of a gradual process of disconnection between the effects of income and education on the vote … It has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters, giving rise in the 2010s to a divergence between the influences of income (economic capital) and education (human capital): high-income voters continue to vote for the

right, while high-education voters have shifted to supporting the left. This separation between a "Merchant right" and a "Brahmin left" is visible in nearly all Western democracies, despite their major political, historical, and institutional differences. We also find that the rise of green and anti-immigration parties since the 1980s–1990s has accelerated this transition—although it can only explain about 15% of the overall shift observed—as education, not income, most clearly distinguishes support for these two families of parties today. As a result, many Western democracies now appear to have shifted from 'class-based' to 'multidimensional' or 'multiconflictual' party systems, in which income and education differentially structure support for competing political movements. One might call these systems 'multi-elite' party systems, in which governing coalitions alternating in power tend to reflect the views and interests of a different kind of elite (intellectual versus economic), assuming that elites have a greater influence on political programs and policies than the rest of the electorate" (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 3-4).

The multidimensionality and multiconflictionality of contemporary party systems grows out of different modalities of relations growing out of the perception of freedom or protection. In this mind, the findings of a study reflecting data from nearly a hundred states are noteworthy. The multidimensionality and multiconflictionality of contemporary party systems grows out of different modalities of relations growing out of the perception of freedom or protection. In this vein, the findings of a study reflecting data from nearly 100 states are noteworthy, showing very different perceptions of the importance and role of the two dimensions within the political right: "It is more common for culturally and economically right-wing attitudes to correlate negatively with each other, an attitude structure reflecting a contrast between desires for cultural and economic protection vs. freedom" (Malka – Lelkes – Soto 2017: 1045). In this sense, related studies emphasize the complex processes of ideological belief systems formation in the context of competition and the formation of relationships between dispositional attributes and political preferences (Federico – Malka 2018).

Again, we thus observe a research methodology based on a combination of socio-economic and socio-cultural principles, similarly to what was done, for example, in the already presented Anna-Elisabeth Schmitz (2022). The authors focus on the positioning of political parties on two axes – an "economic-distributive" axis and a "sociocultural" axis – showing that "the separation between these two dimensions of political conflict and the divergence of income and education are tightly related phenomena" (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 4). An important finding is that the different age cohorts – generations – show significant differences in their preference for one of the axes or dimensions. This is true not only for the aforementioned smaller, in many ways still rather niche parties, but more generally. "Generational dynamics appear to have mattered tremendously in generating the reversal of the education cleavage: while older lower-educated voters continue to vote 'along class lines' and thus support the left, social democratic and green parties have attracted a growing share of the higher-educated electorate among the youth. The reversal in the educational divide has also been highest among nonreligious voters and among men, although it has happened in other subgroups, too." (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 6). Furthermore, we can observe the "backlash" against social progress among the older generations (ibid.: 39).

The authors focused their analysis on a range of different variables related with identity and polarization – age, geography, religion, gender, and other socioeconomic variables – but only education turned out to be a variable that underwent a major transformation; for the other variables they conclude that "there has been no major realignment of voters along these other dimensions

comparable to the one observed in the case of education". In addition to this dimension, they also point to very different findings with regard to gender, "the only variable other than education for which we find a clear reversal of electoral divides: in nearly all countries, women used to be more conservative than men and have gradually become more likely to vote for left-wing parties" (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 6).

Nevertheless, we should not forget also about the rural-urban cleavages where the study observes "reshuffling of rural-urban divides within rather than across left–right blocs: support for green parties tends to be concentrated in cities today, just like other left-wing parties, while anti-immigration parties generally fare better in rural areas as is the case of other conservative parties" (Gethin – Martínez-Toledano – Piketty 2022: 39).

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As the findings presented above show, the changes in polarization, or the strength and significance of the various cleavages in more than 20 democratic societies, have not been dramatic and rapid, but rather evolutionary over the last 70 years. Post-modernization, or rather neo-modernisation, coupled with the strengthening of the educated middle class, has been the impetus for the weakening of the traditional class dimension; indeed, the traditional left parties have responded to this by shifting to new themes of inclusiveness, minority protection, etc., and if they have not done so, they have grown competition in the form of the Greens or, for example, the Pirate Parties. As for the political right, it either sticks to a liberal-conservative position and moves towards the centre, or it tends to be a tendency to hold back, i.e. to stop economic globalization and value progression, or to initiate a cultural counter-revolution in response to the new issues emerging from post-modernization that sharply contrast to the social conservatism of the "old" working class. This cultural backlash also became the basis for the rise of the populist right. It is this development that many of the studies and approaches presented above have shown as a key polarizing factor in contemporary Western-style democracies. The electoral cleavages undergo changes, but still we believe that "Rokkanian cleavage theory can be developed to illuminate contemporary political conflicts" (Sass – Kuhnle 2023: 192).

As we have tried to point out, a significant role in the polarization of contemporary societies is played by a psychology based on (dis)trust between members of different – not necessarily antagonistic – social groups, as well as on distrust in political institutions, especially when they are dominated by political parties/actors representing opposite political camps and different value systems. An a priori and largely prejudicial distrust of members of various outgroups and of these outgroups as a whole poses a fundamental challenge that undermines civic culture. As Jamal and Nooruddin (2010: 46-47) note, "one of the long-standing stated correlates of support for democracy has been generalized trust. This individual-level association between generalized trust and support for democracy has been highlighted by scholars of civic culture." When significant social groups lose trust in political institutions, political culture changes towards low-trust societies in which people "tend to trust only those to whom they are similar" (Khodyakov 2007: 117).

In this context, some political thinkers emphasize the fact that postmodern societies, characterized by strong individualization and high volatility, begin to lack clear majorities and turn more into sets of minorities. However, when large parts of societies fail to define themselves with the majority, whether economically, socio-culturally or otherwise, a situation of inequalities in epistemic power arises; distrust in political institutions thus turns into a feeling that the individual is unable to influence political processes in any way (Catala 2015: 424-425).

Let us recall at this point one of the important empirically based assumptions concerning polarization: "Polarisation is higher in countries that either are poor, are ethnically fragmented, or have a low level of trust" (Lindqvist – Östling 2010: 544). If we take into account that in the last 15 years and more, large social groups in Western democracies have been coping with relative and absolute economic decline and weakening of welfare state, and at the same time the fact that it is often social groups reflecting themselves as "losers" of the changes associated with globalization or technological transformation that support policies of (re-)homogenization, we see here a clear symbiosis of all three effects reinforcing polarization.

Such symbiosis has been well demonstrated by the analyses we have presented, the key conclusions of which are summarised in other similar research on anti-EU sentiment and demands for the renationalisation of EU member states' policies and economies: "There are two potential explanations for the decline of trust toward the EU, the rise of Eurosceptic populists, and the electoral successes of radical-left and far-right parties. The first one is a cultural backlash against progressive values, such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, and a shift toward national identity. The second explanation emphasizes economic insecurity, stemming from either globalization and technological progress (typified by outsourcing, increased competition from low-wage countries, and automation) or the sharp increase in unemployment in Europe in the aftermath of the recent global financial and economic crisis. Although these two explanations are not mutually exclusive and certainly interact, much of the public debate has been about the cultural backlash" (Algan et al 2017: 310).

For the purposes of the TRUEDEM project, we thus formulate as a useful theoretical and methodological approach a focus on socio-economic and socio-cultural factors associated with the polarization and transformation of group identities. We perceive both groups of factors as interconnected, especially with regard to how populist actors (not only politicians, but also the media and other institutions influencing the political polarization) present alleged or real correlations between the socio-cultural transformations (typically migration, integration, globalization, i.e. the processes associated with strengthening the heterogeneity) and economic challenges or problems.

6 Methodological Framework

The concern with political trust is deeply rooted in ensuring the survival of democracy. There exists a long-standing research tradition based on the assumption that the survival of representative democracy relies on the support of its citizens. In van der Meer and Zmerli's (1017: 1) words, political trust "functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine." Or, as Carstens (2023) puts it, the main argument for the necessity of political trust is that it enables cooperation between citizens and political institutions, and therefore this positive effect of political trust on public compliance is particularly important in times of crisis.

From this perspective, public trust in political institutions is considered a crucial component of regime support, serving as a powerful resource for political legitimacy and a determinant of regime stability (see e.g., Easton 1965, 1975; Putnam 1993; van der Meer – Zmerli 2017; Haerpfer et al. 2019), with a lack of trust (mistrust) or even political distrust[2] having been shown to have negative consequences for the development of the political system (see e.g., Crozier et al. 1975; Mishler –

[2] In this context, van der Meer and Zmerli (2017) suggest a distinction between political mistrust as the absence of trust, political distrust as the opposite of trust, and political scepticism as the withholding of trust judgments (see also Mishler – Rose 1997; Bertsou 2019; Carstens 2023).

Rose 1997, 2005; Norris /ed./ 1999; Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). As a result, contemporary democracies have long been linked to concerns about their possible downfall caused by a lack of political trust; indeed, to this day, much of the scholarly literature even considers declining or low levels of political trust as a risk to representative democracy. At the same time, there is undeniable evidence that public trust in political institutions is quite low (Dalton – Weldon 2005; Kim 2007; Okolikj et al. 2022) and has been waning in recent decades in many European democracies (e.g. Dalton 1999, 2004, 2019; Kaase 1999; Mair et al. /eds./ 2004; Norris 2011; Mair 2013; Petrarca et al. 2022).

Given that European democracies operate as party democracies, whereby political parties play a crucial role in linking citizens' preferences to the political decision-making process, as they are entrusted with a mandate to act on behalf of citizens (as principals), our research primarily centers on political actors and specifically on political parties. Even though more than a century has passed since James Bryce stated that political parties are inevitable because "no one has shown how representative government could be worked without them" (Bryce 1921: 119), which was confirmed two decades later by E. E. Schattschneider stating that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties" (Schattschneider 1942: 1), political parties are still considered one of the most important components and actors ensuring the transmission of demands and general communication between society and political institutions. In other words, political parties seem to be the central means of political representation in contemporary democracies. Thus, the regular and legitimate functioning of political parties presents a key precondition for the stability of the democratic system and trust in democracy in general.

However, political partisanship has undergone a significant and multifaceted transformation in recent decades, with both established (Western) democracies and the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe undergoing this evolution. If the twentieth century could be described as the century of political parties, recent decades have seen an increasing number of scholarly findings about the crisis of political parties, or even concerns about their future existence. One manifestation of this change is that citizens increasingly perceive political parties as elite-driven and unrepresentative of the broader public and generally untrustworthy, resulting in a gradual weakening of partisan identifications among voters and, more generally, of the ties between political parties and the mass public.

In our research, we focus on the key factors and indicators determining and illustrating the transformation of public trust in political parties. Thus, next to the explicitly declared tendency to (dis-)trust in political parties, we also consider broader aspects of this issue, such as the party membership development, total and extra-system electoral volatility, the emergence and success of challenger parties, etc.

6.1 Conceptualising political trust

Although we acknowledge that the level of political trust may be significantly conditioned by the civic culture of a given society and the process of socialisation (e.g. Putnam 1993; Mayne – Hakhverdian 2017), we primarily draw upon an institutionalist perspective (e.g. Coleman 1990; Hetherington 1998; for more details on this distinction, see e.g. Mishler – Rose 2001, 2005; Carstens 2023). When conceptualizing political trust, we draw upon Hardin's view that "trust is directed from a subject to an object and relates to the truster's expectation about the trustee's future behaviour" (Hardin 1999: 26). Obviously, the subjects of political trust are citizens, and the objects of political trust are political institutions such as governments, legislatures, or political parties (and politicians).

Drawing upon the evaluative component of political trust (the trust-as-evaluation approach) and the assumption that political parties are entrusted with a mandate from the electorate, we can assume that political parties are evaluated on the basis of their actual performance, which determines whether they gain public trust. More specifically, we approach political trust as a relational attitude describing a context-dependent accord between citizens and political institutions, with citizens' judgements of whether or not to trust political institutions are embedded in situational conditions, i.e., they are constrained to specific actions and/or circumstances. Hence, political trust is considered to be the outcome of citizens' (more or less cognitive) evaluation of the quality of specific political institutions and/or actors' performance based on their perceived ability to respond consistently according to public expectations and reliability (e.g. Hardin 1999; Levi – Stoker 2000; Dalton 2004; Dalton – Weldon 2005; Norris 2011; Hetherington – Husser 2012; Citrin and Stoker 2018; Okolikj et al. 2022; Carstens 2023).

At the same time, we are aware that political trust corresponds to the multilevel nature of politics and thus involves political institutions and political actors at different levels of governance, i.e. at the local, regional, national, or international level, with a spill-over effect exists between the different levels of governance (e.g. Carstens 2023). Yet it is the national level that dominates in this context and is thus the most relevant in terms of examining public trust in political parties. Furthermore, we opted for the country-election level because we are interested in the aggregate-level effects of political trust on party polarization and because macro-level analysis allows us to cover a larger number of countries (the EU Member States) over a longer period of time (since 1990).

As can be observed from the above definition, two types of recipients of public opinion towards political institutions can generally be distinguished in contemporary democracies, namely institutional recipients, i.e., legislatures and/or governments, and political actors, i.e., political parties and/or politicians (Petrarca et al. 2022; Carstens 2023; cf. Easton 1965; Norris /ed./ 1999; Norris 2011; Zmerli – Newton 2017). Although our research focuses primarily on political parties, the actor-centered perspective seems to be a poor indicator to explain changes in party politics, as it is considerably lower (Kim 2007; Zmerli – Hooghe 2011; van der Meer – Zmerli 2017; Zmerli – Newton 2017; Okolikj et al. 2022; Petrarca et al. 2022; Carstens 2023) and more prone to fluctuate than public trust in political institutions (trust in political parties seems to be more sensitive to different types of crises, corruption scandals, or generally poor performance in managing public goods and services). Indeed, recent research has indicated that public trust in national legislatures is a more reliable indicator than trust in political parties in this context (e.g. Petrarca et al. 2022; cf. Voogd et al. 2019).

Furthermore, we are also aware that in contemporary European democracies, national governments and legislatures are predominantly party governments and party legislatures because citizens, by voting (for parties) in elections, give political parties a mandate to act on their behalf in legislatures and governments. In addition, as political parties are agents of the democratic process, public evaluations of the performance of political parties and party leaders significantly affect whether national governments and national legislatures gain public trust (or not), and *vice versa*, public trust in political parties suffers as a result of the government's performance deficit, which highlights the importance of monitoring public trust not only in political parties but also in political institutions.

6.2 Political trust and party polarization

This draws our attention towards electoral politics, which is further supported by the fact that recent changes to European party systems are currently taking place at the electoral rather than at the

governmental level. Since democratic elections are supposed to be a contest between rival (societal) groups, typically represented in the political arena by political parties competing for citizens' votes, it is the competitive elections that lie at the very heart of the relationship between political parties and representative democracy. Indeed, competitive elections enjoy a prominent position within the range of current democratic institutions and are considered a cornerstone of contemporary representative democracies, as they allow ordinary citizens to engage periodically in the political process. Moreover, their votes determine both who is elected and the overall composition of the legislature and, more importantly, they may affect who will have influence over the political agenda and who will govern.

In general, electoral politics can be defined as a means enabling society to collectively appraise past politics of the government and parliamentary political parties and to indicate a preferred direction for the future government to pursue (e.g. Dalton 2010; Okolikj et al. 2022). Hence, perceived political trust can be expected to have important consequences for citizens' voting behaviour (and beyond). Specifically, changes in political trust can be expected to have a particularly strong effect on changes in citizens' voting preferences towards or away from established political parties, with distrusters lacking incentives to form stable party preferences, leading them to higher levels of vote switching (Dalton – Weldon 2005; Voogd – Dassonneville 2020). For instance, if the government and/or political parties do not meet the expected performance levels, voters may perceive the performance of political parties (and party governments) to be poor, the political trust may decline, and as a result, voters may be more inclined to eschew established political parties and seek alternative strategies and options, whether abstention or protest voting.

Consequently, public dissatisfaction with the political establishment represents a crucial individual attitude on which populism thrives. Indeed, it is widely recognised that low and declining levels of political trust are depressing electoral support for established political parties and thereby facilitating the rise of challenger parties,[3] especially anti-political-establishment and/or populist parties (e.g. Abedi 2001; Lubbers et al. 2002; Fieschi – Heywood 2004; Dalton – Weldon 2005; Arzheimer 2009; Mudde 2013; Pauwels 2014; van Kessel 2015; Rooduijn et al. 2016; Bélangér 2017; Hooghe 2018; Hooghe – Dassonneville 2018; Rooduijn 2018; Mauk 2020; Okolikj et al. 2022; Petrarca et al. 2022; Carstens 2023). As anti-elitism is one of the core appeals of anti-political-establishment and populist parties (Rooduijn 2018; Voogd – Dassonneville 2020; see also Jagers – Walgrave 2007; Ernst et al. 2017, 2019; Reinemann et al. 2017), it is precisely these challenging parties that share with dissatisfied voters a harsh criticism of the political establishment.[4]

To sum up, drawing upon a study of political scholars' literature, we argue that performance dissatisfaction may translate into electoral losses for established political parties. As a result, low and declining levels of political trust create a "window of opportunity" for new political parties to mobilize electoral support. At the same time, there is ample evidence indicating that low-trusting citizens are more likely to turn to challenger political parties (instead of ideologically coherent

[3] As far as "challenger" parties are concerned, we draw upon Abedi's (2004) definition, according to which those are parties that challenge the *status quo* on major policy and political system issues (see also Bolleyer – Bytzek 2013).

[4] Populist political discourse routinely works with the juxtaposition of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, namely the good and virtuous "pure people" versus the evil and corrupt political elites, with the former supposed to reclaim popular sovereignty in order to prevent the corrupt elites from continually betraying them (Mudde 2004; Albertazzi – McDonnell 2008; Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; van Kessel 2015; Bobba 2019).

voting).[5] It is, after all, the established political parties that are often the target of attacks by leaders of those political parties. Since elections are a zero-sum game, once these newcomers manage to increase the votes significantly (electoral volatility), or even surpass the inclusion threshold (threshold of representation), electoral and possibly parliamentary fragmentation is likely to increase because the more volatile the electorate, the more likely the emergence of new parties. Last but not least, in order to win votes (and offices) in multiparty systems, each competitor needs either to identify at least one niche in the programmatic space in which it will differentiate itself from its rivals or it must differ significantly from its competitors on at least one dimension. Hence, an increasing number of political parties implies a dispersion of parties with different policy positions. Furthermore, since new (populist) political entrepreneurs manage to mobilize existing groups and exploit the latent discontent of "outsiders" and disillusioned voters in general, the liberal consensus among established political parties is challenged, thereby fuelling a tendency towards protest voting.[6]

6.3 Research design and operationalization of indicators

As a result, we treat public trust in political parties, national legislatures, and governments, i.e., the percentage of survey respondents, who reported that they "tend to trust" scrutinised by Eurobarometer surveys, which constitutes the most comprehensive data source on political trust, as independent variables, while the dependent variables are the following indicators:

- voter turnout;
- electoral fragmentation that is quantified as the effective number of (elective) parties;
- total electoral volatility, i.e. the average change in party vote shares between successive elections;
- extra-system volatility, i.e. the average change in party vote shares between successive elections due to voters shifting to newly emerging political parties;
- and protest voting, i.e. the overall electoral support of anti-political-establishment, populist and/or extreme parties.

Electoral fragmentation

We expect that characteristics of the party system may influence party polarization levels. In this context, our initial assumption is that the number of parties may indicate party polarization, since an increasing number of parties implies a dispersion of political parties with different policy positions (e.g. Lijphart 1994; Dalton 2018, 2021). To measure the degree of electoral fragmentation, we thus employ Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) effective number of elective parties, which is a frequently utilized indicator of the party system size. The effective number of elective parties is a measure for determining how many parties, weighted by their electoral size, are in the party system in a given election. More technically, the effective number of elective parties (N_v) is calculated employing the following formulae: $N_v=1/\Sigma v_i^2$, where v_i is the proportion of votes of the i-th party. The data on the effective number of elective parties are primarily drawn from Gallagher's Election indices dataset (Gallagher 2023) and the authors' own calculations.

[5] This is not to say that populist party voters are exclusively protest voters; some voters are undoubtedly attracted to challenger parties because of their policy offerings.
[6] Voters who predominantly cast a vote for challenger parties to demonstrate their discontent with the current political establishment are referred to in the scholarly literature as "protest voters" (e.g. Bergh 2004; Rooduijn 2018; Voogd – Dassonneville 2020).

Total electoral volatility

We argue that declining political trust undermines the formation of stable party preferences and encourages voters to switch party preferences, thus stimulating electoral volatility. Electoral volatility is a simple and straightforward indicator of electoral change (the failure of established parties and the electoral success of new parties) and thus represents primarily the electoral aspects of party system stability. While a certain degree of electoral volatility is desirable for well-functioning representative democracies because it is a prerequisite for government alternation, excessive volatility is more of a negative phenomenon because it indicates party system instability. To put it simply, the more volatile the electorate, the stronger the rise of new parties.

We conceptualize (total) electoral volatility as the average change in party vote shares between successive elections. Hence, we utilize the classic Pedersen index (1979) to measure (total) electoral volatility, i.e. total electoral volatility (*TEV*) is measured according to the following formula: $TEV=\Sigma|v_{it}-v_{i(t+1)}|/2$, in which $v_{i,t}$ is the vote share for an *i*-th party at a given election (*t*) and $v_{i(t+1)}$ is the vote share of the same *i*-th party at the next election (*t+1*). The data on electoral volatility are primarily drawn from the database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond (Casal Bertoa 2023) and authors' own calculations.

Extra-system electoral volatility

In examining electoral volatility, however, we must be interested not only in its overall value but also in what electoral shifts are its sources. Since a bulk of research suggests a gradual ideological convergence between the main existing political parties (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2012; Krouwel 2012; Dalton 2019, 2021; Gethin et al. /eds./ 2021), voters dissatisfied with the political establishment may show their disapproval by casting a vote for new political parties. Hence, in terms of political consequences, it makes a significant difference whether voters switch their votes between existing political parties (within-system volatility), albeit to a greater extent, or towards newly emerging political parties (extra-system volatility). The former type of electoral volatility is considered a desirable component of representative democracy because it allows for governmental alternation, which, moreover, takes place between political parties that are already largely a relevant and established part of the democratic political process. The latter type of electoral volatility, which is caused by the exit of some established parties and the entrance of newly emerging ones, is much more indicative of party system instability (e.g. Powell – Tucker 2014; Chiaramonte – Emanuele 2017; Mainwaring et al. 2017; see also Birch 2003; Sikk 2005; Tavits 2008).

In our conceptualisation of extra-system electoral volatility, we follow the approach of Powell and Tucker (2014), who capture in this measure only vote shifts that are caused by the entrance of newly emerging political parties into the political system and the exit of existing political parties from the political system. More technically, extra-system volatility is calculated as follows: $ESEV=\Sigma|v_{ot}+v_{w(t+1)}|/2$, in which v_{ot} is the vote share for an old disappearing political party at a given election (*t*) and $v_{w(t+1)}$ is the vote share of the newly emerged political party contested only the next election (*t+1*). The data on extra-system electoral volatility are drawn from authors' own calculations.

However, determining when a party entered or exited the political system is rather complicated and requires establishing explicit rules for classifying different types of political parties (stable, newly emerging and old exiting). These rules are subject to further clarification. At the same time, it seems effective to employ a threshold of the vote share below which a political party is considered not to

be 'in the political system'. Given the way the Dutch electoral system works, we tentatively propose to set this threshold at 0.67% of the vote.[7]

Protest voting

But if we study electoral polarization, we do not just need data on electoral volatility. Indeed, as Voogd and Dassonneville (2020) have shown, the populist electorate can no longer be considered a group of volatile voters. Their findings indicate that populist voters display similar levels of stability to those of established political parties and that populist parties attract a core group of loyal voters who are just as loyal as established party voters. Since we argue that low or declining levels of political trust may serve as a breeding ground for challenger parties, be they anti-political-establishment, populist, and/or extreme political parties, thereby stimulating electoral polarization, we also focus on the overall electoral support for challenger parties. Indeed, such political parties usually enjoy disproportionate support among disillusioned citizens who do not tend to trust political parties or other political institutions.

Drawing upon Casal Bertoa's (2023) approach to measure polarization, protest voting is thus calculated as the overall electoral support of anti-political-establishment, populist, and/or extreme parties, i.e. political parties fulfilling all of the following criteria:

- it perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment;
- it asserts that a fundamental divide exists between the political establishment and the people (implying that all establishment parties, be they in government or in opposition, are essentially the same;
- and it challenges the status quo in terms of major policy issues and political system issues.

The data on protest voting are primarily drawn from the database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond (Casal Bertoa 2023), from the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al. 2019), and the authors' own calculations.

Furthermore, we propose to complement this research on political trust with an analysis of the degree of ideological and issue polarization across political parties. This research, based on an international expert survey, was conducted in 2019 as part of the Global Party Survey and further developed or replicated (see, e.g., Norris 2020; 2023). As Norris recalls, the Global Party Survey includes 21 core survey items designed to estimate key ideological values, issue positions, and populist rhetoric … using ten-point continuous scale. These were designed to identify each party´s current position and salience ideological values of Left-Right economic values and Liberal-Conservative Social Values" (Norris 2023).

Our intention is to replicate this expert survey within a group of EU Member States, both using the internal potential of the TRUEDEM project consortium and extending the network of respondents to all EU countries. We also want to supplement the questionnaire with topics related to questions focused on ways and opportunities to reduce polarization or strengthen trust. Specifically, we will focus on the issue of development trends associated with changes in the level of trust, as well as trustworthiness. In this respect, the TRUEDEM consortium has proposed the concept of a "trust gap", defined as the relative trust gap between the voters of AP parties and voters for other parties.

[7] Thus if a party was below this threshold in the previous election but above it in the current election, the party is considered 'new'. Similarly, if the party was above the threshold in the previous election but below it in the current election, it is considered to exit the party system.

The key question seems to us to be whether the key polarizing impulse is the fact that protest parties gain popularity on the basis of the poor performance of the incumbent parties and the loss of trust in these parties, or whether, on the contrary, the key polarizing impulse is the fact that the protest party or parties take over the government, whereupon they profile themselves as untrustworthy. The causes of such untrustworthiness can be various, including incompetence (due to inexperience), dishonesty (due to their rhetoric), and irresponsibility, manifested among others by economic populism. The answer to this question can undoubtedly also be one of the practical incentives to effectively reduce distrust in politics as well as polarization.

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