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CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF VALUES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

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Table of Contents

Summary	3
About the project	3
Annotation of the Deliverable (D4.1).....	3
1 Introduction	4
2 Study Design	7
2.1 A Social Class Index	7
2.2 Ideological Cleavages.....	10
2.3 Data and Case-selection	11
3 Findings	12
3.1 Overarching Picture.....	12
3.2 Exemplary Cases	16
3.2.1 West European Core (e.g., <i>Germany</i>)	16
3.2.2 Nordic Region (e.g., <i>Sweden</i>).....	20
3.2.3 Mediterranean South (e.g., <i>Spain</i>).....	22
3.2.4 Post-Communist East (e.g., <i>Poland</i>)	25
3.3 Evidence for Polarization?	29
3.3.1 Trust in Institutions	29
3.3.2 Market Cleavage	30
3.3.3 Diversity and Sexuality Cleavage	30
3.3.4 Sustainability Cleavage.....	31
3.3.5 Model Variations.....	32
4 Conclusion	33
ANNEX	35
References	36

Summary

About the project

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 behavior, 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.

Annotation of the Deliverable (D4.1)

Much of the democratic backsliding literature sees reactionary ideological shifts in large population segments as a key reason for the rise of Right-Wing Populism (RWP)—shifts that supposedly fuel citizens' distrust in democratic institutions and accordingly increase readiness to support RWP in its efforts to cut back on democracy's liberal principles. The assumptions underlying this "standard narrative" of RWP's rise are, however, more often stated than tested. Filling this void, we analyze data from the European Values Study/World Values Survey, tracing the development of institutional trust among the EU's populations over a twenty-five years' time span. Focusing on the four largest national populations from the EU's Western core, Nordic region, Mediterranean South, and post-communist East as exemplifications, we examine whether these national publics' middle class spectrum experienced polarizing ideological shifts on four key value dimensions: right-vs-left on economic issues, nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism on immigration issues, patriarchy-vs-emancipation on sexuality issues, economy-vs-environment on the sustainability issue. Specifically, we identify to what extent voter segments especially at the lower end of the middle class spectrum drifted ideologically away from the majority's emancipatory progression on immigration, sexuality and sustainability issues, thus increasing value polarization in ways that erode institutional trust and diminish support for liberal democracy, again especially in the lower middle class spectrum, with the consequence of increased readiness to support RWP in its efforts to weaken democracy's liberal constitutional elements. Contradicting this "democracy eroding" narrative, our preliminary results provide no consistent confirmation that polarizing ideological shifts among European electorates' middle-class segments account for growing institutional distrust or anti-liberal shifts in voters' democratic preferences. Moreover, RWP-supporters are social class-wise only weakly differentiated and do not show a particularly high concentration in the lower

middle class. Instead, the nature of their distinction is primarily socio-psychological, manifest in a deep-seated opposition against the non-RWP parties' liberal consent on immigration policy and the resulting institutional distrust for not having a voice among the parties of the pre-RWP era. These two distinctions –immigration opposition and its associated institutional distrust– reach into all middle-class segments and exist in spite of the fact that, overall, European electorates and especially their middle-class spectrum have actually become more (instead of less) tolerant of cultural diversity and immigration. We conclude that the problems accounting for RWP's success do not originate in the electorates and the supposedly reactionary public opinion shifts in parts of them. Instead, the problems reside in accrued representation deficits with respect to grown non-voter camps whose immigration skepticism found no credible voice in the party systems of the pre-RWP era.

1 Introduction

The still young literature on “democratic backsliding” and on the “deconsolidation of democracies” continues to grow at a rapid pace—driven by a general “democracy eroding” concern (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Mechkova et al., 2017; Mounk, 2018). Most of this literature assumes that the reasons for the recent electoral successes of right-wing populism (RWP) and the subsequent cutbacks on democracies' liberal qualities result from dramatic changes in public opinion (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Mounk, 2018). Specifically for North America and Western Europe's mature post-industrial democracies, scholars suspect an authoritarian reaction against the decade-long rise of progressive-liberal (i.e., emancipative) values among the increasingly educated middle class spectrum of Western publics (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Most scholars working in this field assume that this authoritarian reaction prevails among culturally marginalized (i.e., “left-behind”) voter segments at the lower end in the middle class spectrum: the so called “petty bourgeoisie” in middle income occupations with only vocational training (artisans, craftsmen, shopkeepers), typically characterized by a predisposition to Lipset's (1960) famous “lower class authoritarianism” (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Goodhart, 2017; Han & Han, 2023).

Against the backdrop of risen economic inequalities and insecurities, scholars presume that the alleged authoritarian reaction among “modernization losers” increases ideological group polarization over key dimensions of political conflict. Following widening ideological polarization, economically deprived and culturally marginalized population segments become increasingly alienated from the existing system and its representatives, visible in crumbling institutional trust. The anti-establishment rhetoric of RWP capitalizes on these sentiments and reactivates frustrated former non-voters, thus making RWP electorally stronger, more frequently seizing government power and, eventually, more capable to cut back on democracies' liberal qualities—which is widely discussed under the terms “democratic backsliding,” the “deconsolidation of democracy” or *How Democracies Die* (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Mechkova et al., 2017).

It is a defining feature of populist rhetoric to divide the population into the “real people” and the “corrupt elite” (Caramani & Manucci, 2019). Following 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a seemingly endless series of terrorist attacks in Western capitals (London, Madrid, Paris, Brussels and Berlin among others), the financial crisis in 2008 and the migration crisis in 2014 all contributed to cement a cultural division into “us” (the real people defined by nationality, religion, social class) and “them” (political, academic and international business elites) (Noury & Roland, 2020; Pappas & Kriesi, 2015). This separation is reflected in several dichotomies which label the two groups as “anywheres” and “somewheres” (Goodhart, 2017) or “cosmopolitans” and

"communitarians" (Koopmans & Zürn, 2019). This alleged separation of the population no longer develops along the previous fault-lines, which mostly followed an economic left-right separation (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Increasingly, cleavages unfold along "identity politics" and supposedly elitist projects that lose sight of the people's true interests and result in an alienation of customs and traditions.

A psychological state serving the populist anti-system rhetoric is known as "relative deprivation" (Runciman, 1966).¹ Relative deprivation results from a combination of group identity and social comparison. Because humans are a cooperative species whose collective achievements depend on teamwork, evolution has hardwired into individuals a psychological drive to develop and cultivate a "collective self" (we-feelings) to the groups in which we live. This is the basis of group identity. Given that populations are divided along the lines of people's spatial distance as well as their different gender, age, class, ethnicity, language and religious affiliation, group identities adopt a certain degree of divisiveness, which eases and fuels social comparison. Indeed, since human evolution proceeded largely via group competition, another natural human tendency is social comparison: Individuals compare the well-being and standing of their own group with that of others. Social comparison easily generates shared feelings of frustration, threat and anger when people see their own group at a decisive and--very importantly--unjust disadvantage relative to others. Then we have relative deprivation, which is a state of mind in which people see the other groups as culprits who deserve punishment, discrimination and disempowerment for their undue privilege. Therefore, the presence of relative deprivation always offers an opportunity for political actors to pursue scapegoating campaigns, so as to mobilize the anger of the deprived for their own purposes. RWP (as well as other forms of extremism, radicalism and fundamentalism) draw heavily on these psychological mechanisms (Korzeniowski, 2021; Cena et al., 2023).

Back to the *democracy eroding* narrative in the media and academia, this narrative consists of a sequence of temporally ordered assumptions about how public opinion dynamics in Western democracies cause RWP's electoral successes and the subsequent cutbacks on liberal principles, most notably minority rights, press freedom, judicial independence and separation of power.

We call this sequence of hypotheses the "standard *democracy eroding* narrative." Sequentially ordered, the assumptions can be phrased as follows (see also the schematic depiction in Figure 1 below):

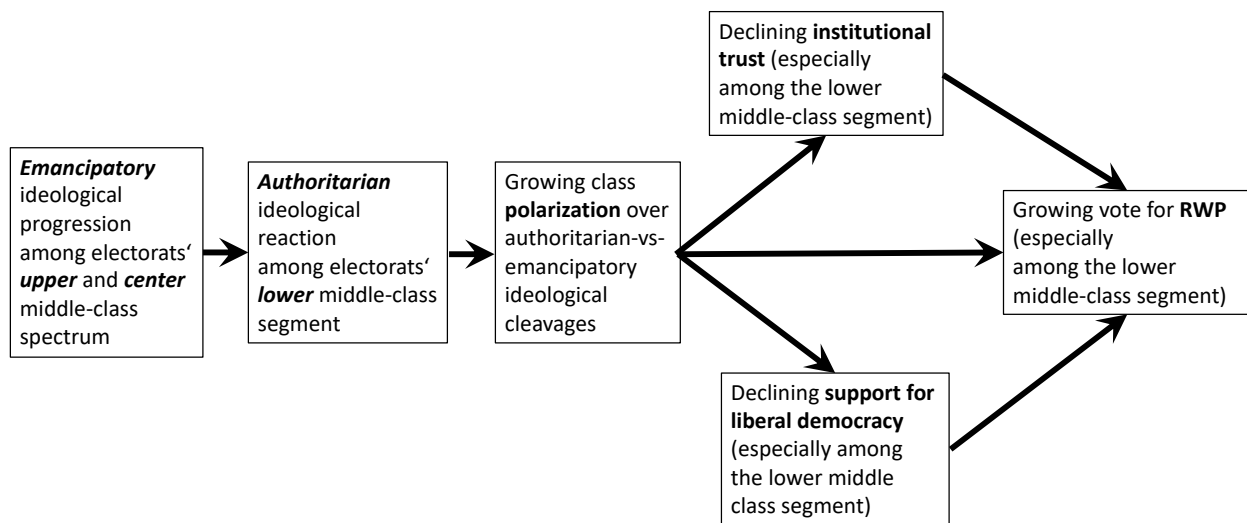
- (1) Over the past decades, Western publics as a whole experienced a slow but steady emancipatory shift in values away from conformity, followership and obedience and towards greater emphasis on individual self-determination and equality of opportunities. This emancipatory shift was strongest among the educated center and upper middle-class segments, alongside the expansion of education into the wider population. As a result, populations' overall emphasis on emancipative values rose on average, bringing more support for gender equality and sexual self-determination as well as openness to immigration, cultural diversity and environmental protection.
- (2) Given the academization of parties and the media, politicians and journalists alike are increasingly found at the highly educated polar end of their clienteles, leading them to

¹ "Relative deprivation" characterizes a state of mind that is nourished by the experience of a negative difference in treatment concerning a specific issue, resulting from comparing yourself with another person belonging to the same group. Unfulfilled expectations may lead to feelings of frustration, which consequently affects one's socio-political behaviors.

“out”-liberalize especially the electorates' less educated lower middle-class segments who feel increasingly “left behind” by immigration, sexuality and sustainability policies that they perceive as excessively liberal and too progressive.

- (3) Consequently, despite the overall emancipatory shift, group polarization over authoritarian-vs-emancipative values has increased, with the “left behinds” in the electorates' lower middle-class segments representing the authoritarian end of this polarization. Growing awareness about their marginalized cultural position (e.g., “strangers in their own land”) makes these mostly lower middle-class voters more adamant in their opposition against further emancipatory progression, thus triggering reactionary cultural responses, vividly described by Norris and Inglehart (2019) as “cultural backlash.”
- (4) Alienation among the authoritarian-minded “left behinds” feeds their increasing disenchantment with the system and its representatives, thus fomenting increasing distrust in established democratic institutions.
- (5) Because of this risen distrust, “left behinds” in the lower middle-class develop a distaste for democracy’s liberal principles and other civic virtues, as a consequence of which these voters’ readiness to vote anti-establishment RWP-parties into power grows.

Figure 1. The Causal Sequence of the **Democracy Eroding** Narrative



This report tests several central assumptions of the “standard *democracy eroding* narrative,” especially whether there actually is an anti-emancipatory reaction among deprived and left-behind population segments at the lower end of the middle class spectrum and whether this reaction caused a subsequent ideological polarization between reactionary and emancipatory middle class strata over key value dimensions, including the classic right-vs-left cleavage over distributional issues, the nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism cleavage over diversity and immigration issues, the patriarchy-vs-emancipation cleavage over gender and sexuality issues and the economy-vs-ecology cleavage over the sustainability issue.

The nature of this report is a mapping-and-tracking exercise: (a) *mapping* the ideological positions of socio-economically differentiated voter segments on different cleavage dimensions, while (b) *tracing* the trend in these various ideological positions over time in a comparison between European democracies from the EU's four main geo-historic regions. Overall, our *mapping-and-tracking* analysis represents a complex matrix, covering 9 socio-economically differentiated voter segments, times 5 ideological cleavages, times 2 distant time points, times 27 countries--amounting to a total of an astounding 2,430 (!) data points in the aggregate. This report condenses the gist of this mapping-and-tracking exploration.

The central assumption taken from the “*democracy eroding*” narrative is that socio-economically weaker groups in the lower middle-class segment respond to all ideological cleavages with a reactionary resistance against the mainstream’s emancipatory progression. As a result, ideological polarization over mature democracies’ main conflict dimensions increases, thus leaving the reactionary groups behind with increasing feelings of alienation, visible in growing institutional distrust and eroding support for democracy’s liberal principles, specifically among the lower middle-class segments (i.e., the “petty bourgeoisie”). Together, these polarizing ideological shifts are supposed to raise the vote share for RWP.

To examine this topic, we rely on representative cross-national public opinion data that have been repeatedly collected in consecutive survey waves at distant time points. This allows us to trace ideological shifts among different—socio-economically defined—population segments in European democracies over time. We cover those EU-members which have been surveyed at least twice and explicate their publics’ ideological shifts from the mid-to-late 1990s until recently. Because we focus on ideological shifts on key *value* dimensions, the European *Values* Study/World *Values* Survey (EVS/WVS) clearly provide the first choice of survey data at hand.

2 Study Design

2.1 A Social Class Index

To conduct our analyses, we need to make quite a number of operational decisions. To begin with, in the wake of magnified economic inequalities and insecurities (and against claims that “social class is dead”), demographic differences in socio-economic status have regained salience as a source of deeper social divisions that are likely to translate into growing ideological differences on key value dimensions (Piketty, 2017; Romero-Vidal & van Hauwaert, 2020).

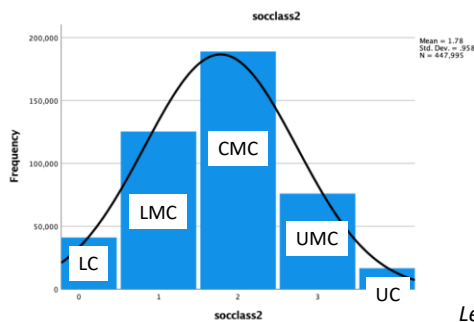
To map differences in socio-economic status on corresponding ideological differences, we first need to create an index of socio-economic status, ranging from lower status in socio-economically weaker positions to higher status in stronger positions. Since socio-economic status remains to be primarily defined by the combination of individuals’ income and education (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2019), we rely on respondents’ self-reported income and education, which are available on 10- and 9-point ordinal scales, respectively. However, because the fine-graded categories on both of these multi-point scales are not fully equivalent across countries’ differing income structures and education systems, we collapse these income and education scales into three-point scales each, classifying respondents on both variables as having low, middle or high incomes and low, middle or high education (coded 0 for “low,” 1 for “middle” and 2 for “high” on both categories). To determine the cut-off points for these categorizations, we inspect the frequency distributions of respondents’ income and education on the original multi-point scales. Here we see strongly bell-



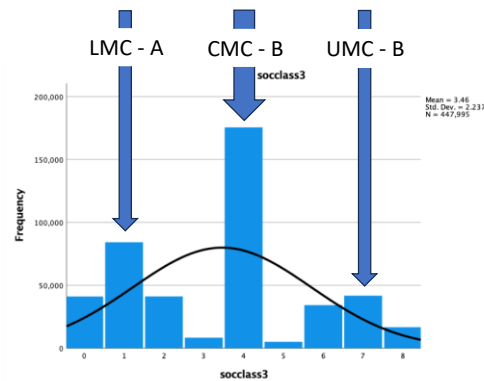
shaped and mean-clustered distributions that are single-peaked in the center on both income and education (based on the country- and time-pooled full dataset). Hence, we collapse both the income and education distribution into low-middle-high categories, using as cut-off points the scores separating the lower, center and upper third of respondents. Then we combine the 3-point ordinal scales of education and income to yield an index distinguishing in ascending order the lower class (LC), lower middle class (LMC), center middle class (CMC), upper middle class (UMC) and upper class (UC), as shown in the left-hand diagram of Figure 2.

Figure 2: Social Class Distribution in the Country/Time-Pooled EVS/WVS Individual-Level Data

5-Category Index (treating Income and Education equally)



9-Category Index (prioritizing Education over Income)



Legend:
 LC – Lower Class
 LMC – Lower Middle Class
 CMC – Center Middle Class
 UMC – Upper Middle Class
 UC – Upper Class

The cross-tabulation of income and education yields a 3 x 3 matrix with 9 categories. However, not all of these 9 categories are distinct on the score sheet, which collapses the 9 categories into only 5 distinct scores because respondents obtaining a middle range score of 1, 2 or 3 are not distinguishable in terms of whether their income or their education makes the score higher or lower. Table 1 below illustrates the issue. Accordingly, only scores 0 (low income, low education) and 5 (high income and high education) are unambiguous in this respect.

Table 1: A 3x3 Matrix collapsing into 5 main categories

EDU / INC	LOW (0)	MID (1)	HIGH (2)
LOW (0)	0	1	2
MID (1)	1	2	3
HIGH (2)	2	3	4

Therefore, we refine the original scheme in such manner that low-middle-high education works as the *major* differentiator, while low-middle-high income functions as the *minor* differentiator, operating within each of the three education categories. We do this under the assumption that education is the more potent driver than income in differentiating reactionary-vs-emancipatory positions on the cleavage domains under study here. This point is justified in light of the plenty of evidence showing that--except for the classic right-vs-left cleavage on distributional issues--education is the much stronger determinant than income when it comes to voters' ideological positioning on issues with a reactionary-vs-emancipatory connotation, as in questions on immigration, sexuality and sustainability (Welzel, 2013).

At any rate, our refined classification scheme now yields a 9-point index, ordered from 0 for the least to 8 for the most privileged socio-economic position. Table 2 displays this 9-point scheme, while the right-hand diagram in Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution over the respective categories. On a higher level of abstraction, this scheme is three-fold, ascending from an unambiguous lower class (category 0) over a broadly differentiated middle class (categories 1 to 7) to an unambiguous upper class (category 8). The middle class itself differentiates into a 2-partite lower segment (categories 2 and 3), a 3-partite center segment (categories 3 to 5) and another 2-partite upper segment (categories 6 and 7).

Table 2. A 9-Point Scheme of Socio-Economic Classes

CATEGORY	MEANING	LABEL	LETTER CODE
0	Edu low, Inc low	Lower Class	LC
1	Edu low, Inc middle	Lower Middle Class - A	LMC - A
2	Edu low, Inc high	Lower Middle Class - B	LMC - B
3	Edu middle, Inc low	Center Middle Class - A	CMC - A
4	Edu middle, Inc middle	Center Middle Class - B	CMC - B
5	Edu middle, Inc high	Center Middle Class - C	CMC - C
6	Edu high, Inc low	Upper Middle Class	UMC - A
7	Edu high, Inc middle	Upper Middle Class	UMC - B
8	Edu high, Inc high	Upper Class	UC

In terms of respondents' frequency distribution, the scheme closely represents the idea of middle class-centered societies. Indeed, as the right-hand diagram of Figure 2 shows, the distribution as a whole centers on the broad middle-class part, with the most centrist category—the “Center Middle Class - B” (category 4)—being the most frequent. Moreover, looking separately into the lower and upper half spheres of the distribution, they show two secondary frequency clusters, and both of them exactly in their respective hemisphere's centers: the “Lower Middle Class - A” (category 1) in the lower hemisphere and the “Upper Middle Class - B” (category 7) in the upper hemisphere of the distribution.

Given these distributional features, it seems obvious that the tracking of group polarization over ideological issues should focus on those groups in the different corners of society that are carrying the heaviest demographic weight in their respective sphere, rather than factoring in idiosyncratic

shifts among groups of too negligible size to count for a population’s overall cleavage mapping. Consequently, our mapping-and-tracking analysis focuses on just three groups: the “Center Middle Class - B (CMC)”, characterized by a mid-level income and education, as the biggest group overall, and the “Lower Middle Class - A (LMC)” with low education but mid-level income as the biggest group in the lower hemisphere, versus the “Upper Middle Class - B (UMC)” with high education and mid-level income as the largest one in the upper hemisphere. To estimate class polarization over ideological issues, we focus on the positional distance (and its change over time) of the two most different socio-economic groups in this scheme: the lower and upper middle class. Table 2 of the annex documents the level and development of these most distant--and yet still sizeable--socio-economic segments per country and ideological cleavage. Besides, it should be noted that (given the large N-size of our samples) all ideological group differences discussed in the findings section are statistically significant. Therefore, we refrain from the redundancy to explicitly document significance levels in our subsequent empirical material.

2.2 Ideological Cleavages

Since our point of departure is the assumption of growing institutional distrust, we always map group-specific ideological shifts onto the trust cleavage, which separates institutional alienation at the left end of each horizontal axis from institutional confidence at the right end.² Considering which other ideological dimensions constitute a potential domain of class-based polarization, the political sociology, electoral behavior and party politics literatures identify four major cleavage lines, typical of mature post-industrial democracies (Lipset & Rokkan, 1966; Dalton, 1996; Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2019). Accordingly, we plot the ideological shifts of our three major class segments on the trust cleavage against their shifts on each of the other four cleavage domains. These include:

- (1) the *market* cleavage over the *deregulation* versus *regulation* of the economy³,
- (2a) the *migration* cleavage over the *exclusion* versus *inclusion* of immigrants⁴,
- (2b) the *diversity* cleavage over the *intolerance* versus *tolerance* of ethno-linguistic pluralism⁵,
- (3) the *sexuality* cleavage over the *restriction* versus *widening* of reproductive freedoms⁶,
- (4) the *sustainability* cleavage over *job creation* versus *environmental protection* as policy priorities.⁷

² We summarize responses to three questions asking for interviewees’ confidence in the national parliament, government and political parties on 4-point Likert scales each (1 “a lot of confidence,” 2 “some confidence,” 3 “little confidence,” 4 “no confidence at all”) and rescale them to a 0-1 range.

³ We summarize three questions asking respondents for their degree of support for income inequality reduction, public ownership of industries and government responsibility for individuals’ material misery.

⁴ We rely on responses to a question asking for respondents’ attitude towards their country’s migration policy from 1 (“let anybody come in”) to 4 (“strict ban on in-migration”).

⁵ We summarize responses to two questions asking whether respondents would or would not accept “people of a different race” and “immigrants” as neighbors.

⁶ We summarize three questions asking on a 1-to-10 scale each to what degree respondents find “homosexuality,” “abortion” and “divorce” acceptable.

⁷ We rely on a question asking respondents whether—in case of a goal conflict—environmental protection should always come first (code 1) or whether creating jobs should always have priority (code 2) or it depends (code 3).

Examining these key ideological cleavages, we move beyond a simple one-dimensional analysis and, instead, trace whether class-specific changes in institutional trust go along with growing polarization in the identified cleavage domains. If we find a covariation of cleavage- and trust-polarization, we can (in a next step) dig deeper and identify the driving forces behind polarization in ideological cleavages and institutional trust.

Of these cleavages, the migration cleavage (2a) and the diversity cleavage (2b) are intimately related as alternative manifestations of the same over-arching conflict dimension: preference for a closed-vs-open society, or nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism. We consider the items that the EVS/WVS have at hand to operationalize the nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism dimension in its migration domain (2a) better targeted than those available for the diversity domain (2b). Yet, to allow for comparison, we rely on (2b) for countries and time points for which (2a) is not available because of missing data.

2.3 Data and Case-selection

We apply our analytical scheme to all EU-countries which participated in at least two survey waves. To avoid mixing the long-term trend with futile momentary fluctuations, we focus on changes over a considerably long-time span, that is, from the mid-1990s (way before any of the recent--financial, migration, pandemic, war--crises) till now (EVS/WVS wave 7). Still, for the purpose of a more complete documentation, we occasionally refer to less distant time spans. Since displaying the complete material largely exceeds the space limits of this report, most of the documentation is outsourced into [Supplementary Online Materials \(SOM\) available online](#).

Also because of space limitations, we have to be selective in choosing a couple of exemplary countries. To do so, we start from the European Union (EU)'s differentiation into four distinct geo-historical regions: the Western European core (which started the integration process in the 1970s), the Mediterranean South (which joined the EU in the 1980s), the Nordic region (part of which joined in 1995) and the post-communist East (which followed last). Naturally, we select from each of these regions the country with the biggest population. These are Germany for the Western European core, Sweden for the Nordic region, Italy (also a founding member) for the Mediterranean South and Poland for the Post-communist East. However, data for Italy are too patchy for our mapping-and-tracking analysis, for which reason we chose Spain (which joined 1986) as the country representing the Mediterranean South.

3 Findings

3.1 Overarching Picture

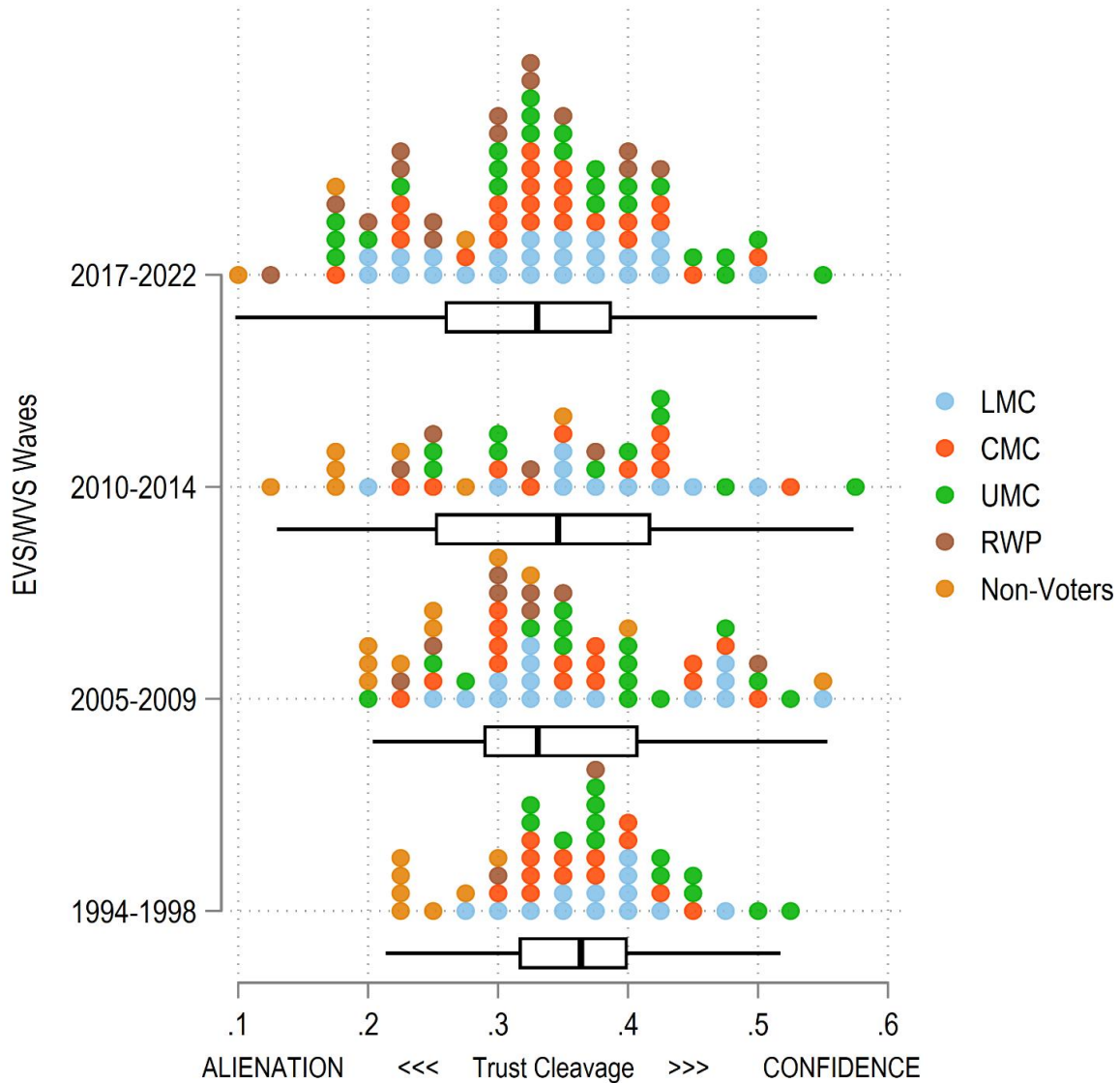
Before providing detailed evidence for the four exemplary countries, this section provides a more general perspective of the development of institutional trust in the EU. As pointed out, we differentiate the electorates' broad middle-class spectrum into its lower, center and upper layers, mostly based on education while holding income constant in the middle category (Erikson, Goldthorpe & Portocarero, 1979). In addition, we map the ideological positions of RWP-voters (and non-voters).⁸ Due to the different data availability, the graphics cannot rely on a balanced dataset, especially since many countries have only been surveyed once. Nevertheless, the fully available picture provides a reasonable overview of whether average levels of institutional trust within the EU are shifting and--if yes--in what direction and to what extent in which middle-class segment.

Figure 3 shows average levels of institutional trust across the EVS/WVS waves with the largest country coverage and separates the distribution into the three social-class categories plus RWP-voters and non-voters. The inclusion of non-voters helps to complete the overall picture, as some RWP-parties have not been coded in the earlier waves but oftentimes catered to the demands of the previous non-voters. Accordingly, each dot in the distribution represents a country-specific score of institutional trust for the respective colored class. Since the coverage of countries and larger regions changes from wave to wave, the results are not directly comparable, but nevertheless help to see whether there are general EU-wide trends.

So, what is the takeaway from this mapping-and-tracing exercise? Simply put, the available evidence does *not* (!) exhibit a universal decline in institutional trust, in spite of repeatedly strong assertions to the exact contrary. That is, across periods and countries, institutional trust remains relatively stable with the middle 50% of the observations largely overlapping (box with bar indicates middle 50% of the distribution and median). Across the EU, we find no clear separation of trust levels by lower, center or upper middle-class segments. Only RWP-voters and non-voters stick out by a visibly lower-end position on our institutional trust scale, far away from the rest of the electorate. Figure 4, which divides the EU electorates into their four geo-historic regions confirms the former conclusion: Socio-economic status does not strongly differentiate the European electorates in terms of institutional trust. This insight in turn has a clear implication: The repeatedly asserted thinning out of the middle class and the relatedly alleged shift from the upper and center into the lower segments of the middle class cannot explain declining institutional trust, which does not seem to exist anyway--at least not as a generic phenomenon.

⁸ To identify these voters we rely on the variable which asks respondents for their hypothetical vote choice.

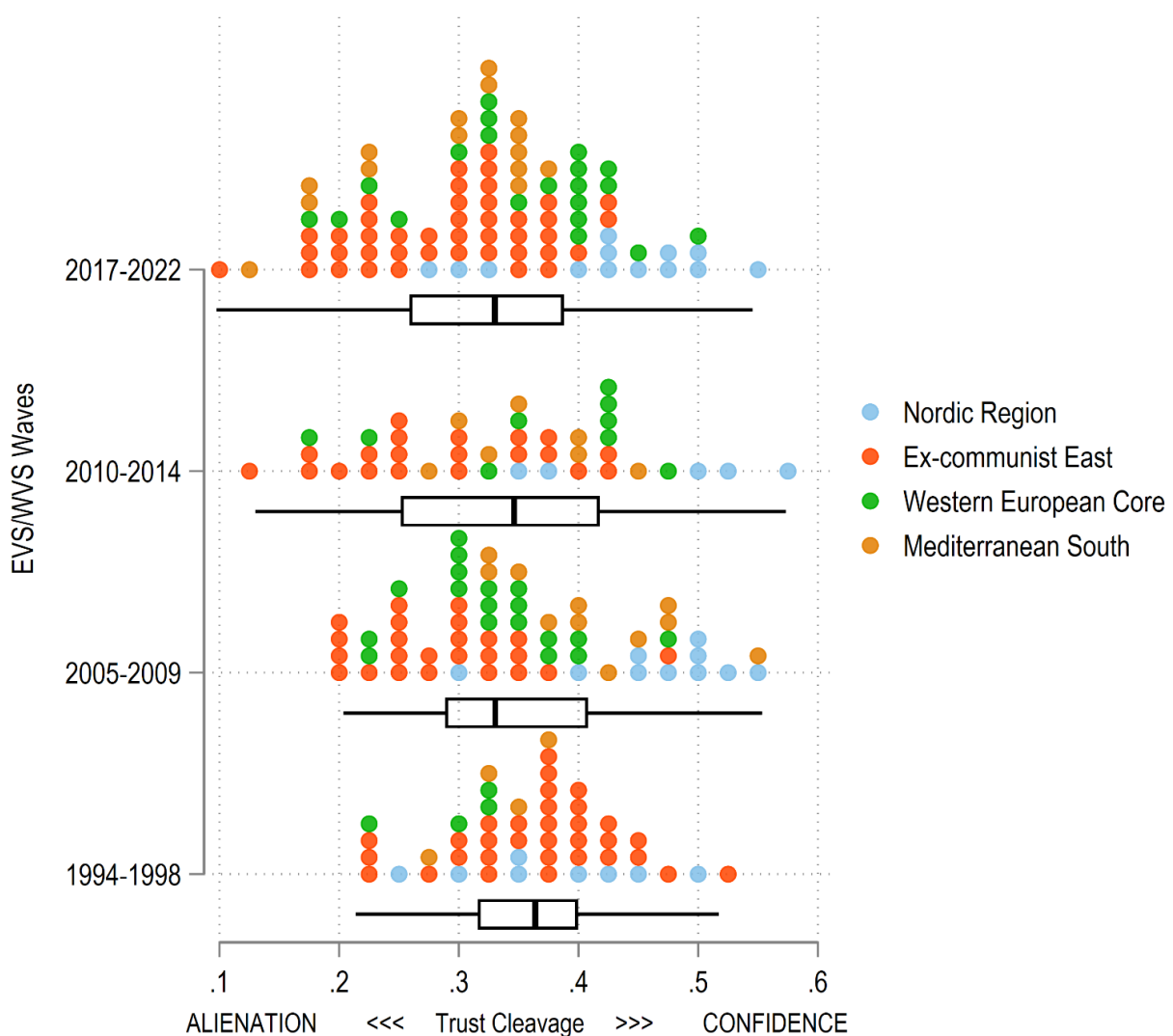
Figure 3: Average levels of institutional trust across EU-countries separated by EVS/WVS waves and social class.



Notes: each observation stands for the average value of one of the three social classes in a given country. Meaning that one country is resembled by at least three observations (LMC, CMC, UMC + potential RWP) in this figure. This helps to create a more nuanced picture.

In addition to the social classes, there may well be a regional pattern of trust in parliament, parties and governments. However, Figure 4 shows that even those waves that oversample one EU-region in relation to the others, show a consistent median value for trust between 0.3 and 0.4 on our 0-to-1 scale. For example, 62% of the observations in wave three (1994-1998) are post-communist countries which were a prime target for cross-national surveys after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and not yet EU-member states. The Nordic countries dominate the upper scale-end, while the post-communist countries dominate the lower end of the scale.

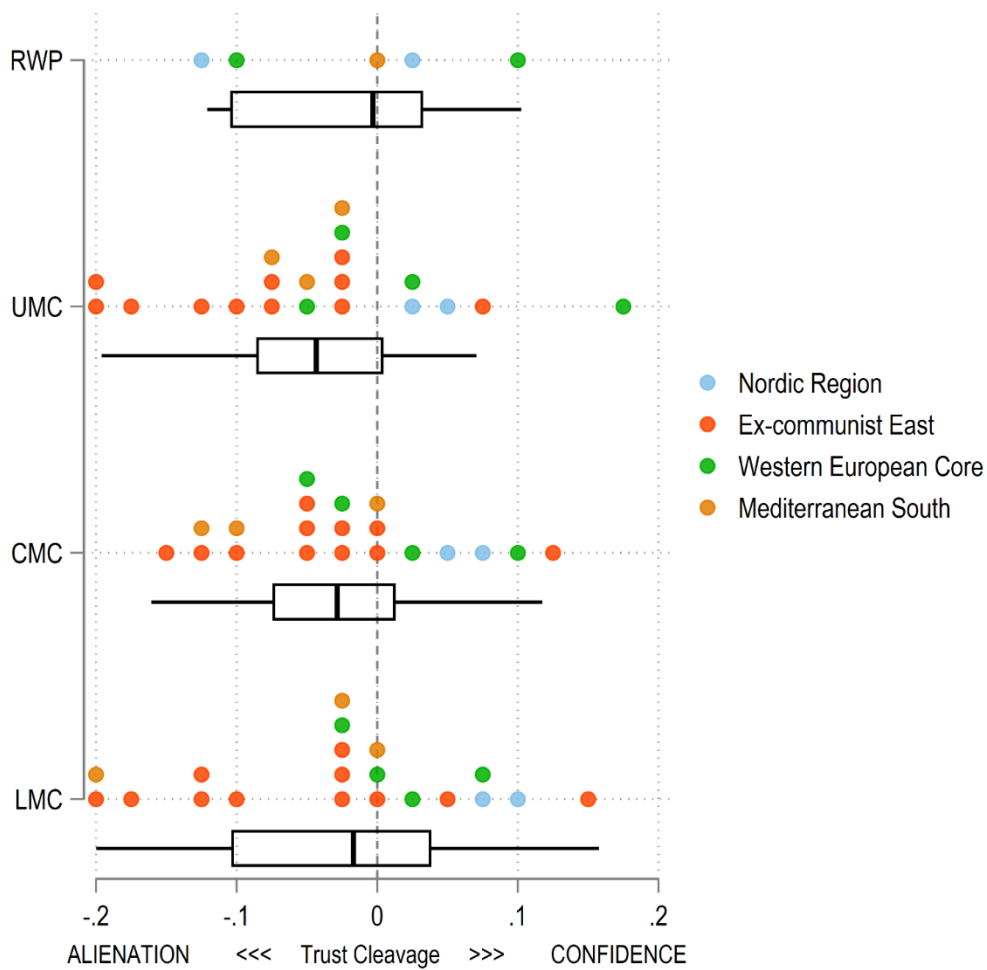
Figure 4: Average levels of institutional trust across EU-countries separated by EVS/WVS waves and EU-regions.



Notes: each observation stands for the average value of one of the three social classes in a given country. Meaning that one country is resembled by at least three observations (LMC, CMC, UMC + potential RWP) in this figure. This helps to create a more nuanced picture.

Since Figures 3 and 4 do not depict *within*-country change but display the EU-electorates' average level of institutional trust, Figure 5 exhibits the over-time change for those countries surveyed twice. The diagram always shows the two most distant measurements for each country, meaning that for some countries the shift captures the change between the mid 1990s and the early 2020s, while for other countries it documents the change between the late 1990s/early 2000s and the early 2020s. To provide further detail, the separate rows refer to the different social classes (plus RWP) and the color-coding indicates which EU-region the datapoint refers to.

Figure 5: Average changes of institutional trust across EU-countries separated by social class and EU-region.



Interestingly, when we look at *within*-country change, the picture changes somewhat. We find a slightly negative shift, driven by the Post-communist East and Mediterranean South with a median decline in institutional trust of around 0.05 scale points. Explanations for this observation may be found in the literature on the 2008-2010 economic crisis, which placed a very heavy austerity-burden on most countries of the Mediterranean South and frustration with national and EU institutions (Biten et al., 2023; Caïs et al., 2021; Drakos et al., 2019; Torcal, 2014). Additionally, some authors show that post-communist countries carried a heavy corruption burden, which grew with the privatization of the economy in the early post-transition period (Sandholtz & Taagepera,

2005). In these countries, cultural liberalization and individualism lead to more reports of corruption and increase the perceived level of corruption, leading to growing distrust (Amini et al., 2022).

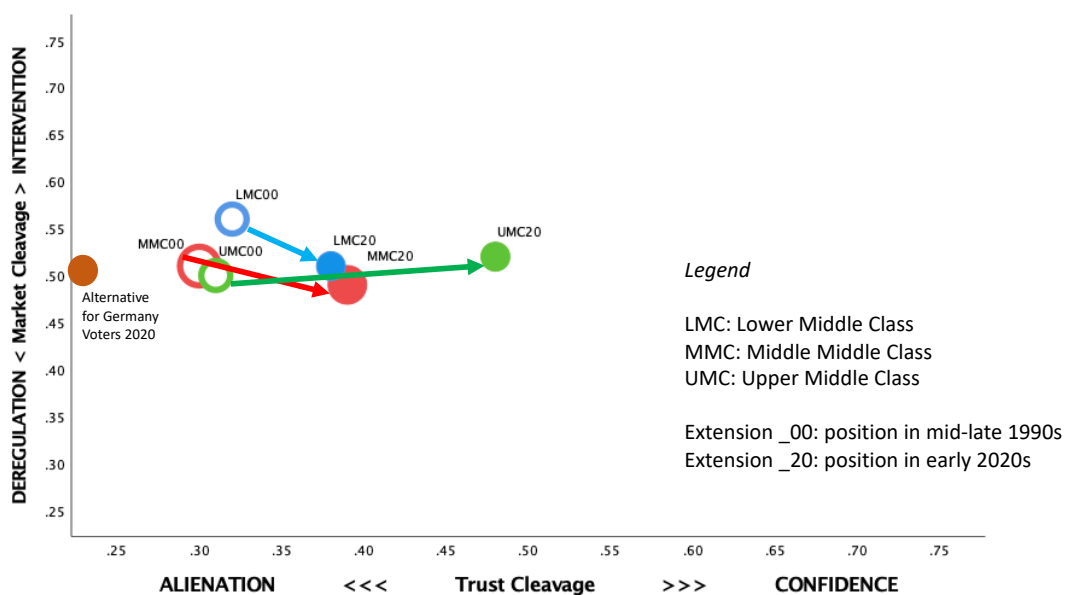
In contrast to this picture, however, growing institutional trust across all social classes is visible in the two Nordic countries included here (Finland and Sweden). The Western European core, for its part, shows no clear trend, neither downwards nor upwards in matters of institutional trust. Overall, then, the idea of a generic trust decline is as off-base as it can be, despite its repeated reference.

3.2 Exemplary Cases

3.2.1 West European Core (e.g., Germany)

Zooming into exemplary countries, our consideration starts with Germany as an illustration of the Western European core. Figure 6.1 plots the ideological shifts of Germany’s socio-economic segments on the alienation-vs-confidence cleavage in matters of institutional trust (horizontal axis), against the deregulation-vs-intervention cleavage in matters of economic governance (vertical axis). Interestingly—and surprisingly in light of what most of the literature suggests—the different socio-economic segments of the German public each have moved towards more, not less, institutional trust over the past twenty-five years, namely from an average of about .30 to .40 score points on a total 0-to-1 scale range, which means a significant increase in institutional confidence and less alienation overall. At the same time, however, the upper middle class has shifted so much farther into this direction that—compared to the situation twenty-five years ago—we now see a slightly bigger trust gap in the population that was not visible before. Insofar, the trust cleavage does show modest evidence for grown polarization. The position of RWP-voters (i.e., AfD-supporters), who stick out by a pronounced alienation from the representative institutions at a trust level of only .20 score points, further underlines the conclusion of grown polarization over institutional trust.

Figure 6.1: Institutional Trust and the Market Cleavage in Germany



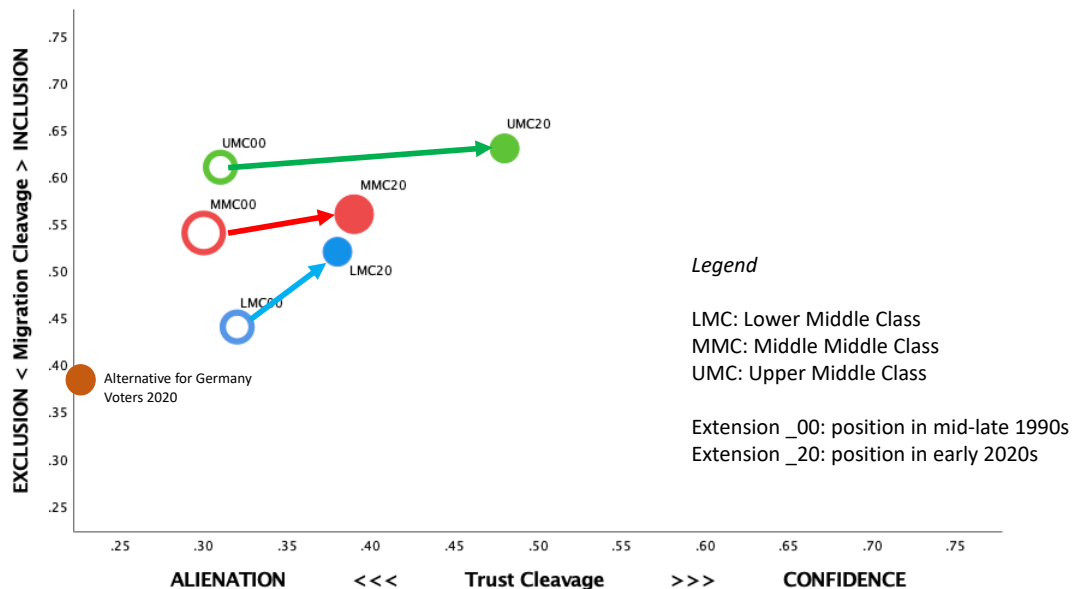
Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

Interestingly, against expectations that grown economic divisions over bad-vs-well paid jobs and precarious-vs-secure occupations would have increased ideological polarization over distributional issues, no evidence for such polarization exists on the classic right-vs-left dimension. At any rate, right-vs-left polarization over distributional issues is less class-dividing than one would guess: The different socio-economic segments of the German public differ from each other within a rather narrow range on classical (economic) right-vs-left questions: that is, between .50 and .57 on a scale range from 0-to-1, with the margin having even become more narrow over the past twenty-five years.

This pattern repeats itself in the other geo-historic regions of the EU, as we will see below. In a nutshell, market-vs-state issues are not the main dividing line of the day and show no sign of obtaining this status any time soon again. This conclusion is further supported by the observation that RWP-supporters do usually not significantly differ from the rest of the population in terms of their right-vs-left standing in economic policy terms. Cantoni et al. (2019) also find that the growing support for the AfD does not follow changes in voter attitudes but develops along a historical geographic pattern.

Most surprisingly, in the face of the allegedly risen salience of migration-induced societal tensions, Figure 6.2 exhibits neither an increase of exclusionary orientations on the migration cleavage, nor increased polarization over this issue. Instead, the German public as a whole became more inclusionary in its orientation towards migration. But here RWP (AfD)-supporters do stick out from by a clearly exclusionist orientation on the migration cleavage.

Figure 6.2: Institutional Trust and the Migration Cleavage in Germany

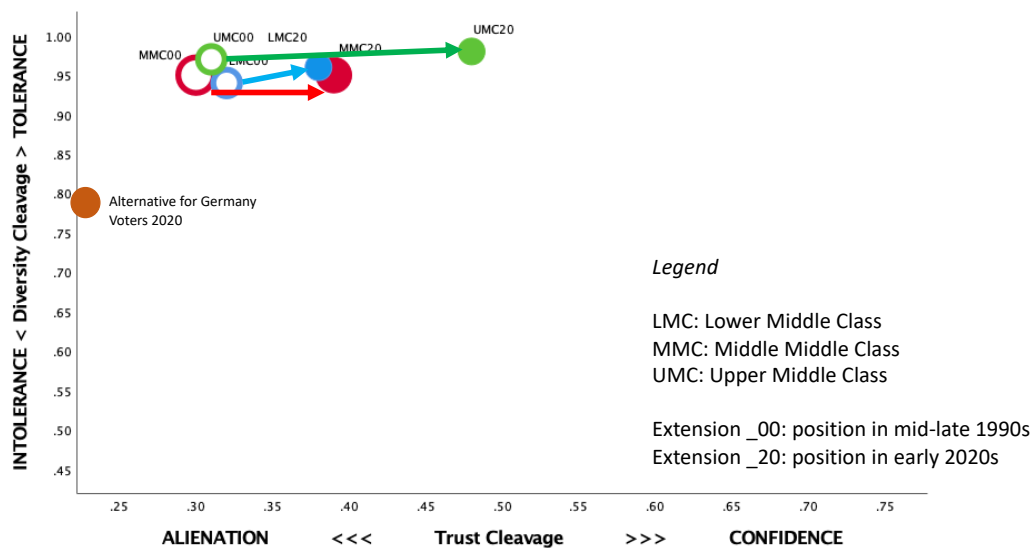


Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

Next to the migration cleavage, the diversity cleavage provides another take on the nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism issue (Figure 6.3). Apparently, the differences between the German public's middle-class segments are negligible and did not grow over time. Like twenty-five years before, all middle class segments of the German public report a high tolerance of ethno-linguistic diversity

in their society (at .95 and higher on a 0-to-1 total scale range), whereas RWP (AfD)-supporters stick out even more on this issue than on the migration cleavage, namely by a clearly less tolerant position as concerns ethno-linguistic diversity (at .80 score points). It is noteworthy here that the German public is less welcoming of future immigration (at a support level of .55 score points) than of the already existing ethno-linguistic diversity (at a support level of .95 score points). Once more, we will see that this finding applies to all four of the EU's four geo-historical regions under inspection here.

Figure 6.3: Institutional Trust and the Diversity Cleavage in Germany



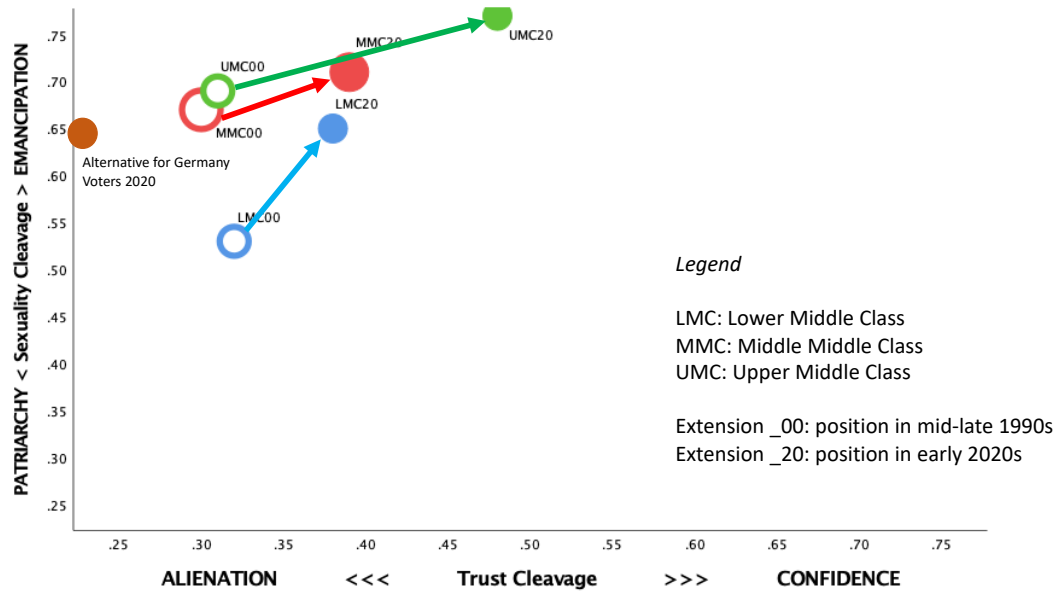
Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

On the sexuality cleavage (Figure 6.4), all middle-class segments of the German public shifted massively towards a more emancipatory position, that is, towards greater support for divorce, abortion and homosexuality as tolerable practices. And even though the standard polarization narrative suggests that the lower middle class would withstand the emancipatory trend or even move into the opposite direction, the contrary holds true: It is exactly the lower middle-class moving the farthest towards emancipatory sex norms, thus causing a decrease instead of increase in class polarization over sexuality matters. Expectedly, RWP (AfD)-supporters score on the conservative end of the sexuality cleavage. But their position is fully within the range of difference among the German public's middle-class spectrum, in contrast to what we have seen with respect to the trust and migration/diversity cleavages, on each of which RWP (AfD)-supporters clearly diverge from the mainstream of the German public.

A similar picture is present with respect to the sustainability cleavage (Figure 6.5). All middle-class segments moved towards a more progressive, post-materialist position by placing greater emphasis on environmental protection relative to job creation. Again, the lower middle-class as the most conservative group on this issue made the biggest post-materialistic move, thus closing the gap to the upper middle-class. Hence, there is no increased class polarization over the sustainability cleavage either. As with the sexuality cleavage, RWP (AfD)-supporters score at the conservative

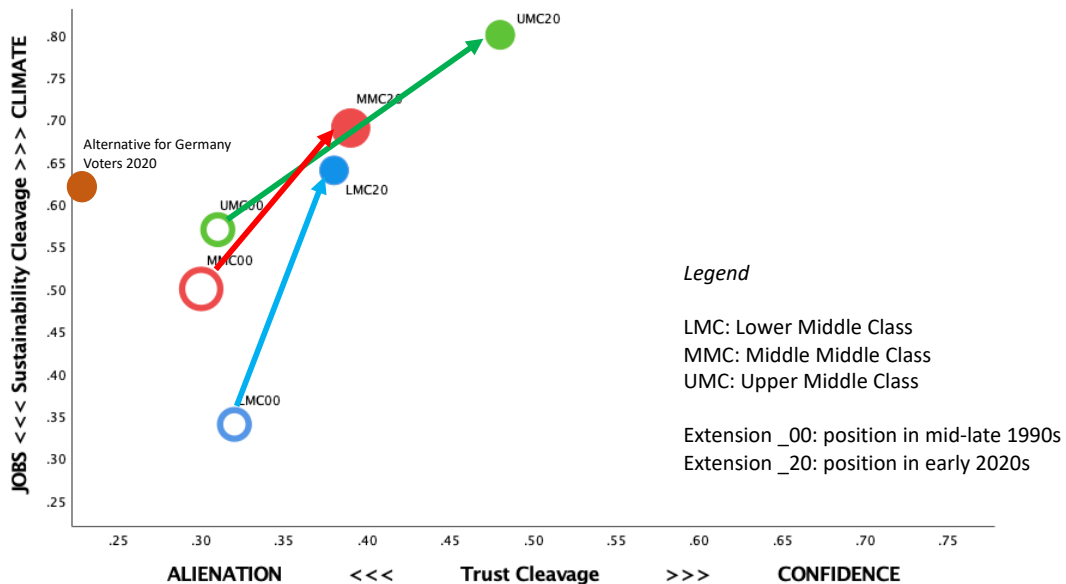
materialistic end of the sustainability cleavage, yet without being far outside the range of differences that characterizes the German public's middle-class spectrum.

Figure 6.4: Institutional Trust and the Sexuality Cleavage in Germany



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

Figure 6.5: Institutional Trust and the Sustainability Cleavage in Germany



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

In summary, the German case offers no evidence showing increased class polarization over mature democracies' four main ideological cleavages, except for the trust cleavage on which the upper middle class shifted so far towards greater institutional confidence that class differences over

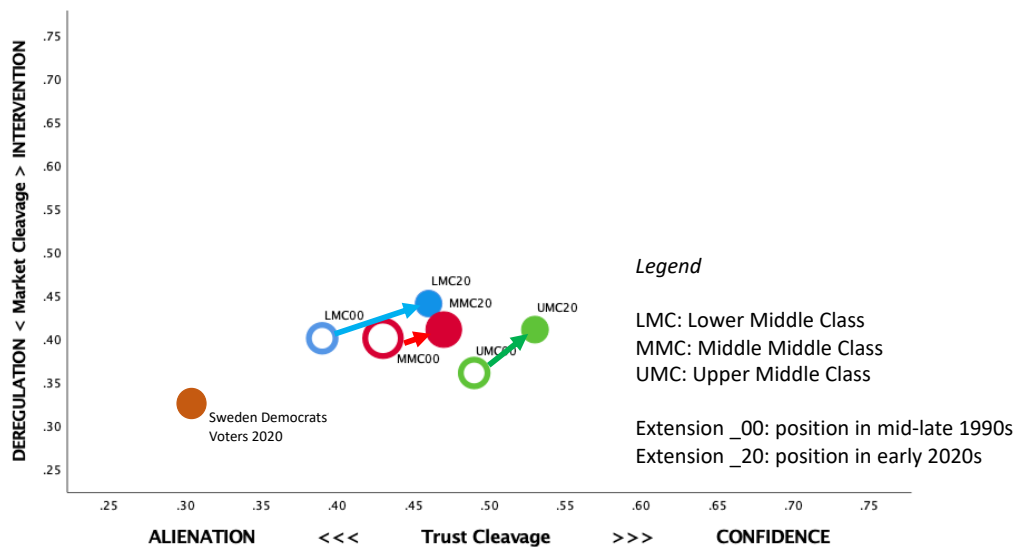
alienation-vs-confidence are now bigger, albeit on a higher base level of confidence (not alienation). RWP (AfD)-supporters diverge from the German public's middle-class differences over ideological cleavages by out-of-range positions on the trust cleavage (alienated) and the migration/diversity cleavage (rejection, intolerance), yet not on the market, sexuality and sustainability cleavages.

If this positioning of RWP-supporters is telling us something, then it suggests that the established pre-RWP party systems overwhelmed particular electoral segments with a too liberal immigration policy, while denying these voters a voice, which accordingly lead to an institutional alienation that RWP-parties are now effectively articulating.

3.2.2 Nordic Region (e.g., Sweden)

Sweden (Figures 7.1 to 7.4) offers even less evidence for grown class-based polarization over mature democracies' main ideological cleavages. As in Germany, all middle-class segments of the Swedish public moved towards more, instead of less, trust in institutions as well as towards more progressive positions on the diversity cleavage (i.e., more tolerance), the sexuality cleavage (i.e., more emancipation) and the sustainability cleavage (i.e., more environmental protection). But these progressive ideological shifts did by no means increase ideological differences between lower and upper middle-class segments.

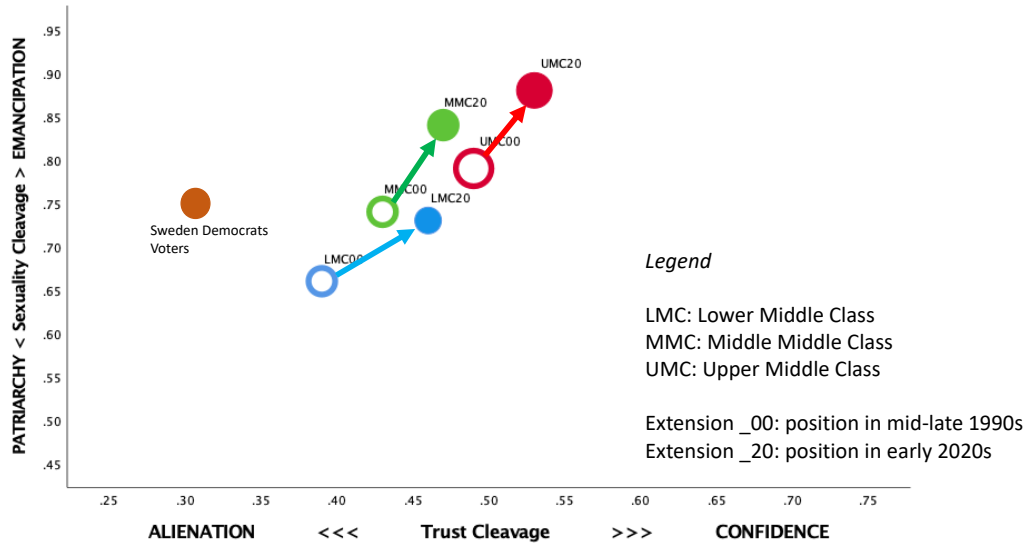
Figure 7.1: Institutional Trust and the Market Cleavage in Sweden



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

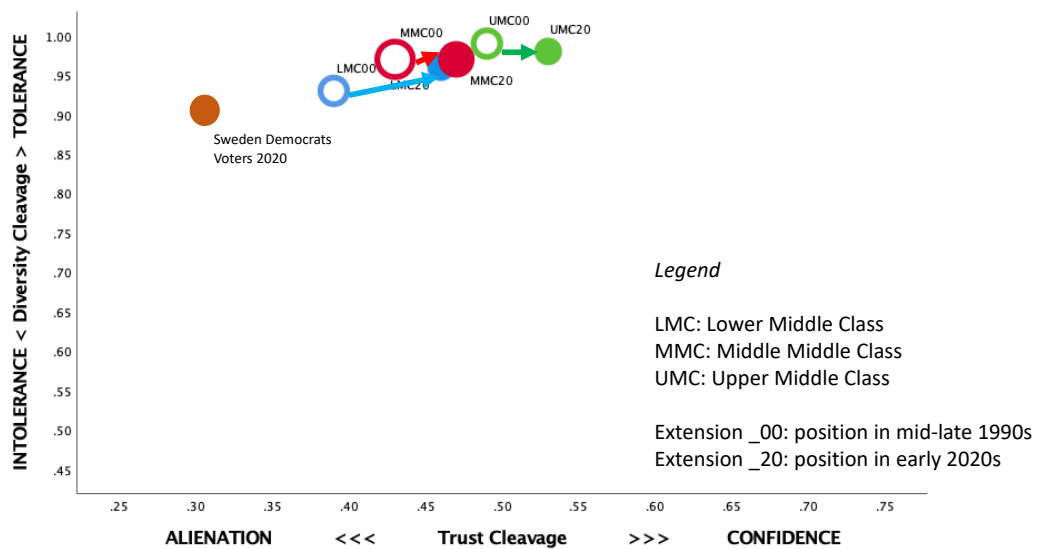


Figure 7.2: Institutional Trust and the Diversity Cleavage in Sweden



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

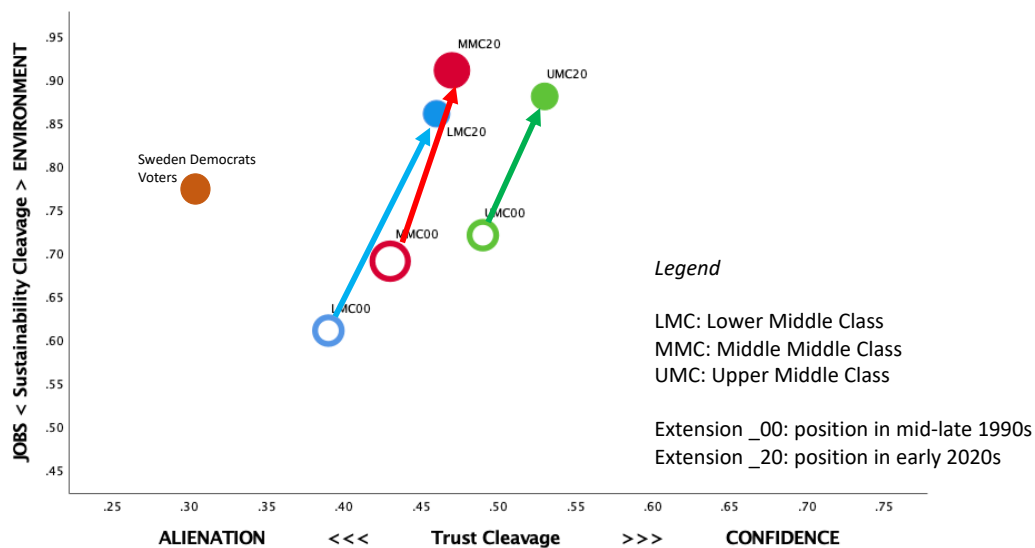
Figure 7.3: Institutional Trust and the Sexuality Cleavage in Sweden



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

Supporters of RWP (i.e., Sweden Democrats) hold more conservative positions on all of these cleavages, with out-of-range positions especially on the trust cleavage (alienation) and somewhat less pronounced on the diversity cleavage (intolerance) and sustainability cleavage (less environmental protection). Yet, compared to German RWP-supporters, those in Sweden are positioned less out-of-range from the usual ideological differences within the middle-class spectrum. Interestingly, and in contrast to German RWP-supporters, those in Sweden hold a clearly more rightist position on both the market and sustainability cleavage, thus opposing the pro-welfare and pro-environment positions that are otherwise such a signature feature of the Swedish population’s ideological stance.

Figure 7.4: Institutional Trust and the Sustainability Cleavage in Sweden



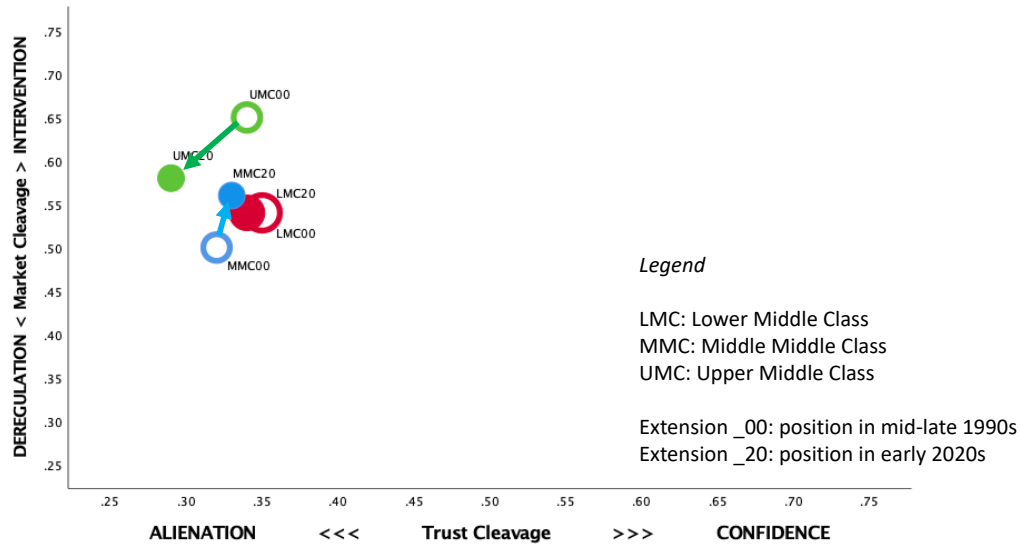
Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

3.2.3 Mediterranean South (e.g., Spain)

Considering Spain (Figures 8.1 to 8.4), institutional trust in Europe’s Mediterranean South is generally lower (at about .30 score points) than in the Western European core (e.g., Germany at .40 score points) and the Nordic region (e.g., Sweden at .50 score points). In contrast to Germany and Sweden, institutional trust in Spain is not only lower but has further dropped, especially among the upper middle-class, thus making the alienation-vs-confidence gap between middle class segments somewhat bigger than it used to be (Figure 8.1). While this drop is rather small in magnitude, the decline of the UMC’s institutional trust (from .36 to .28 scale points) warrants further analysis.



Figure 8.1: Institutional Trust and the Market Cleavage in Spain



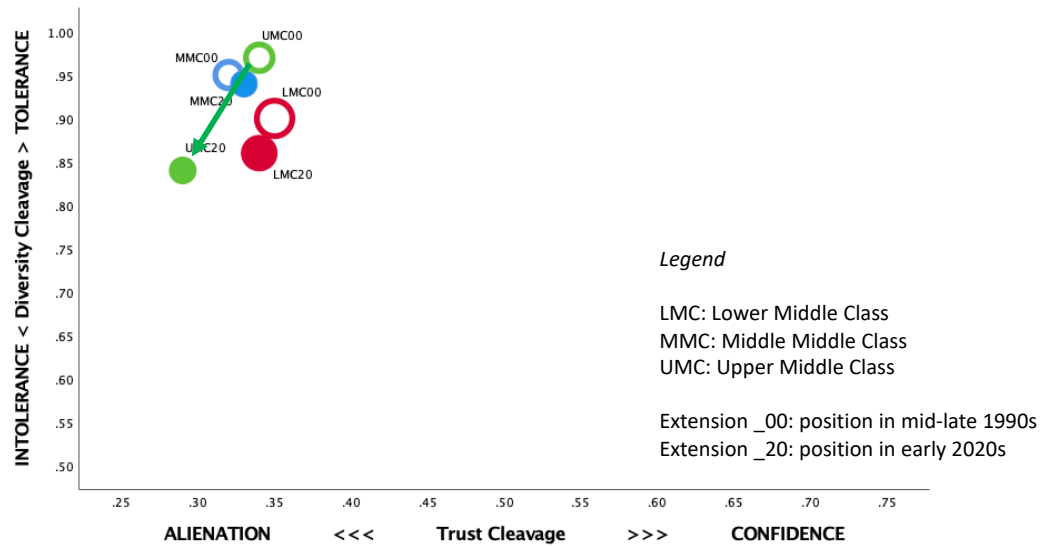
Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

As in the EU's other geo-historical regions, class polarization on the market cleavage in Spain is modest and has not increased over time, albeit on a more leftist (i.e., pro-interventionist) base level (centering on roughly .55 scale points) compared to Germany (.45) and Sweden (.40).

Polarization over the diversity cleavage has also increased to some extent, mostly by a reactionary shift of the upper middle class towards a more intolerant position (Figure 8.2). On the sexuality cleavage (Figure 8.3), all middle-class segments shifted pronouncedly towards a more emancipative position. And they did so to about the same extent, which means no increase of class polarization over sexuality. On the sustainability cleavage, class polarization has somewhat grown, mostly by a progressive, post-materialistic move of the upper middle-class towards an environmentally more friendly position (Figure 8.4). Overall, evidence in favor of a dramatic growth of class polarization over mature democracies' main ideological conflicts is modest at best, except for the trust cleavage.

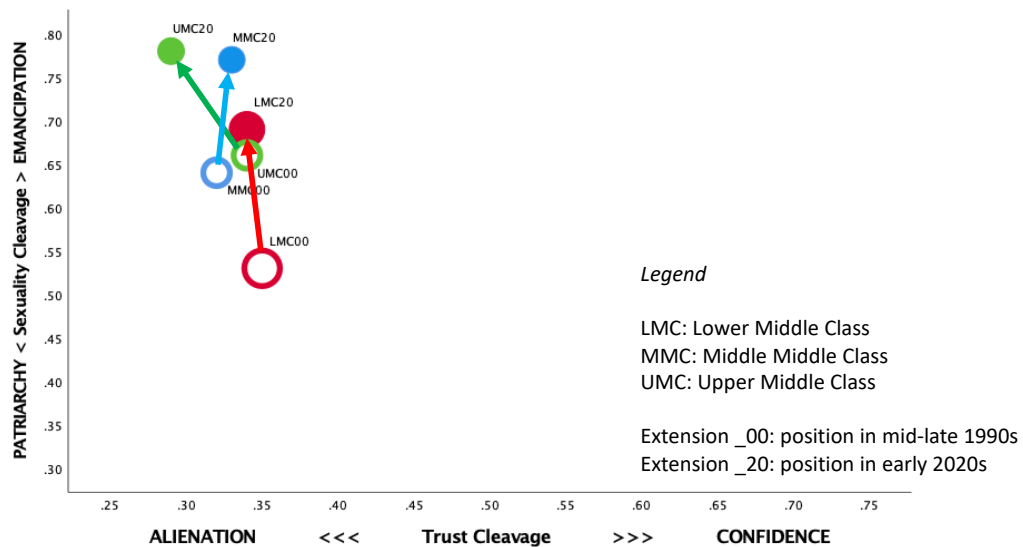


Figure 8.2: Institutional Trust and the Diversity Cleavage in Spain



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

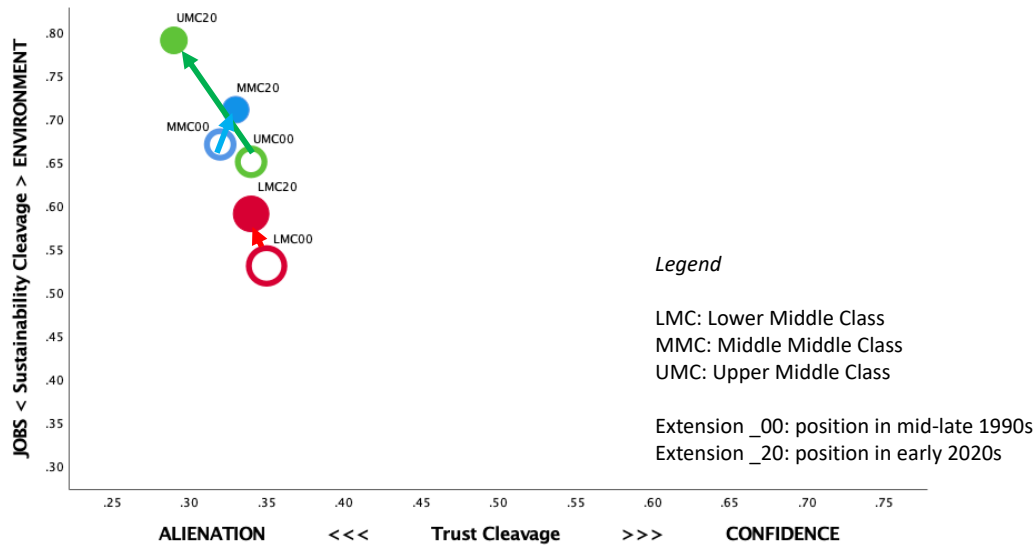
Figure 8.3: Institutional Trust and the Sexuality Cleavage in Spain



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

Unfortunately, we cannot plot the ideological positions of RWP in Spain because support for Spain’s VOX party has not been coded in previous Spanish EVS/WVS surveys. We would suspect, however, that the electoral successes of VOX in Spain also reflects deep-seated fears from “too liberal” migration policies that found no voice in the pre-RWP era and caused corresponding alienation from the established parties and institutions that RWP-parties, like VOX, now articulate.

Figure 8.4: Institutional Trust and the Sustainability Cleavage in Spain



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

3.2.4 Post-Communist East (e.g., Poland)

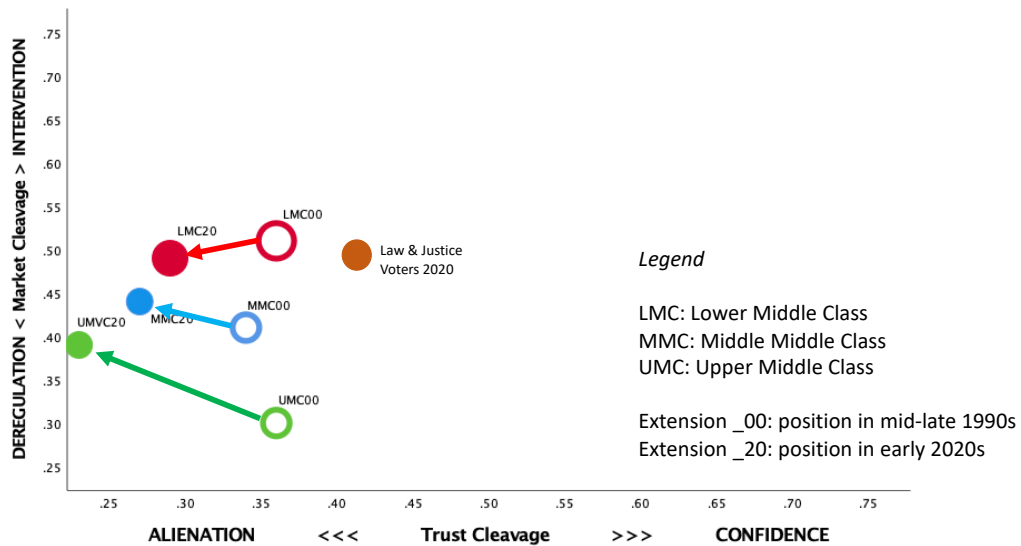
Turning to Poland (Figures 9.1 to 9.4), things in the EU’s Post-communist East show more resemblance with the Mediterranean South than with the Western core and the Nordic region. As in the Mediterranean South, institutional trust is generally low (below .35 scale points) and has further decreased throughout all middle-class segments. However, the decline was not even. The most clearly visible loss of institutional trust is observed among the upper middle class. Indeed, while there was no gap between the lower and upper middle class in the mid-late 90s, the differences became more significant over time, increasing class polarization over the trust cleavage (Figure 9.1). Supporters of RWP (i.e., Law and Justice (PiS) Party) stick out again on the trust cleavage, but this time through a pronouncedly more confident position. This deviation from the usual RWP-pattern is easily explained because PiS is in power from 2015 until 2023, thus massively increasing institutional trust among RWP-supporters in Poland.

As in the EU’s other geo-historic regions, the market cleavage is neither a source of deep class divisions, nor has class polarization over this cleavage increased over time. Instead, it actually decreased, with the upper middle-class moving more leftward (i.e., towards more intervention) and the lower middle-class more rightward (i.e., towards more deregulation), while the center middle-class held its position. PiS-voters exhibit a relatively high level of support (Figure 9.1) for economic benefits by the state, which reflects the policy pursued by PiS since taking power. Its central ideological element is the termination of the "belt-tightening" austerity policies of the EU, the sharing of economic growth with the poorer groups in the society and the protection of the Polish



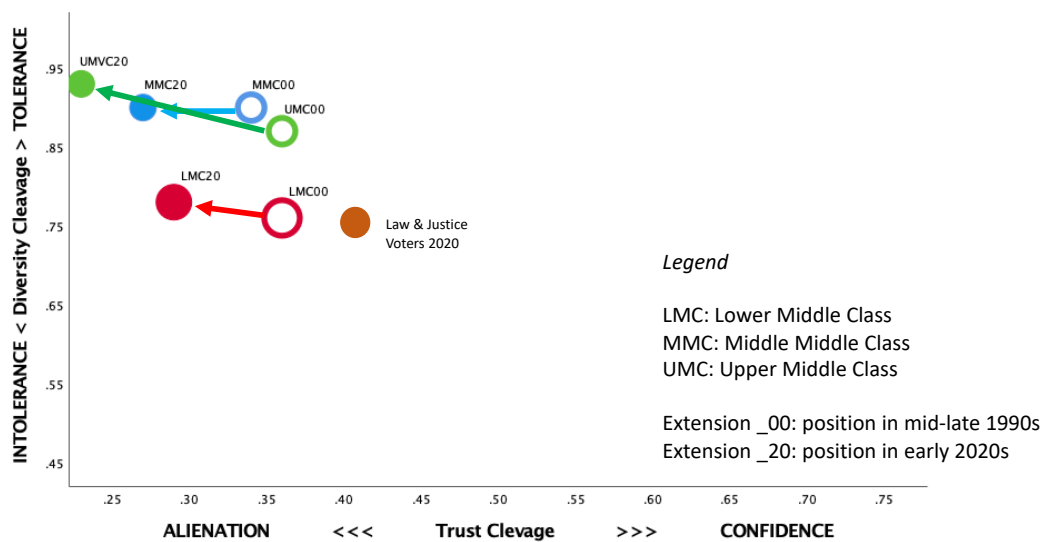
market from foreign competition. While, in most countries, welfare and fiscal regimes tend to be stable, in Poland PiS introduced their announced changes in a very short time.

Figure 9.1: Institutional Trust and the Market Cleavage in Poland



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

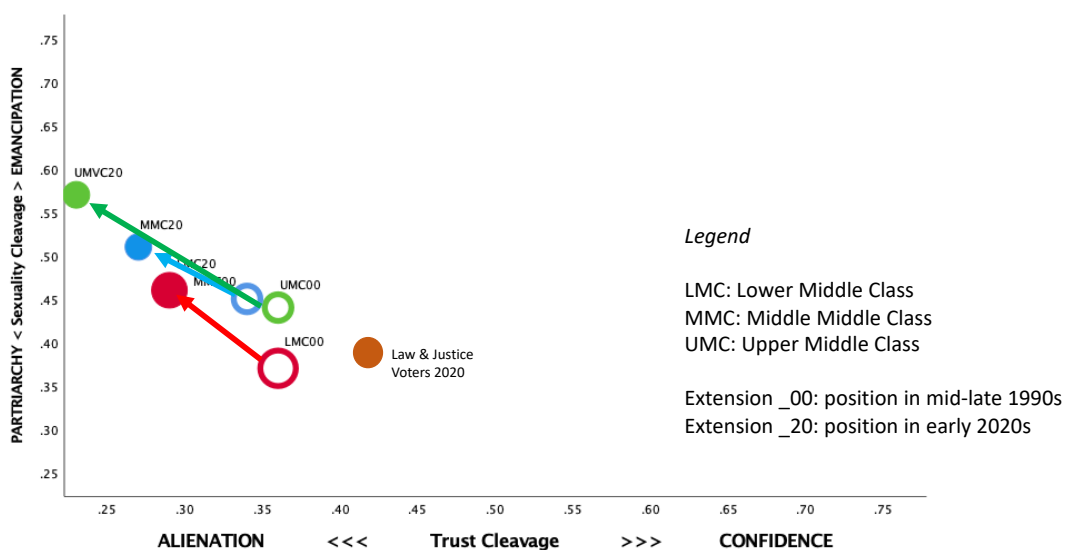
Figure 9.2: Institutional Trust and the Diversity Cleavage in Poland



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

On the diversity cleavage (Figure 9.2), all middle class segments of Polish society moved towards a slightly more progressive position. Over time, the lower middle class held the most significant distance from other groups, while the upper middle class currently ranks the most tolerant. RWP supporters again hold a pronouncedly more conservative position. It reflects the desire for a cultural closure policy and the need to find enemies and culprits among various minority groups. Also, PiS implemented one of the most stringent abortion laws in Europe, opposing the rights of LGBTQ+ people, while advocating attachment to national and religious traditions in explicit opposition to the EU's emancipatory agenda.

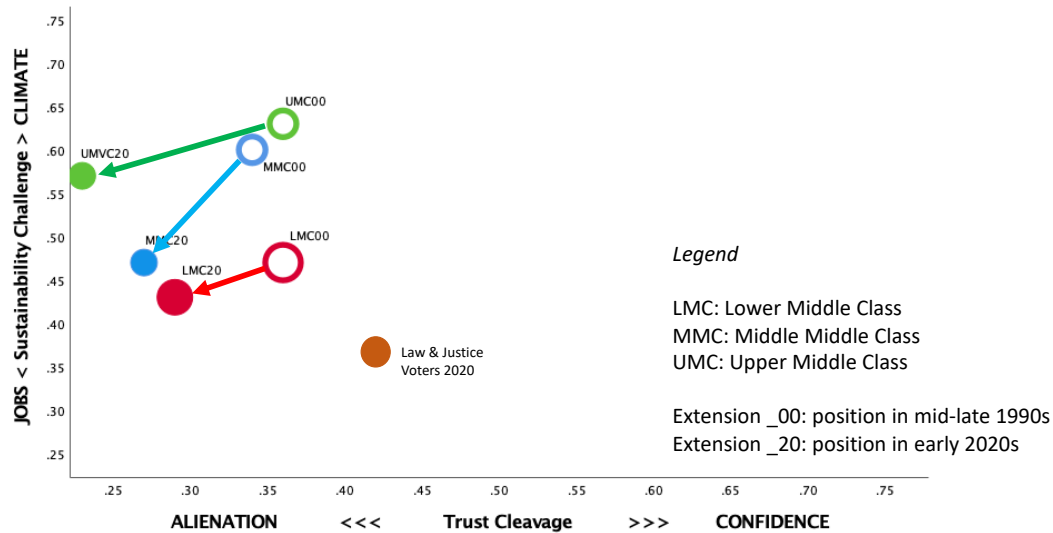
Figure 9.3: Institutional Trust and the Sexuality Cleavage in Poland



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

On the sexuality cleavage (Figure 9.3), the situation is similar to the diversity cleavage: All middle-class segments of Polish society moved towards a more progressive position. The upper middle class currently ranks as the most emancipatory group. RWP supporters again hold a more conservative worldview. It could be a consequence of the PiS strategy to promote the traditional family model based on Catholic values in opposition to a modern family model based on secular-liberal values. PiS also refers to LGBTQ+ as a threat to Polish identity and the expression of a dangerous “leftist” ideology. It has further implications for the education system and civil society, which are censored for gender issues. According to the ruling party, both sectors should strengthen the Polish Catholic family model.

Figure 9.4: Institutional Trust and the Sustainability Cleavage in Poland



Note: Own calculations from EVS/WVS waves 3 (mid-late 1990s) and 7 (early 2020s), indicating shifts from wave 3 to 7.

The sustainability cleavage (Figure 9.4) shows an apparent decline in support for environmental protection among all middle-class segments of Polish society over the last twenty-five years. The most pronounced drop in pro-environmentalism occurred among the center middle class. Consequently, the center middle-class is now closer to the lower middle class and farther away from the upper middle class. PiS-supporters, for their part, clearly prefer job creation over environmental protection, in line with the Polish's public's overall drop in environmentalism. This can be seen as an expectable move downward on Maslow's hierarchy of human needs: In times of perceived threats, post-materialistic priorities (like environmental protection) fade into the background.

In summary, neither the case of Poland does not provide evidence of significantly increased class polarization over mature democracies' main ideological divisions. Indeed, the data only exhibit class distances on the domains of trust, welfare and sexuality in the range of .04 to .07 scale points. The PiS supporters, by contrast, stick out from other middle-class segments by cultural rightism combined with economic leftism. Polish researchers seek for the reasons of this cultural rightism/economic leftism combination (which is reminiscent of National Socialism) mainly at the macro level, referring to specific socio-historical, cultural and political conditions that may have shaped citizens' political orientations (Skarżyńska & Henne, 2011). For example, during the communist regime in Poland, a rightist cultural conservatism co-existed with a leftist welfare system directed by the state (i.e., leftist views) (Czarnek et al., 2019). A few studies have also sought the sources of the culturally right/economically left combination at the micro level. Radkiewicz (2017), for instance, argues that the ideological right/left combination among citizens' beliefs is a product of psychological coherence in specific values whose point of convergence is the desire for a strong state that protects its citizens from the threats of both cultural alienation (i.e., identity) and economic deprivation (i.e., prosperity).

3.3 Evidence for Polarization?

To conclude, we again turn our attention to the bigger picture. Evidence of increased middle-class polarization over ideological cleavages, as suspected by the “standard *democracy eroding* narrative,” is modest at most and inconsistent across European regions. Table 2 in the Annex evidences this insight in numbers for our four selected cases: On no domain of ideological conflict did the distance between the lower and upper middle class increase by more than .09 scale points. In fact, in most instances, ideological class distances decreased, thus indicating diminished ideological class polarization.

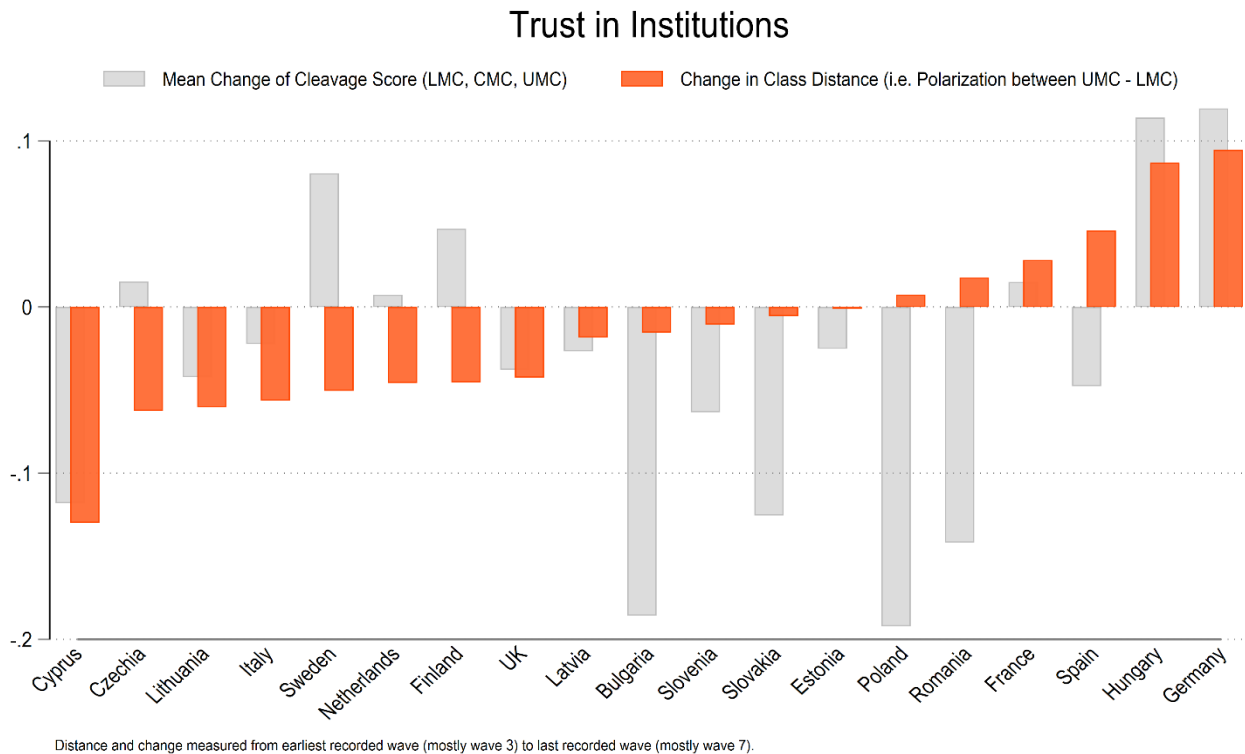
Where the supporters of RWP could be placed into our maps, they generally take reactionary ideological positions on each cleavage, but most notably on the migration/diversity and sustainability cleavages, with specificities related to national context. What is most uniformly common for RWP-supporters, though, is how pronouncedly they stick out by their out-of-range position on the trust cleavage, with strikingly alienated positions where and when RWP-parties are in the opposition and strongly confident positions where and when they are in power.

Figures 10 and 11 summarize the decrease or increase of polarization across all EU countries for which two WVS/EVS-waves exist. We measure polarization by the distance between the upper and lower middle classes’ main cleavage scores. Next, we calculate how this distance changed from the first to the last wave and identify whether the different classes moved further apart or closer together. Positive values indicate growing polarization (class-distances) and negative values indicate decreasing polarization. In addition to changing class distances, Figures 10 and 11 also report the middle classes’ average change across the main cleavage dimensions (always in grey).

3.3.1 Trust in Institutions

The results show that polarization over the alienation-vs-confidence cleavage on matters of institutional trust has moderately increased for around a third of the countries with sufficient data-points (Figure 10). This includes three of our exemplary countries as well as France, Hungary and Romania. Also, while institutional trust has decreased in the Mediterranean South and in the Post-communist East, it has increased in some of the West European Core and the Nordic region. When this increase is not evenly distributed across lower to upper middle-class segments, we diagnose increasing polarization.

Figure 10: Change in Class Distance for Trust in Institutions



3.3.2 Market Cleavage

On the right-vs-left cleavage over economic deregulation versus state intervention, our exemplary countries point towards no consistent changes. Taking all available countries into consideration, we actually see decreasing polarization on this cleavage domain with the exceptions of Italy, Cyprus, Hungary and Romania (Figure 11, top left). Overall, polarization over the distributional issues is very moderate and shows no systematic shifts.

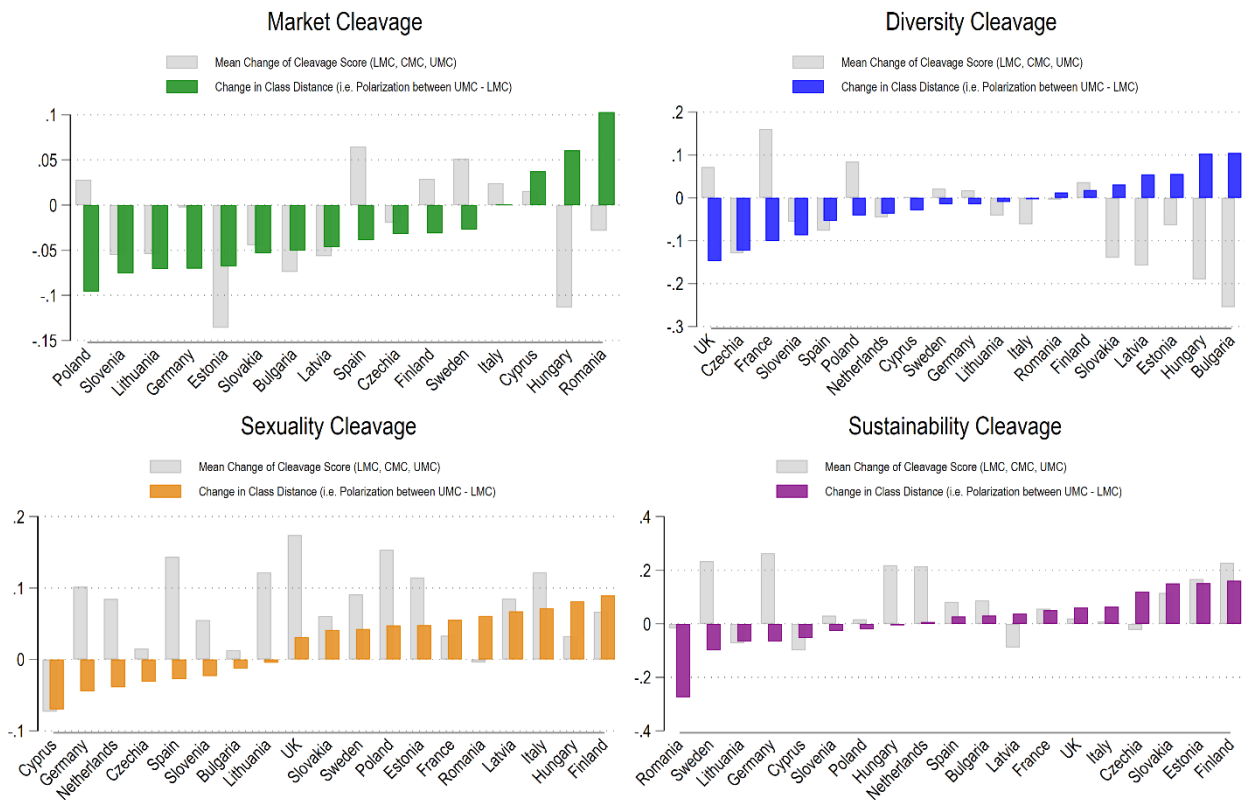
3.3.3 Diversity and Sexuality Cleavage

On the diversity and sexuality cleavages, the four exemplary publics moved towards more progressive positions, thus exhibiting increasing tolerance and emancipation. For the diversity cleavage this happened without increasing class polarization, but for the sexuality cleavage the separate middle-class positions moved slightly further apart in the case of Poland and Sweden. On the EU-level, we see that emancipative values grew considerably across all observed countries. However, this growth is not evenly distributed across the middle-class spectrum and leads to increasing polarization on this cleavage dimension in a slight majority of countries and always within a modest margin (Figure 11, bottom left). For the diversity cleavage, that is toleration of ethnic diversity in one's society, we find some significant decreases in Bulgaria, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia. At the same time, the polarization in these countries increased, pointing (again) to a slightly uneven change across the middle-class spectrum.

3.3.4 Sustainability Cleavage

Our case-based analyses suggest that the Mediterranean South and Post-communist East turned less pro-environmentalist and instead became more materialistic in favor of job creation, whereas the West European core and the Nordic region turned strikingly more progressive in favor of environmental protection, with little indication of grown polarization over this cleavage in either region. The larger picture (Figure 11, bottom right) also suggests that in a majority of countries, the electorates' broad middle-class spectrum turned more strongly in favor of environmental protection. In around half of the observed countries, we observe increasing while in the other half we see decreasing polarization, thus refusing a consistent picture. Overall, there is no clear regional trend observable.

Figure 11: Change in Class Distance for the main Cleavages.



Notes: Distance and change measured from earliest recorded wave (mostly wave 3) to last recorded wave (mostly wave 7).

3.3.5 Model Variations

Another aspect of the "*democracy eroding*" narrative suggests that voters give up their support for democracy's liberal principles and that this sacrifice is closely related to low institutional trust and most evident among the lower middle-class segment. These assumptions can be tested using the scale of "authoritarian-vs-liberal" notions of democracy, as described by Welzel (2013), Kirsch and Welzel (2019) as well as Kruse, Ravlik and Welzel (2019). If the "*democracy eroding*" narrative is accurate, we should see that from EVS/WVS wave five (the first one available for these items) till seven, the middle-class segments have shifted downward on the vertical scale towards more authoritarian and less liberal notions of democracy. Second, more authoritarian notions of democracy should be correlated with less institutional trust. Third, the authoritarian shift should be strongest among the lower middle-class and it should have increased polarization between the lower and upper middle-class on the authoritarian-vs-liberal notions scale.

Among these assumptions, only the second one is confirmed: People belonging to socio-economic status groups with more authoritarian notions of democracy tend to show less institutional trust, although this pattern only holds true for mature democracies, while it does not apply to autocracies: There, more authoritarian notions of democracy associate with stronger, instead of weaker, institutional trust--quite logically. Be that as it is, there is no general shift towards more authoritarian notions of democracy (which would indicate greater readiness to cut back democracy's liberal principles), not even among the lower middle-class segments--hence, no increased polarization over democracy notions.

As a robustness test, we have altered the differentiation of European electorates by (a) using respondents' self-reported subjective social class membership and (b) by dividing electorates into "right," "center" and "left" based on their right-vs-left self-placement. These alterations produced basically similar results, with no greater indications of ideological polarization along the lines of the "standard *democracy eroding* narrative." These results are documented in SOM-section ___.

Addressing the issue of "trustworthiness" (Norris, 2022), we regress voters' institutional trust on their countries' actual institutional performance, using the "rule of law" and "public corruption" (inverted) scores from V-Dem. This regression produces a residual score for each individual respondent. These residual scores vary from strongly negative scores to zero to strongly positive scores. For ease of interpretation, respondents with *positive* residual scores report institutional trust levels *above* the actual quality of their country's institutions, thus indicating different degrees "naivety" depending on how strongly positive the residual score is. By implication, respondents with *negative* residual scores report trust levels *below* the actual quality of their country's institutions, thus indicating different degrees of "cynicism" depending on how strongly negative the residual score is. Respondents with residual scores *close to zero*, for their part, report trust levels close to their country's actual institutional quality, which reveals different degrees of "realism" depending on how close to zero the residual score is. Hence, by regressing respondents self-reported institutional trust level on expert measures of their country's actual institutional performance and saving the residual scores from this regression, we obtain a reality-adjusted cynicism-vs-naivety scale. However, using this reality-checked institutional trust scale instead of the raw institutional trust scores from the respondents' self-report only, reproduces the same results: so once more, no support for the "standard *democracy erosion* narrative" (results in SOM-Section ___).

4 Conclusion

In this report, we present descriptive evidence for changing institutional trust among socio-economically differentiated voter segments and link our observation to five distinct dimensions of ideological cleavage, characteristic of mature post-industrial democracies. All four exemplary EU-countries (representing the Western Core, the Nordic Region, the Mediterranean South and Post-Communist East, respectively) exhibit progressive moves on the migration/diversity and sexuality cleavages, without increasing polarization over these issues. Despite this commonality, the inter-regional differences place the West European Core and the Nordic Region into one (Protestant) group and the Mediterranean South and Post-Communist East into another (Catholic) group. While the Protestant group experiences growing institutional trust and made a massively progressive move on the sustainability cleavage, the Catholic group witnesses falling institutional trust and a reactionary shift on the sustainability cleavage, away from environmental protection.

These differences in ideological shift map on the different performance profiles in these two country groups, with better functioning institutions, less corruption and more efficient economic policies in the Protestant group, contrasted by the exact opposite in the Catholic group. This religiously-connotated pattern (reminiscent of Max Weber's first treatment of the Protestant/Catholic difference) reflects long-lasting mutual path dependencies in mentalities and governance (Delhey & Newton, 2003).

Overall, our findings contradict the “standard *democracy erosion* narrative.” There are no significant and widespread reactionary shifts among the lower middle-class segments of the EU’s electorates (and also not among the other social class segments) and there is no general increase in ideological polarization over democracies’ key cleavage dimensions, including authoritarian-vs-liberal notions of democracy. On a more theoretical note, this means that at least the evidence available from representative population surveys with a focus on values eliminates all causal arrows of the *democracy erosion* narrative displayed in Figure 1. Consequently, rising electoral RWP-support cannot be explained by reactionary ideological shifts on the demand side, that is, among the electorates.

If this is an accurate conclusion, this suggests that the causes driving RWP's electoral rise must lie on the supply side, that is, accruing representation deficits of the once established party and media systems of the pre-RWP era. Obviously, the mainstream’s liberal-progressive policy focus overwhelms culturally conservative voters who exist throughout the electorates' broad middle-class spectrum and whose opposition against a further emancipatory progression found no potent voice in the pre-RWP era. Populist rhetoric now fills this void and offers culturally conservative citizens (many of whom were non-voters in the pre-RWP era) a new political identity outside of the political mainstream of the pre-RWP era. In a nutshell, not reactionary ideological shifts among lower middle class electoral segments but representation deficits with respect to cultural conservatism fuels the electoral rise of RWP. Indeed, some formerly conservative parties, including center-right parties like the Christian Union in Germany under Merkel, began to pursue a culturally progressive agenda towards ever-growing post-materialist goals. Their programs increasingly catered to the liberal (well-educated) citizenry while those resistant to this change experience an increasing distance between their political view and an ever-changing political landscape. Not because they are reactionary, but because the world develops faster than they do. RWP now offer to return to the “good old days” and become attractive for these voter segments.

Supporting this view, RWP voters are socio-economically only weakly differentiated from the European electorates' broad middle-class spectrums. Of course, RWP supporters are--on average--more male, older, more rural and tend to be less educated (Alexander & Welzel, 2017). But these distinctions are modest in scale and actually became weaker over time. Where RWP-supporters (and non-voters) really stick out is their opposition against migration, plus frustration about not being heard, manifest in particularly low institutional trust and less liberal notions of democracy. This opposition against migration has no exclusive socio-economic anchor in the lower middle-class but, instead, has widely diffused into all middle-class segments of European electorates.

This report is not a normative treatise, yet one qualification on normative grounds is due. We are not saying that RWP is a good thing because it fills previously accrued representation deficits or because it brings back previous non-voters to the polls. Although, some might see herein a revitalizing democratic impulse of RWP's electoral rise, this is actually not our point. Instead, we simply stress that the rise of RWP is a reliable seismograph that lays open truly existing representation deficits. From a normative point of view, the problem is that RWP addresses legitimate concerns about too voluminous immigration by a xenophobic rhetoric and that it--wherever in power--works on reducing democracies' liberal qualities. Hence, if the established parties wish to gain back a significant share of the RWP-vote, they need to address voters' legitimate concerns about immigration, without adopting RWP's openly xenophobic ideology. This challenge is most acute for Europe's traditionally conservative center-right parties.

To close, we wish to emphasize that this descriptive report is the first out of a series of three. Insofar, the findings and conclusions are preliminary. In the next step, we will explore whether and to what extent the EVS/WVS-based results reported here can be replicated with other public opinion data, most notably the European Social Survey. We will also make a step from mostly descriptive to more inferential statistics, using sequential regressions and path modelling techniques to examine the causal connections underlying the "*democracy eroding*" narrative depicted in Figure 1.

ANNEX

Table 1. Change in Ideological Class Distances from EVS/WVS Waves 3 to 7

Country	Variable	Period	LMC- Position	UMC- Position	Class Distance	Change in Class Distance
Germany	TRUST	Mid-late 1990s	.32	.31	.01	
		Early 2020s	.38	.48	.10	+.09
	MARKET	Mid-late 1990s	.56	.05	.04	
		Early 2020s	.50	.50	.01	-.03
	MIGRATION	Mid-late 1990s	.44	.61	.17	
		Early 2020s	.52	.64	.12	-.05
	DIVERSITY	Mid-late 1990s	.95	.95	0	
		Early 2020s	.95	.95	0	0
SEXUALITY	Mid-late 1990s	.54	.69	.15		
	Early 2020s	.65	.76	.11	-.04	
SUSTAINAB.	Mid-late 1990s	.34	.56	.22		
	Early 2020s	.64	.80	.16	-.06	
Sweden	TRUST	Mid-late 1990s	.39	.49	.10	
		Early 2020s	.46	.54	.08	-.02
	MARKET	Mid-late 1990s	.40	.36	.04	
		Early 2020s	.44	.41	.03	-.01
	DIVERSITY	Mid-late 1990s	.90	.96	.06	
		Early 2020s	.94	.95	.01	-.05
	SEXUALITY	Mid-late 1990s	.67	.79	.12	
		Early 2020s	.74	.89	.15	+.03
SUSTAINAB.	Mid-late 1990s	.61	.72	.11		
	Early 2020s	.86	.88	.02	-.09	
Spain	TRUST	Mid-late 1990s	.35	.34	.01	
		Early 2020s	.34	.29	.05	+.04
	MARKET	Mid-late 1990s	.55	.65	.10	
		Early 2020s	.55	.58	.03	-.07
	DIVERSITY	Mid-late 1990s	.90	.96	.06	
		Early 2020s	.84	.86	.02	-.04
SEXUALITY	Mid-late 1990s	.54	.66	.12		
	Early 2020s	.70	.78	.08	-.04	
SUSTAINAB.	Mid-late 1990s	.54	.65	.11		
Poland	TRUST	Mid-late 1990s	.36	.36	0	
		Early 2020s	.28	.21	.07	+.07
	MARKET	Mid-late 1990s	.51	.31	.20	
		Early 2020s	.50	.40	.10	-.01
	DIVERSITY	Mid-late 1990s	.76	.86	.10	
		Early 2020s	.78	.94	.16	+.06
	SEXUALITY	Mid-late 1990s	.37	.44	.07	
		Early 2020s	.46	.57	.11	+.04
SUSTAINAB.	Mid-late 1990s	.46	.64	.18		
	Early 2020s	.44	.56	.12	-.06	

Note: All ideological scales are in a theoretical range from minimum 0 for the most conservative/reactionary position to maximum 1 for the most progressive/emancipative position. LMC: Lower Middle Class, UMC: Upper Middle Class.

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