



**TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies  
2023-2025**

**European Commission Grant No 101095237**

**AUTOCRACY-VS-DEMOCRACY:  
THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF GLOBAL  
REGIME EVOLUTION**

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**Purpose and scope of the deliverable:** The purpose of this deliverable is to find a way to tell apart the meanings of high institutional trust in autocracies from those in democracies. Using Welzel's emancipatory version of modernization theory as the point of departure, we present a sequence of the psychological forces driving democratic resilience and progress, by turning citizens' trust from a "devout" (*over-estimating*) into a "demanding" (*under-estimating*) judgement of their institutions' trustworthiness.

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## Contents

<b>PROJECT SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>ANNOTATION OF THE DELIVERABLE (D4.3).....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: REJUVENATED SYSTEM RIVALRY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1 MODERNIZATION THEORY: PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 THE MEDIAN VOTER THEOREM: A FLAWED ALTERNATIVE .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3 PUBLIC TRUST: RE-UNDERSTOOD.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4 EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES: A SEQUENCE THEORY .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5 CONCLUSION: PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF DEMOCRATIC EVOLUTION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Project summary

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.

## Annotation of the Deliverable (D4.3)

This document is a part of work package 4 led by LUL-DE. With the background of the geopolitical confrontation the paper proceeds in four sections. The first section discusses the gist and diverse misunderstandings in the treatment of modernization theory, especially concerning its "rational choice" contender: the median voter theorem (section two). In section three, we reflect the role of citizens' institutional trust within the global system rivalry between democracy and autocracy (or more generally between liberalism and coercion). The fourth section then places our thoughts and evidence into a broader sequence of the psychological forces driving democratic progress, regress or stagnation. As will become evident, citizens' institutional trust certainly has its place in this sequence, but in a different manner than is usually understood: What matters is not just the overall level or amount of institutional trust but whether and to what degree citizens' institutional trust is driven by emancipatory value standards that guide individuals from "devout" to "demanding" trustworthiness judgements concerning the institutions governing their public life.

## Introduction: Rejuvenated System Rivalry

Clearly, *democracy* is the normatively guiding concept in Western political thinking, political theory and empirical political science (Lipset 1960; Dahl 1973; Sartori 1987; Putnam 1990; Held 2000; Haerpfer et al 2019). This becomes easily obvious when looking at the many attempts to measure the positions of the worlds' political regimes on an imaginary democracy-vs-autocracy continuum. To mention the most widely cited and ongoing measurement endeavors, Polity IV, Freedom House, Cingranelli/Richards, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the Economist's Intelligence Unit Democracy Index, the Democracy Barometer, the Democracy Matrix and--of course--the various V-Dem democracy measures come to mind (Lindberg et al. 2022).

Despite repeated assertions that democracy is an elusive concept plagued by mutually contradictory definitions, the measurement industry is unified by a tacit consensus that political regimes in history and around the world differ most fundamentally by the degree to which they entitle their residents to have a voice and vote in the decisions that affect their lives. No matter whether scholars see this issue as a dichotomy between existing and non-existing entitlements (Sartori 1987; Alvarez & Przeworski et al. 1996) or whether they treat this question as a matter of degree (Vanhanen 2000), either way there is agreement that the presence of civic entitlements (i.e., democracy) versus their absence (i.e., autocracy) is the key dividing line between political regimes around the world--apart from anarchical situations of chaos (i.e., failed states, civil war) where political regimes are inexistent. In this sense, talking about country-wise distinctions on the autocracy-vs-democracy spectrum presumes the presence of a functioning state capable of effectively enforcing civic entitlements or to successfully suppress them by coercive means.

Another important differentiation is the degree of certainty by which entitlements written on paper are protected and respected in daily practice or frequently ignored and violated, which is a finer line of division that separates--within the democratic realm--*effective* from *ineffective* forms of democracy (Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi 2008; Welzel & Alexander 2012). In fact, the two crucial benefits often attributed to democracies in comparison to autocracies--i.e., an impartial provision of public goods and services and a superior civic rights performance--depends on the state capacities that carry democracies across the line from ineffective to effective versions of this type of political order (Welzel et al. 2019).

Since a while, concern about where global regime evolution is leading the world's countries on the autocracy-vs-democracy continuum is steeply rising. The core of the spreading worries are amassing doubts about whether Western liberal democracies will survive and prevail in the rejuvenated system rivalry with their autocratic alternatives elsewhere in the world (Brunkert, Puranen, Turska-Kawa & Welzel 2025). Fueling this concern is the seeming success by which highly industrialized autocratic powers, most notably China, Russia and the super-rich Gulf monarchies, manage to harness technological progress in favor of their popular support inside and their imperial missions outside (Welzel, Brunkert, Turska-Kawa & Brieger 2025).

Because these and other countries (like Singapore) showcase the viability of an autocratic version of modernity, questions about one of the leading paradigms in the social sciences--modernization theory--are becoming painfully nagging. Modernization theory is most widely known for the claim that progressing socioeconomic development operates as a selective force in the global evolution of political orders by gradually turning the chances of elites' regime choices in favor of democracy and against autocracy (Lerner 1958; Lipset 1959; Huntington 1991). In the face of progressing socioeconomic development in most parts of the world, the modernization theorem has fueled a

widespread euphoria about liberal democracy as the irresistible future model of modernizing countries' political regimes (Fukuyama 1992). After several consecutive waves of democratization in one global region after the other, followed by the collapse of crashing collapse of Soviet-type communism in the late 1980s, it only seemed to be a matter of time when autocratic powers in China and the Middle East will fall as well in giving way to democracy (Diamond 2008).

But the democratic optimism of the 1990s did not last for long. Tightening authoritarian tendencies and imperial aggression by non-Western powers (e.g., China, Russia, the Middle East and other BRICS countries), plus the failure of the Arab Spring, generate surging skepticism about the continuation of the global democratization trend of previous decades. In fact, several studies diagnose a stalling and even a recent reversal of the global democratic trend of previous decades (Luehrmann & Lindberg 2019; Wiebrecht et al. 2023). Further nourishing the simmering doubts about Western democracies' resilience in face of the rejuvenated system rivalry with their autocratic alternatives elsewhere in the world is a whole series of recent external shocks, frequently summarized under the term "poly-crisis": financial crisis, refugee crisis, Corona crisis, climate crisis and--after Russia's aggression on Ukraine and beyond--security crisis (Schaefer & Zuern 2023).

On top of these challenges from *outside*, Western liberal democracies operate under increasing stress from *inside*, visible in the rising electoral success of authoritarian populism and its attacks on democracies' liberal principles. Consequently, the "breakdown of democracies" literature that prevailed during the 1970s is back on stage. In the meanwhile, most intellectual energy in political science is dedicated to themes like "democratic backsliding," "democratic deconsolidation," "how democracies die," "the people against democracy" and a creeping "cultural backlash" under the electoral rise of authoritarian populism (Foa & Mounk 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2019; Norris & Inglehart 2019; Mounk 2020).

Having this revived system rivalry in mind, our article proceeds in four sections. The first section discusses the gist and diverse misunderstandings in the treatment of modernization theory, especially concerning its "rational choice" contender: the *median voter theorem*, which we portray in somewhat greater detail in section two. In section three, we reflect the role of citizens' institutional trust within the global system rivalry between democracy and autocracy (or more generally between liberalism and coercion). The fourth section then places our thoughts and evidence into a longer sequence that pinpoints the psychological forces driving, halting or reverting democratic progress. As will become evident, citizens' institutional trust certainly has its place in this sequence, but in a fundamentally different manner than is usually understood: What matters is not just the overall level or amount of institutional trust but whether and to what degree citizens' institutional trust is driven by emancipatory value standards that guide individuals from "devout" to "demanding" trustworthiness judgements concerning the institutions governing their public life.

The data presented in sections one to four are based on an innovative match of individual-level survey data from the EVS/WVS (Haerpfer et al. 2022) and country-level regime data from V-Dem (Lindberg et al. 2022). To relieve readers from over-technical details, we explain measurements in the footnotes of the forth-following materials, which we present in graphical illustrations, instead of numerical tables, to ease readability.

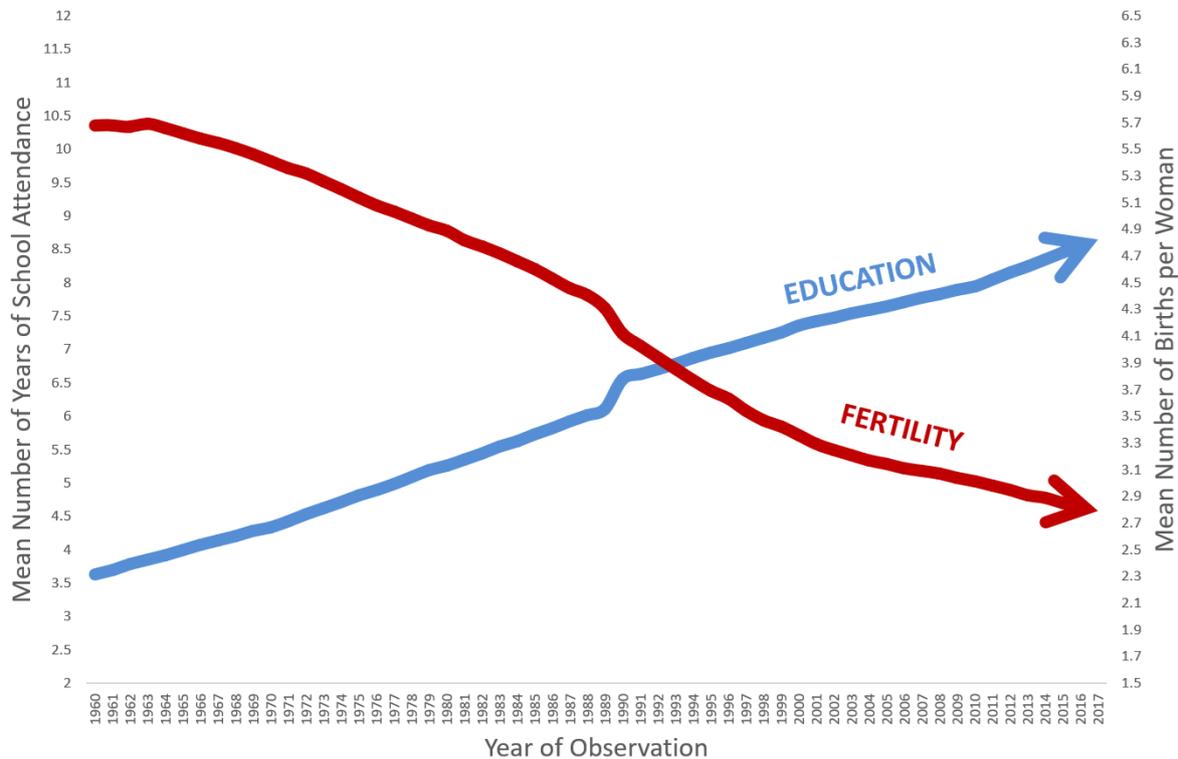
## 1 Modernization Theory: Properly Understood

Since its first formulation by Lerner (1958) and Lipset (1959), the venerable modernization literature has been too narrowly obsessed with analyzing the relationship between countries' per capita income and their levels of democracy--assuming that higher absolute levels of per capita income and greater equality in its distribution shift political regimes from the autocratic to the democratic end of the regime spectrum. In spite of the fact that the assumption of an inherent income-democracy relationship at the country level has been analyzed with increasing methodological sophistication, the evidence has in itself remained mixed and authors continue to draw opposing conclusions from the same findings (Przeworski & Limongi 1997; Boix & Stokes 2000; Boix 2003; 2017; Teorell 2010; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; 2017; Treisman 2017). What is probably most perplexing about the income-democracy literature is its wholesale fixation on the country level with its neglect of possible individual-level mechanisms from which any country-level association between income and democracy must emerge. As a matter of fact, cross-national survey data from around the world defy any evidence that individuals who possess higher incomes (whether in absolute numbers or relative to their countries' income hierarchy) are more supportive of democracy than individuals with lower absolute or relative incomes (Ansell & Samuels 2015; Rosenfeld 2023).

This ignorance is all the more baffling as the supposed reasons of why modernization should operate as an evolutionary force that shifts the selective advantage in global regime evolution from autocracy to democracy is inherently psychological. Indeed, the key substantive argument is about how modernization and its partial processes reshape the mindsets of individuals at the grassroots of society, especially individuals' legitimacy beliefs. Country-level effects of these individual-level mind shifts result from changes in the aggregate distribution of people's value orientations and, consequently, their regime preferences and legitimacy beliefs. At best, there is just a handful of studies examining systematically how progressing modernization reshapes individuals' mindsets and then--as a consequence of these grassroots shifts--transforms the aggregate distribution in populations' legitimacy beliefs in ways that eventually bestow a selective advantage in regime choice to democracy over autocracy (the most prominent exceptions being: Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013).

The main idea assumes a modernization-induced awakening of human cognition. The core process of progressing modernization is of a deeply demographic nature, visible in a drop of (maternal and infant) mortalities, a resulting rise of life expectancy followed by a steep drop in birth rates and a parallel expansion and prolongation of time spent in education and skill building (Dyson 2013; Murin 2013; Murin & Wacziarg 2014). Especially concerning women's lifetime investments, this is a demographic shift from "*quantity breeding*" (i.e., a focus on the number of children and an early birthing career) to "*quality building*" (i.e., a focus on women's own and their fewer children's skills). As Figure 1 illustrates, this demographic "*quantity-to-quality*" shift is of a universal nature; populations around the globe are just at different stages within the same process. The isomorphism of this process questions the idea of "multiple modernities" and instead establishes that modernization is in its key aspects a rather uniform affair.

Figure 1: The Quantity-to-Quality Shift in Lifetime Investments around the Globe



Source: Our own calculations based on V-Dem (Lindberg et al. 2022), using variables "e\_miferrat" (right-hand scale) and "e\_peavedu" (left-hand scale), 1960 till today (global averages per year calculated by weighting countries for their population size).

In evolutionary psychology, the "quantity-to-quality" demographic shift is known as the transition from "short" to "long" *life histories* (Woodley 2011). The related expansion of lifetime horizons fundamentally reshapes people's future orientation from searching for "short-term" benefits (in that you grab a gain whenever you can) to striving for "long-term" rewards that come with a "delay of gratification." And education is the most pivotal time investment whose gratification does come with a substantial delay.

No matter in what subject field education proceeds, it is not only a knowledge-accumulating but, more importantly, a skill-building process that releases, trains and refines individuals' cognitive potential to think for themselves--in other words, intellectual agency (Deci & Ryan 2000; Ryan & Deci 2000). The psychological consequences are groundbreaking and evolve naturally bottom-up, without the need for any elite designed top-down ideological program. Indeed, as people learn and get used to think for themselves, their need for doctrinal guidance by religious and secular elites as well as their susceptibility to brainwashing propaganda from above recede. In parallel, individuals' "cognition needs" rise, that is, the need to base one's decisions on a thought process of collecting evidence and the rational balancing of pros and cons, instead of acting just under the impulses of one's gut feelings (Fording & Schramm 2021).

As individuals have learned to think for themselves, they no longer want to be told of what to believe and what to do. In this moment of mental awakening (indeed, Enlightenment), individuals naturally find appeal in the ideas of human rights and civic entitlements and begin to oppose arrogated authority--be it in the family, at the workplace or in politics. In a nutshell, cognitive

mobilization triggers a tectonic shift in individuals' value orientations that tames their otherwise predominant *submissive instincts*, while awakening their *emancipatory drives*, including the desire for self-determination in the private sphere and co-determination in public affairs (Welzel et al. 2025).

What we just outlined is the key psychological argument of why the process of modernization should shift people's legitimacy beliefs from an appreciation of autocratic strongmen rule towards a demand for liberal-democratic entitlements. In other words, as more and more individuals in a population internalize emancipative values, regime preferences should shift from autocracy to democracy. If so, autocratic regimes that modernize face--beyond their awareness--a gradually increasing likelihood to meet at one point or another emancipatory resistance against their coercive nature from below.

Logically speaking, this is the most intuitively plausible narrative to pinpoint modernization's emancipatory consequences at the grassroots of society. This basically psychological step-sequence provides the most logical line of thinking of why modernization is an evolutionary force that slowly but steadily is shifting the selective advantage in global regime evolution from the coercive-autocratic to the liberal-democratic end of the spectrum of political orders.

## 2 The Median Voter Theorem: A Flawed Alternative

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that scholars of cross-national surveys focus their attention squarely on questions about individuals' regime preferences. Surprisingly, however, individuals' regime preferences show very limited variation across nations (Dalton, Shin & Jou 2007). Instead, people all over the world seem to strongly favor democracy over autocracy, or at least they say so. And there is little to no variation alongside countries' differentiation in modernization terms in this respect. Almost the contrary, individuals in poorer countries (especially in the MENA-region and South Asia) report even stronger preferences of democracy than those in some of the Western world's longest-standing democracies (Maseland & van Hoorn 2012).

For most scholars, the percentage distribution of popular support for democracy across the world's countries is a slap in the face of modernization theory. The reason seems straightforward: the numbers flatly disprove modernization theory in its assumption of development-shaped differentials in ordinary people's regime preferences and legitimacy beliefs. Thus, much of political science scholarship (rational choice advocates in particular) was ready to drop modernization theory into the dustbin of failed paradigms (Munck 2017).

In search for a replacement of modernization theory's apparent shortcomings, several versions of the "median voter theorem" gained prominence as an explanation of why democracy support is so uniformly strong across nations at all kinds of different levels of socioeconomic development. The basic argument is rational choice based (Boix 2003; Ansell & Samuels 2015). In its simplest form, it maintains that the median voter is--by definition--the most centrist and most typical citizen in her/his society who (because of this centrism) holds in most contested issues the majority position of the population. Aware of her/his majority (or at least plurality) position, the median voter knows that democracy is the vehicle to bring majority will to dominance, which is the ultimate reason why large population majorities practically everywhere naturally favor democracy over autocracy as the preferred political order.

However, the idea that ordinary people almost always and everywhere prefer democracy over autocracy needs to be reconciled with a crisp and simple counterfactual: Throughout the history of states and till today, most of the world has been and continues to be under autocratic rule (Welzel et al. 2025).

The most radical solution to explain away this stunning paradox is to posit that ordinary people's legitimacy beliefs simply don't matter for regime selection because history has placed the cards of regime selection into the hands--and only into the hands--of power elites and their political choices (Higley & Burton 1989). Only if, out of a historic learning process, opposing elite camps agree that conflict regulation by democratic means is the best alternative to rule a country, will ordinary people's seemingly ubiquitous preference for democracy be satisfied. If, by contrast, the elites don't find a regime consent on democracy, their control over the means of coercion will always allow them to sustain autocratic rule against the majority's desire for democracy.

Interestingly, as much as this radical view declares popular regime preferences for irrelevant in global regime evolution, it implies with similar radicalness that autocratic rule is never popular and legitimate because it always persists in opposition to the majority's regime preferences.

### 3 Public Trust: Re-Understood

These views have clear implications of what to expect about citizens' trustworthiness judgements concerning their societies' public institutions--and how these trustworthiness judgements should differ alongside countries' position on the autocracy-vs-democracy regime spectrum.

Here, we follow the usual distinction between *political* institutions on the domain of *electoral contestation* (e.g., parliaments, parties, governments) and *order* institutions on the domain of *law enforcement* (e.g., courts, police, civil service). Factor analyses of cross-national survey data have shown time and again that--even through civic trust in political and order institutions overlaps--they nevertheless constitute two distinguishable sets of institutions (Welzel 2007; Norris 2022). Overwhelmingly, scholars consider public trust as a quintessential lubricant for political orders' efficiency in implementing policies (ibid.). This seems plausible insofar as public trust ascertains citizens' voluntary abidance to law and order, thus preventing widespread ignorance, disobedience, sabotage and hidden or even open resistance that would urge authorities to resort to coercion when trying to enforce citizens' abidance to their issued policies. In other words, public trust places "political capital" into power holders hands because the presence of public trust allows authorities to save unproductive surveillance and repression costs to ascertain compliance to their policies among the population.

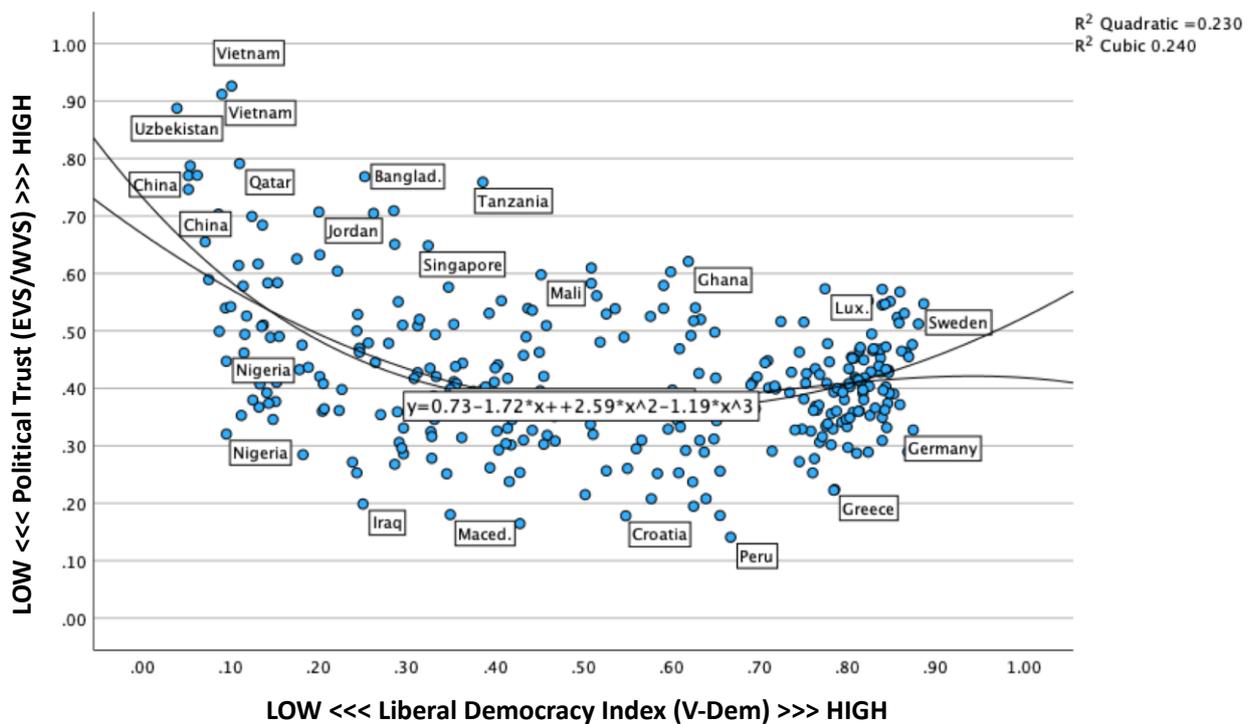
However, if the median voter theorem is accurate in its assumption of a more or less universal civic preference for democracy over autocracy as the desired regime, then citizens' public trust should systematically co-vary with their regimes' positioning on the autocracy-vs-democracy spectrum. Specifically, citizens' public trust should vary in such fashion that it goes up with higher levels of democracy and down with higher degrees of autocracy. The reason is self-evident under the median voter theorem: autocracies negate citizens' desire for democratic rule, which should be manifest in low institutional trust within autocracies; democracies, by contrast, satisfy citizens' regime preference and should be rewarded for this by higher trust in institutions.

Yet, the facts flatly contradict these assumptions. Most notably, Welzel (2007: 405, Figure 1.1) demonstrates in all clarity that higher levels of civic trust in either political or order institutions at

a prior point in time associate with *lower* (!) levels of democracy at later points in time. Remarkably, this result is not based on a cherry-picked case selection but reflects a global pattern across time. Nevertheless, the large idealist literature on the alleged democratic benefits of citizens' institutional trust continues to grow, in spite of conclusive evidence to the contrary of its idealism.

Figure 2 demonstrates the point with newer data, mapping worldwide cross-national and longitudinal information on citizens' trust in political institutions from the EVS/WVS on data from V-Dem on countries' positioning on the autocracy-vs-democracy regime spectrum, using the Liberal Democracy Index ("v2x\_libdem").

Figure 2: Low-vs-High Liberal Democracy and Low-vs-High Political Trust



Source: Horizontal axis: Liberal Democracy Index ("v2x\_libdem") from V-Dem (Lindberg et al. 2022). Vertical axis: country-aggregated trust of individuals in political institutions (parliaments, parties and governments combined) from the EVS/WVS (Haerpfer et al 2022). Time coverage is from 1983 till today.

Contradicting the median voter theorem's idea that citizens' alleged universal preference for democracy should depress their trust in public institutions inside autocracies, while lifting it in democracies, we find the exact opposite. Both a linear and (even more so) a cubic fit of the data reveal a significantly negative relationship, with levels of civic trust dropping alongside a gradient from higher levels of autocracy to higher levels of democracy. Actually, citizens express the highest levels of civic trust in die-hard autocracies, such as China, Vietnam, Qatar or Uzbekistan. In these countries, citizens' self-reported institutional trust is considerably higher (i.e., by 40-50% points) than in such mature and solid democracies as Sweden, Switzerland or Germany.

This obvious contradiction to the median voter theorem might be easily resolved by reference to the "public lies - private truths" argument (Kuran 1991). Accordingly, citizens in autocracies avoid

to reveal their true (and supposedly low) institutional trust to avoid being punished by the authorities for saying something that the authorities don't like to hear. Plausible as this proposition sounds at first glance, it doesn't withstand closer scrutiny. For one, if a respondent is in a situation in which s/he could express her/his aversion of the regime in power but fears punishment for saying the truth, s/he is under conflicting impulses between expressing anger and avoiding sanctions. This is a classic case of "cognitive dissonance," which according to Festinger (1957) should trigger an escapist reaction in avoidance of the inner conflict. In an interview situation, the most obvious escape from cognitive dissonance is response refusal. Hence, if most citizens in autocracies would like to follow their expressive urge to reveal their regime aversion (i.e., reporting institutional distrust), while at the same time trying to avoid punishment for such honesty, response refusal to regime-related questions should be the result. Consequently, percentages of response refusal among surveyed populations should substantially increase alongside higher degrees of autocracy. Contradicting this expectation, the data deny to reveal such evidence. Percentages of response refusal certainly vary from one country to the next, yet this variation is not powerfully predicted by countries' location on the autocracy-vs-democracy regime spectrum. In a nutshell, proportions of individual-level response refusals to regime-sensitive questions do not substantially grow alongside higher degrees of autocracy (Kirsch & Welzel 2019).

Therefore, there are good reasons to assume that high levels of civic trust, when reported in autocracies, are as real as when they are reported in democracies. If so, autocracies in which civic trust reaches high levels are basically considered legitimate in the eyes of most of their citizens. Should this be true, something is fundamentally wrong with the median voter theorem about civic regime preferences. More specifically, autocracies do not persist always and everywhere in suppression of fundamentally opposing regime desires in the bulk of their populations. Presumably, ordinary people's regime preferences are not as universally favorable to democracy-over-autocracy as the median voter theorem postulates and as the survey numbers deceptively suggest.

So, could it be that 80% democracy support in the population of Pakistan does not mean the same as 80% democracy support in Switzerland's population? The answer is a resounding "YES." Recent evidence shows rather conclusively that people's understandings of what democracy is about differ considerably, all the while exactly these differences covary systematically with regimes' position on the autocracy-vs-democracy spectrum. To be precise, in many autocracies in which large majorities of the population express support for democracy, many people confuse democracy with autocracy. They actually (mis)understand strongmen rule and other features of authoritarian government as features of democracy (Kirsch & Welzel 2019; Kruse, Ravlik & Welzel 2019).

From a Western perspective, this assertion seems absurd perhaps but the evidence is clear, despite repeated claims to the contrary (Chu et al. 2024). Almost all states in the world of today, no matter how coercive, portray themselves as democracies. And they indoctrinate their people with a narrative of "guardianship," which has two parts. First, Western democracy is a perverted version of liberal individualism that destroys society by infusing into people an obsession with rights when their obligations to the community are needed to create flourishing societies. Second, true democracy is to have wise leaders who know what is in the best of people's interest, for which reason the people owe their leaders loyalty. Indeed, EVS/WVS data show that large percentages of people, especially in autocratic states, define democracy as the obligation "to obey their rulers." When 80% of the Pakistani say to support democracy together with 80% of the Swiss, while the same 80% of the Pakistani define democracy as "obedience to rulers" and the Swiss define it as the right "to oppose rulers," it is evident that the same numbers mask incompatible conceptions of

democracy. Despite numerical equivalence on a supposedly identical term, the figures do not measure the same.

Most likely, the same holds true for numerically similar figures in institutional trust across the autocracy-vs-democracy aisle--not only because the objects of trust (autocracy in one case, democracy in the other) differ categorically but also because the same numbers result from exactly opposite psychological processes at the micro level. Thus, it would be helpful to find a way to tell apart the meanings of high institutional trust in autocracies from those in democracies.

This is where modernization theory, and especially its emancipatory psychological variant, can still be helpful. Our take on the story goes like this.

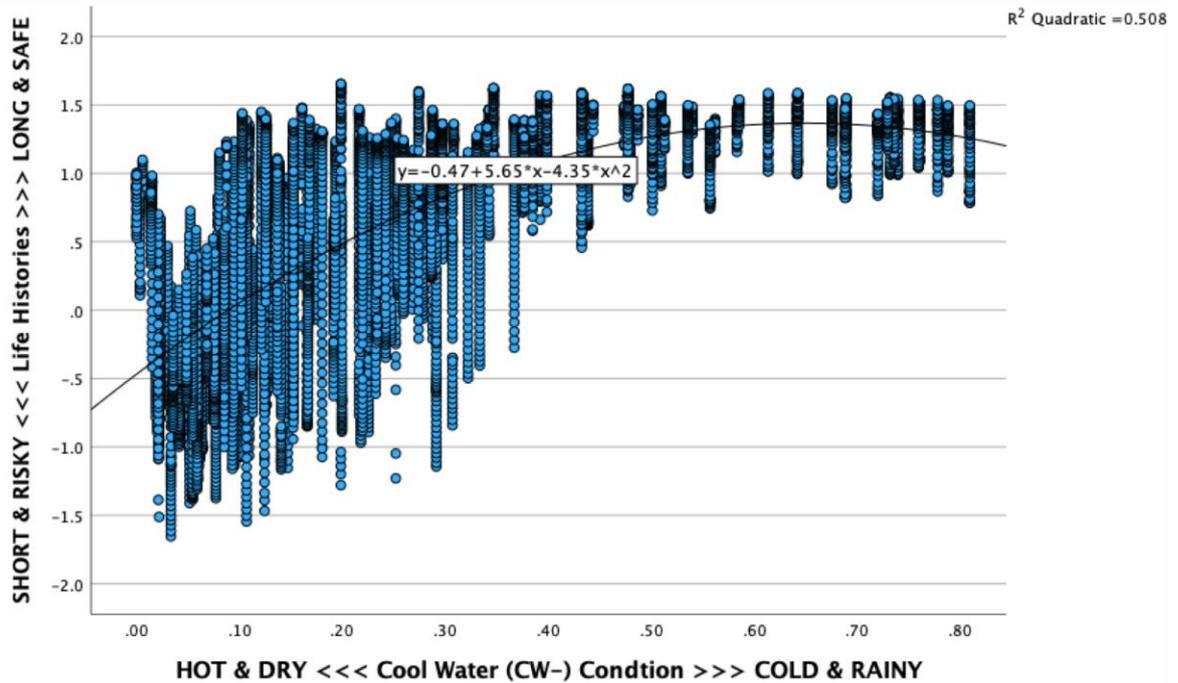
## 4 Evolutionary Psychological Forces: A Sequence Theory

We begin with Welzel et al.'s (2025) "cool water theory." It considers the geo-climatic conditions in human populations' ecological niches as the first difference from which further variation in developmental trajectories follows. The "cool water" condition combines mostly cool summers in the absence of debilitating heat peaks with steady rain throughout the year (no dry season) in relative proximity to coasts. The significance of the "cool water" condition lies in the fact that any emerging economy under this condition only functions through a decentral management of water, land and labor, with nuclear families operating as self-sufficient (re)production units at the grassroots of society. These features infuse local autonomies into the social fabric, which naturally goes hand in hand with consensual and later marriages together with lower fertilities and mortalities--thus, longer life histories than under climatically more problematic conditions, like heat and aridity under which agriculture necessitates central irrigation management (van Zanden et al. 2016).

Figure 3 presents the evidence, showing that a more pronounced "cool water" condition back in time began to shift the life histories of populations from the "short and risky" towards the "long and safe" end (the evidence presented starts in 1789).

Longer life histories, in turn, incentivize time investments into endeavors with a "delay of gratification," most notably education. Consequently, longer life histories favor the mobilization, rather than paralyzation, of populations' cognitive potential (Figure 4).

Figure 3: The Cool Water Condition and Short-vs-Long Life Histories



Source: Horizontal axis: Welzel et al. (2025), timeless. Vertical axis: Factorial summary of inverse female fertilities, inverse infant mortalities and life expectancies, 1789 till today from V-Dem (Lindberg et al. 2022).

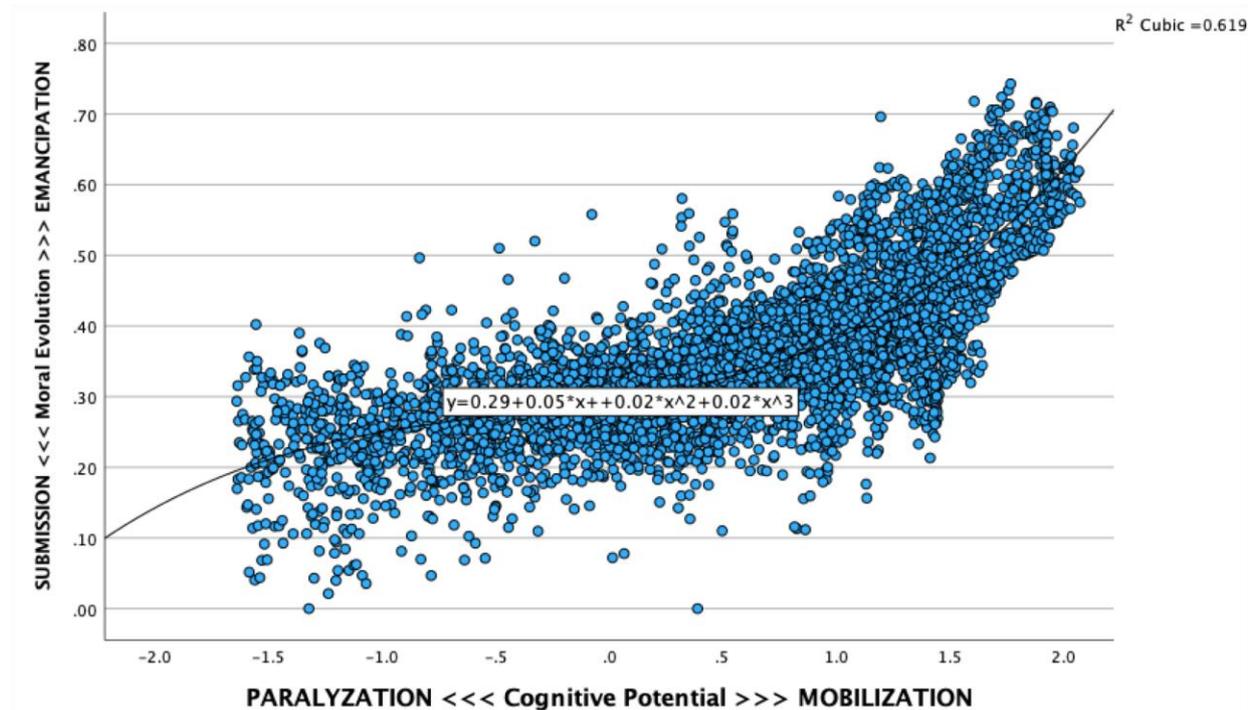
Figure 4: Short-vs-Long Life Histories and Paralyzed-vs-Mobilized Cognitive Potentials



Source: Horizontal axis: See vertical axis description of Figure 3. Vertical axis: Factorial summary of mean years of schooling ("e\_peavedu") and the GINI ("e\_gini") index of educational inequality (inverted), 1789 till today, from V-Dem (Lindberg et al. 2022).

As already outlined, when cognitive mobilization trains people's intellectual agency (i.e., the ability to think for oneself), an incremental evolutionary shift in moral values occurs through which humans' submissive instincts give way to our emancipatory drives (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Paralyzed-vs-Mobilized Cognitive Potentials and Submissive-vs-Emancipative Moral Values



Source: Horizontal axis: See vertical axis description in Figure 4. Vertical axis: Welzel et al. (2025).

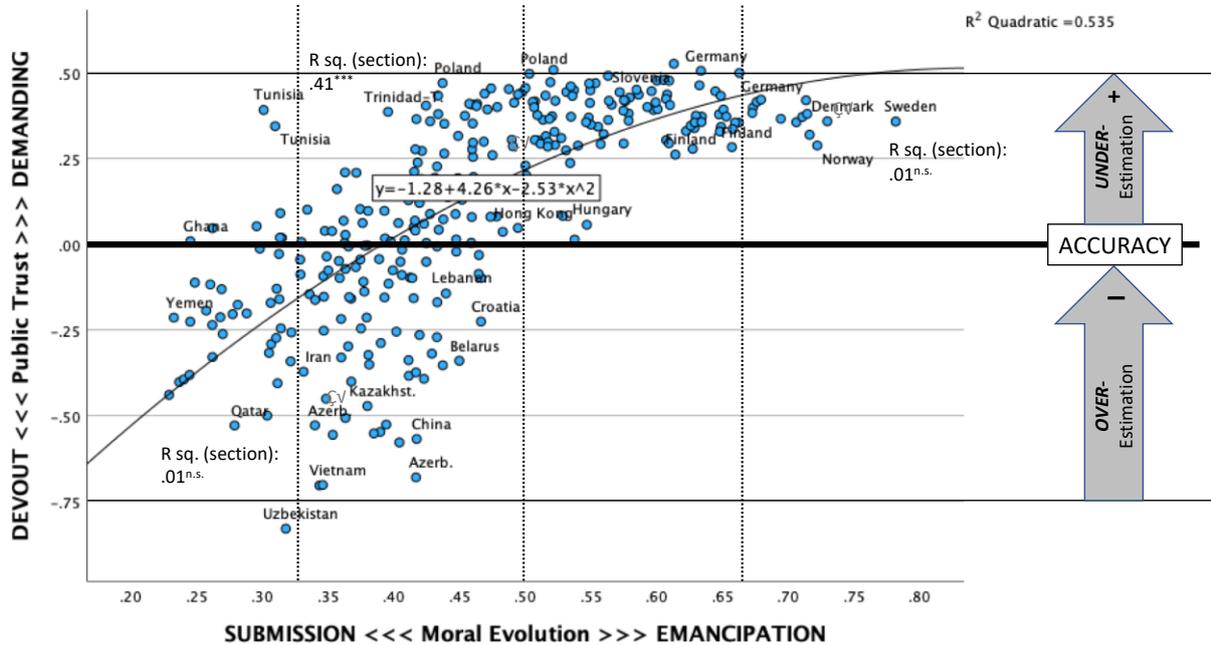
As emancipative values slowly but steadily replace submissive values, individuals' perceptions of their countries' institutional performance and quality do not necessarily turn more *accurate* (relative to expert judgements). Instead, they become more *critical* in that people judge institutional performance against more demanding expectation standards. Therefore, the more the moral orientation of a population is shifting from submissive to emancipative values, the farther does their institutional trust move from a ("*devout*") *over-estimation* of trustworthiness to a ("*demanding*") *under-estimation* of trustworthiness (Figure 6). As of note, this is not a *rational* move towards greater *accuracy* in citizens' trustworthiness judgements but a *moral* move towards greater *criticality* in their trustworthiness judgements.

Interestingly, the relationship is sectionally divided. Below an overall population level of emancipative values of roughly a third of the scale (.33 score points or 33%), a rise in emancipative values tends to lead citizens' "*devout*" over-estimations of their institutions' trustworthiness slowly towards greater accuracy, but rarely into "*demanding*" under-estimations. In between the interval from roughly .33 and .66 of an overall population level of emancipative values, this changes. In this interval, growing emancipative values guide citizens' judgements of their institutions' trustworthiness clearly out of the "*devout*" over-estimation zone and way into the "*demanding*"

under-estimation zone. But as overall population levels in emancipative values cross the two-thirds threshold (.66 scale points or 66%), the association pattern changes again, such that further rises of population levels in emancipative values stop to push the "demandingness" of citizens' judgements of their institutions' trustworthiness above a 50 percent (.50 score) under-estimation. Thus, widespread emancipative values embody a mysterious but effective 50% ceiling in citizens' demandingness, thus preventing citizens to become too over-critical or even cynical in their trustworthiness judgements.

The sectional partiality in the effect of citizens' submissive-vs-emancipative values on the devoutness-vs-demandingness of their trustworthiness judgements is a genuinely new discovery that needs further theorizing--thus, opening a promising line of forthcoming research. For now, we speculate that--once populations cross the two-thirds critical mass of emancipative values (i.e., the .66 score line on the horizontal line in Figure 6)--the pressures from these values on high institutional performance become so strong that the performance actually follows these pressures and improves indeed so much that citizens intuitively acknowledge the response and stop short before becoming over-critical and cynical: hence, the .50 score point ceiling on the vertical axis in Figure 6. Anecdotally, the location of the Scandinavian countries in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 6 lends credit to the supposition that high institutional performance in response to strong emancipative values puts the breaks on emancipative values' otherwise strong tendency to push further for more demandingness.

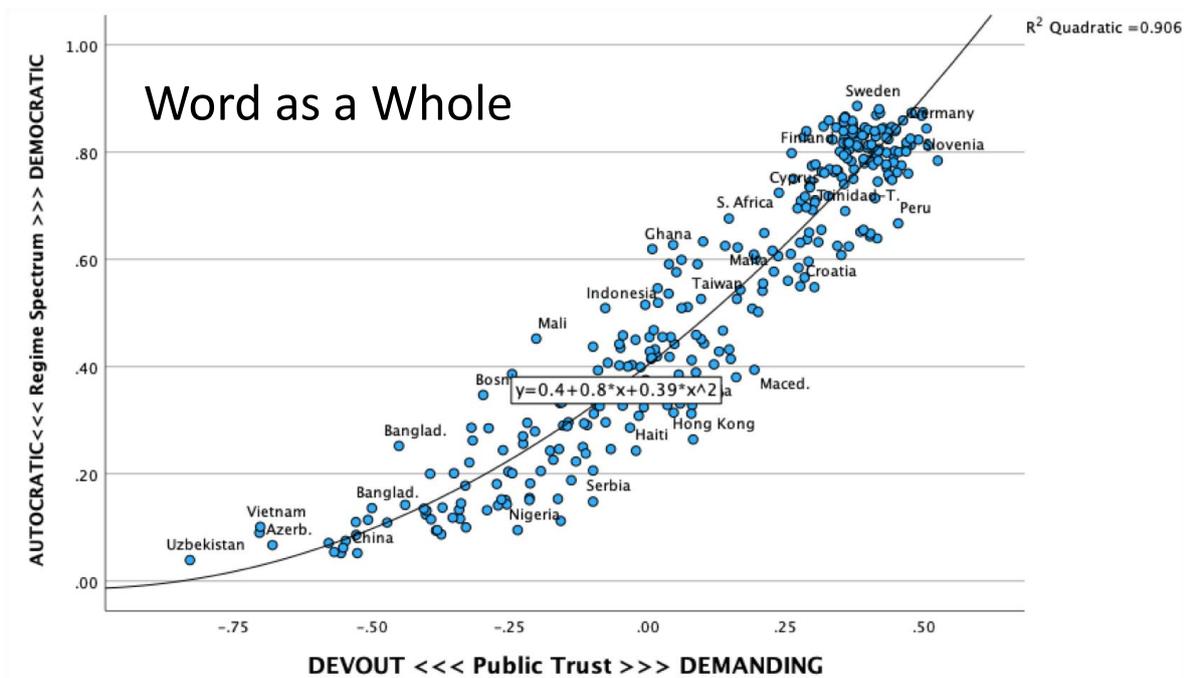
Figure 6: Submissive-vs-Emancipative Moral Values and Devout-vs-Demanding Public Trust



Source: Horizontal axis: Welzel et al. (2025). Vertical axis: Individuals' institutional trust (summarized across courts, police, civil service, governments, parliaments and parties) from the EVS/WVS (Haerpfer et al. 2022), 1983 till 2022, subtracted from V-Dem's (Lindberg et al. 2022) Rule of Law Index ("v2x\_rule") in order to measure civic over-vs-under estimations of institutional performance, such that laypersons' under-estimations of their institutions' trustworthiness ("demanding") relative of expert judgements receive positive scores, whereas over-estimations ("devout") relative to expert judgements yield negative scores.

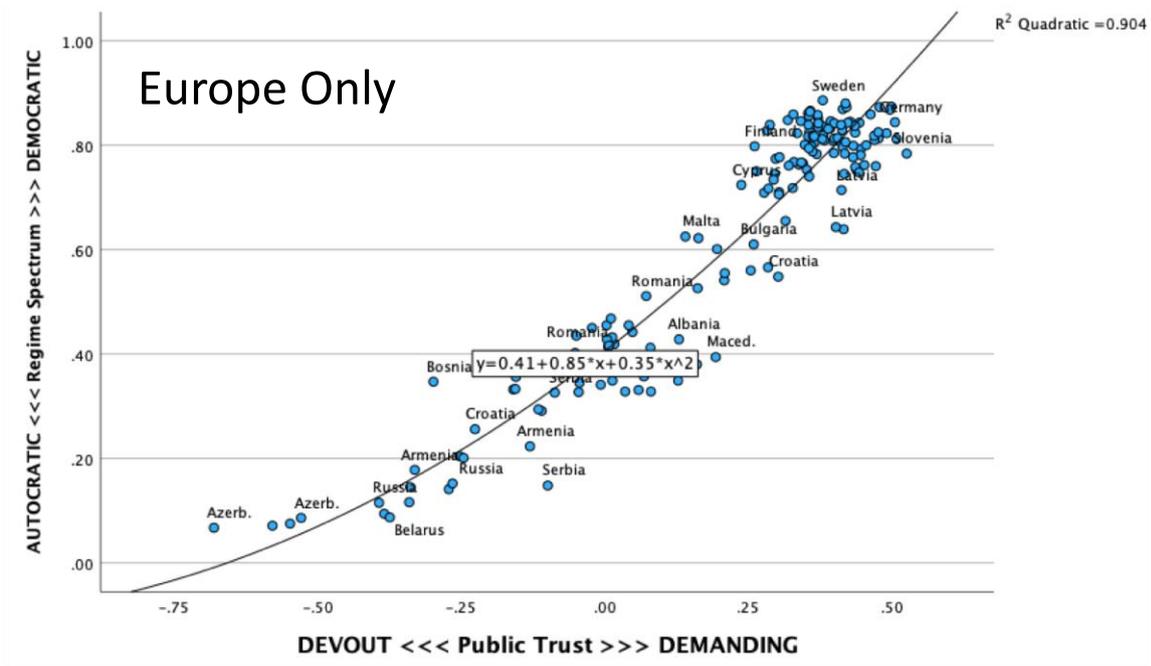
Finally, as Figures 7A and 7B illustrate, the further publics' judgements of their institutions' trustworthiness are located on the demanding (rather than devout) end of the spectrum, the less autocratic and the more democratic is the quality of countries' regimes on the coercion-vs-liberal spectrum. The explained variance amounts to a stunning 91% across the globe (upper diagram) and is not even a tiny bit smaller when zooming in into Europe only (lower diagram). Comparing the evidence in Figures 2 and 7 reveals a quintessential insight: While unqualified "raw" calculations of citizens' public trust fail entirely to show the theorized relationship with regimes' degree of autocracy-vs-democracy, distinguishing citizens' responses into "devout-vs-demanding" judgements of their institutions' trustworthiness reveal this relationship as close to perfection as social science data can get us--with "devout" over-estimations of institutional trustworthiness being the close ally of autocracy and "demanding" under-estimations being the intimate associate of democracy.

Figure 7A: Devout-vs-Demanding Trustworthiness Judgements and Autocratic-vs-Democratic Regime Qualities (world as a whole)



Source: Horizontal axis: See explanation for vertical axis in Figure 7. Vertical axis: V-Dem's (Lindberg et al. 2022) "Liberal Democracy Index" ("v2x\_libdem"), 1983 till today.

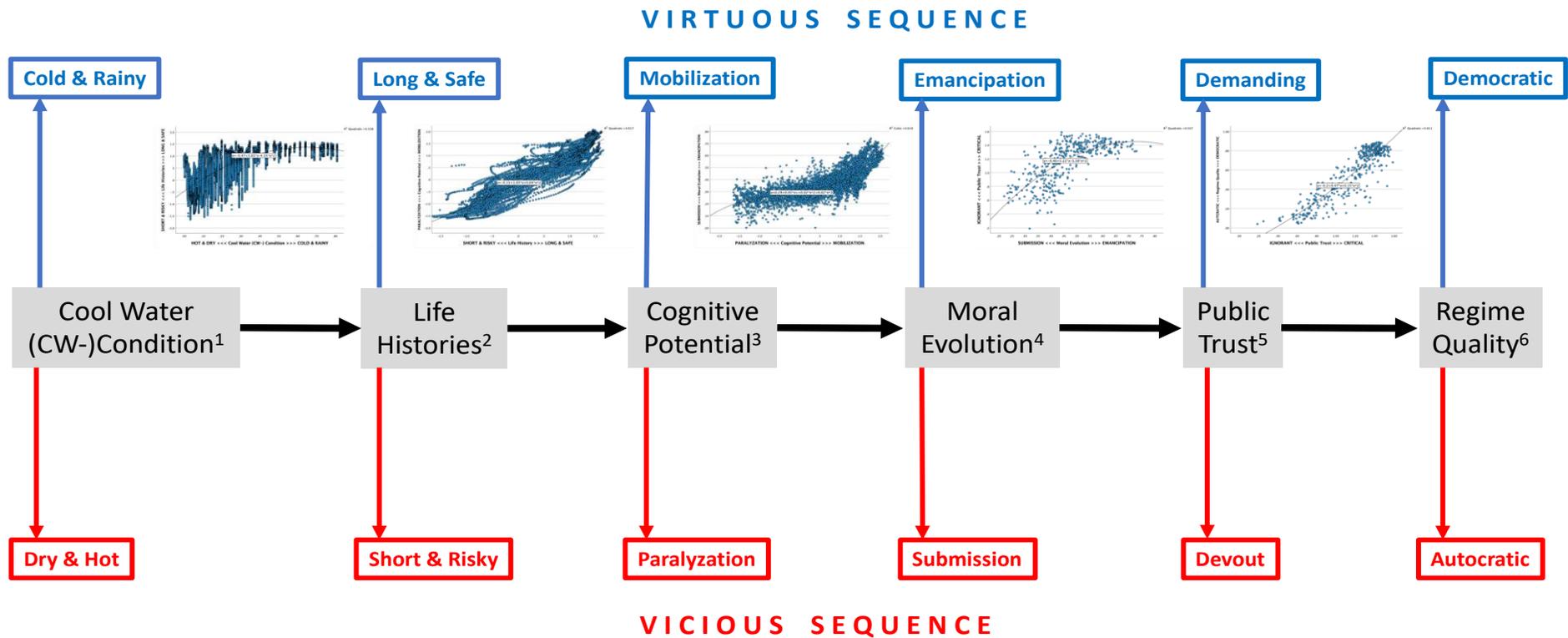
Figure 7B: Devout-vs-Demanding Trustworthiness Judgements and Autocratic-vs-Democratic Regime Qualities (Europe)



Source: Horizontal axis: See explanation for vertical axis in Figure 7. Vertical axis: V-Dem's (Lindberg et al. 2022) "Liberal Democracy Index" ("v2x\_libdem"), 1983 till today.

The logical sequence of all this evidence is summarized in Figure 8, which--as far as we can tell--is to date the most encompassing contextualization of global political regime variation in country populations' broader socio-psychological constitution.

Figure 8: Contextualizing Regime Variation on Autocracy-vs-Democracy within Emancipatory Socio-Psychological Drives on Societies' Grassroots



<sup>1</sup>Welzel et al. (2025): „cTw4“ (timeless). <sup>2</sup>Inverted child mortality, inverted fertility and life expectancy based on Gapminder (factor summarized, 1789 till today). <sup>3</sup>Tertiary enrollment and education GINI from Gapminder (factor summarized, 1789 till today). <sup>4</sup>Submissive-vs-Emancipative Values from Welzel et al. (2025) based on EVS/WVS data („EVI35\_002a“, 1983 till today). <sup>5</sup>Over-Estimation („devout“) versus Under-Estimation („demanding“) of public institutions’ trustworthiness from the EVS/WVS relative to actual institutional performance („v2x\_rule“ from V-Dem, 1983 till today). <sup>6</sup>V-Dem’s liberal democracy index („v2x-libdem“).

## 5 Conclusion: Psychological Drivers of Democratic Evolution

What matters for the success of Western liberal democracies in the system rivalry with their autocratic alternatives on the opposite end of the regime spectrum is not the raw level of citizens' trust in their countries' public institutions. What matters instead, is the emancipatory inspiration that shifts citizens trustworthiness judgements from a *devout* acceptance of *anything* to a *demanding* expectation of *something*.

Our analyses shed light on the grassroots psychological underpinnings of the deeper evolutionary forces and their selective impulses that channel societal dynamics into certain corridors of ascension or decay. Elites' historic decisions and the actions of "great persons" unfold within the limits of these corridors. To recognize this is not to place contextual determinism above actor voluntarism but to illuminate probabilism and the deeper-layered selective forces pushing situational actor choices more likely in one direction than another.

In the interplay of these evolutionary forces, institutional trust has its role, for sure, yet certainly not in the way conventionally assumed. The level and amount of trust as such is not the force that drives dynamics in favor or disfavor of liberal democracy. Instead, it is only the very demanding trust inspired by the spark of emancipation that helps democracy to prevail over autocracy in the global evolution of regimes.

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