



**TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies
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**POLITICAL POLARIZATION LONG-TERM
TRENDS AND EMERGING PATTERNS**

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Purpose and scope of the deliverable:

The objective of *D5.3 – Political polarization long-term trends and emerging patterns* is to present an aggregating analytical report discussing the long-term dynamics in polarization at the European,(macro)regional and national levels as well as addressing the prospects of societal and political cleavages shaping the European societies.

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Introduction

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 (D5.3)

The aim of the WP5 is to address the substantial and even fundamental changes regarding the socio-political and socioeconomic cleavages in European societies, including such trends as: erosion of old and emergence of new political cleavages; shift towards the axiological cleavage/s; radicalization of political attitudes and increased polarization; strengthening of 'bad civil society'; erosion of old identities and party alignments; emergence of new social movements and political parties; decline in party membership, individualization of citizens attitudes, etc. Analysis conducted in this WP will contribute to identifying and reflecting the most important emerging cleavages and polarizing trends related with the general trends of (de)globalization and (counter)cosmopolitanism, as well as internal division between and among European regions and within the EU-member states societies (new and/or transformed socio-economic divisions, intergeneration conflicts, gender, new forms of nativism and nationalism etc.).

Research scope of this WP includes identifying the quantitative indicators for the comprehensive assessment of political polarization; review the secondary data sources databases of polarization indicators; completion of a comprehensive database of quantitative indicators for the 1990-2022 period and make it available for the public use; producing analytical report reflecting the long-term dynamics in polarization at the European, (macro)regional and national level; preparation of a policy paper specifying a set of policy recommendations aiming on weakening the political polarization and promoting the centripetal solutions; as well as

presenting the outcomes to the scientific and policy-making community to obtain their constructive feedback (including NGOs, think-tanks etc.).

This analysis is a part of *Work Package 5 – New identities and emerging cleavages – implications for political polarization*, led by MUP-CZ (Team leader: Ladislav Cabada). While in D5.1 (Cabada & Charvát 2023) we presented basic contemporary theoretical reflections on polarization, new cleavages and identities, and in D5.2 (Brunner, Cabada, Charvát & Haerpfer 2024) a secondary dataset on the issue of polarization was prepared, the D5.3 analysis is intended to reflect key trends in the evolution of polarisation in a group of European democracies.

For much of the twentieth century, European politics was characterized by the stability of party competition. In recent years, on the other hand, there has been a growing body of research that suggests a potential transformation or even a crisis of European political partisanship. Moreover, in recent years there have been mounting concerns about the upsurge of backing for populist and/or anti-establishment political parties; indeed, more and more populist and anti-establishment political parties have succeeded in increasing the number of votes in elections, gaining national parliamentary representation, or even getting government roles. If a similar change were to occur in one or a few countries, it could be attributed to the specific social and/or political circumstances of that country or countries, but comparable trends are replicated across many European democracies, and more generally Western democracies.

Since there exists a general consensus among political science scholars that political parties are the central institutions of contemporary democratic governance, the commonality and consistency in trends among numerous European party systems deserves close attention. Or, this forces us to investigate the broader social developments that affect contemporary European democracies over the past three decades. Hence, this paper posits that this trend is not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon, but rather the inevitable consequence of a long-term development that has its origins in the second half of the twentieth century, which has recently accelerated under the influence of several crises that European politics and societies have faced in recent decades. At the same time, it identifies the main sources of this gradual transformation to be social modernization and globalization, which are changing the traditional roles of political parties, and the need for party systems to adapt to these processes.

Bearing in mind that political parties (not only) in European democracies are undergoing a multi-faceted transformation (e.g., the decline in relative and absolute party membership since the 1950s as a result of social modernization, a shift towards a more candidate-centered voting, and thus the personalization of politics due to the modernization of political communication, etc.), the most evident and direct impact of (the transformation of) partisanship can be observed in (changes in) electoral behavior. Indeed, elections typically signify a competition among (societal) groups and their conflicting interests. Given that elections lie at the heart of the relationship among citizens, political parties, and democracy, this study focuses primarily on contemporary electoral politics and the underlying base of electoral choice, and in particular on the weakening and transformation of partisan ties within the electorate (i.e., partisan dealignment), a relationship that was once considered a crucial factor in the process of representative democracy.

The issue under study is thus approached from a sociological-historical perspective and is drawn upon Rokkanian concept of political cleavages. This theoretical framework enables the

capture of changes in the social backgrounds of voters over time, thereby allowing the description of the broad effects of various influences, such as societal modernization or the multifaceted crises of recent decades, on voting behaviour. We begin by discussing the origins of party competition in Europe, with the primary ideological foundations of party politics in Western societies were defined by the political cleavages that emerged as a result of the large-scale societal structural transformations brought about by the National and Industrial Revolutions (the Rokkanian concept of political cleavages). What follows is a discussion of the changes brought about by social modernization and globalization, in particular the emergence and sources of new cleavages. Even though party competition in European democracies had remained “class-based” until the 1980s, from the late 1960s at the latest a process of gradual transformation of its nature could be observed in the background, which Ronald Inglehart called the “silent revolution”. In Western societies at this time, affluence and political information began to spread, the processes of social modernization and incipient globalization have brought about significant socio-demographic changes, e.g. urbanization, secularization, the number of college-educated and well-off middle-class professionals grew, etc. As a result, new demands are coming to the forefront of the agenda and political competition is beginning to transform from party-based to issue-based. This will give rise to new (niche) parties, but at the same time it will gradually strengthen the importance of the cultural dimension of political competition, opening a window of opportunity for social-conservative populist parties and politicians, what Norris and Inglehart refer to as “cultural backlash”.

Hence, the inevitable result of this development has been the growing polarization of inter-party competition in European democracies. A significant role in the polarization of contemporary societies is played by a psychology based on (dis)trust between members of different – not necessarily antagonistic – social groups, as well as on distrust in political institutions, especially when they are dominated by political parties/actors representing opposite political camps and different value systems. While trust or rationally formulated distrust or rather dissatisfaction is mostly transformed into a standard, ideologically based polarization, distrust can manifest itself in two basic forms. The first of these takes the form of declining interest or disinterest in politics and is expressed by abstention in elections or by the change of party preferences and is thus a determinant of electoral volatility. However, since populism provides a strong anti-institutional impulse, a clear threat to democracy is populist or extreme polarization, i.e. a shift of voters away from mainstream parties. Support for populist and/or extremist political parties leads to a weakening of the pro-democracy consensus, extreme polarization based on affective perceptions of and a priori distrust of political opponents (as well as affectively and irrationally based trust in the in-group and its political representatives), and ultimately to a weakening of democracy.

Thus, the objectives of the paper are to examine how different levels of political trust affect political polarization and what are the sources of protest (anti-establishment) electoral politics, and what are the implications of these developments for the stability of democracy. In light of the growing polarization of European (party) politics and the concerns about its potential impact on the stability of European democracies, the study seeks to explore the dynamic relationship between party system polarization and political trust. It focuses on how party system polarization affects political trust by asking how ideological polarization and political trust are correlated. To this end, the Eurobarometer data on political trust and the data from the Manifesto Project on how different political parties within thirty European countries express their ideological stances over time (between 1990 and 2019) were utilized. Combining these data, a

panel dataset of 155 observations was created. The analysis employed a fixed-effects (FE) model, regressing the outcome variables on the quantitative measure of ideological party polarization. When estimating the models, the causality from party system polarization to political trust was assumed.

The research finds that average European party system polarization is increasing slightly over time, with the “political system”, “welfare and quality of life”, and “fabric of society” domains appearing to be the drivers of this upward trend. The research also suggests that there exist significant relationships only for two ideological domains, “freedom and democracy” (negative and significant estimates for the outcome variables trust in parties and parliaments) and “social groups” (positive and significant estimates for the outcome variables trust in parties, parliaments, and the government).

1 Emerging Political Cleavages, Party System Polarization, and Political Trust in European Politics: The Role of Ideological Party Polarization

Since modern (representative) democracies rely on citizens' support, the concern with political (institutional) trust is deeply rooted in ensuring the survival of representative democracy (e.g., Almond & Verba 1963; Crozier et al. 1975; Mair 2013; OECD 2017; Norris 2011, 2022; Carstens 2023; and many others). Or as van der Meer and Zmerli puts it, political trust “functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine” (2017: 1). From this perspective, public trust in political institutions is considered a crucial component of regime support, serving as a powerful resource for political legitimacy and a determinant of regime stability (e.g., Easton 1965, 1975; Putnam 1993; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017; Haerpfer et al. 2019), with a lack of trust (mistrust) or even political distrust having been shown to have negative consequences for the development of the political system (e.g., Crozier et al. 1975; Mishler & Rose 1997, 2001, 2005; Norris /ed./ 1999; Dalton 2004a; Norris 2011).

Hence, contemporary democracies have long been linked to concerns about their possible downfall caused by a lack of political trust; indeed, to this day, much of the scholarly literature even considers declining or low levels of political trust as a risk to representative democracy (the “democracy-in-crisis” argument).¹ At the same time, there is a wealth of evidence that public trust in political institutions is quite low (Dalton & Weldon 2005; Kim 2007; Okolikj et al. 2024) and has been waning in recent decades in many European democracies (e.g., Dalton 1999, 2004a, 2004b, 2019; Kaase 1999; Mair et al. /eds./ 2004; Norris 2011; Mair 2013; Petrarca et al. 2022).

If the general assumption among political scientists is that institutions matter, it seems worth following an institutionalist approach to political trust. And in this context, the evaluation-based and representation-based nature of political culture deserves particular attention. The trust-as-evaluation approach understands political trust as a form of generalized citizens' evaluation of perceived or actual performance of political institutions which constitutes a powerful resource

¹ While the “democracy-in-crisis” argument assumes that low and declining levels of political trust threaten the legitimacy, stability and survival of representative democracy, a more optimistic view argues that the emergence of “critical citizens” (Norris /ed./ 1999; Norris 2011; Dawson & Krakoff 2024) may strengthen the accountability of political institutions and actors, and thereby democratic governance itself. However, the lack of empirical evidence led Marien and Hooghe to conclude that “most of this debate is being conducted in the absence of reliable knowledge about the possible social and political consequences of lower levels of political trust”. And as a result, “we do not know whether the stability of democratic political systems is indeed threatened by low levels of political trust” (2011: 268; see also Gabriel 2017). Hence, recent critical studies have suggested treating political trust as a multidimensional concept. This implies, among other things, distinguishing between political mistrust as the absence of trust, political distrust as the opposite of trust, and political scepticism as the withholding of trust judgments (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017; see also Mishler & Rose 1997; Bertou 2019; Norris 2022; Carstens 2023), each of which may have different implications for contemporary representative democracies. While declining or low levels of political trust need not be a source of threat to contemporary democracies, political mistrust can be understood as a healthy scepticism which, in turn, strengthens representative democracy by demanding accountability. But once political trust or sceptical mistrust turn into political distrust as a cynical rejection of the trustworthiness of political institutions, representative democracy really comes under threat of survival because distrusting citizens disengage or even support non-democratic political actors (Carstens 2023; see also Voogd et al. 2019; Dawson & Krakoff 2024).

for political legitimacy. An important prerequisite for this perspective is that a citizen believes “that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour” (OECD 2017: 42; see also Miller & Listhaug 1990; Hardin 1999; Mishler & Rose 2001; Hetherington 2005).

At the same time, political trust involves the feeling that the citizen is represented, and that the system protects her/his interests (Hetherington & Rudolph 2015; Martini & Quaranta 2019, 2020). Political trust is thus a middle-range indicator of political support (Zmerli et al. 2007), which is somewhat more abstract than electoral support, but on the other hand more specific than the overarching democratic principles (Dalton 2004a: 5–7; Voogd et al. 2019: 671). Last but not least, we approach political trust as “an essential attitude that translates directly in political behaviour” (Carstens 2023: 300; see also Rudolph 2017; Voogd et al. 2019), both in elections and beyond. And since it is competitive elections that for many authors are the cornerstone of contemporary democracy, and thus enjoy a prominent position within contemporary democratic institutions, as they allow ordinary citizens to participate regularly in the political process, our attention turns to electoral politics.

However, to understand electoral politics in European democracies (and its changes), we need to look at the underlying foundations on which electoral choice is based. Since contemporary democracies are based on the values of competition and pluralism, democratic representation requires comparisons between various options. To this end, competitive elections serve as a mechanism that helps to crystallize the conflicting interests that exist within a society and take the form of competition between rival (societal) groups, in particular political parties that provide voters with policy programmes. Hence, European political systems operate as party democracies, whereby political parties play a crucial role in linking citizens’ preferences and views on important policy issues to the decision-making process that is essential for representative democracies and, as a result, seem to be the central means of political representation in contemporary democracies, with the regular and legitimate functioning of political parties thus being a key precondition for the stability of the democratic system and trust in democracy in general.

Given that European democracies operate as party democracies, our research primarily centres on political parties and policy programmes on which political parties based their electoral appeals. Party policy programmes often grew out of long-standing social conflicts that gave rise to political cleavages. Although the 1960 study *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) had already revealed that voters have stable affective attachments to political parties, bringing the issue of party alignment to the forefront of contemporary political analysis, it was not until Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) seminal study on cleavage structures and voter–party alignments that the topic was addressed in a more systematic way. Since then, scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that in established democracies party identifications acted as long-standing psychological predispositions that constituted a cognitive mechanism for orienting individuals to politics.

From the point of view of our analysis, the cleavage theory is particularly noteworthy in that it considers interest antagonism growing out of conflicting demands and expectations to be a key and characteristic feature of democratic societies. Notwithstanding the considerable shifts that have occurred in both societal and political cleavages over the past four decades or more, we adhere to the view, as set forth, for example, by Sass and Kuhnle (2023), that the cleavage theory remains a valuable lens through which to examine the contemporary political conflicts.

2 Emerging political cleavages and party system polarization

For much of the twentieth century, European politics was characterized by the stability of party competition, with a gradual narrowing of ideological differences (ideological convergence) between the main left-wing and right-wing parties during the post-World War II decades (Kitschelt 1994, 2007). However, the modernization process has created tremendous changes in society and politics. In Western societies at this time, affluence and political information began to spread, the processes of social modernization and incipient globalization have brought about significant socio-demographic changes, e.g. people moved from the countryside to the cities, the number of people attending church declined, the number of college-educated and well-off middle-class professionals grew, etc. At the same time, these developments gave rise to the “assertive citizen” (Inglehart 1977), emphasizing self-expression and direct participation in politics.²

In line with these developments, politics remained secondary behind more immediate life concerns, and instead new demands came to the forefront of the agenda. This, in turn, has exerted pressure on the established European party systems and facilitated a process of gradual transformation in the nature of political competition, which Inglehart (1977) called the “silent revolution”. As a result, political partisanship has undergone a significant and multifaceted transformation. The relatively broad (liberal) consensus embodied in the post-WWII catch-all parties “concert” and centripetal orientation started to deteriorate already in the 1960s with the appearance of challenger outsider (niche) parties, growing from the new social movements or settled in the radical or extremist positions.³ The niche parties rejected the traditional class targeting of politics and socio-economic cleavages in society (Meguid 2005: 347–348) and developed a different strategy based on the politicisation of selected issues and/or policies while competing primarily on a small number of non-economic issues (Wagner 2012: 848).

The structure of political cleavages that once framed party competition and provided voters with a simple framework for making their electoral choices have weakened, thereby opening the way for the emergence of post-material cleavages, which subsequently became one of the sources of the later spread of elite-challenging attitudes. More specifically, the salience of the classic long-established cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) focused on economic distribution (e.g. Kitschelt 1995) has declined, while the new cultural issues have become more salient as citizens in many Western democracies have expanded their interests to include non-economic, quality-of-life issues that constitute a new post-material agenda, with the major shifts taking place between the 1970s and the 1990s. New cultural issues have thus brought new (political) tensions to contemporary representative democracies, especially in terms of political (partisan) competition over new cleavages beyond economic issues, such as the environment, sustainable development, immigration and other liberal policies.

More recently, right populist and far-right parties have mobilized conservative reactions to post-materialist issues (e.g., Kitschelt 1995; Mudde 2007; Arzheimer 2009; Bušíková 2014; Kriesi 2014; Norris & Inglehart 2018; Cabada & Charvát 2023; Dennison & Kriesi 2023). Last but not least, attention to these new issues has been paralleled by a general growth in issue-based

² Norris’s (1999, 2011) conceptualization of “critical citizens” and Welzel’s (2013) “theory of emancipation” further elaborates this view.

³ In Western political science, Communist, environmental (“green”) and extreme-nationalist parties have generally been identified as niche parties (e.g. Adams et al. 2006), while Meguid (2005) also adds ethno-territorial parties.

voting, even for “old” issues, such as the size of the welfare state and the overall scope of government. These developments have resulted in the new cultural divide as an antagonism between the universalistic convictions of the New Left and the communitarian-traditionalist defence of the traditional national community by the populist right. All of these differences naturally give rise to political polarization.

Furthermore, the cleavages may reinforce, overlap or cut across each other, and also vary in intensity, making some cleavages salient and dominant, while others remain latent. Moreover, the political weight of cleavages and their position in the cleavage hierarchy may vary across countries and change over time (Sass & Kuhnle 2023; see also Dalton 2021). As a result, different configurations of cleavages are observed to create unique cleavage structures within particular political systems (Flora 1999).

To sum up, many Western democracies have shifted from “class-based” to “multidimensional” (or “multiconflictual”) party systems, in which elites have a greater influence on policy programmes than the rest of the electorate (Gethin et al. 2022). The shift in values has been accompanied by an increase in political polarization in many countries, and therefore the recent political polarization within European societies has reflected the set of new and reshaped cleavages and the ideological distances between political parties. If most of the twentieth century could be described as the century of political parties, recent decades have seen an increasing number of scholarly findings about the crisis of political parties, or even concerns about their future existence. One manifestation of this change is that citizens increasingly perceive political parties as elite-driven and unrepresentative of the broader public and generally untrustworthy, resulting in a gradual weakening of partisan identifications among voters and, more generally, of the ties between political parties and the mass public.

Hence, the importance of long-term party predispositions for electoral choice and cleavage-based appeals has been declining in last decades, resulting, *inter alia*, in the emergence of new cleavages and in the growing importance of issue-based voting (at the expense of the formerly predominant class-based voting). Furthermore, the weakening of partisan ties (dealignment) has led to a simultaneous decline in voter party consistency from election to election and an increase in electoral volatility (i.e. the change in party vote shares between adjacent elections), thereby providing opportunities for new political parties to mobilize support and gain electoral support, while established (and regularly ruling) parties suffered electoral losses (e.g., Meguid 2005; van Spanje 2010; Wagner 2012; Bolleyer 2013; Meyer & Miller 2015).

3 Party system polarization and political trust: expectations

Most of the literature on the relationship between voting behaviour and political trust suggests that citizens disenchanted with politics and dissatisfied citizens with low levels of political trust are more likely to be absent from elections or to cast votes for challenger outsider (anti-establishment) parties (Miller & Listhaug 1990; Hetherington 1999; Hooghe et al. 2011; Hooghe & Marien 2013; Mair 2013; Eder et al. /eds./ 2015; Hooghe & Dassoneville 2018; Petrarca et al. 2022; Addeo et al. 2024; Okolikj et al. 2024; see also Citrin 1974; Mair et al. 2004). As a result, declining or low political trust drives voters to change their party preferences and is thus a determinant of electoral volatility (Dalton 2004a; Dalton & Weldon 2005; Voogd et al. 2019).

And since populism provides a “strong anti-institutional impulse” (Kriesi 2014: 363), low and declining levels of political trust are seen as a possible reservoir of voters for radical (Cheles et al. /eds./ 1995; Lubbers et al. 2002; Ivarsflaten 2005; Bélanger & Aarts 2006; Mudde 2007; Arzheimer 2009; Werts et al. 2013; Buřtiková 2014) and/or populist parties (Fieschi & Heywood 2004; Ivarsfalten 2008; Bélanger 2017; Rooduijn 2018; Jiang & Ma 2020; Mauk 2020; Petrarca et al. 2022; Carstens 2023). Once successful, these parties will persist in emphasizing the issues that have facilitated their parliamentary representation, while the established parties will also respond (Bischof and Wagner 2019; Dalton 2021), thus further polarizing the political competition. However, in relating these developments to political trust, Mauk (2020) concludes that the entry of anti-establishment parties is less detrimental to political trust than previous research might suggest.

While this is a simplification of more complex political competition that often involves multiple dimensions of political (societal) conflict, following Downs (1957), Sartori (1976) and other scholars, we argue that political competition is structured along the unidimensional left–right axis, with positions on this scale summarize the issues and cleavages that structure (national) political competition (Dalton 2021). In this context, we approach the party system polarization as a dispersion of all political parties along the left–right axis. This implies that the ideological views of the political parties in question become more distant from the political centre, thus increasing the variance of positions. More specifically, the more the political parties are positioned around the centre of the left–right axis, the more centrifugal and moderate the political competition is; and conversely, the more the main political parties are close to the edges of such an ideological spectrum, the more polarized the party system is.

Since party system polarization represents a crucial parameter of a functioning party competition (Schmitt & Franzmann 2020), or “the quality of party competition” (Dalton 2008), the question remains whether and, if so, how the party system polarization affects political trust. Hence, the presented paper explores the dynamic relationship between emerging political cleavages, party system polarization, and political trust, focusing specifically on how ideological party polarization affects trust in partisan political institutions, such as the government, parliament and political parties. Influenced by the inspiration above, we ask how party system polarization and trust in political institutions are correlated.

If in recent years it has been possible to observe an increase in the popularity of challenger outsider (anti-establishment) parties that accentuate a strong anti-institutional impulse, we expect that *in line with these developments there is an increase in party system polarization* (Hypothesis 1). Since high levels of party system polarization involve ideological disagreement

and inter-group animosity between supporters of opposing political parties (Iyengar et al. 2012; see also Bischoff & Wagner 2019) and therefore is often accompanied by a lack of willingness to cooperate between rival political parties, thus undermining the rules of competition by the political actors, we posit that *a higher level of party system polarization fuels the decline in political trust* (Hypothesis 2).

Furthermore, in light of the aforementioned factors, namely the facts that political competition has become increasingly issue-based in recent decades, that there is a distinctive cleavage structure across political systems, and that European democracies have shifted from “class-based” to “multiconflictual” party systems, with different types of issues being emphasized to varying degrees, we expect that *it is possible to observe that different kinds of issues (domains), such as external relations, democracy, political system, economy, welfare, or social groups, exhibit varying degrees of polarization* (Hypothesis 3). Last but not least, we hypothesise that *the polarization within each domain has varying impacts on political trust* (Hypothesis 4).

4 Data

For our empirical analysis, we utilized data from several sources to estimate the relationship between ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions. We derived our outcome variables from the Eurobarometer data on trust in political institutions, focusing on trust in political parties, national parliaments, and national governments. We obtained the raw data for our explanatory variables from the Manifesto Project, which provides information on political party manifestos for various countries. The Manifesto Project data covers a range of variables under different domains on party stances regarding economic, social, and political issues. The resulting panel dataset covers thirty countries, namely all EU Member States, Iceland, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, and spans the time period from 1990 to 2019, thus providing a total of 155 observations.

To obtain a proxy for ideological party polarization, we utilized the Manifesto Project dataset by focusing on how different parties within a country express their ideological stances over time. According to the Manifesto Project dataset codebook, each variable indicates “the share of quasi-sentences in the respective category calculated as a fraction of the overall number of allocated codes per document” (Lehmann et al. 2024: 10).

Our approach involved computing the variance of these shares across parties within each country for each year. Specifically, we measured the degree of ideological party polarization by obtaining the variance in how often parties address specific issues in their manifestos. We assumed that more polarized party landscapes exhibit higher variance and less polarized party landscapes lower variance. The underlying intuition is that similar parties will likely address specific issues with similar frequency, whereas parties with different ideological positions have more variation between their ideological stances. With our proxy, we aim to capture how ideological stances differ across parties, thereby providing a quantitative measure of party polarization.



5 Ideological Party Polarization across European Democracies

We plot our quantitative measure to observe how European ideological party polarization has evolved over time. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive view of the average party polarization for each domain across European democracies from 1990 to 2019. This figure shows that average European party polarization weakly increases over time, as the overall trend line indicates. Specifically, the “political system,” “welfare and quality of life,” and “fabric of society” domains appear to be the drivers of this upward trend.

In contrast, ideological party polarization within the other domains does not exhibit a similar upward trend. Instead, it remains relatively static, with values fluctuating around a constant mean. Moreover, we note that average European party polarization experiences significant fluctuations across all domains. These variations possibly suggest the presence of a seasonal pattern. However, due to the limited number of observations in our data and the restricted number of countries and periods of analysis, the reliability of the graph is uncertain. Outliers might drive the observed trend, and the observed fluctuations over time might decrease with a larger dataset.

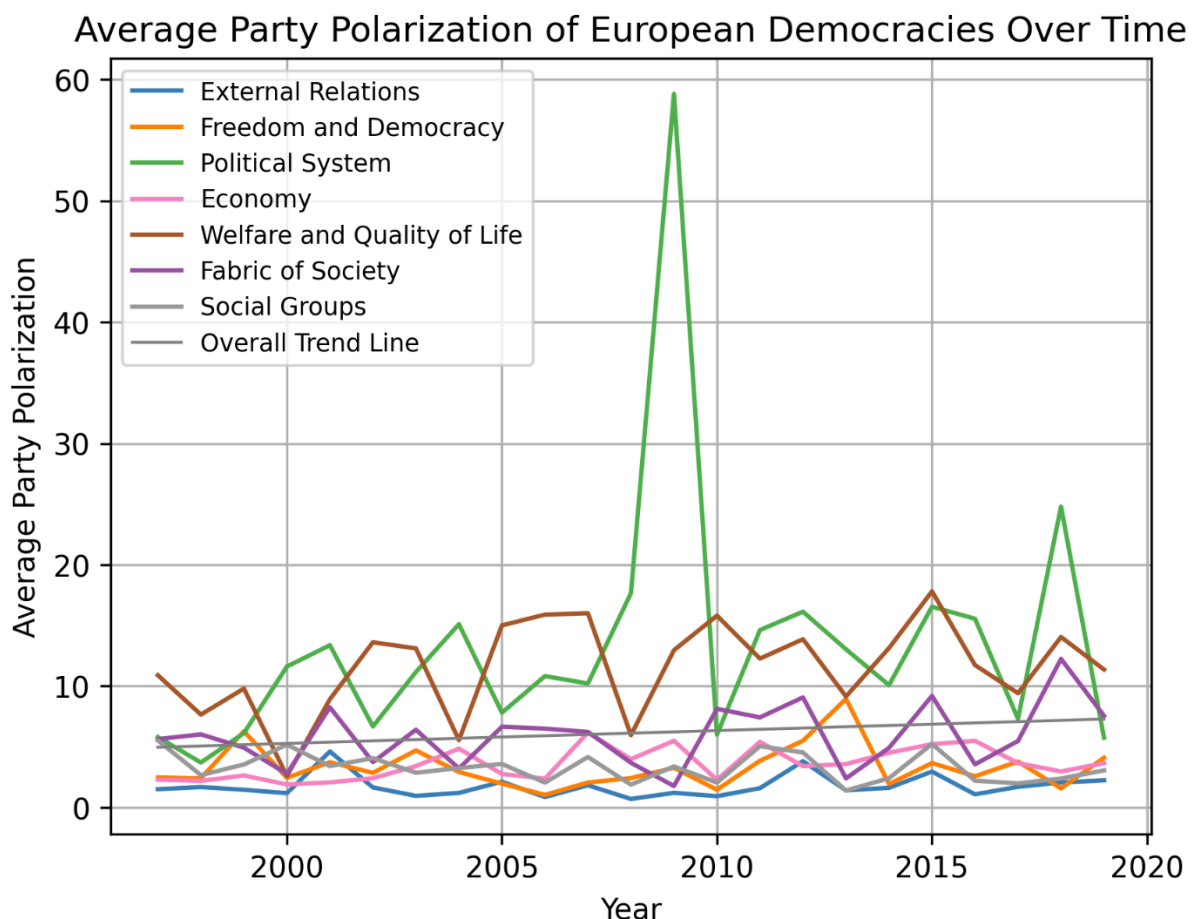


Figure 1, Average Party Polarization of European Democracies Over Time.

Source: Authors.

6 Methodology

To analyze the relationship between party system polarization and trust in political institutions, we used a fixed-effects (FE) model, regressing our outcome variables on our quantitative measure of ideological party polarization. Specifically, we regressed trust in political parties, trust in national parliaments, and trust in national government on our measure of ideological party polarization, aggregated in the respective Manifesto project domains: “external relations,” “freedom and democracy,” “political system,” “economy,” “welfare and quality of life,” “the fabric of society,” and “social groups.” We chose the FE model to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and over time, therefore controlling for time-invariant characteristics within countries. However, due to autoregression in our data, which persisted despite using various methods to control for it, such as Feasible Generalized Least Squares (FGLS), we chose the First Differences (FD) estimator. This approach helped us obtain results where the model’s residuals did not exhibit significant autocorrelation, enhancing our results’ robustness.

When estimating our models, we assumed causality from party system polarization to trust in political institutions. However, we must acknowledge that the true causal relationship between ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions could be bidirectional or reversed. For example, higher ideological polarization may lead to lower trust in political institutions, leading people to vote for parties at the political spectrum’s extremes. This, in turn, can increase party polarization as parties are incentivized to diverge further from the political centre. Therefore, the results of our empirical analysis should be interpreted considering our assumption about the direction of causality. Despite this obvious shortcoming, our results provide valuable insights into the potential impact of ideological party polarization on trust in political institutions. Specifically, our methodology enables us to identify how ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions correlate. Estimating this correlation is the minimum result we can achieve; under the assumption of a correctly identified direction of causality, our results can also provide insights into how ideological party polarization affects trust in political institutions.

7 Results

In our analysis, the outcome variables are the share of people who report positive trust levels in political institutions, which, in our case, is trust in political parties, national parliaments, and national governments. Our primary explanatory variables are the natural logarithm of the variance of differing political stances in manifestos across parties in each country and each year, grouped by the Manifesto Project’s domains as elaborated in the methodology section of this paper (our quantitative measure of party system polarization).

Our results show significant relationships between party system polarization and trust in political institutions for two domains. Notably, we got negative and significant estimates for the domain “freedom and democracy”⁴ for the outcome variables trust in political parties and parliaments. This indicates that higher ideological party polarization in “freedom and

⁴ The domain “freedom and democracy” consists of the issues of freedom and human rights, democracy, and constitutionalism (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 13).

democracy” correlates with lower trust in political parties and parliaments. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the log variance of party positions within the “freedom and democracy” domain goes with an approximate 1.39 percentage point decrease in the share of people who trust political parties and a 2.57 percentage point decrease in the share of people who trust parliaments. These results indicate that public trust in political parties and parliaments tends to decrease when parties are more polarized on issues regarding “freedom and democracy”.

This phenomenon may be related to the recent rise of the challenger outsider parties. In order to win voter support, challenger outsider parties need to find a niche through which they can engage voters and break through. However, as a result of the former ideological convergence of the established parties, the challenger outsider parties have often to adopt strong anti-establishment, anti-institutional and therefore more extreme policy positions to attract voters, thereby increasing the ideological party polarization. Moreover, once successful, these parties will continue to emphasize the issues that enabled them to gain parliamentary representation, which will not go unchallenged by the established political parties more vigorously defending their original positions and warning of the threats associated with the entry of the challenger outsider parties, thus further increasing ideological party polarization.

Table 1: First Differences Regression Results

	Outcome Variables		
	Trust in Political Parties	Trust in Parliament	Trust in Government
external_relations	-0.996 (0.756)	-0.970 (1.604)	-2.365 (1.919)
freedom_democracy	-1.387** (0.417)	-2.566** (0.612)	-1.111 (0.868)
political_system	-0.335 (0.390)	-0.954 (0.943)	-0.993 (1.227)
economy	-1.222+ (0.666)	-0.865 (1.984)	-1.336 (2.453)
welfare_quality_life	-0.060 (0.641)	-0.509 (1.625)	-2.583 (1.800)
fabric_society	-1.357 (0.908)	-4.717+ (2.355)	-4.114+ (2.251)
social_groups	2.191* (1.005)	4.996** (1.574)	6.447** (1.644)
Obs	58	58	58
Adj. R ²	0.284	0.245	0.248
F-stat	2.892	2.365	2.402

Source: Authors.

Conversely, our analysis showed positive and significant estimates for the domain “social groups”⁵ for the outcome variables trust in political parties, parliaments, and governments. This indicates that higher ideological polarization in “social groups” correlates with higher trust in

⁵ The domain “social groups” consists of the issues of labour groups, agriculture and farmers, middle class and professional groups, underprivileged minority groups, and non-economic demographic groups (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 21–22).



political parties, parliaments, and governments. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the log variance of party positions within the “social groups” domain goes with an approximate 2.2 percentage point, 5 percentage point, and 6.5 percentage point increase in the share of people who trust political parties, parliaments, and governments. This result indicates that diverging stances on social groups issues may enhance public trust in political parties, parliaments, and governments.

If it has been noted above that the new cultural issues have brought new political tensions into contemporary representative democracies, especially beyond economic issues, it is somewhat surprising that the research has not yielded similar findings for some of the other ideological and issue domains, such as “external relations”,⁶ “welfare and quality of life”,⁷ and “fabric of society”,⁸ as for “freedom and democracy”. Instead, the research did not provide conclusive evidence for the other five ideological and issue domains as the estimates were not statistically significant, and therefore it is not possible to draw meaningful conclusions about how these ideological domains are correlated with trust in partisan political institutions. The explanation of this phenomenon would certainly deserve attention in further research. With regard to the new geopolitical situation in the 2020s, it can nevertheless be expected that, especially in the case of the domain “external relations”, the dynamics of the monitored relationship will change.

The absence of conclusive evidence in the case of the domain “economy”, on the other hand, may further indicate its weakening influence in terms of ideological party polarization. Similarly, issues included in the domain “political system”⁹ do not seem to be significantly ideologically controversial.

8 Discussion and Conclusion

In light of the growing polarization of European (party) politics and the concomitant concerns voiced about its potential impact on the stability of European democracies, the presented study sought to explore the dynamic relationship between party system polarization and political trust as a powerful resource for political legitimacy and a determinant of regime stability. In particular, the research focused on how party system polarization affects political trust by asking how ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions are correlated. Hence, political polarization is understood as the ideological party polarization, i.e. the dispersion of all political parties along the left–right axis.

To this end, we utilized the Eurobarometer data on trust in political institutions and the data from the Manifesto Project on how different political parties within thirty European countries express their ideological stances over time (between 1990 and 2019). Combining these data, a panel dataset of 155 observations was created. At the same time, we created a quantitative

⁶ The domain “external relations” consists of the issues of foreign special relationship, anti-imperialism, military, peace, internationalism or the European Union (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 11–13).

⁷ The domain “welfare and the quality of life” includes, among other issues, environmental protection, culture, and education expansion or limitation (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 18–19).

⁸ The domain “fabric of society” includes, among other issues, national way of life, traditional morality, law and order, or multiculturalism (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 19–21).

⁹ The domain “political system” consists of the issues of (de-)centralization, efficiency, political corruption, and political authority (for more details, see Lehmann et al. 2024: 14).

measure of party system polarization to calculate the variance in how often parties address specific issues in their manifestos within each country for each year.

In accordance with the expectations, the research finds that average polarization of the European party systems is increasing slightly over time (Hypothesis 1), with the “political system”, “welfare and quality of life”, and “fabric of society” domains appearing to be the drivers of this upward trend. These findings also support the assumption that different issue domains exhibit different degrees of polarization (Hypothesis 3).

In contrast, in the case of the macro-level relationship between ideological party polarization and trust in partisan political institutions, the initial expectations that a higher level of party system polarization fuels the decline in political trust (Hypothesis 2) were not confirmed. Indeed, the research suggests that there exist significant relationships only for two ideological and issue domains, namely “freedom and democracy” and “social groups”. However, while in the case of the former domain the results indicate that public trust in political parties and parliaments tends to decline when parties are more polarised on issues related to freedom and democracy, in the case of the latter domain the results suggest that divergent positions on social group issues can increase public trust in all the partisan political institutions studied, i.e. the government, parliament and political parties. The explanation of the latter phenomenon would certainly deserve attention in further research. However, this has (at least partially) fulfilled the original assumption that the polarization within each issue dimension has varying impacts on political trust (Hypothesis 4).

Obviously, this study has limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the study is restricted to limited number of observations and the restricted number of countries and periods of analysis. In addition, the findings are limited by the fact that they were drawn from an unbalanced panel dataset. It is possible that this is not sufficient to substantiate the trends under investigation because the reliability of the findings is uncertain and more research with more data over a shorter time span is needed. Second, the results of the empirical analysis should be interpreted only considering the assumption about the direction of causality from party system polarization to political trust (as suggested by the Hypothesis 1). However, even though the research did not test the mechanisms that explain how political trust affects party system polarization, it must be acknowledged that the actual causal relationship between ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions may be bidirectional, thus creating an imaginary “spiral of party system polarization”.

Indeed, higher ideological party polarization may result in declining trust in political institutions, encouraging voters to cast a vote for challenger outsider (anti-establishment) political parties. And this, in turn, increase party system polarization as both challenger outsider and established political parties are incentivized to diverge further from the political centre. In this sense, we may draw inspiration from Hooghe and Dassoneville (2018), who elaborate on existing findings on the relationship between distrust in political institutions and protest voting by noting the existence of a “spiral of distrust” where political distrust and protest voting are reinforcing each other (see also Mauk 2020). On the one hand, low and declining levels of political trust increase the likelihood of protest voting, while at the same time challenger outsider (anti-establishment) parties fuel distrust in political institutions across the population even further (see also van der Brug 2003; Rooduijn et al. 2014).

Hence, more detailed research is needed to enhance our understanding of the dynamic relationship between party system polarization and political trust, or whether and, if so, how both party system polarization and trust in partisan political institutions contribute to the “spiral of party system polarization”. At the same time, if we link the increasing party system polarization with the rise of challenger outsider (anti-establishment) parties, with the increasing electoral success of these political parties in recent European politics, it is worth examining whether the trends discussed are changing depending on specific circumstances and over time. More specifically, by the specific circumstances we mean whether there is any difference in trends in party system polarization and trust in partisan political institutions, and the relationships between these two variables, in cases where the challenger party “merely” enters parliament and cases where it becomes the ruling party, or whether there is any difference in this sense between cases where the challenger party becomes a junior ally and cases where the challenger party even forms the government.

Similarly, it would be interesting to examine how this dynamic relationship under study changes as the presence of challenger parties in parliament or government increases. For example, the polarization effects may be strongest after challenger outsider party entry and may weaken over time. Last but not least, the present study focused only on the elite polarization in the sense of issue polarization of party manifestos. The question remains whether and, if so, how elite partisan polarization affects voters’ policy positions, or, more specifically, how do voters respond, if at all, to changes in the programmatic supply of political parties and, more generally, to changes in political parties’ policy positions.

Even though the present study cannot determine exactly what the relationship and causality between emerging political cleavages, party system polarization, and political trust are, its results provide valuable insights into the potential impact of ideological party polarization on trust in political institutions. Specifically, the chosen methodology enables to identify how ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions correlate. Bearing in mind that, given the above limitations, the findings presented in this study may be only a first indication of how party system polarization and political trust are correlated, they may nonetheless warrant some cautious optimism; indeed, provided the direction of causality is correctly identified, the results may be an important step towards providing important insights into how ideological party polarization affects trust in political institutions.

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