



**TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies
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**SOCIAL MEDIA PARTICIPATION AND
POLITICAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS
DEMOCRACY**

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Purpose and scope of the deliverable:

The purpose of this report is to expand upon existing theories and the current state of the art, laying the groundwork for research within the TRUEDEM project's work package 6, which focuses on social media and political trust. Some authors emphasize the significance of the "input" side of liberal democracy in fostering public confidence, particularly in connection to decision-making processes. Social media has recently emerged as a critical component of online news dissemination and consumption, serving as a vital tool for sharing political information and facilitating political dialogue among various stakeholders. Viewed from this perspective, social media offer opportunities for investigating new channels for translating citizens' demands into policymaking and for analysing modern tools for political engagement. Consequently, this framework paper explores the interaction between social media participation and political attitudes towards democracy.

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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.

Summary of the report (D 6.1)

This report is a part of work package 6 “Social media and political trust: democracy backing or democracy destabilization”, led by Aneta Világi, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. This research framework paper focuses on political trust, trustworthiness, democracy and the role played by social media. The aim of the paper is to elaborate on existing theories and state of art and prepare groundwork for the subsequent research in this work package.

Performance theories suggest that attitudes formation reflect rational calculations in decision-making processes about trustworthy relationships. The evaluation may result from either one or both dimensions: 1) reflection of the past competency of agents and agencies; 2) reflection of the performance of government decision-making processes (e.g. transparency, good governance etc.). The “filters” individuals use for reflection of objective agency performance are various, however, academic literature stresses the role played by information provided by media. The communication channels might trigger the processes of informed decision-making and therefore influence the judgements on trustworthiness (Norris 2002). Social media recently have become an important part of online news distribution and consumption (Newman et al., 2021), crucial tool for sharing political information (Bhagat and Kim, 2023) and serve as easily accessible platforms for political dialogue (interactions with agents, agencies and other users). From this perspective, social media offer amply opportunities for studying new channels for transfer of citizen’s demands into the policymaking and for analysing modern tools for political communication and participation. Therefore, the research focus within the TRUEDEM project (WP6) incorporates also an investigation of the links between political trust, democracy and social media usage.

1 Exploring the links between social media and political behaviour

Social media can be broadly defined as “a group of internet-based application that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 60). Prominent examples of social media platforms encompass Facebook, Instagram, X (previously Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and others. Despite the distinct features inherent in various platforms and applications, scholars commonly employ the overarching terms 'social media' or 'digital media' to undertake their examination.

The academic literature is not unified nor straightforward on the effects social media have on democracy. While exploring such links, the studies focus on the influence social media usage has on political behaviour and political attitudes. There are several political activities of citizens that draw the attention of political scientist like electoral behaviour, political participation or interest in politics. While such activities might be of importance in any political regime, they are essential for democratic governance. Therefore, the literature focusing on the effects of social media on political behaviour examines the consequences that such an effect has on democracy.

1.1 Social media and political trust

The empirical studies do not find clear uniform effects of social media on democracy. However, there is significant evidence for scholars to argue that the use of social media is associated with a reduction in the level of political trust. Trust is generally considered a crucial element that not only fosters societal cohesion but, concerning the political system, a certain level of trust in political institutions is vital for the legitimacy and stability of the political system. From the perspective of democratic regimes, trust and trustworthiness are also important in terms of the quality of democracy.

The findings of several empirical studies are relatively unequivocal; the use of social networks and media diminishes trust in politicians, political institutions (Kiratli 2023), public institutions (Sabatini and Sarracino, 2019), and the media (Park et al. 2020). However, what is less clear is the effect it has from the perspective of democracy. Evaluating the impact depends on the type of regime in each country, making it context related. Decreasing trust in political institutions and politicians may, in the long term, lead to the destabilization of the political regime and even its alteration. In authoritarian regimes, the influence of social media on diminishing trust in the (non-democratic) regime may be considered a beneficial effect. An example could be the role that social media played during the Arab Spring (for more details, see Lutz and Toit, 2014). However, in case of consolidated democracies (e.g., Western European countries, the USA, Australia), such an influence of social media is considered detrimental to democracy.

1.2 Social media, polarization and populism

Yet, another detrimental effect the social media has on democracy is documented with regard to polarization as political polarization contributes to the strengthening of extremist currents in society and politics. Various forms of polarization, such as affective polarization, have the tendency to divide societies into opposing camps and hinder or at least jeopardize democratic decision-making (McCoy, Somer 2019). A specific type of polarization is the populist division of society into a corrupt 'elite' opposed by 'the people.' As one of the essential democratic values in liberal democracy is tolerance and derived from it, political and social pluralism, polarization that divides society and politicians into antagonistic, cooperation-incapable camps goes against these democratic values.

Empirical studies on the impact of social media highlight the expansion of populist, often connected with far-right, political communication on social media platforms, contributing to the spread of populism in societal discourse and the increased popularity of populist parties (Schumann et al. 2021; Heiss and Matthes 2020; Bouljanne, Koc-Michalska and Bimber 2020). However, research on the behaviour of social media users also provides mixed evidence about their impact on strengthening polarization, depending on the research design. Studies that examine the use of social media in general often show a positive correlation between social media usage and processes such as partisan sorting, affective polarization, or issue alignment (e.g., Bryson 2019; Yarchi et al. 2020). However, studies focusing on specific platforms present a more nuanced picture. For example, studies on the use of X (formerly Twitter) in the United States unequivocally point to an increase in polarization (Bail et al. 2018), while the use of Facebook contributed to the reduction of affective polarization (Levy 2021). Yet, in other cases, Facebook also served to support polarization based on right-wing populism (Heiss and Matthes 2020).

Polarization, whether broadly or in its populist form, goes against the ideals of a pluralistic democracy. A more detailed examination of the effect in various political contexts and on different platforms, as well as testing hypotheses about the depolarizing effect of social media, would contribute to a better understanding of the mixed effect reported so far.

In the next sections we will delve into more detailed examination of social media effects on political behaviour via news consumption and mobilization as these are of interest to the TRUEDEM research agenda in WP6.

1.3 Social media, political knowledge and news exposure

Media assume a crucial role in democratic systems, playing integral roles in citizen information dissemination, informed decision-making, and the facilitation of mechanisms for democratic accountability by monitoring government performance. Furthermore, news media contribute significantly to democratic socialization, aiding in the cultivation or reinforcement of democratic values and attitudes (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Selvanathan and Lickel, 2021; Salzman, 2019).

Media research predominantly concentrates on two avenues through which media shape political attitudes: media news effects/exposure (framing, priming, agenda setting, etc.) and contributions to political interest. The impact of media on attitudes is encapsulated in two prominent theories: 1) the Theory of Media Malaise (Robinson, 1976); 2) the Theory of Virtuous Circle (Norris, 2000) or Media Mobilization (Strömbäck and Shehata, 2016).

The Media Malaise thesis links media consumption to perceptions of political distrust and inefficacy. This thesis posits that the interpretive, negative, and anti-institutional nature of media news contributes to fostering such attitudes (Robinson, 1976). Experimental testing by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) confirmed that the effect of media news consumption on political cynicism (distrust) is attributed to the framing of politics as a strategic game, portraying political actors as self-interested rather than working towards the common good. Television often bears responsibility for inducing civic malaise, with the Internet expected to exacerbate the issue (e.g., Putnam, 2000).

Contrastingly, Norris' argument on the Media Virtuous Circle asserts that "attention to campaign communication and feelings of political trust are mutually reinforcing, producing a virtuous circle" (2000: 251). New communication channels potentially allow greater interactivity between voters and politicians (Norris, 2023). Newton (1999) similarly emphasizes positive effects, associating media news consumption with increased political trust, knowledge, and interest.

Media environment and media consumption patterns have changed significantly during the last decades (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). As Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre and Shehata (2016) pointed out, low-choice media environment transform into high-choice environments and individual motivations and abilities become more important for understanding the effect of media on one's attitudes.

The impact of the evolving media landscape on the quality of democracy remains a subject of contention. While there is mixed evidence suggesting a potential benefit for democracy, a concurrent accumulation of studies highlights a growing body of evidence indicating a detrimental effect on democracy.

The current discussions about the role of social media on democracy and democratic attitudes are characterized by a higher level of complexity compared to the debates of the 1990s (Lindner and Aichholzer, 2020). Social media, as innovative online platforms allowing users to construct public or semi-public profiles, establish connections, and explore connections made by others (Boyd and Ellison, 2007), present a new realm of internet-based communication. These platforms offer diverse opportunities for user interaction (Boulianne, 2015), significantly entangling with traditional mass media and becoming deeply embedded in daily practices (Graham and Schwanzholz, 2020). The unprecedented popularity and use of platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram have gradually integrated into formal politics. However, the complexity of understanding their impact arises due to the evolving nature of these platforms within a hybrid media system (Boersma and Graham, 2016). Current debates on social media and democratic attitudes are part of a broader discussion on the crisis of liberal democracy, marked by declining civic and political engagement, reduced trust in political institutions and representatives, and the rise of anti-liberal tendencies (Lindner and Aichholzer, 2020).

Arguments for social media democratizing potential pointed on their capacity to promote horizontal communication, collaboration, and diverse opinions, allowing easy connections and independent opinion formation outside established institutions (Dahlgren, 2013). Social media bring forth additional information sources, contributing to a better-informed public (Price, 2013). They increase exposure to politically relevant information, diversify sources and viewpoints, and enable dialogue and democratic participation as alternatives to traditional forms (Boulianne, 2015). This was exemplified by the early events of the Arab Spring, demonstrating their impact on interest articulation outside conventional democratic channels (Lutz and Toit, 2014).

On the other hand, scholars have argued that the potential for digital democracy is greatly overstated or that the digital media pro-democratic potential is conditional and content restrictions by government influence such potential (Stoycheff, 2020). Empirical evidence often showcases the detrimental impact of social media on democratic processes, failing to fulfill optimistic ideas about democracy's positive transformation. Concerns arise from pathologies associated with social network communication, including fake news, filter bubbles, echo chambers, hate speech, rapid spread of false information, and promotion of authoritarianism (Shin et al., 2018; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017; Chetty and Alathur, 2018; Soroush et al., 2018; Fuchs, 2018). These phenomena contribute to declining trust, increased polarization, and the rise of populist and authoritarian figures (Vaidhyathan, 2018; Morelock and Narita, 2021; Schirch, 2021).

Social media algorithms may create "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011) or "echo chambers" (Burns, 2021; Sunstein, 2001) that reinforce existing biases and online tribalism, make it difficult for individuals to engage with competing perspectives (see del Vicario et al., 2016). Echo chamber concept is based on theory of selective exposure which explains that users intentionally choose

information which are in congruence with their views while avoiding the information that distorts it. Social media additionally reinforce these patterns as algorithms contribute to this selective consumption of information with an optimized offer. While original theory of selective exposure built on traditional media environment was mainly focused on the demand side, social networks might reinforce the selective bias on both demand and offer side of information consumption. Thus, when social media became a primary source of political news to citizens, their echo chamber effect might contribute to polarization locking a social media user into information trap minimalizing different perspectives (potential for critical thinking) on the issue. From such angle, digital media are seen as “self-learning vehicle to indoctrination, to radicalisation, to shaming, and discrimination” (Kauert, de Deus Pereira & Edwards, 2022, p. 53).

Blind or uncritical trust towards digital information sources due to its echo chamber effect but also due to its potential for amplification of misleading information (e.g. disinformation or conspiracy theories) is seen as problematic for democracy. However, as Nguyen and Vu (2019) argue, declared negative power of social media is rather problematic when relaying on empirical evidence. Their study on echo chamber effect of social networks users (compared to users of other media) provides little evidence for such impact. Rather, it was general predisposition of users towards the issue, not their primary source of political news, that influenced their attitudes and beliefs. Similarly, Bruns (2021) argues that “echo chambers and filter bubbles principally constitute an unfounded moral panic that presents a convenient technological scapegoat (search and social platforms and their affordances and algorithms) for a much more critical problem: growing social and political polarization” (p. 33). While some studies mitigate these negative perceptions, social media have yet to fulfill expectations as spaces for deliberative exchange of diverse arguments (Boersma and Graham, 2016; Lindtner and Aichholzer, 2020).

1.4 Social media and political participation

The empirical studies suggest that social media encourage democratic participation and engagement by creating opportunities for online participation. Along these lines, digital media are often associated with greater support for democracy (Breuer and Groshek, 2012; Stoycheff, Nisbet and Epstein, 2020).

In a broad sense, political participation refers to the activities undertaken by citizens, either directly or indirectly, with the aim of influencing political processes (van Deth, 2014; Nissen, 2021). The conventional understanding of political participation, as articulated by Verba et al. (1995), imposes four essential conditions: a) it involves active actions rather than passive behaviours; b) it encompasses unpaid actions by private citizens, excluding professional politicians or lobbyists; c) the actions are voluntary and not coerced by external forces or legal mandates; and d) the actions are directed toward the political system and decision-making processes.

This traditional conceptualization of political participation not only encompasses activities related to the electoral process (such as voting and participating in election campaigns) or engaging with government officials but also involves activities within groups seeking to influence political decision-making and participating in protest activities (Blais, 2010). However, the identification of novel avenues for influencing political decision-making, such as political consumerism, has posed challenges in demarcating a clear conceptual boundary between political participation and civic engagement. Consequently, efforts have been made to broaden the definition of political participation to include activities challenging conventional understandings of the role and scope of politics. This expanded definition encompasses activities addressing collective community

problems and indirectly political activities that express the political goals and values of participants (van Deth, 2014).

Within the literature, various arguments underscore the importance of political participation for democracy and its proper functioning. Carole Pateman's participatory theory of democracy posits that citizen political participation serves an educational function, influencing individuals' opportunities to impact the political system and decisions, thereby enhancing the democratic legitimacy of outcomes. Furthermore, participation contributes to personal growth, psychological aspects of personality, and the acquisition of skills related to democratic procedures. Pateman argues that participation also serves an integrating function, fostering acceptance, cooperation, and group harmony among individuals engaged in collective decision-making (Pateman, 1970:63). This perspective emphasizes the broader effects of participation on values, socialization, and democratic attitudes.

Aligned with this argument, Quintelier and van Deth (2014) found that participatory behaviour plays a crucial role in shaping the values of young people, making them more adept democrats, particularly in terms of political attitudes and normative considerations.

Social media is thought to have the potential to enhance democratic attitudes, not necessarily through the information it offers (media exposure), but rather through the environment it creates. Salzman (2019) calls this environment the public sphere referring to deliberative theorists like Habermas (2022). He points on the uniqueness of social media as a form of communication which provide space for individuals to interconnect with one another regardless of their personal backgrounds and immerse themselves in the deliberative processes. This means that social media users can gather information to share and then respond when others present information or arguments that contradict/confirm their position. Such direct experience with social media as discursive platforms, inviting engagement and deliberation might influence pro-democratic values. Based on empirical evidence from Latin America, Salzman points on a strong, positive relationship between social media and democratic attitudes, more precisely he finds social media users to be more tolerant to competing ideas and the individuals and institutions advocating those contra positions (2019). Evidence from Norway suggests similar role of social media on democratic attitudes via deliberative practices (Holst and Moe, 2021).

The academic discussions on political participation in a digital environment revolve around the question of what kind of activity should be considered as 'participation' (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013; Ruess et al., 2023). Some forms of online participation require minimal activity, leading authors to dismiss them as mere clicktivism (Morozov, 2011) or 'feel-good forms of political participation' (Vitak et al., 2010). Consequently, they are considered insufficiently legitimate to serve as participation due to a perceived lack of ability to effect change. Others advocate for broader definitions encompassing various contemporary forms of engagement (Norris, 2001; Theocharis, 2015; Pickard, 2020).

Ruess et al. (2023) suggest that the evolving definition of political participation in the digital age stems from the fact that online technologies have enabled new forms of engagement previously impossible. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook and X have facilitated sharing political content and engaging in online discussions, while online petitions and crowdfunding campaigns have introduced novel ways for people to participate in political causes. Overall, the authors argue that the shifting definition of political participation in the digital age mirrors the evolving nature of democracy and civic engagement in the 21st century. They propose that scholars

and policymakers must acknowledge these changes and adapt their approaches accordingly to ensure that democracy remains vibrant and inclusive in the digital age.

Some scholars argue for distinguishing between online and offline forms of participation, while others consider them largely interchangeable. In our view, with the advancement of digital technologies and their integration into contemporary political life, online and offline participation complement each other. Some activities have both online and offline forms, while others exist exclusively online or offline. Based on various recent studies, online political behaviors can be categorized into two types: active and passive (see Table 1).

Table 1 Modes of political participation

<i>Active</i>	<i>Passive</i>
voting	news consumption
party/campaign activities	discussions
protest activities	expressive mode
communal actions	
contacting politicians/institutions	

Source: Gibson and Cantijoch 2013

Focusing on the online environment, the active category of political behaviors includes forms of political participation such as petitions, protests, and so-called “digitally native activism” (Li, Bernard and Luczak-Roesch, 2021). For instance, online movements could aim to counter online disinformation and hate speech by campaigning to withdraw advertising from certain websites.

Passive online political behaviors encompass activities like reading political news or visiting political websites (similar to media exposure), while expressive behaviors involve sharing political content on social media or engaging in online discussions. In some studies, including the aforementioned categorization, expressive engagement is considered a form of passive political participation. However, in line with other scholars, we find the term ‘passive’ for online discussion and expression somewhat misleading, as these activities require heightened levels of attention and engagement (Reuss et al., 2023). In the TRUEDEM project, we aim to distinguish between “un-constructive” expressive participation (closer to clicktivism, such as contributing with emojis to a discussion) and “constructive” expressive participation, which seeks to achieve change (of opinion, attitude, or policy) through argumentation. The question worth to explore is how social media is used for political communication and participation by both sides – users as well as political actors. Our assumption is that constructive expressive activities on social media could be considered active political participation. Our research aims to test if political empowerment facilitated by social media expressive participation influences democratic attitudes and to explore the effect more thoroughly.

2 Exploring the links between social media and attitudes towards democracy

Similarly to impact social media has on political behaviour, the academic discourse on social media impact on democratic attitudes yields inconclusive results. Initial optimistic views have shifted to focus more on the problems they bring. This stream of literature is simultaneously characterized by its emphasis on the theoretical assumptions regarding the opportunities and pitfalls that social media bring for shaping democratic attitudes. One possible explanation is the issue related to the conceptualization and operationalization of "pro-democratic" attitudes, which we address in the following section.

2.1 Conceptualisation and operationalization of democratic attitudes

What can be considered pro-democratic attitudes is debatable and largely depends on the concrete conceptualization of democracy. Mattes (2018) succinctly delineates four distinct conceptions of democratic support. The first three emphasize varying values and personality traits, constituting what Rose (1997) terms an "idealist" value-based approach, while the fourth centres on regime preferences.

The first conception, micro-level theory, is founded on a set of fundamental psychological predispositions conducive to democracy, including moderation, accommodation, tolerance, pragmatism, interpersonal trust, efficacy, cooperation, and willingness to compromise. Individuals possessing pro-democratic attitudes, according to this approach, must strongly endorse individual liberty, tolerate diverse political ideas, exhibit interpersonal trust, while simultaneously maintaining a reasonable level of distrust towards political authorities (Diamond, 2008). Research employing this approach typically employs a series of questions prompting respondents to express agreement or disagreement with statements related to democracy, democratic processes, and politics more broadly.

The second conception, macro-level theory, aligns with Putnam's democracy theory, emphasizing the role of social capital. A democratic society, according to this perspective, is characterized by numerous civic organizations wherein citizens share overlapping memberships and a pervasive sense of interpersonal trust. Norms of cooperation and trust extend to civic participation, manifesting in activities such as collaborative efforts, contacting representatives, and government monitoring. In addition to the micro-level approach, this conception incorporates the measurement of interpersonal trust and the number of organizations to which the average citizen belongs.

The third conception is rooted in modernization theory, which posits that economic growth, increased education levels, and enhanced communication networks propel political systems towards liberalization and democracy (Inglehart, 1997). Individuals supportive of democracy, according to this perspective, are those satisfied with life, trusting of others, valuing equality over patriarchy, prioritizing participation over security, and endorsing tolerance over conformity.

The fourth conception, introduced by Mattes (2018), shifts the focus from values conducive to democracy to popular regime preferences. In this approach, support for democracy is measured as a choice between competing regime types, aligning with Rose's (1997) "realist" theory of democracy and public opinion. Accordingly, a proponent of democracy is not characterized by an inherent love for democracy or specific democratic personality traits but rather by a lack of preference for alternative regime types.

Transitioning from conceptualization to operationalization, constructing a valid measurement of attitudes supporting democracy presents a considerable challenge. Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) contend that survey questions explicitly employing the term “democracy” may elicit socially desirable responses, as respondents might idealize democracy without necessarily internalizing democratic values. People might answer that they support democracy, and, at the same time, they support a strong leader unrestricted by parliament or elections, as well. To address this issue, multiple indicator scales have been advocated.

Ariely and Davidov (2010) present two distinct scales for measurement of attitudes towards democracy. First, the “democracy-autocracy preference” (DAP) scale asks respondent’s opinion on a way of governing the country while describing various types of political systems. Second, the “democratic performance evolution” (DPE) scale reflects respondent’s evaluation of democratic performance in different spheres like economy, maintenance of order, efficiency in decision-making etc. The first scale is more in line with Easton’s (1975) “diffuse support” concept which captures popular belief that the existing system of adopting, implementing and enforcing societal rules are legitimate. As such it is a support for the political system that transcends individual office holders. The second scale, performance evaluation is closer to Easton’s (1975) “specific support” which is based on people satisfaction with what they get from the system (as “outputs”). This specific support is more volatile as it may reflect support for the current administration or regime. In practical terms it can reflex in a way that when preferred candidates or parties are in power, satisfaction with democracy increases; and when preferred candidates or parties are out of power, satisfaction with democracy decreases.

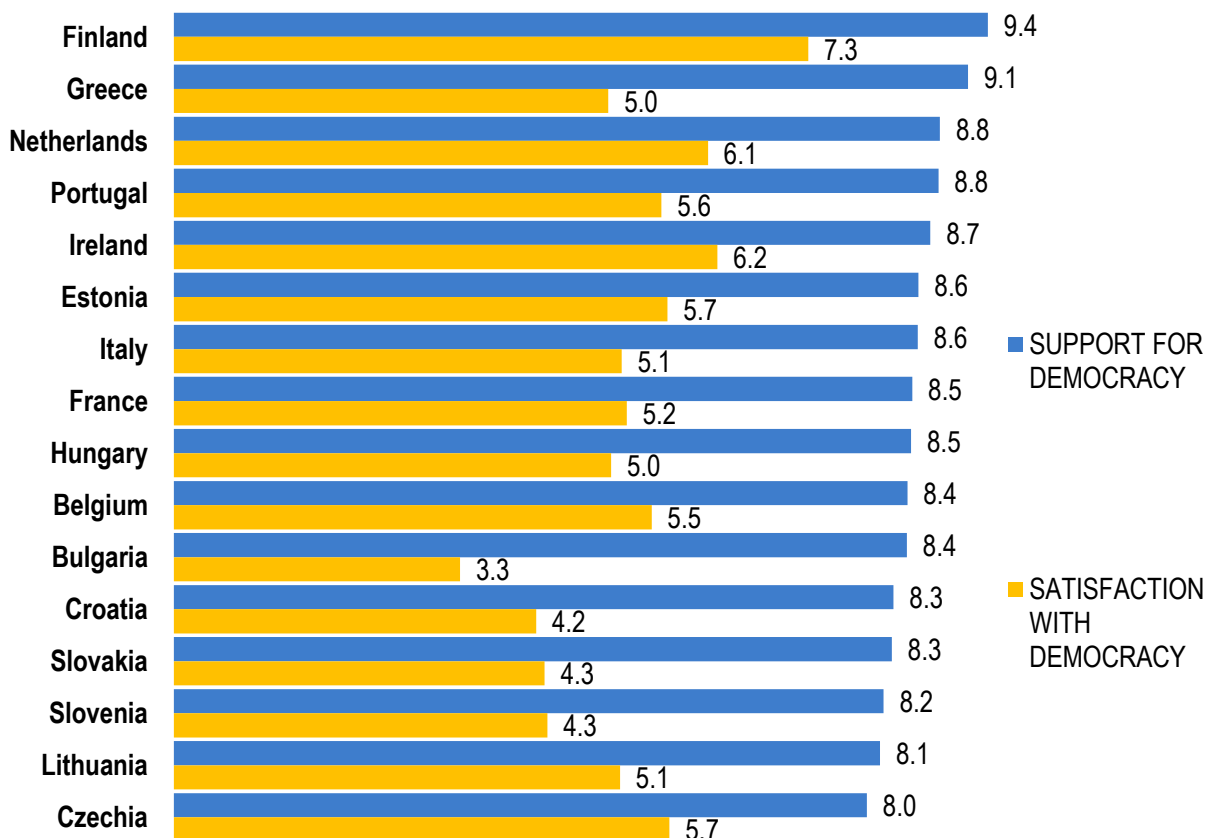
Contemporary scholarly research provides extensive data on citizen endorsement of the abstract notion of democracy, yet there exists a notable gap in our understanding of what democracy signifies to ordinary citizens. This problem has persisted within studies of political culture and support (Canache, 2012; Hernández, 2016). Previous investigations predominantly focused on the tension between favourable attitudes towards the ideal of democracy as a system of governance and the considerably less favourable satisfaction levels with democratic governance among citizens. By integrating these two dimensions of attitudes, aligning with the classical differentiation between diffuse and specific support (Easton, 1975), scholars derive four potential combinations of support and satisfaction. In addition to categorizing citizens as either democrats or non-democrats based on their support for democracy as a governance regime, a subset of citizens emerges who favour and endorse democracy as a suitable form of government but express dissatisfaction with its practical functioning. This subgroup is often denoted as “critical citizens” (Norris, 1999; 2011) or “disaffected democrats” (Dalton, 2004; Klingemann, 2014). While the prevalence of citizens exhibiting this perception and support profile varies across individual countries, a significant concentration is observed, particularly in Central and Eastern European nations in contrast to their Western European counterparts.

Empirical evidence affirms that citizens differentiate between their endorsement of democracy as a regime and their satisfaction with the state of democracy in their respective countries. Utilizing the latest European Social Survey data, we investigated the perceived importance of living in a democracy and citizens’ satisfaction with democracy in their countries. Democracy support is gauged through the query: “How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?” with respondents selecting a numerical value between zero (not at all important) and ten (extremely important). Satisfaction with democracy is measured through the question: “And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?” on a scale ranging from zero (extremely dissatisfied) to ten (extremely satisfied). Figure 1 illustrates the



average support scores for EU member states based on the European Social Survey. The support for democracy ranges from 9.4 in Finland to 8.0 in Czechia, while satisfaction with democracy varies from 7.3 in Finland to 3.3 in Bulgaria.

Figure 1: Support for, and satisfaction with democracy (mean values)



Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

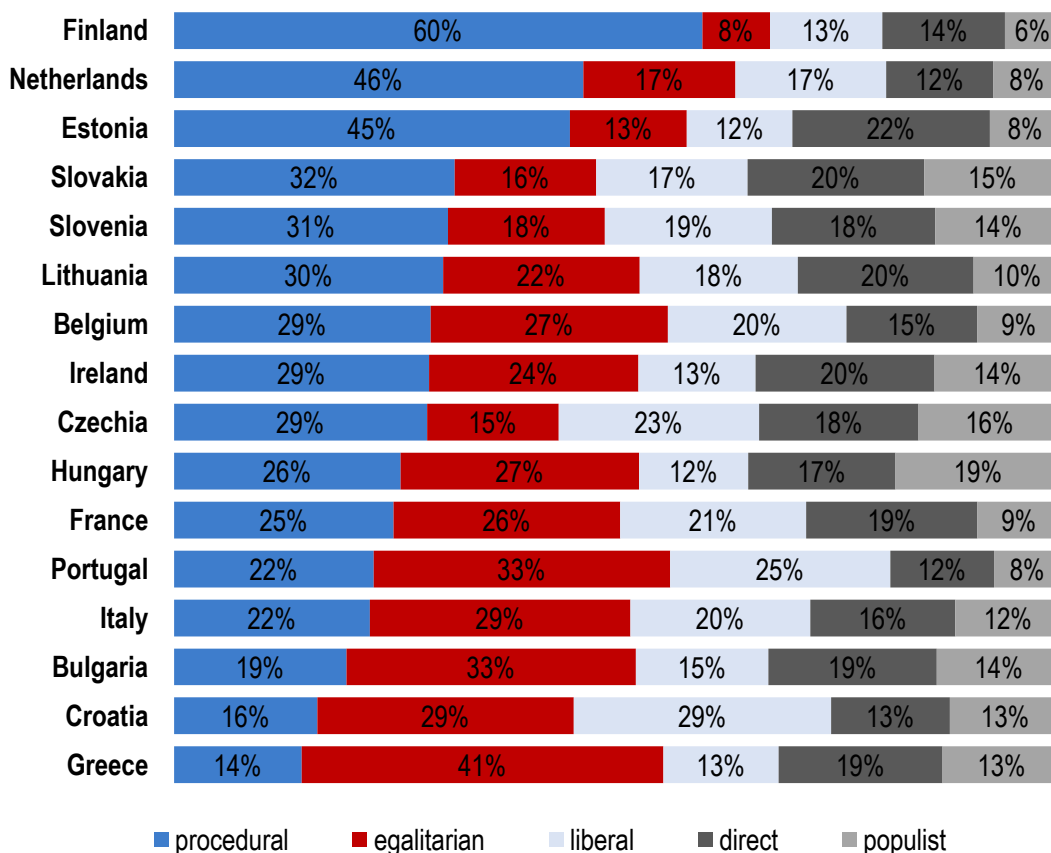
These findings suggest that while support for democracy displays minimal variation and remains relatively high across all countries, satisfaction with democracy exhibits greater variability among EU member states, with only a handful of nations reporting unequivocal citizen satisfaction with the state of democracy. In addition to country-level results, we delved into individual-level correlations between support for and satisfaction with democracy. The individual correlations range from 0.38 (Finland) to -0.09 (Hungary). This reaffirms our conjecture that citizens formulate their support for democracy more or less independently of their assessment of satisfaction with the current state of democracy in their country.

As empirical data suggest, measuring pro-democratic attitudes through satisfaction and support for democracy yield different results. TRUEDEM's research interest is diffuse support for a democratic regime, and since the use of the word democracy in a measuring instrument can be misleading, we are looking for a measuring instrument that does not explicitly mention it.

To address the respondents' individual interpretations of the term "democracy" and whether such subjective notions significantly vary among citizens, we provide a partial insight based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) conducted in 2022. The survey module on democracy featured a question prompting respondents to select the characteristic feature of democracy they deemed most important. Respondents could choose one characteristic from a predefined set of five, each representing a distinct theoretical model of democracy. The options were as follows: a) that national elections are free and fair (highlighting the procedural model of democracy); b) that the courts treat everyone the same (emphasizing liberal democracy); c) that the government protects all citizens against poverty (reflecting the egalitarian principle); d) that citizens have the final say on the most important political issues through voting in referendums (indicative of direct democracy); e) that the views of ordinary people prevail over those of the political elite (illustrating the populist principle).

The analysis revealed that in nine out of 16 countries, the principle typical of the procedural democratic model prevailed, albeit marginally so in Belgium and Ireland. Conversely, in the remaining seven countries, citizens predominantly selected the egalitarian principle. Notably, the populist principle appeared to be of lesser significance for citizens in the surveyed EU countries. However, in four countries—Hungary, Greece, Ireland, and Czechia—the populist principle assumed greater importance than either the liberal-democratic or egalitarian principles.

Figure 2: Popular choice of democratic model principles

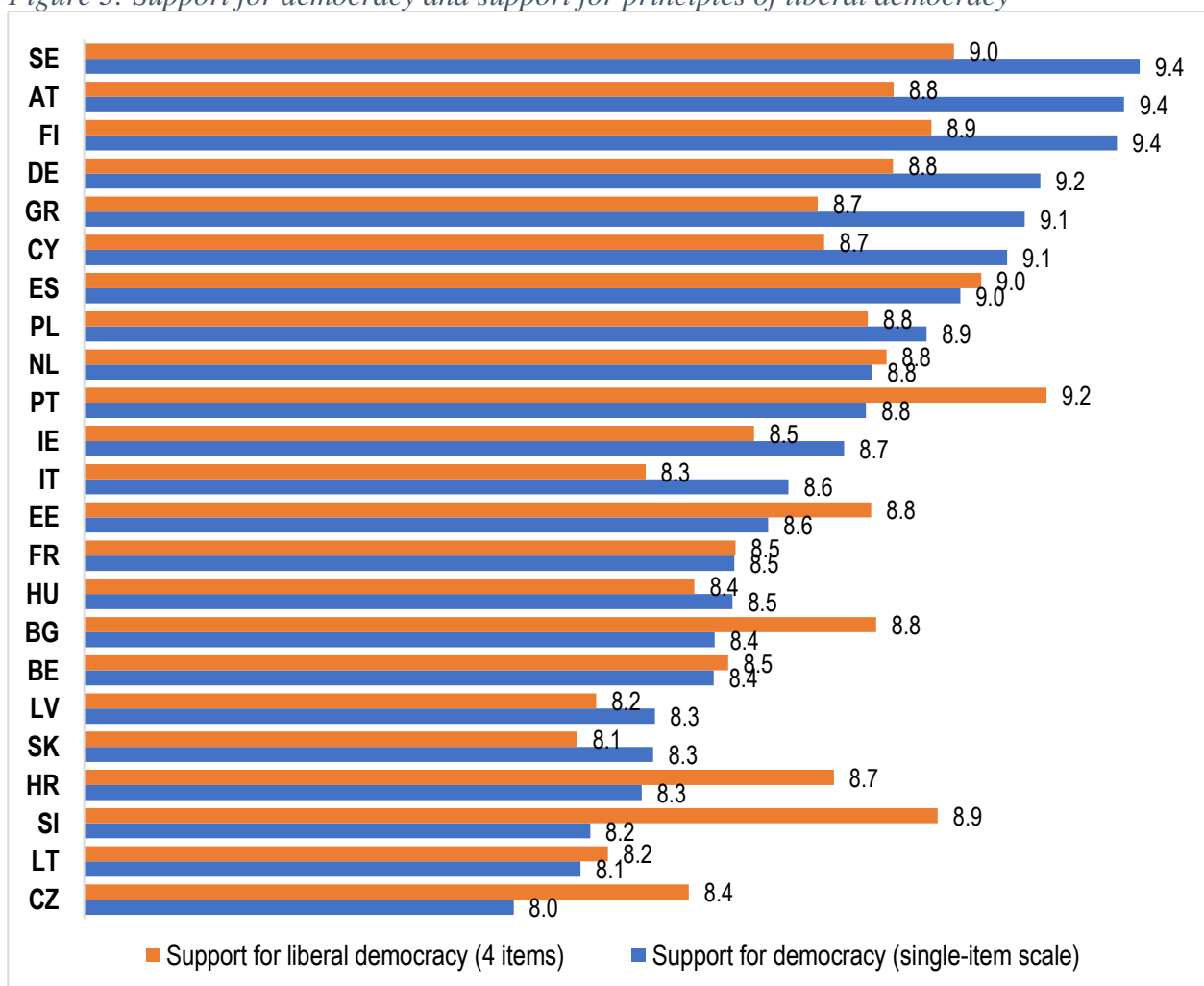


Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

An alternative approach to capturing popular attitudes towards democracy based on diffuse support is rooted in the conceptualization of democracy as liberal democracy. Van der Brug et al. (2021) argue that a valid operationalization of support for liberal democratic principles should encompass the different dimensions of democracy, encompassing majority rule, constitutional protection of basic rights, and the limitation of executive power. This measurement aligns with diffuse support for a democratic regime and reflects the two pillars of liberal democracy: the electoral pillar based on citizen representation and majority rule, and the constitutional pillar encompassing institutional checks and balances to limit executive power and protect minorities.

Ferrin and Kriesi (2016) who measured support for democracy by liberal democratic values, used a battery of questions. It included items asking about the importance of ‘equality before the law’, ‘checks of government by the courts’, ‘minority protection’, ‘freedom of the media’ and ‘freedom of expression’. As opposite, illiberal democratic attitudes, that might be widespread also in countries that fulfil the criteria of liberal democracies, manifest themselves by a rejection of the legitimacy of institutions (e.g. constitutional courts) that impose constraints on the power of the executive, and possibly limit the tyranny of majority (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018) and rejection of minorities protection.

Figure 3: Support for democracy and support for principles of liberal democracy



Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

Nevertheless, employing such an approach for measurement is not devoid of complexities and challenges. A critical question arises, particularly in relation to the analysis of data derived from the scale gauging support for liberal principles of democracy. Table 3 presents the outcomes of the comparison between support for democracy measured through a single item ("How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?") and a composite index comprising four principles of liberal democracy (rights of media to criticize government, courts treating everyone equally, elections being free and fair; minority rights protection). The results indicate no significant differences when employing these two distinct approaches. However, disparities emerge when scrutinizing inferences, specifically the relationships between variables that elucidate the reasons underlying attitudes towards democracy.

While the liberal model represents just one interpretation of democracy among several, it holds a prominent position in contemporary democracies. Theoretical distinctions between democracy and liberalism are possible, leading to influential concepts such as "delegative democracy" (O'Donnell, 1992) or "illiberal democracy" (Zakaria, 1997). However, classical democratic theorists argue that liberal democracy is the sole type that adequately corresponds to and facilitates the realization of the true essence of democracy (Dahl, 1989; Sartori, 1993; Merkel, 2004). Empirical investigations corroborate the strong interdependence between the liberal and democratic components of contemporary democracies (Møller, 2007). Therefore, when assessing and measuring democracy, it is imperative to consider it precisely in the context of its liberal model.

2.2 Social media and democratic attitudes

Arguments for democratizing potential of social media are bolstered by new features specific to such platforms, especially compare to regular media. Notably, their capacity to promote horizontal communication, collaboration, and diverse opinions, allowing easy connections and independent opinion formation outside established institutions, stands out (Dahlgren, 2013). Social media bring forth additional information sources, contributing to a better-informed public (Price, 2013). They increase exposure to politically relevant information, diversify sources and viewpoints, and enable dialogue and democratic participation as alternatives to traditional forms (Boulianne, 2015). This was exemplified by the early events of the Arab Spring, demonstrating their impact on interest articulation outside conventional democratic channels (Lutz & Toit, 2014).

Scholars also anticipated social networks fostering relationships between citizens and their representatives, potentially boosting political trust. Deseriis (2021) notes that by lowering participation costs and facilitating cooperation, these platforms modernize representation along different dimensions: monitoring constituents' opinions (responsiveness), enhancing transparency (accountability), and encouraging collaboration on political initiatives (collaboration). Some even propose that social media can establish direct relationships between politicians and citizens, characterized by interactive communication and mutual learning (Graham et al., 2013; Coleman, 2017).

Empirical investigations into the nexus between social media and satisfaction with democracy yield equivocal findings. Ceron and Memoli (2016) emphasize that the utilization of the Internet itself exerts no discernible impact on satisfaction with democracy. However, a negative effect manifests when users engage with news disseminated through social media channels. This correlation is mediated by the prevalence of online discord and conflicts. Similar effect on satisfaction with democracy is present also in Fan and Zhang's (2022) study, wherein occasional social media use and a skeptical disposition towards these platforms are inversely associated with the probability of satisfaction with democracy.

In a distinctive contribution, Placek (2024) incorporates considerations of democratic regime characteristics, introducing a nuanced perspective for prospective research endeavours. Placek's examination of Central East European democracies reveals that the relationship between social media use and satisfaction with democracy is contingent upon the robustness of a country's democratic framework. Notably, higher social media use is correlated with increased satisfaction when the democratic regime is more resilient. Conversely, as democratic backsliding occurs, social media use is associated with diminished satisfaction with democracy.

This collective body of research underscores a recurrent theme: the intrinsic relationship between social media use and satisfaction with democracy lacks clear indicative value, with mediating factors assuming an important role in shaping outcomes. The role of social media in altering political attitudes thus remains unclear. Could social media as technological infrastructure influence individuals' attitudes?

In theoretical discourse, democratic attitudes, particularly those pertaining to diffuse support, are posited to have deep-seated roots in childhood socialization (Easton, 1965; Jennings and Niemi, 1968) or even genetic predispositions (Smith et al., 2012; Hatemi et al., 2011). Parents, functioning as agents of socialization, transmit specific values to their children, including those conducive to supporting democracy.

Scholars have also highlighted the potential for altering or shaping political attitudes through the acquisition of experiences, whether firsthand (Banducci and Karp, 2003; Mattes and Bratton, 2007) or mediated experiences (Lelkes, 2016; Newton, 2016). Direct or firsthand experiences may stem from active participation in political processes, such as engaging in elections, participating in deliberative activities, or directly observing government performance. This approach is grounded in the principle of learning by doing, positing that political participation or civic engagement can empower citizens, contributing to the perception of regime efficacy, and fostering an appreciation for democratic principles, such as political accountability and consensus building.

Indirect or mediated experiences occur through intermediaries, such as following political developments in the media. In this context, individuals learn not only about specific cases or politicians but also gain insights into democratic practices and procedures.

We start from the assumption that our independent variable—social media—represents an infrastructure that facilitates the shaping of political attitudes through both channels. Firstly, individuals utilize social media to consume political news, and secondly, social media platforms provide a space for online political participation. Consequently, we posit that the influence of social media on the formation of political attitudes should be evident. However, given the diverse content in social media and varied consumer practices, the question of how social media precisely shape political attitudes remains a pertinent and open inquiry which we aim to explore in the project.

2.3 Measuring the effects

The European Social Survey serves as a valuable resource for conducting cross-national analyses to explore the impact of various factors on democratic attitudes. This comparative dataset incorporates inquiries on support for democracy, satisfaction with democracy, as well as news exposure for offline media, and both online and offline political participation. Therefore, we examined the relations between these selected variables for the TRUEDEM project countries.

News exposure was gauged through the following query: "On a typical day, about how much time do you spend watching, reading, or listening to news about politics and current affairs?"

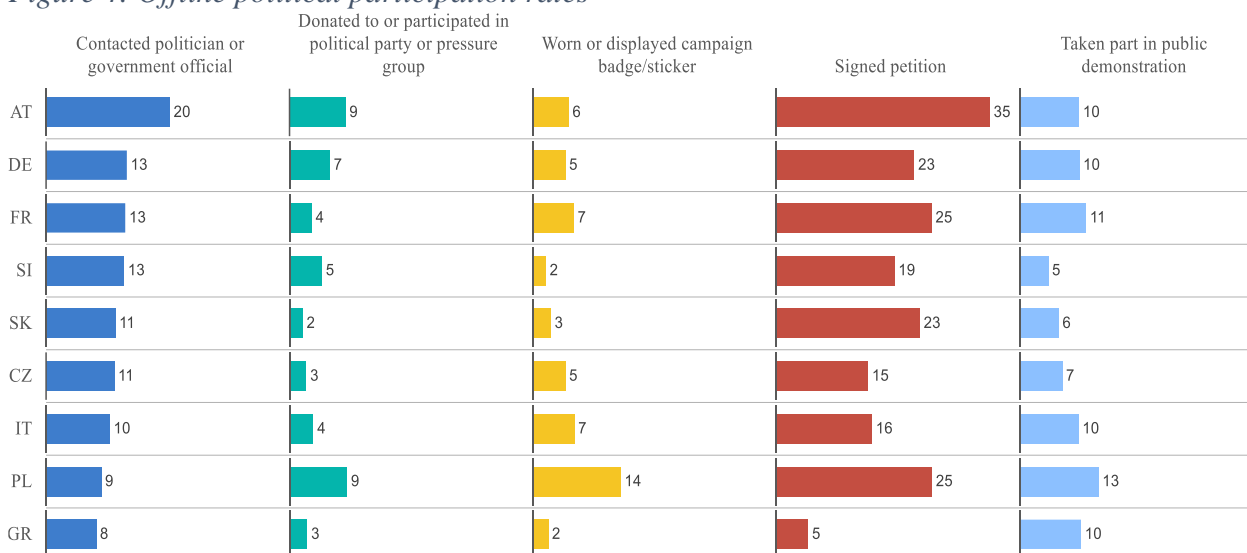
Respondents were prompted to input their responses in minutes. The dataset was refined by excluding data with durations exceeding eight hours per day, and the variable was subsequently recoded to measure time in hours for enhanced interpretability.

Offline political participation was assessed using the subsequent question: "During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? 1) ... contacted a politician, government, or local government official? 2) ... donated to or participated in a political party or pressure group? 3) ... worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker? 4) ... signed a petition? 5) ... taken part in a public demonstration?"

Online participation was measured by a single item that inquired: "... thinking about different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong, during the last 12 months, have you ... posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email, or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?"

Initially, we examine variations across countries in the levels of political participation and news exposure. Figure 4 illustrates the proportions of individuals engaged in specific political activities. Overall, Austrian citizens exhibit the highest level of offline political participation, particularly in activities involving direct interaction with politicians or political parties. Signing a petition emerges as the most prevalent form of offline participation across all countries. Notably, Poland demonstrates the highest percentage of citizens who have worn or displayed a badge or sticker, as well as the highest participation rate in public demonstrations.

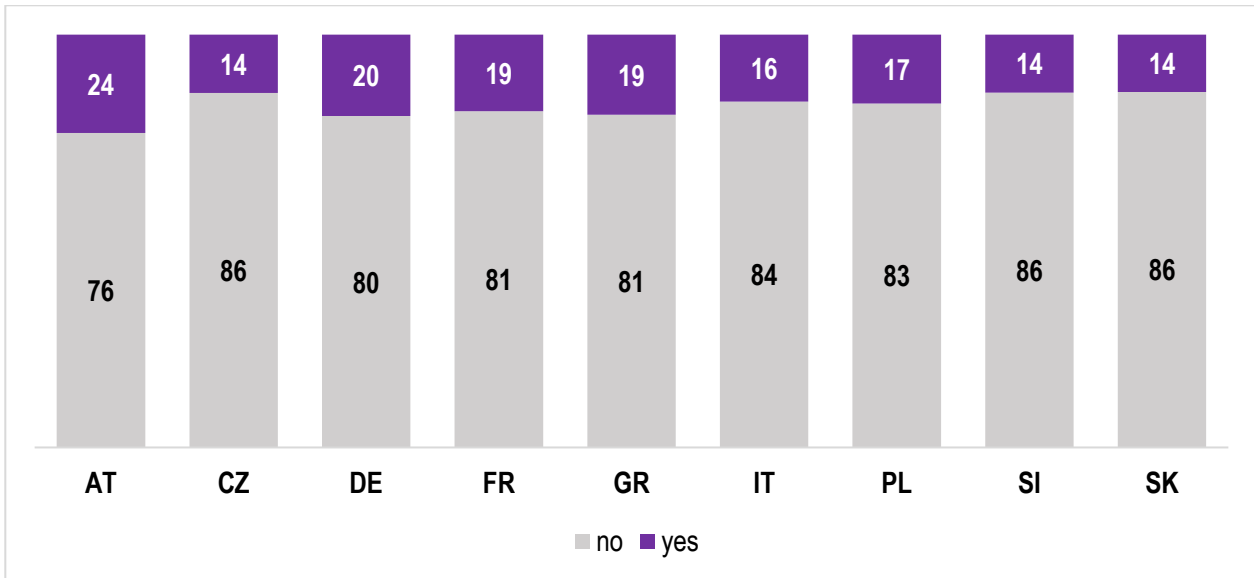
Figure 4: Offline political participation rates



Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

When it comes to online participation, Austrian citizens appear to be the most active, just as they are in the realm of offline activities. Almost a quarter of them have shared or posted something about politics online. Similarly, in line with offline participation activities, Polish citizens seem to be more active than their counterparts from other post-communist countries, although the differences are not very large.

Figure 5: Offline political participation rates (average across different types in %)



Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

News exposure (in relation to politics and current affairs) is rather similar in the countries under study. In seven out of nine countries the median time people spend watching, listening or reading news is one hour, and it is less only in Slovenia (median 0.5 hours) and Czechia (0.75). Mean time of news exposure runs from 0.89 (Slovenia) to 2.71 (Italy). Since the median time is almost the same in all countries, the mean time is most likely affected by few extreme cases.

Table 2: News exposure in hours, mean and median.

News exposure in hours	Mean	Median
AT	1.14	1
DE	1.26	1
FR	1.36	1
SI	0.89	0.5
SK	1.32	1
CZ	1.10	0.75
IT	2.71	1
PL	1.63	1
GR	1.72	1

Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

To assess the impact of news exposure and political participation on democratic attitudes, we developed several regression models. Initially, three models were compared, each based on different measurements of democratic attitudes as dependent variables: 1) support for democracy as a single-item question; 2) satisfaction with democracy measured as a single-item question; and 3) a composite index reflecting support for liberal democratic principles (rights of media to criticize government, courts treating everyone equally, elections being free and fair; minority rights protection). In addition to news exposure and political participation (both online and offline), key

control variables such as political interest and self-placement on the left-right political scale were included. Standard demographic variables including age, education, gender, size of establishment, household income, and country of origin were also incorporated into the regression analysis (details not presented).

The results of the regression analyses indicate that both news exposure and political participation exert an impact on democratic attitudes. However, news exposure demonstrates a statistically significant effect solely on support for democracy (diffuse regime support), without influencing satisfaction with democracy.

Both online and offline participation exhibit significant influence on democratic attitudes, albeit in opposing directions. Offline political participation adversely affects democratic support among citizens, while concurrently positively influencing satisfaction with democracy. Consequently, offline political participation appears to narrow the gap between traditionally higher support for democracy and lower satisfaction with democracy. Opposite to it, online political participation positively correlates with democratic support but simultaneously diminishes satisfaction with democracy. In essence, the effect of online political participation manifests as higher support for the democratic regime among participants, coupled with lower satisfaction with the way democracy operates, compared to individuals not engaged in online participation.

Table 3: Regression coefficients

	Support for democracy	Satisfaction with democracy	Support for liberal democratic principles
Online participation	0.096**	-0.601***	0.149***
Offline participation	-0.078***	0.129***	-0.101***
News exposure	-0.019**	0.012	-0.025***
Political interest	-0.296***	-0.344***	-0.240***
Left-right self-placement	-0.012*	0.058***	-0.052***
N	17275.000	17249.000	17018.000
r ²	0.123	0.108	0.136

Note: *** - p-value < 0.001

** - p-value < 0.01

* - p-value < 0.05

Source: ESS 2022, Authors' calculation

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the effects of both types of participation, as well as news exposure, are stronger (whether positively or negatively) when considering support for liberal democracy, as opposed to using a more general, single-item scale to measure support for democracy. Despite relatively minor differences in effect sizes, one may conclude that the choice of measure for support for democracy does not significantly alter the observed outcomes.



However, if we regress the same predictors on the individual four principles (‘equality before the law’, ‘minority protection’, ‘freedom of the media’, ‘free and fair elections’), we discover distinct effects that participation and news exposure have. As presented in Table 4, online participation exhibits the most pronounced impact on the perception of the importance of media rights, with no significant effect on the perception of the importance of minority rights. Conversely, offline participation exerts its strongest effect on the perception of the importance of minority rights protection but in a negative direction. This implies that increased offline participation is associated with a diminished consideration of the importance of protecting minority rights.

News exposure is negatively linked to the perception of the importance of three principles: media rights, free and fair elections, and courts treating everybody the same. However, in the assessment of the importance of minority rights protection, it appears that news exposure has a negligible, or at least insignificant, impact.

Table 4: Regression coefficients

	Principle: media are free to criticise the government	Principle: national elections are free and fair	Principle: rights of minority groups are protected	Principle: courts treat everyone the same
Online participation	0.276***	0.116***	0.048	0.128***
Offline participation	-0.111***	-0.098***	-0.121***	-0.076***
News exposure	-0.033***	-0.034***	-0.009	-0.023***
Political interest	-0.287***	-0.281***	-0.241***	-0.163***
Left-right self-placement	-0.055***	-0.017**	-0.121***	-0.017***
N	17 236	17 235	17 198	17 262
r ²	0.100	0.100	0.095	0.089

Note: *** - p-value < 0.001

** - p-value < 0.01

* - p-value < 0.05

Source: ESS 2022, Authors’ calculation

In general, the effects of participation and news exposure exhibit significant variations based on the specific liberal democratic principles under consideration. Consequently, we contend that a nuanced understanding of real-world relationships necessitates not only measuring but also analysing support for democracy in a detailed manner, distinguishing the specific principles that citizens endorse or reject.

3 Political trustworthiness and social media

In the introduction to this report, we have already addressed the relationship between political trust and social media. Existing literature indicates a decrease in trust in political institutions among individuals who use social media. However, in this section we aim to explore how social media can contribute to building trustworthiness. Given that various platforms may have different effects on democracy, and political context (e.g., regime type) also plays a role, we assume that it is necessary to examine the effects of specific platform. Additionally, it is crucial to focus on studying the behaviour of individuals in social networks, going beyond the frequency of usage. We posit that the positive effects of social networks, such as their impact on political knowledge and participation, may create conditions for improving trust in political institutions. The acquired information can contribute to making informed decisions about whom and when to trust. Empowerment from political participation can influence the perception of the efficiency of the political regime. The direct form of political communication facilitated by social networks, which we want to investigate, provides actors with the space to form judgments about the competence, integrity, and impartiality of political actors and institutions. Therefore, investigation of online political participation seems like promising avenue to learn more about mechanisms influencing political trust and trustworthiness.

There are two main theoretical approaches to the potential impact of online participation on building the relations based on trust. One approach considers news consumption as a form of passive political participation, while the other stems from studies of deliberation and deliberative practices in policy-making.

Considering news consumption as a form of passive political participation, a few studies have explored this area. Alongside news consumption, the choice of media also holds importance. A comparative study across European countries revealed a link between media choice and political trust. Specifically, individuals who read or watch news from social media platforms tend to have lower political trust compared to those who rely on traditional news media (Ceron, 2015). Similarly, Strömbäck and colleagues (2016) found that consuming traditional news media is associated with higher levels of political trust. This relationship was observed even before social media became a dominant information source for a significant portion of society.

However, in contrast to traditional offline media, using social networking sites as information sources increases the likelihood of encountering 'antipolitical and antisystem information,' which can have a negative impact on political trustworthiness. In more recent research, Klein and Robinson (2020) established a strong relationship between social media use and political trust (as a dependent variable). However, they also examined the content of the news along with respondents' ideologies and party preferences. Their findings revealed that the impact of news media on political trust is influenced by an individual's political attitudes.

Shifting focus to online participation in deliberation, several arguments suggest why such experiences could lead to higher levels of political trust (Halvorsen, 2003; Wright, 2019). Firstly, through deliberation, citizens encounter the necessity for compromises and trade-offs to achieve a democratic consensus. This suggests that participating in deliberation grants citizens a better understanding of the complexity of policy-making processes and the need for compromise in reaching consensus, possibly leading to increased trust in political institutions and leaders who engage in this process. Participants might also learn more about public officials and identify with them based on shared personal characteristics, potentially raising trustworthiness levels.

Additionally, exposure to diverse viewpoints during deliberation might lead to a greater appreciation of the complexity of policy issues, thereby increasing trust in political decisions. Finally, the exchange of ideas and opinions might foster a sense of shared understanding and mutual respect among participants. However, this assumption relies on the notion that participants engage respectfully with others' opinions, promoting shared understanding and mutual respect among them. This aspect might not always be present in online discussions on social networks.

Scholars have already proposed more nuanced or improved models for studying associations between political trust and participation. Trustworthiness might interact with a person's sense of political efficacy, a person's belief in their ability to influence political outcomes when investing time and energy into online political participation. Although this interaction effect lacks comprehensive empirical support, it represents an intriguing research question worth exploring, as we aim to do within the future research in the TRUEDEM project.

4 Conclusion

This research framework paper delves into the role played by social media in shaping democratic behaviour and attitudes, with a specific focus on laying the groundwork for the TRUEDEM work package on social media and trustworthiness.

The scholarly discourse, thus far, lacks a definitive and universally agreed-upon answer regarding the precise impact of social media on democracy. Various scholars have reported both beneficial and detrimental effects of social media on democracy. The assessment of these effects is, to a certain extent, context-dependent, contingent upon the specific social media platform and the nature of the prevailing political regime. For instance, the assessment of the negative effect of social media on political trust may vary when considered within the contexts of illiberal democracies or authoritarian regimes as opposed to consolidated democracies. Such distinctions lead to divergent conclusions, with social media potentially contributing to pro-democratic change in the former and having a detrimental effect in the latter.

Also, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of evaluating these effects, given that both democratic behaviour and attitudes are multidimensional variables sensitive to the validity of measurement methodologies. The paper underlines the need to distinguish the support for democracy and satisfaction with democracy as two conceptually, but also empirically distinct phenomena. As argued above, the various levels of support and satisfaction indicate that they are most likely shaped by different factors, or, in other words, that the same factors shape them in a different way. We argue that when evaluating and measuring support for democracy, particularly in the context of diffusive support, it is crucial to consider it within the framework of its liberal model. The operationalization of this concept should reflect the dual pillars of liberal democracy: the electoral pillar, grounded in citizen representation and majority rule, and the constitutional pillar, encompassing institutional checks and balances to limit executive power and protect minorities.

Yet, another question is what shapes such attitudes. The “filters” individuals use for reflection of political reality and agency performance are various, however academic literature stress the role played by information provided by media. The communication channels might trigger the processes of informed decision-making and therefore influence the judgements on trustworthiness (Norris 2002). Social media recently have become an important part of online news distribution and consumption (Newman et al., 2021), crucial tool for sharing political information (Bhagat and Kim, 2023) and serves as easily accessible platforms for political dialogue (interactions with agents,

agencies and other users). From this perspective, social media offer ample opportunities for studying new channels for transfer of citizen's demands into the policymaking and also for analysing modern tools for political communication and participation.

On one hand, online political participation is inherently low-cost. On the other hand, the participation rate remains substantially lower than internet penetration or social network usage. This prompts the question of whether there is a self-selection bias in online political participation—whether factors such as interest in politics or a sense of political efficacy motivate individuals to participate online. In alignment with existing literature highlighting the role of social networks as platforms for expressing hate speech or spreading fake news (Shin et al., 2018; Sunstein, 2017; Chetty and Alathur, 2018; Soroush et al., 2018; Fuchs, 2018), it is plausible that social networks such as Facebook or X (formerly Twitter) attract individuals already dissatisfied with the state of democracy in their country, providing an outlet to vent their discontent. Based on existing findings, the plausible is also that political activities on social networks could increase the overall support for democracy. In the TRUEDEM project, we aim to study political activities on social media, distinguishing between “un-constructive” expressive participation (closer to clicktivism, such as contributing with emojis to a discussion) and “constructive” expressive participation, which seeks to achieve change (of opinion, attitude, or policy) through argumentation. Our assumption is that constructive expressive activities on social media could be considered active political participation. Our research aims to test if political empowerment facilitated by social media expressive participation influences democratic attitudes.

The paper additionally delineated avenues for future research as the mixed evidence of social media effect on democracy and especially political trust call for further investigation. Also, an examination of social media dynamics through a focused analysis of specific types or platforms, recognizing their differential impact is worth to explore. And last but not least, the literature revision pointed on need to explore political participation on social media (extending beyond mere usage frequency) as potential influence of individual's judgements on political trust.

Drawing upon the contemporary academic discourse, we articulate the following research inquiries for further empirical scrutiny:

- What are the patterns and modalities of social media utilization for political interactions, involving both users and political actors?
- How do users perceive political activities conducted on social media platforms?
- In what ways can social media function as platforms for fostering or increase of trustworthiness and pro-democratic attitudes?

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