


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The *democracy falling* narrative: debunking stereotypes about democratic deconsolidation in the EU

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Abstract

The democratic backsliding literature sees reactionary shifts among the electorates of mature democracies as a reason for the rise of right-wing populism (RWP)—shifts that supposedly fuel citizens' distrust in democratic institutions and their readiness to support RWP in its efforts to cut back on democracy's liberal principles. However, the assumptions underlying this *democracy falling* narrative are more often stated than tested. Filling this void, we analyze data from the European Values Study/World Values Surveys in a cross-national longitudinal design amended by multilevel evidence, covering all EU countries surveyed at two distant timepoints over the past twenty to twenty-five years. We test whether reactionary shifts among socio-economically vulnerable electoral segments increased polarization over four ideological cleavages: right-vs-left on economic issues, nativism-vs-cosmopolitanism on immigration issues, patriarchy-vs-emancipation on sexuality issues, and economy-vs-environment on sustainability issues. Specifically, we examine whether those population segments at the reactionary end of these cleavages lost trust in democracies' political institutions and their liberal principles in ways that increase voters' readiness to support RWP parties. Our results provide no confirmation that polarizing shifts in the population account for RWP's electoral rise. We conclude that the problems explaining RWP success do not originate in reactionary public opinion shifts. Instead, we propose further research into potential representation gaps with respect to nonvoter camps that grew larger during the pre-RWP era and are now mobilized by RWP parties—a game change presumably triggered by the rise of social media.

Keywords: Institutional trust; polarization; ideological shift; cleavage dimensions

Introduction

The still young literature on “democratic backsliding” and the “deconsolidation of democracies” continues to grow at a rapid pace—driven by a general *democracy falling* concern (Foa and Mounk, 2017; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Mechkova *et al.*, 2017; Mounk, 2018). Besides institutional malfunctions and policy failures, a major strand of this literature assumes that the reasons for the steeply rising electoral successes of right-wing populism (RWP) and the subsequent cutbacks on democracies' liberal qualities result from reactionary and anti-liberal shifts in public opinion (Foa and Mounk, 2017; Mounk, 2018).

Focusing on advanced post-industrial democracies, scholars of public opinion suspect an authoritarian reaction against the decade-long rise of emancipative values among the increasingly educated societal mainstream and its progressive-liberal agenda on matters of cultural diversity, sexual liberation, and ecological sustainability (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Prominent studies

assume that this “authoritarian reflex” prevails among culturally marginalized (i.e., “left-behind”) voter segments at the low education end of the middle-class spectrum. Often characterized as the “petty bourgeoisie” (Bernstein, 1988; Poulantzas, 1979), this spectrum comprises low-to-middle income occupations with vocational training, like artisans, craftsmen, shopkeepers, and other manual workers (see, e.g., Engler and Weisstanner, 2021; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Goodhart, 2017; Han and Han, 2023). Already Lipset (1960) saw in this electoral spectrum a chronic predisposition to “working-class authoritarianism.” Now, “[a]fter almost 60 years, the Lipset working-class authoritarianism thesis stands the test of time” (Norris and Inglehart, 2019, p. 279).

Against the backdrop of rising income inequalities and existential insecurities in the wake of economic globalization, scholars presume that the alleged authoritarian reaction among “modernization losers” increases ideological class polarization over key dimensions of political conflict. Following widening ideological polarization, economically vulnerable and culturally marginalized population segments become increasingly alienated from the democratic system, its central institutions, and their guiding liberal principles. The progressing alienation allegedly manifests itself in crumbling trust in public institutions and eroding support for liberal democracy writ large, especially among the reactionary voter segments. As a result, trust-vs-distrust in public institutions and approval-vs-disapproval of liberal democracy turn into a new domain of polarization in its own right, separating increasingly *alienated* from still *allegiant* voters. The anti-establishment rhetoric of RWP capitalizes on alienated voters’ accrued frustration and mobilizes them to leave their detainment in the growing nonvoter camp (cf. Minkenberg, 2000; Dunn, 2015; Bonikowski, 2017; Gidron and Hall, 2020). Accordingly, RWP becomes electorally stronger, seizes government positions more frequently, and eventually uses its power to curtail democracies’ liberal qualities.

This narrative represents a dominant subtext inspiring the “democratic backsliding” and “deconsolidation of democracy” literatures (Foa and Mounk, 2017; Mechkova *et al.*, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

The assumptions underlying the *democracy falling* narrative are, however, more often told than demonstrated. Filling this void, we analyze data from the European Values Study/World Values Survey to trace the development of institutional trust, democracy support, and ideological polarization among European electorates over a twenty to twenty-five-year timespan. The purpose of this examination is to figure out whether, and to what extent, the sweeping public opinion trends that are stereotypically taken for granted in much of the *democracy falling* literature actually hold true in a broadly comparative perspective with a wider time horizon.

The remainder of this article proceeds in four steps. The first section outlines the *democracy falling* narrative in theory. The second section portrays the study design intended to examine the main assumptions inspiring this narrative. The third section describes the data and variables used. The fourth section presents the results in a three-step sequence, moving from “exemplary case evidence” to “fully comparative evidence” to “pooled multilevel evidence.” The concluding section discusses the limitations and further implications of our study.

The democracy falling narrative

We abstain from a detailed recapitulation of all the debates in the large and still growing inequality, backsliding, deconsolidation, and RWP literatures. Instead, we distill from a selection of relevant works in these fields some key interpretive elements that combine into an overarching frame, which we call the *democracy falling* narrative.¹ There is no single reading to which we can

¹As depicted here, the *democracy falling* narrative is informed by a combined reading of the following writings (in chronological order): Mudde (2004), Lerner and Tiedens (2006), Miron and Brehm (2006), Steindl *et al.* (2015), Müller (2014), Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), Foa and Mounk (2017), Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza (2017), Alexander and Welzel (2017), Salmela and von Scheve (2017), Aksoy, Guriev and Treisman (2018), Colantone and Stanig (2018), Mounk (2018), Schäfer

attribute the *democracy falling* narrative as a whole; instead, the narrative emerges from a combination of the overlapping interpretive elements in a large and diverse body of writings. As such, the *democracy falling* narrative comprises a series of temporally ordered assumptions about how public opinion dynamics in advanced post-industrial democracies propel the electoral rise of RWP and its attacks on the liberal principles of democracy. Sequentially ordered, we phrase these assumptions as follows (see Figure 1 for a schematic depiction):

- (1) Over the past decades, the electorates of post-industrial publics experienced a gradual emancipatory shift in values away from conformity and obedience toward individual self-determination and equality of opportunities. This emancipatory shift was strongest among the increasingly educated middle-class segments. As a result, populations' overall emphasis on emancipative values rose on average, bringing more support for migratory openness, sexual self-determination, and ecological sustainability.
- (2) Contrasting with the accelerating educational expansion among the mainstream post-industrial electorates, the remaining voters in less educated lower-middle class positions face greater socio-economic vulnerabilities and feel culturally marginalized under advancing de-industrialization and growing in-migration—policy outcomes favored by the electoral mainstream's increasingly liberal agenda. In response, the vulnerable and marginalized voters react with an adamant conservative resistance against further liberal progressions on the policy domains of migration, sexuality, and sustainability.
- (3) Consequently, class-based ideological polarization over conservative-vs-liberal (authoritarian-vs-emancipative) policy priorities grows so steeply that the reactionary conservative voters become increasingly alienated from the democratic system.
- (4) Systemic alienation manifests itself, for one, in reactionary voters' growing distrust in democracies' central political institutions.
- (5) Systemic alienation manifests itself also in an increasing disapproval of democracies' liberal principles, paralleled by spreading sympathy for authoritarian-style strongmen rule.
- (6) Both manifestations of systemic alienation finally feed rising support for RWP parties' anti-establishment rhetoric and their verbal as well as real attacks on democracy's liberal principles, especially media freedom, judicial independence, and minority rights.

To date, there is no comprehensive test of this system of sequential trend assumptions that informs the *democracy falling* narrative as portrayed here. The following section describes the study design by which we intend to fill this gap.

Study design

Conceptual set-up

The *democracy falling* narrative addresses developments among mature post-industrial democracies. Accordingly, our ambition narrows down to this category of countries. Geographically, economically advanced (i.e., post-industrial) democracies exist in large parts of Europe² and include North America (USA, Canada), Australia and New Zealand, as well as parts of East Asia (certainly Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), parts of Latin America (certainly Chile,

(2022), Turska-Kawa (2022).

Norris and Inglehart (2019) provide extensive discussions of this six-step sequence in their backlash theory (page-numbers in parentheses). They argue that the societal mainstream's emancipatory progression triggered an authoritarian reaction beyond the mainstream (listing points 1–3, pp. 87–131). They debate economic vulnerabilities and the role of “globalization losers” (listing points 1–3, pp. 131–173), and they discuss the link between systemic aversion (distrust/authoritarianism) and RWP vote (listing points 4–6, pp. 257–293).

²We mean the democracies of the European Union, plus Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and the UK.

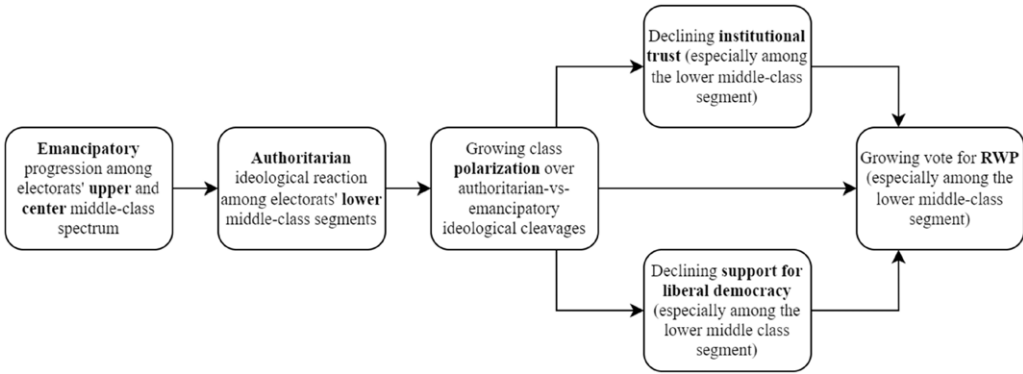


Figure 1. The hypothetical sequence of the eroding democracy narrative.

Uruguay), and Israel.³ To keep our study within a manageable scope among this geographically wide array of countries, we focus on the European Union (EU) as the world’s largest and, at the same time, most diverse collection of mature democracies within the same regulatory framework.

Taking EU democracies as the point of departure, we recognize that the Union’s countries divide into four distinct geo-historic regions, which entered the EU at different points in time, under different circumstances, and with a different legacy. The four geo-historic regions comprise what we call (1) the *Western Core*, (2) the *Scandinavian North*, (3) the *Mediterranean South*, and (4) the *Post-Communist East* (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019). Doing justice to this geo-historic structuration of the EU-space mandates to study the ideological patterns and dynamics among European electorates separately for the countries of each of the four regions—at least in a first step, before jumping right away into a pooled analysis of all countries at once.

Both the classic and contemporary writings in political sociology, electoral behavior and party politics presume that individual differences in income, education and occupation divide electorates into socio-economic segments of varying existential vulnerability, ordered from less privileged lower and lower-middle class strata to more privileged upper-middle and upper class strata (Lipset, 1960; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Kitschelt, 1994; Dalton, 1996; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2019). Different socio-economic vulnerabilities, in turn, embody conflicting interests and preferences on given policy domains. In mature post-industrial democracies, the contested policy domains typically boil down to four larger ideological “cleavages.” Each of these four cleavages embodies the conflict between a conservative/defensive (or authoritarian) position at one extreme end and a progressive/interventionist (or emancipatory) position at its opposite end, with intermediate positions in the center between the extremes.

In our terminology, the four ideological cleavages include (1) the *MARKET* cleavage over the *deregulation* of (conservative) versus *intervention* in (progressive) the economy, (2) the *MIGRATION* cleavage over the *exclusion* (conservative) versus *inclusion* (progressive) of immigrants, (3) the *SEXUALITY* cleavage over the *restriction* (conservative) versus *extension* (progressive) of sexual self-determination, and (4) the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage over *job preservation* (conservative) versus *environmental protection* (progressive) as policy priorities.

³India as a long-standing, albeit deficient, democracy would not (yet) count into our categorization because its socio-economic development is not yet a level at which we could talk about an “advanced post-industrial” economy. Although any cut-off point is arbitrary, intuition would guide us to judge that none of today’s democracies below a score of 0.80 on the Human Development Index (India: 0.64) would qualify as an “advanced post-industrial” economy. A score on the Human Development Index at or above 0.80 implies a Gross Domestic Product (in purchasing power parities) of no less than 30,000 international Dollars per person (India: 10,000), an average life expectancy of no less than 75 years (India: 72) and a number of schooling years of 9 per average person (India: 7) (UNDP, 2025).

The *MARKET* cleavage represents an old line of tension that reaches back in time to the material conflicts during the era of modern democracies' industrialization. With the transition into the post-industrial age, the old *MARKET* cleavage has lost its once overwhelming dominance and now competes in salience with the post-industrial cleavages on matters of *MIGRATION*, *SEXUALITY*, and *SUSTAINABILITY*. Our focus of interest, therefore, concentrates on the three post-industrial ideological cleavages. We nevertheless include the *MARKET* cleavage into our consideration to obtain a complete picture of the electorates' ideological patterns and dynamics.

In line with the literature, the *democracy falling* narrative assumes that socio-economically vulnerable voters in lower and lower-middle class positions tend toward more conservative positions on the post-industrial ideological cleavages. More importantly, the *democracy falling* narrative claims that these voter segments' conservative/defensive distancing from the electoral mainstream has increased over time, thus enlarging ideological polarization between the electorates' lower and lower-middle class segments, on the one hand, and the upper-middle and upper class segments, on the other.

Besides ideological polarization, the *democracy falling* narrative presumes the emergence of two new political cleavages that differ from the previous four ideological cleavages in the sense that they do not center on differences in policy content but on differences in voters' general *aversion-vs-affection* to the political system. Thus, in addition to the four *ideological* cleavages, we consider two (supposedly intertwined) *systemic* cleavages, which we call (1) the *TRUST* cleavage over *alienation* versus *confidence* to the system's political institutions and (2) the *REGIME* cleavage over preferences for *authoritarian-like strongmen rule* versus *democratic governance* tied by checks and balances. Alienation on the *TRUST* cleavage and authoritarianism on the *REGIME* cleavage represent the *aversive* side on the systemic polarity; confidence on the *TRUST* cleavage and democracy support on the *REGIME* cleavage represent the *affectionate* side.

Against the backdrop of this setting, the *democracy falling* narrative suggests that ideologically conservative voters in socio-economically vulnerable class positions have enhanced class polarization over both the *TRUST* and *REGIME* cleavages by shifting away from the electoral mainstream, that is, toward greater aversion on both of these systemic cleavages. Allegedly, the grown system aversion of these electoral segments feeds a growing readiness to vote for RWP parties.

Analytical strategy

One question to test this narrative is to ask whether and to what extent the RWP vote has throughout Europe's electorates a solid micro-foundation in (a) more vulnerable socio-economic class strata, (b) more extremely reactionary (i.e., conservative) positions on the three post-industrial ideological cleavages, and (c) more aversive postures on the two systemic cleavages. Yet, even if these micro-foundations exist as suggested (and as evidenced in the broad literature on the electoral determinants of RWP success),⁴ the mere existence of these micro-foundations cannot explain the *rise* of the RWP vote over time—unless the three characteristics that constitute the psychological micro-foundations of RWP (i.e., socio-economic vulnerability, conservative extremism, system aversion) did *also* increase over time. Hence, a proper trend description alongside a comparative mapping-and-tracking scheme is our first analytical task in testing the *democracy falling* narrative.

As of note, this task is not a matter of sophisticated statistical modeling but simply a descriptive fact-checking exercise, albeit a complex one that requires extensive data mining on a wide spatial and temporal scope. Indeed, our mapping-and-tracking scheme comprises a matrix of twenty-three countries, five socio-economic classes, six political cleavages, and two distant time points, which yields ($23 \times 5 \times 6 \times 2 =$) 1,380 aggregate data points to compare. There are way too many

⁴See the readings listed in footnote 1.

data points on too many dimensions to visualize the ideological trends of our interest in a readable manner for all EU electorates at once.

Therefore, we choose a different approach and—in a first step—reduce complexity by zooming into the EU’s four geo-historic regions. The idea is to select from each region the country with the largest population. We do this in the hope that what we find among a region’s largest national electorate is more or less typical for most electorates in the same geo-historic region. Given each of the four regions’ formative cultural legacies, the assumption that cleavage patterns and dynamics show intra-regional similarities does not seem to be off base (cf. Hutter and Kriesi, 2019).

Following these rationales, the first step of the mapping-and-tracking examination (“Exemplary Case Evidence”) focuses on Germany, Sweden, Spain,⁵ and Poland as representative cases of their respective geo-historic region. Separately for each of the four countries, we trace positional shifts of five lower-vs.-upper class voter segments on the four ideological cleavages listed above over the twenty to twenty-five-year timespan from the mid/late 1990s till the late 2010s/early 2020s. The purpose is to see whether these shifts unfolded as predicted by the *democracy falling* narrative—with the vulnerable socio-economic segments moving into a growing reactionary distance to the mainstream’s supposed emancipatory progression in ways that increase class polarization over the four ideological cleavages and shift the vulnerable segments into a more aversive stance on the two systemic cleavages, visible in greater alienation on the *TRUST* cleavage and stronger authoritarianism on the *REGIME* cleavage. Visualizing the ideological dynamics in this setting gives us a first impression of the extent to which the first three steps of the *democracy falling* narrative depicted in Figure 1 hold true. In other words, is there convincing evidence for (1) a long-term emancipatory progression among the center-middle and upper-middle class mainstream of the electorates, (2) an authoritarian ideological reaction among the socio-economically vulnerable lower and lower-middle class segments, and (3) a subsequent polarization along our four ideological and two systemic cleavages?⁶

To trace ideological shifts, we chose the twenty to twenty-five years timespan just mentioned because such a rather wide temporal range helps avoid confusing short-term fluctuations with the long-term trend. Moreover, when examining the reasons for RWP parties’ electoral success, it is appropriate to select as the reference a time point before their electoral ascension began to pick up speed—hence, the mid-late 1990s as the starting point of our temporal observation. This is also a calmer period before the EU introduced the joint Euro currency and began to approach the turbulent era of consecutive crises that followed (financial crisis, refugee crisis, Corona crisis, etc.).

In the “Exemplary Case Evidence” section, we plot—next to the different socio-economic voter segments—also the position of the voters of the main RWP party in each country. In Germany, this is the “Alternative für Deutschland” (Alternative for Germany: AfD); in Sweden, the “Sverigedemokraterna” (Sweden Democrats: SD); and in Poland, the “Pokój i Sprawiedliwość” (Peace and Justice Party: PiS).⁷ We do so in order to figure out how much the positions of RWP voters are out of range from the electorates’ positional differentiation alongside socio-economic divisions. Unfortunately, we can only plot the position of RWP voters for the latest point in time because the right-wing party spectrum looked very different at our first point of observation. Also, the RWP electorate was too small back then to calculate reliable positional averages. Because our focus on mean values hides the potential variability behind these values, we extend our analyses and provide the changes in distribution for our four exemplary cases across time and across SES in

⁵The largest national electorate in the Mediterranean are the Italians but data for Italy are too patchy to complete our mapping-and-tracking scheme, so we chose Spain instead.

⁶Supplementary Online Material (SOM) Figures S5–S17 repeat the same analysis for the remaining European countries with sufficient data. Figures S18–S37 show the underlying distributions separated by country, wave, and SES. This helps to emphasize the single peaked nature of most variables’ distributions and the reliable use of mean values in our exemplary case evidence.

⁷For Spain, it would be voters of “Vox Populi” (Voice of the People). However, the party preference variable in the latest Spanish EVS/WVS does not include a code for this party.

Supplementary Online Material (SOM) Figures S18–S37. The distributions paint a very *normal* single-peaked picture for all continuously measured variables and further substantiate our findings.

After illustrating the dynamic pattern for the four exemplary countries, we move on to our second step (“Fully Comparative Evidence”). Here, we zoom out and adopt an encompassing perspective in comparing voters’ positional shifts on the ideological and systemic cleavages as well as their polarization dynamics for most of the EU-27 electorates. The graphics in this second part of the analysis visualize how far the first three chain links of the *democracy falling* narrative depicted in Figure 1 hold true in a more comprehensive European perspective beyond the four exemplary countries of the first step.

The third part of the examination (“Pooled Multilevel Evidence”) means a further and final step of generalization in that we integrate many of the EU-27 electorates into a single universe and apply multilevel modeling. We use these models to estimate how strongly the European electorates’ RWP votes are anchored in micro-foundations related to the variables of scrutiny in our descriptive trend analyses: that is, socio-economic vulnerability, reactionary distancing, and systemic aversion. We estimate the strength of these micro-foundations in a multilevel framework to figure out how sweeping these micro-foundations operate across important country-level differences in policy performance (i.e., economic growth, unemployment rates, price inflation, corruption, and crime) as well as in migration stocks (i.e., share of migrants in the residential population). On the individual level, we estimate respondents’ distance from their country mean as a measure of ideological extremity. In a sense, ideological extremity represents the individual-level equivalent of group-level polarization.

We expect that—seen as a whole—our three-step analytical sequence informs a conclusive judgment about the validity of the widely believed *democracy falling* narrative. Since displaying the complete material exceeds the space limits of this article, most of the documentation is outsourced to SOMs. Where appropriate, the text refers to the respective section in the SOM.

Data and variables

Data

To implement our study design, we need nationally representative data of individuals’ socio-economic status (SES), their ideological and systemic positions, and their voting preferences. These data should cover most of the EU-27 countries, and they should cover them at several—and preferably distant—points in time.⁸

These premises draw our attention to Europe’s repeated cross-national surveys: the *Eurobarometer Surveys* (EBS), the *European Social Survey* (ESS), and the *European Values Study/World Values Surveys* (EVS/WVS). Among these, the questionnaire design of the EVS/WVS fits more closely than the EBS the variables of interest in our study, especially since the EBS is not primarily a values survey and, thus, lacks a focus on the deeper-seated psychological orientations that shape people’s ideological and systemic positions. Compared to the ESS, the EVS/WVS reaches farther back in time, which allows us to base our trend analysis on an earlier reference point (mid-late 1990s), located before the EU’s series of consecutive crises and before the subsequent booming era of RWP. Consequently, the evidence reported in this article is based on EVS/WVS data (Haerper, Inglehart, Moreno, Welzel, Kizilova *et al.*, 2021).

⁸Ideally, we should rely on individual-level panel data to measure the intra-individual change over time. Unfortunately, no available panel data covers all necessary concepts across an equally large time-horizon and equally large set of countries as the EVS/WVS.

Variables

Socio-economic status

Since SES derives primarily from the combination of individuals' income and education, we rely on respondents' self-reported income and education, which are available on 10- and 9-point ordinal scales, respectively. Using the country-time pooled individual-level EVS/WVS data ($N \sim 50,000$), we enter respondents' education and income into a principal component analysis and extract as a new variable for each individual her/his factor score on the first (and only) principal component. This way, we capture in a single measure about two-thirds joint variation of both income and education.

The advantage of this measure is that it recognizes the empirical relationship between income and education, instead of relying on a theoretically predefined but empirically uninformed categorization.

We normalize the factor scores into a 0-to-1 range and collapse the resulting scale into five categories alongside equally sized intervals (0 to 0.2 [. . .] 0.8 to 1.0). We label the intervals in descending order of socio-economic vulnerability: lower class (LC), lower-middle class (LMC), center-middle class (CMC), upper-middle class (UMC), and upper class (UC). Figure 2 shows the country-time pooled individual-level distribution.

In addition to income and education, certain characteristics of occupational status also define individuals' SES. They include a set of binary characteristics indicating such things as to whether a working person is self-employed or employed, fulfills a supervisor role or not, has decision-making autonomy or not, and works in the private or public sector. The combinatory complexity of these occupational characteristics, however, makes it difficult to squeeze them into a coherent coding scheme. For this reason, the occupational status variable in the EVS/WVS is plagued by an unusually large number of missing responses, which greatly reduces the representative reliability of the respective information. Therefore, the SES index used in the analyses here ignores occupational status.⁹ Still, SOM Table S4 documents a supplementary analysis based on an augmented SES index that includes occupational status information.¹⁰ Doing so largely replicates the results reported here.

Political cleavages

We operationalize the four *ideological* cleavages alongside a conservative-vs.-progressive conflict line, with scores growing toward the progressive end on each cleavage. We measure the domains of conflict on which the cleavages center as follows:

MARKET Cleavage: We summarize three questions asking respondents for their degree of support for income inequality reduction, public ownership of industries and government responsibility for individuals' material wellbeing, each asked on a 1 to 10 scale.¹¹ Hence, this

⁹Our five-point socio-economic status index based on self-reported income and education overlaps with respondents' subjective self-attribution into social classes (also based on a five-point ordinal categorization: lower class, working class, lower-middle class, upper-middle class, upper class): $r = .47$ ($p < .001$; $N = 43,097$).

¹⁰Here we rely on Erikson et al. (1979), Ganzeboom and Treiman (1996), and Brauns et al. (2000) and describe our coding in SOM Notes S2.

¹¹In terms of Cronbach's alpha, our item summaries show a variety of weak ($\alpha = .30$ MARKET cleavage), mediocre ($\alpha = .66$ TRUST cleavage), decent ($\alpha = .70$ REGIME cleavage), and good ($\alpha = .84$ SEXUALITY cleavage) reliability markers (based on the country-and-time pooled individual-level data). Accordingly, our item summaries are not always justified under the "reflective" logic of latent variables. However, under the "formative" logic of set theory, the question about added value to be addressed to a multi-item composition is one of "nomological validity": Does the item combination embody higher explanatory power over other measures of the same thematic domain than each of the combination's single components does? If so, the item combinations have added value over their components, which suffices to justify their summary in a single measure. Analyzing this issue, we find an affirmative answer for each of our four item combinations. All of them correlate

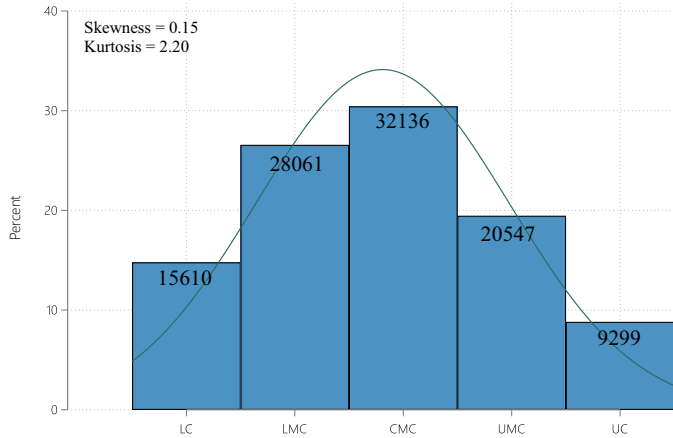


Figure 2. SES distribution in the country/time pooled EVS/WVS individual-level data.

cleavage captures a classical left-right perspective on economic issues with a tradeoff between neo-liberal economic freedom with privatized risks and benefits on the lower end of the spectrum and social-safety nets and public steering of the economy on the other end.

MIGRATION Cleavage: We rely on responses to a question asking for respondents' attitude toward the prioritization of national citizens over migrants when jobs in their country are scarce ("agree," "disagree," "neither"). We compare the results with two additional variables, which ask about attitudes toward migration (see SOM Figures S1 and S2).¹²

SEXUALITY Cleavage: We summarize three questions, each asking on a 1–10 scale to what degree respondents find "homosexuality," "abortion," and "divorce" acceptable.

SUSTAINABILITY Cleavage: We use a question asking respondents whether, in case of a goal conflict, environmental protection should always come first, or whether preserving/creating jobs should always have priority, or whether it depends.

For each individual, we standardize all ideological cleavage variables into a 0-to-1 format. On each cleavage, the low scale end (0) represents the conservative extreme (i.e., economic restraint, migrant exclusion, sexual restriction, job preservation), while the high scale end (1.0) represents the progressive extreme (i.e., economic intervention, migrant inclusion, sexual liberation, environmental protection). Decimal fractions measure intermediate positions between the

considerably stronger than each of their single components with alternative measures of the respective cleavage domain (SOM Table S2).

¹²Given the scarcity of well-suited items that are available in sufficient abundance across countries and periods, our measurement choices are limited. One reflection of this limitation is the fact that our measures of the MIGRATION and SUSTAINABILITY cleavages are both based on just one item only. In these two instances, we have little choice than to rely on the face-validity of the respective item wordings, although one way around this drawback is to correlate the respective items with a number of alternative items for the same cleavage domains that have been fielded in a smaller number of surveys. If the items in question correlate at decent strength and in the expected direction with their more rarely fielded alternatives, credibility is enhanced. By and large, these supplementary correlations provide reassuring results for both of the two single items chosen to represent the MIGRATION and SUSTAINABILITY cleavage. On the MIGRATION cleavage, the nativist item about nationals' priority over immigrants in access to jobs correlates strongly and in the expected direction with items about tolerance of ethnic diversity and immigration-blocking policies. Likewise, on the SUSTAINABILITY cleavage, respondents' priority for environmental protection over job preservation correlates positively and in the expected direction with other items indicating respondents' readiness to make sacrifices for a "greener" living (SOM Table S2).

conservative and progressive poles, with the closeness to 0 and 1.0 indicating the prevailing conservative-vs-progressive direction.

We operationalize the two *systemic* cleavages alongside an aversion-vs.-alegiance conflict line as follows:

TRUST Cleavage: We summarize responses to three questions asking for interviewees' confidence in the "national parliament," "government," and "political parties" on 4-point Likert scales each (1 "a lot of confidence," 2 "some confidence," 3 "little confidence," 4 "no confidence at all").

REGIME Cleavage: We contrast the wish to live in a democratic system with the desire for authoritarian strongmen rule, relying on two questions asking respondents whether "having a democratic system" and "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliaments and elections" is a "good thing" or a "bad thing" on a four-point scale each. We subtract the desire for authoritarian leadership from the desire for a democratic system, resulting in a difference variable that captures support for authoritarian leadership (−1) versus support for democracy (+1), with scores closer to 0 indicating mixed preferences.¹³

We normalize the systemic cleavage variables, too, into a 0-to-1 format, such that the low scale end (0) represents aversive positions (alienation, authoritarianism), while the high scale end (1) represents alegiant positions (i.e., confidence, democraticness).

Additional variables

For the "Exemplary Case Evidence" and "Pooled Multilevel Evidence" sections, we identify for each country's most recent EVS/WVS the major RWP parties and code a voting preference for this party as 1 and 0 otherwise. SOM Table S3 documents which party we treat as the major RWP party for each country. For this coding, we closely follow Rooduijn *et al.* (2024) and classify a party as RWP if the PopuList V3 codes it as both populist and right-wing.

For the "Multilevel Evidence" section, we use additional variables, including basic demographic controls at the individual level (gender, age, age squared) and important country-level differences that plausibly affect individuals' RWP vote. Specifically, we focus on countries' migration stocks (i.e., share of immigrants among the residential population) and standard indicators of national policy performance (i.e., economic growth, unemployment rate, price inflation, corruption, and crime). Intuition suggests that larger migration stocks and weaker policy performance heighten citizens' system aversion and, as a consequence, also the base level of their RWP vote. SOM Notes S3 and SOM Table S1 document the sources, scales, and distributions of the additional variables.

Findings

Exemplary case evidence

WEST European core (e.g., Germany)

Figure 3A plots the ideological shifts of the German electorate's SES segments on the *TRUST* cleavage (horizontal axis) against the *MARKET* cleavage (vertical axis). Surprisingly, in light of what most of the literature suggests, the different SES segments of the German public each have moved toward more, instead of less, institutional trust over the past twenty-five years, namely from an overall population average of about .30 scale points to roughly .40 scale points, which is significant on a total 0-to-1 range. At the same time, however, the upper-middle and upper classes have

¹³The WVS variable used by Kirsch and Welzel (2019) to capture authoritarian-vs-liberal notions of democracy has not been fielded by the EVS and is, hence, missing in many EU countries.

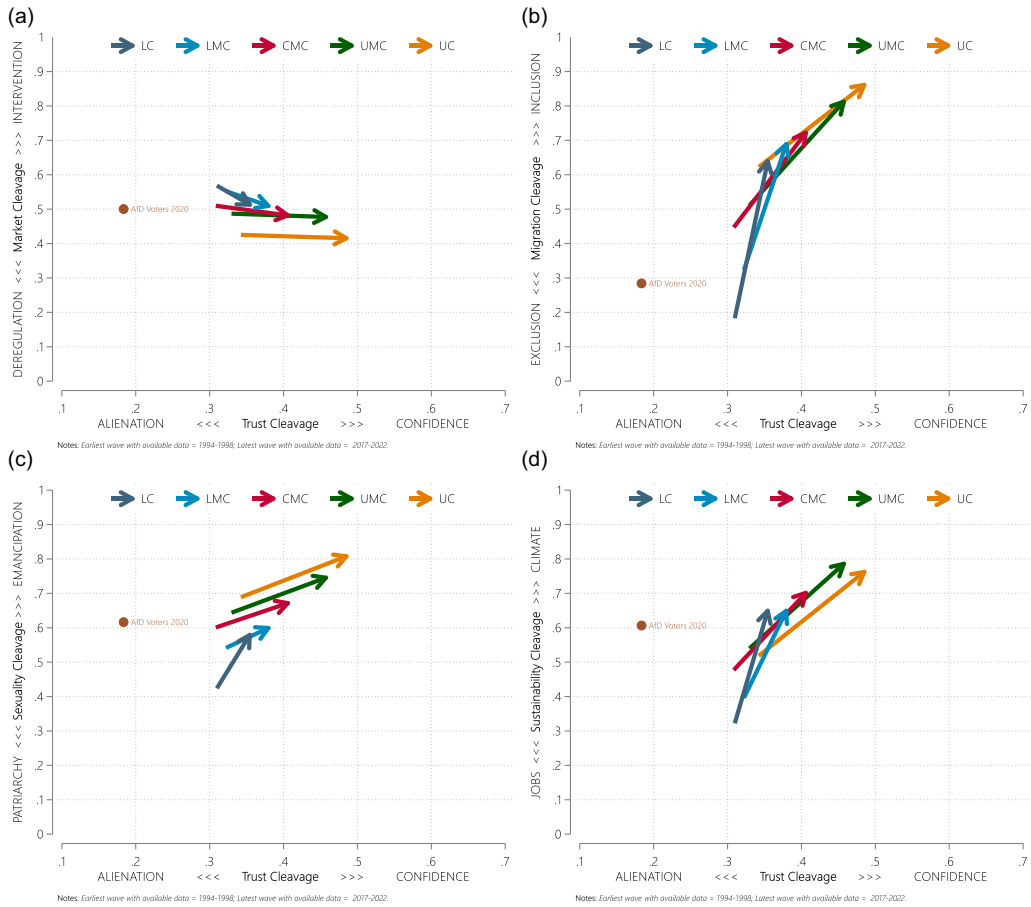


Figure 3. (A, B, C, D clockwise): Cleavage dimensions in Germany.

shifted so much farther toward greater trust that—compared to the situation twenty-five years ago—we now see a slightly bigger trust gap to the lower-middle and lower classes, although they too moved toward a more allegiant position. Overall, the German public’s differentiation on the *TRUST* cleavage is weakly determined by the electorate’s SES segmentation.

In stark contrast, the AfD supporters exhibit an exceptionally alienated position at half of the institutional trust level of the overall German average (roughly .20 compared to .40 scale points). As of note, the AfD supporters’ distinctive alienation does not match with any of the German electorate’s class segments, not even the socio-economically most vulnerable lower-middle and lower classes. In this respect, the exceptionally alienated position of German RWP supporters is only weakly anchored in socio-economic vulnerabilities. Besides, when we evaluate the positions of RWP voters, we neglect their *absolute* scale positions and instead comment on their positions *relative* to a country’s SES segments.

Against expectations that growing economic divisions over low-vs-high paid jobs and precarious-vs-secure occupations would have increased ideological polarization over distributional issues, no evidence for such polarization exists on the classic right-vs-left *MARKET* cleavage. At any rate, right-vs-left polarization over distributional issues is less dividing than one would guess. Indeed, the different SES segments of the German public differ from each other within a rather narrow range on classical right-vs-left questions: that is, between .42 and .58 on a scale range from 0-to-1, with the margin having even become narrower over the past twenty years.

AfD voters show no out-of-range position on the *MARKET* cleavage, which reveals that the AfD elites' neo-liberal position on economic issues is not the major attractor for the party's supporters in the electorate.

This pattern repeats itself in the other three geo-historic regions of the EU, as we will see. In a nutshell, deregulation-vs-intervention issues on the *MARKET* cleavage are not the main dividing line of the day and show no sign of obtaining this status anytime soon again.

Contrary to the widely held belief that ideological polarization over the *MIGRATION* cleavage has significantly increased, Figure 3B exhibits a surprisingly strong increase in *pro*-migration attitudes. The German public, as a whole, became much more inclusionary in its orientation toward migration, measured as the acceptance of migrants' equal access to the labor market. And no increased polarization among the population's SES segments over the *MIGRATION* cleavage is visible. Using an alternative measure—namely the acceptance of immigrants as neighbors—we also find increasing migrant acceptance on an even higher base level across the German SES segments, again without any indication of increased class polarization (see SOM Figures S1A and S2A).

AfD supporters, by contrast, stick out by a clearly exclusionist orientation toward migrants, taking a position that was held by the lower-middle class in the mid-late 1990s.

On the *SEXUALITY* cleavage (Figure 3C), all segments of the German public shifted considerably toward a more libertarian position. Thus, we note a strongly increased tolerance of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality throughout the population. And even though the standard polarization narrative suggests that the lower classes would withstand the sexual liberation trend or even move into the opposite direction, the exact contrary holds true: It is precisely the lower class moving the farthest toward libertarian sex norms, thus causing a decrease instead of an increase in class polarization over sexuality matters. Expectedly, AfD supporters score on the conservative end of the *SEXUALITY* cleavage. But their position is fully within the range of differences among the German public's middle-class spectrum, in contrast to what we have seen with respect to the *TRUST* and *MIGRATION* cleavages, on both of which AfD supporters widely diverge from the mainstream of the German public.

On the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage (Figure 3D), again, all middle-class segments moved toward a more progressive, post-materialist position by placing greater emphasis on environmental protection relative to job preservation. And once more, the lower class, as the most conservative group on this issue, made the biggest post-materialistic move, thus closing the gap with the upper-middle class. Hence, there is no increased class polarization over the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage either. As with the *SEXUALITY* cleavage, AfD supporters score at the conservative materialistic end of the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage, yet remain within the range of differences that characterize the German middle-class spectrum.

In summary, the German case offers no evidence for increased class polarization over mature democracies' four main ideological cleavages, except for the systemic *TRUST* cleavage on which the upper and upper-middle classes shifted so far toward greater institutional confidence that class differences over alienation-vs-confidence are now larger, albeit on a higher base level of allegiance (not alienation). AfD supporters diverge from the German public's differences over political cleavages by far out-of-range positions on the *TRUST* cleavage (alienated) and the *MIGRATION* cleavage (exclusion), yet not on the *MARKET*, *SEXUALITY*, and *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavages. The fact that the extreme AfD positions on the *TRUST* and *MIGRATION* cleavages are not particularly close to the positions of the lower and lower-middle class segments of the German electorate indicates that AfD support is, socio-economically speaking, not sharply demarcated but, instead, exists throughout all electoral segments.

Scandinavian NORTH (e.g., Sweden)

Sweden (Figures 4A–4D) offers even less evidence for growing class polarization over mature democracies' political cleavages. As in Germany, all SES segments of the Swedish public moved

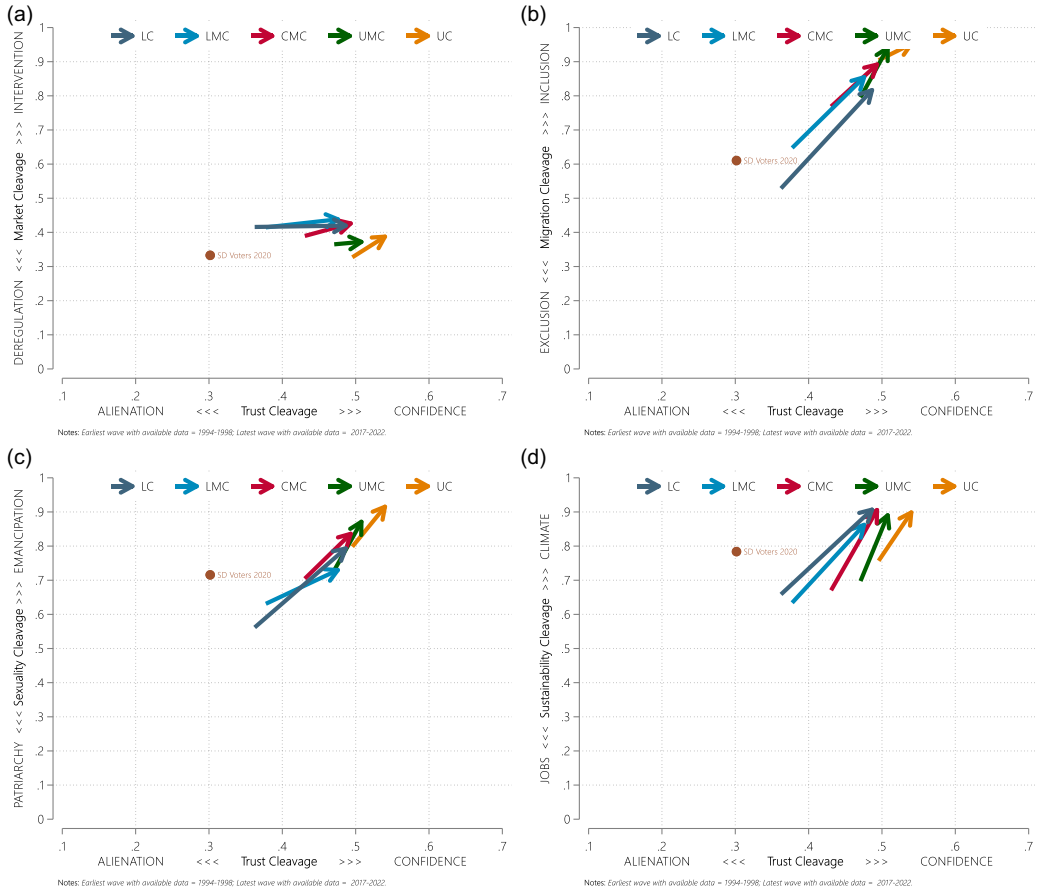


Figure 4. (A, B, C, D clockwise): Cleavage dimensions in **Sweden**.

toward more, instead of less, trust in institutions as well as toward more progressive positions on the *MIGRATION* cleavage (i.e., inclusion), the *SEXUALITY* cleavage (i.e., liberation), and the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage (i.e., sustainability). As in Germany, these progressive ideological shifts did by no means increase positional differences between lower and lower-middle class segments, on the one hand, and upper-middle and upper class segments, on the other. As in Germany, supporters of RWP (i.e., “Sweden Democrats”: SD) hold more conservative positions on all of these cleavages, yet with out-of-range positions only on the *TRUST* cleavage (i.e., alienation) and on the *MIGRATION* cleavage (i.e., exclusion). Sweden also showcases the national culture’s powerful gravitational pull. Indeed, even though voters of the Sweden Democrats take more extreme anti-liberal positions on all cleavages than the average Swede, they are still much more liberal in comparison with (e.g.) the Polish PiS voters. The reason for these astonishingly liberal RWP voters is Sweden’s global leadership in the progression of the emancipatory agenda in terms of migrant inclusion, sexual self-determination, and ecological sustainability. Thus, in the Swedish context, even RWP supporters do not demand the broadband rejection of asylum seekers, the re-criminalization of homosexuality, and the deforestation of natural reserves.

Overall, the different segments of the Swedish middle class moved toward more liberal positions in a relatively uniform manner, with the lower and lower-middle classes catching up with the center-middle and upper-middle classes. The latter two score close to the ceiling of our scales. As is the case for AfD supporters in Germany, the ideological conservatism of the voters of

the “Sweden Democrats” remains within the SES segments’ range of difference in the case of the *MARKET* and *SEXUALITY* cleavages. Also like German AfD voters, Swedish SD voters clearly stick out from the remainder of the electorate on the *TRUST* cleavage (i.e., alienation), the *MIGRATION* cleavage (i.e., exclusion), and—in contrast to AfD supporters—also on the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage (i.e., less environmental protection).

Mediterranean SOUTH (e.g., Spain)

Spain (Figures 5A–5D) is our exemplary case for the EU’s Mediterranean South. As we can see, institutional trust in Spain (as in the Mediterranean South more generally) is lower (at about .35 scale points) than in the Western European Core (e.g., Germany at .45 scale points) and the Scandinavian North (e.g., Sweden at .50 scale points). In contrast to Germany and Sweden, institutional trust in Spain is not only lower but has further dropped, especially among the lower and upper-middle classes, thus making the alienation-vs-confidence gap between SES segments somewhat bigger than before (Figure 5A). The decline of the upper-middle class’s trust in institutions (from .36 to .29 scale points) may be due to the socialist party’s (PSOE) long periods in power: PSOE was the ruling party in 1982–1996, 2004–2011, and 2019–2023. On the other hand, the PSOE was also the governing party responsible for the severe austerity policies after the EU financial crisis. Such policies contradict the historic mission of socialist parties to protect poorer citizens from economic hardship, which is a plausible reason why the Spanish lower class, too, lost institutional trust.

As in the EU’s other geo-historical regions, class polarization on the *MARKET* cleavage in Spain is modest and has not increased over time (Figure 5A), albeit on a more leftist-interventionist base level around roughly .55 scale points, which is high compared to Germany (.45) and Sweden (.40).

On the *MIGRATION* cleavage, a significant movement toward a more inclusive position occurred throughout the electorate (Figure 5B). At the same time, this progression proceeded unevenly between the lower and upper classes, increasing their gap to a point where 80% of the upper class support equal job access for migrants, while only 40% of the lower class share this position. However, the positional distance between the three middle-class segments became smaller on the *MIGRATION* cleavage. Since the three middle-class segments (i.e., lower-, center-, and upper-middle class) are much larger in size than the lower and upper class segments, the de-polarization among the middle-class segments greatly outbalances in demographic weight the polarization between the lower and upper class extremes.

Considering the *SEXUALITY* cleavage (Figure 5C), all class segments shifted pronouncedly toward a more libertarian position in favor of greater reproductive freedoms. As this happened, the distance between the middle-class segments shrank, while the lower class remains in a sexually more conservative position, albeit on a higher level of sexual libertarianism than twenty years ago—hence, no reactionary response of the socio-economically most vulnerable electoral segments to the mainstream’s emancipatory progression on the *SEXUALITY* cleavage.

As concerns the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage (Figure 5D), class polarization has somewhat grown, mostly by a progressive, post-materialistic move of the upper-middle and upper classes toward a more environmentalist position (Figure 5D). The salience of the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage may grow further in the future, since Spain is severely affected by climate change, visible in longer-lasting droughts, occasionally interrupted by catastrophic floods and other extreme weather events. Overall, however, evidence for a dramatic growth of class polarization over mature democracies’ main ideological cleavages is modest in Spain, too.

Unfortunately, we cannot show the position of RWP supporters in Spain because the party preference variable in the Spanish EVS/WVS does not code a voting preference for Vox Populi, the main RWP party in Spain.

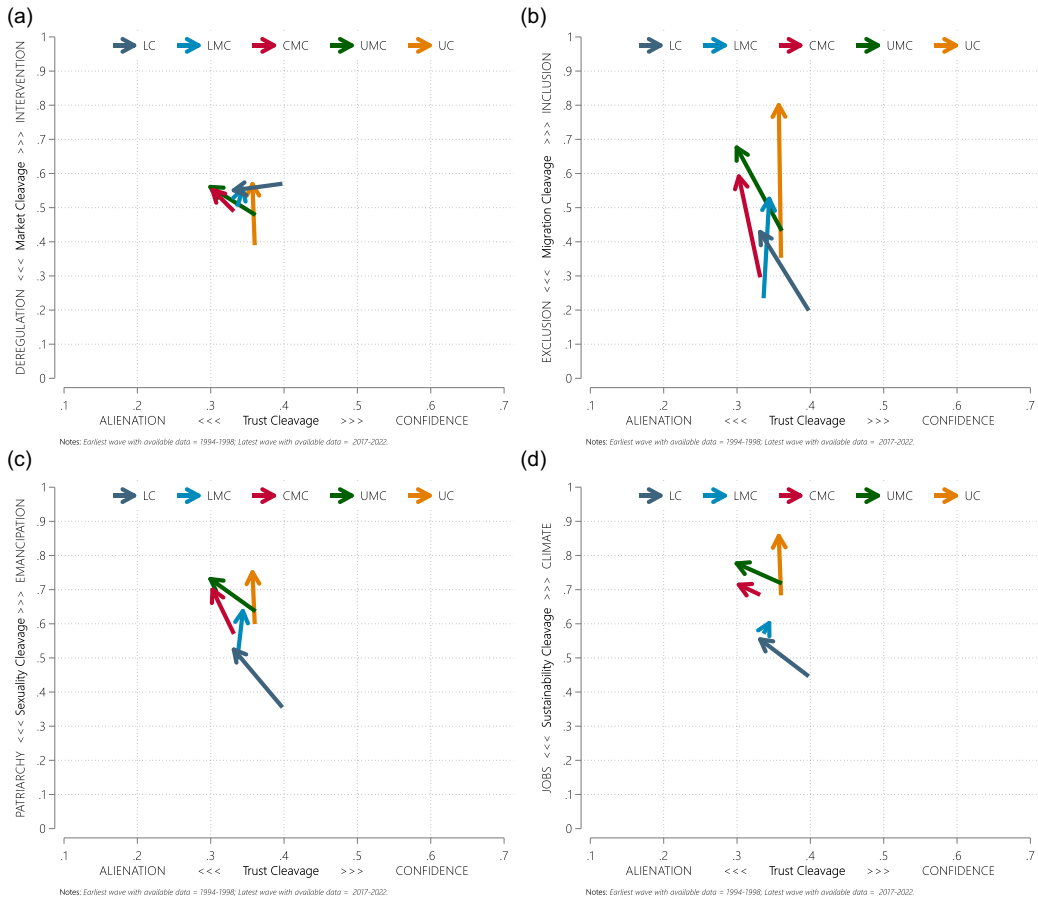


Figure 5. (A, B, C, D clockwise): Cleavage dimensions in Spain.

Post-communist EAST (e.g., Poland)

Turning to Poland as the exemplary case for the EU’s Post-Communist East (Figures 6A to 6D), the dynamic shows more resemblance with the Mediterranean South than with the other two geo-historic regions. As in the Mediterranean South, institutional trust is generally low and has further decreased by a large margin throughout all segments of the Polish electorate (from close to .40 scale points to just above .20 scale points). And while there was almost no gap between the lower-middle and upper-middle classes in the mid-late 1990s, the distances grew larger over time (Figure 6A).

As in Germany and Sweden, supporters of Poland’s RWP party (PiS) stick out on the *TRUST* cleavage. But here it is a pronouncedly more confident position. This deviation from the usual RWP pattern is easily explained because PiS was in power from 2015 until 2023, thus massively increasing institutional trust among PiS supporters in Poland. Vice versa, we see a sharply decreasing trust of the center-middle and upper-middle class segments, whose members do not feel represented by PiS and who had to witness its anti-democratic interferences into the judicial and media systems.¹⁴

¹⁴Following the 2023 election of Donald Tusk and the formation of a pro-democracy and pro-EU government, we may now expect an inversion of the current picture.

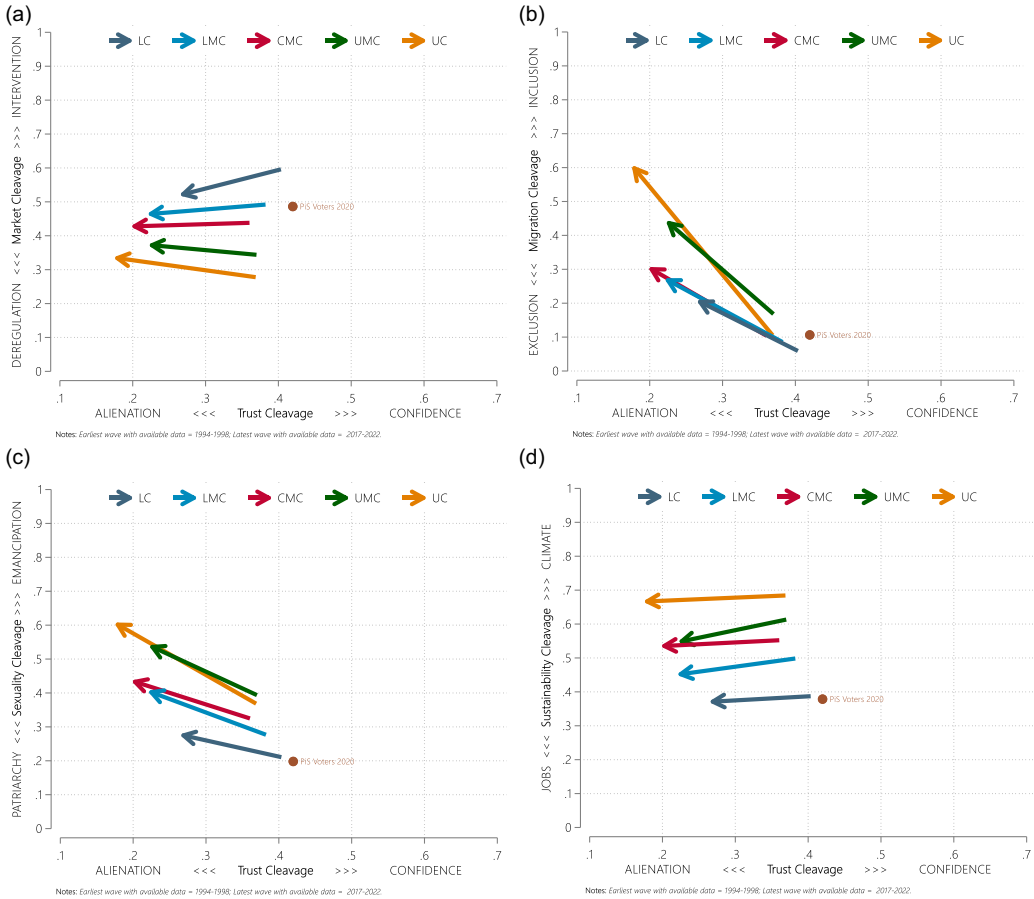


Figure 6. (A, B, C, D clockwise): Cleavage dimensions in Poland.

As in the EU’s other geo-historic regions, the *MARKET* cleavage is neither a source of deep class divisions nor has class polarization over this cleavage increased over time. Instead, it actually decreased, with the upper and upper-middle classes moving more leftward (i.e., toward more intervention) and the lower and lower-middle classes more rightward (i.e., toward more deregulation), while the center-middle class held its position.¹⁵

Inclusionary views on the *MIGRATION* cleavage were on a very low baseline in the mid-late 1990s (below .20 on our 0-to-1 scale). They steadily progressed to a higher level of inclusiveness but—typically for the Post-Communist East—still remain low compared to the other EU-regions (Figure 6B). In numbers, around 55% of the upper-middle class agrees that, in times of scarcity, employers should prioritize Polish nationals over people with a migration background. In comparison, this nativist attitude among the upper-middle class decreased to 20% in Spain and Germany and to 10% in Sweden. During the modest decline of nativism among the Polish electorate, the Polish upper and upper-middle class segments moved further away from the lower and the lower-middle classes, thereby slightly widening class polarization. Like AfD supporters in

¹⁵PiS voters exhibit a relatively high level of support for economic benefits by the state, which reflects the policy pursued by PiS since taking power. Its central ideological element is the termination of the “belt-tightening” austerity policies of the EU, the sharing of economic growth with the poorer groups in the society and the protection of the Polish market from foreign competition.

Germany and SD supporters in Sweden, PiS supporters in Poland hold a pronouncedly more conservative position, with almost 90% of PiS voters opposing giving immigrants the same access to the job market as nationals.

On the *SEXUALITY* cleavage (Figure 6C), all three middle-class segments of Polish society moved toward a more progressive position. The upper class currently ranks as the most libertarian group, although—in comparison with the EU's other three geo-historic regions—sexual libertarianism among the Polish upper class remains low. PiS supporters again hold the sexually most conservative position, even more so than RWP supporters in other EU countries.¹⁶

On the *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavage (Figure 6D), we see a minor decline in support for environmental protection among all segments over the last twenty-five years. PiS supporters, for their part, clearly prefer job preservation over environmental protection, in line with the preferences of the lower class.

In summary, even the Polish case refuses evidence of increased class polarization over mature democracies' main ideological divisions—except for the *MIGRATION* cleavage, which shows growing polarization, albeit in an overall progressive direction.¹⁷

The regime cleavage

The *REGIME* cleavage is not an *ideological* cleavage over conflicting policy preferences on given thematic domains. Instead, like the *TRUST* cleavage, the *REGIME* cleavage is a *systemic* cleavage over aversion-vs-allegiance with respect to the democratic order. This is an important element in the *democracy falling* narrative, which claims that alienated voters in the lower and lower-middle class segments turn their back on democracy in supporting authoritarian forms of strongmen rule, which then feeds voters' attraction to RWP parties' anti-system rhetoric and the personalistic leadership styles of their representatives. This is problematic insofar as the power-greedy ambitions of populist leaders operate directly against democracies' protective constitutional guardrails (“checks and balances”), especially those anchored in an independent judiciary and free media (Brunkert and von Soest, 2022). Because socio-economically better-off and less alienated voters supposedly remain as supportive of democracy as before, the alienated segments' alleged turn toward authoritarianism (“authoritarian reflex”) should have increased voter polarization over the *REGIME* cleavage.

Figure 7 disconfirms this assumption. To be sure, the four exemplary countries exhibit different base levels in democracy support (i.e., higher in Germany and Sweden, lower in Spain and Poland), which is typical for the EU's four geo-historic regions. Apart from this noteworthy difference, the key takeaway is that none of the electorates' SES segments moved away from democracy support toward strongmen rule. On the contrary, all voter segments—including the lower and lower-middle classes in all four major EU electorates—shifted toward stronger support for democracy. What is more, no increase in class polarization over the *REGIME* cleavage is visible over time.

Expectedly, RWP voters endorse strongmen rule more readily (visible in their low position on the vertical scale in Figure 7), but their position on this issue is not out of range of the electorates' differences related to their segmentation in SES terms.

¹⁶However, we take these results with a grain of doubt, as the number of individuals in the upper class is just above our threshold of thirty individuals for some time-points.

¹⁷PiS supporters stick out from the middle-class segments by cultural rightism combined with economic leftism. Polish researchers seek for the reasons of this cultural rightism/economic leftism combination (which is reminiscent of National Socialism) mainly at the macro level, referring to specific socio-historical, cultural and political conditions that may have shaped citizens' political orientations (Skarżyńska and Henne, 2011). For example, during the communist regime in Poland, a rightist cultural conservatism co-existed with a leftist welfare system directed by the state (Czarnek *et al.*, 2019). A few studies have also sought the sources of the culturally right/economically left combination at the micro level. Radkiewicz (2017), for instance, argues that the ideological right/left combination reflects the psychological coherence in values whose point of convergence is the desire for a strong state that protects its citizens from the threats of both cultural alienation (i.e., identity) and economic deprivation (i.e., prosperity).

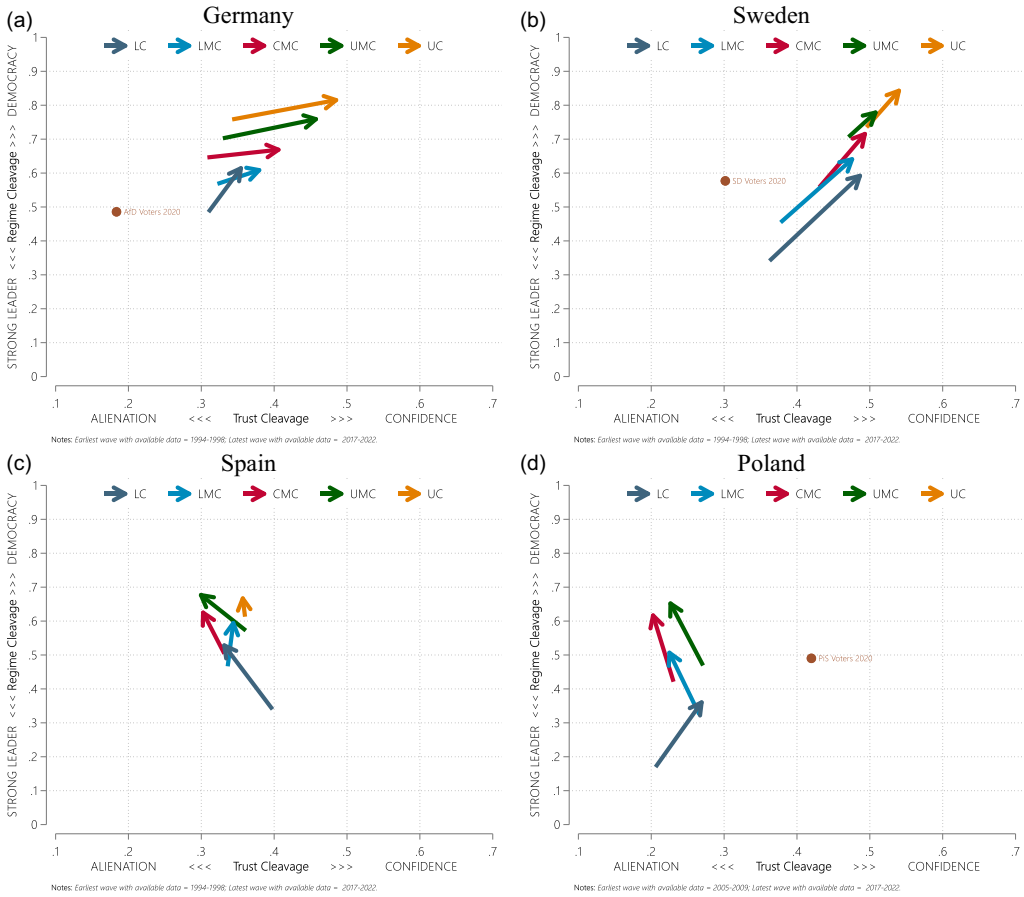


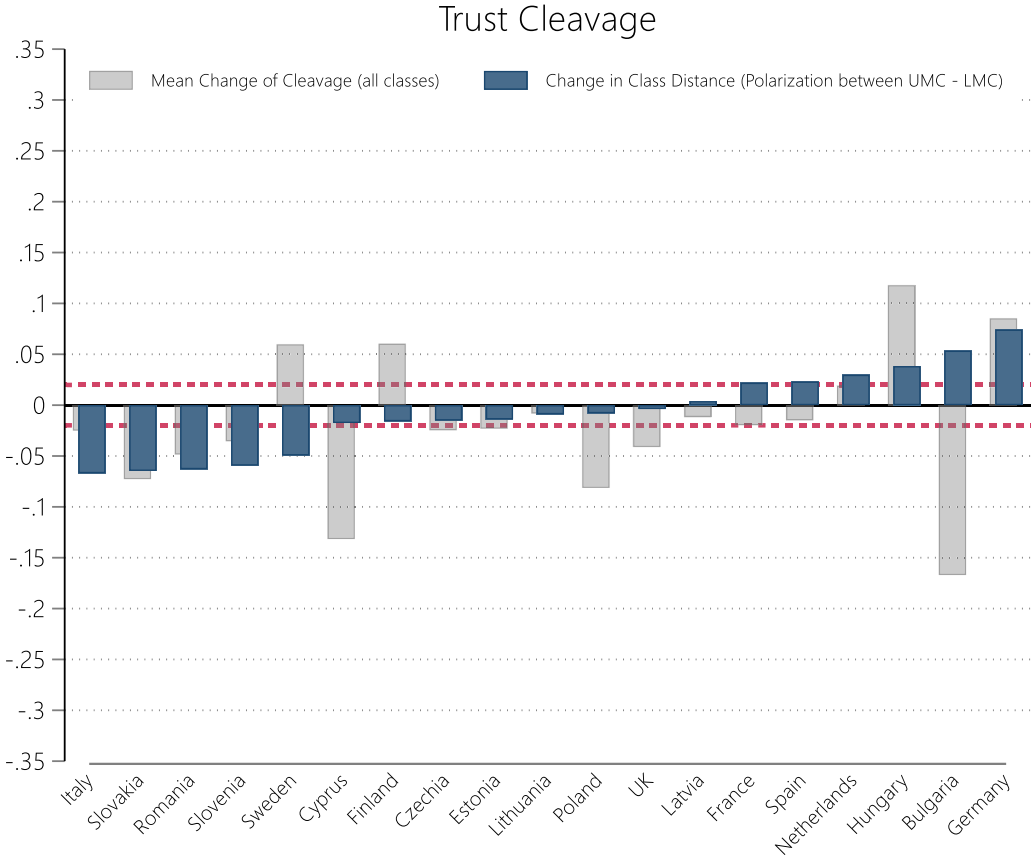
Figure 7. (A, B, C, D clockwise): Regime cleavage in Germany, Sweden, Spain, and Poland.

With respect to the four exemplary countries representing the EU’s four geo-historic regions, the evidence largely disproves the *democracy falling* narrative. There is no generic trend among the socio-economically most vulnerable class segments, neither toward reactionary conservatism on the four ideological cleavages nor toward greater affective aversion on the two systemic cleavages. The following section shows whether and to what degree this finding repeats itself across the entire universe of national electorates in the EU.

Fully comparative evidence

In this section, we contextualize our exemplary case evidence within the entire community of EU electorates. For ease of oversight, we focus on the positional distance between the lower-middle and upper-middle classes as the two demographically largest opposites below and above the center-middle class (see again Figure 2). Focusing on these two segments makes sense, as they constitute a major share of most nations’ electorates, while still besetting polar positions in terms of socio-economic status.

We calculate cleavage polarization as the change in positional distance from the first to the last observation, estimating whether and to what extent the lower-middle and upper-middle classes drifted further apart or moved closer together on both the ideological and systemic cleavages. Our calculation yields polarization scores on a cleavage-by-cleavage basis. Positive scores on the



Notes: Earliest wave with available data = 1994-1998; Latest wave with available data = 2017-2022.

Figure 8. Change in class distance for trust in institutions.
 Notes: The dashed red lines indicate the corridor of significance.

polarization index represent grown polarization, while negative scores indicate the opposite. For each cleavage, the formula for the polarization index reads:

$$\Delta \text{Middle Class Polarization}_{2000-2020} = (\mu_{UMC-2020} - \mu_{LMC-2020}) - (\mu_{UMC-2000} - \mu_{LMC-2000})$$

In addition to electorates’ upward and downward shifts in polarization, the following bar graphs also report upward and downward shifts in electorates’ average position on each cleavage.

Figure 8 focuses on the *TRUST* cleavage. It displays on a country-by-country basis the changes in polarization over trust in dark bars (decreased or increased polarization) as well as changes in the mean trust levels in light bars (declined or inclined trust). The two dotted horizontal lines below and above the vertical axis’ zero-position demarcate the significance corridor for the changes in polarization. Our discussion focuses only on changes reaching outside this corridor, as there is no point in resonating about shifts of statistical insignificance.

With this limitation in mind, the takeaway from Figure 8 is threefold. First, there is no overall trend in institutional trust at all. Polarization did not increase overall; instead, four cases of increasing polarization (Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Netherlands) contrast with five cases of decreasing polarization (Italy, Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden). Still, overall trust levels decreased in a majority of the countries, though on a modest scale. Second, there is no correlation

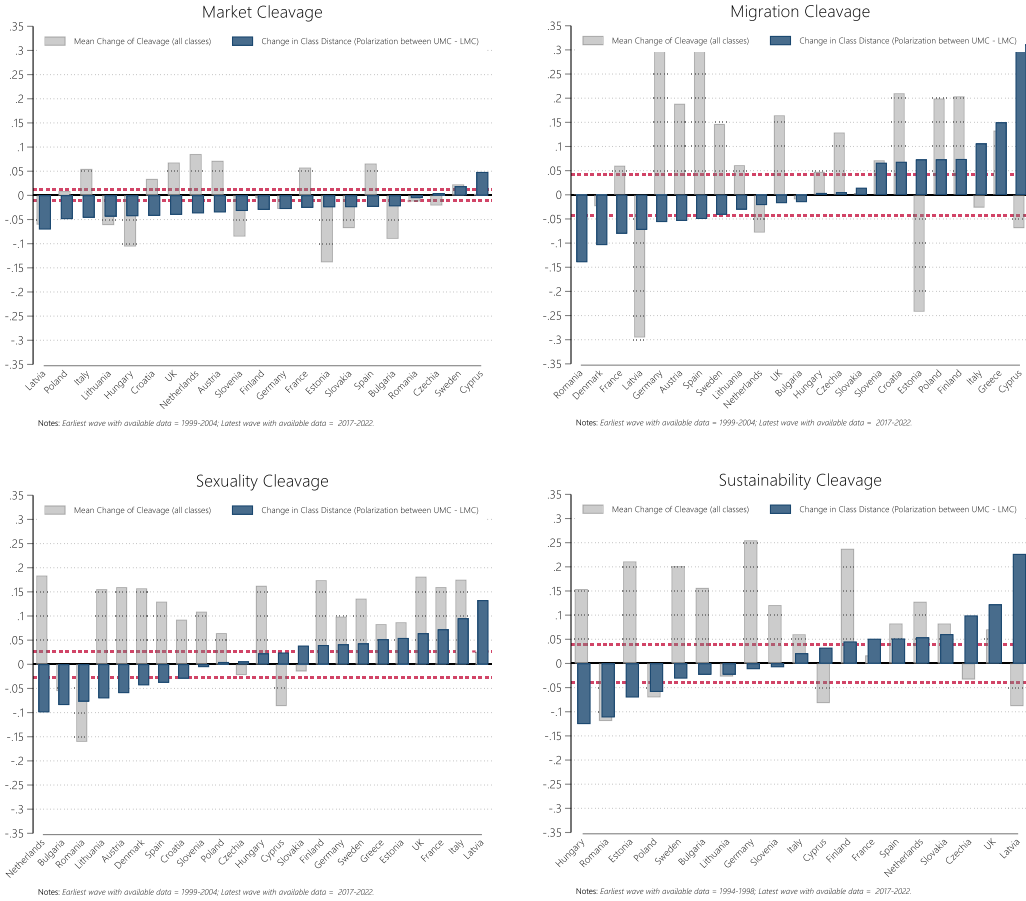
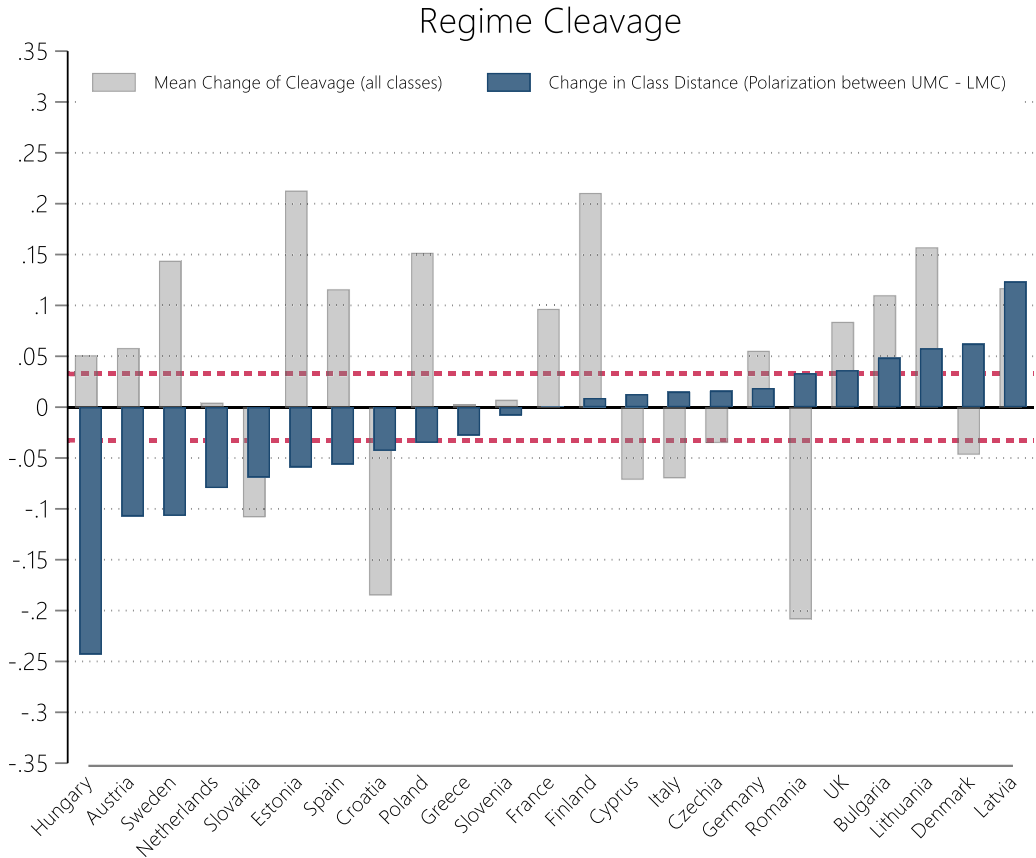


Figure 9. Change in class distance for the four ideological cleavages and the regime cleavage. Notes: The dashed red lines indicate the corridor of significance.

between shifts in trust polarization and shifts in trust levels, such that drops in trust levels would coincide with increases in trust polarization, or vice versa. Third, the significant changes that exist are (a) few in number, (b) moderate in scale and (c) void of any discernable pattern related to the EU’s four geo-historic regions. In a nutshell, the comprehensive EU evidence about electorates’ changes on the *TRUST* cleavage reveals nothing sweeping, generic, or systematic that could be taken to confirm the *democracy falling* narrative.

By and large, these conclusions repeat themselves when focusing on the four ideological cleavages shown in Figure 9 and on the *REGIME* cleavage in Figure 10. First, only a few shifts in polarization reach out of the significance corridor and, if they do, the changes are usually modest in scale. Second, there is no sweeping trend as the number of increases and decreases in polarization cancel each other out. Third, only the shift in electorates’ average cleavage positions exhibits a discernible trend: shifts toward more progressive positions greatly outnumber those in the opposite direction on the *MIGRATION*, *SEXUALITY*, and *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavages. The same holds true for the *REGIME* cleavage on which the overall trend points toward greater democracy support and less authoritarian leader support, with no evidence for a sweeping increase in electoral polarization over the *REGIME* cleavage. In a nutshell, descriptive evidence of the entire EU-space provides no support for the *democracy falling* narrative, thus confirming the illustrative evidence from the four exemplary countries within the broader context of the EU writ large.



Notes: Earliest wave with available data = 1999-2004; Latest wave with available data = 2017-2022.

Figure 10. Change in class distance for the democracy cleavage.

Pooled multilevel evidence

We turn to the final outcome variable in the depiction of the *democracy falling* narrative in Figure 1: individuals’ decision to vote for the main RWP party in their country. For this purpose, we use all available country waves of the EU’s national electorates. We do so to test in multilevel models whether and to what extent citizens’ RWP vote has a micro-foundation in the individual characteristics that the *democracy falling* narrative sees as critical: vulnerable socio-economic positions in the lower and lower-middle class segments; reactionary conservative extremism on the *MIGRATION*, *SEXUALITY*, and *SUSTAINABILITY* cleavages; and a system-averse position on the *TRUST* and *REGIME* cleavages.

By definition, polarization is a group-level phenomenon that has no direct equivalent at the individual level: unless schizophrenic, a single person cannot be polarized. Arguably, however, the presence of positional extremity among the citizenry can be seen as an individual-level manifestation of group-level polarization. Accordingly, our models capture individuals’ ideological and systemic orientations from the viewpoint of positional extremity. Specifically, we measure on each cleavage individuals’ positional extremity by subtracting from their own cleavage position the respective country mean on this cleavage at the given time. By centering individual cleavage positions on the respective country means, we standardize individual positions for the given county’s and timepoint’s center of gravity.

We apply multilevel models to figure out whether extremity in individuals' cleavage positions operates as a micro-foundation of electorates' RWP vote across the boundaries of national electorates, even under control of country-level differences that should affect the electorates' base levels of RWP support. These country-level characteristics include countries' migration stocks (i.e., share of migrants among the residential population) and standard indicators of policy performance, including economic growth, unemployment rates, price inflation, and corruption (Coppedge *et al.*, 2023; World Bank Group, 2025). Moreover, we include two distinct measures of countries' performance on the sexuality and sustainability domains: the Gender Inequality Index (United Nations Development Program, 2019) and the Sustainable Development Index (Hickel, 2020).¹⁸ However, the simultaneous inclusion of these two indices, as well as the simultaneous inclusion of our measures for unemployment and corruption, infuses multicollinearity biases into the models. To avoid this problem, we include these country-level characteristics in separate models (Models 3–5 in Table 1).

As concerns the role of migration stocks, one can have conflicting assumptions: is it high or low migration stocks that elevate countries' base level of RWP support? Examples exist for both possibilities. France contains a large migrant population and shows a high level of electoral support for the Rassemblement National, while Poland (before the Ukraine war) includes a tiny migrant population combined with a high level of electoral support for PiS. As concerns indicators of policy performance (e.g., growth, unemployment, inflation) and systemic functioning (e.g., corruption), the expectation is clearer: evidence for malperformance and malfunctioning should elevate overall electoral support for RWP parties. Overall, however, we are not primarily interested in the specific RWP effects of these country-level characteristics as such. Instead, we are interested in whether and to what extent the supposed micro-foundations of electoral RWP support operate uniformly across country-level differences in migration stocks, policy performance, and system functioning.

Looking at the evidence, the odds ratios in Table 1 illustrate that citizens in privileged upper-middle and upper class positions exhibit 25%–40% lower odds to vote for RWP parties than voters in the central-middle class (i.e., the reference category). But people in lower-middle and lower class positions are hardly less likely to vote for RWP parties than those in the central-middle class. This is an important indication that RWP support is by no means limited to socio-economically vulnerable electoral strata but, instead, has made broad inroads into the center of society.

Looking at voters' ideological cleavage positions, more extreme rightist positions on the *MARKET* cleavage are associated with slightly higher odds to vote for RWP parties. Most importantly, more extreme nativist positions on the *MIGRATION* cleavage strongly increase the odds of the RWP vote. In numbers, citizens who score one standard deviation below the national mean in openness to immigrants are 35% more likely to vote for RWP parties.¹⁹

More generally, more extreme conservative positions on all four ideological cleavages are associated with a higher likelihood to vote for RWP parties. Likewise, a more extreme system aversion on the *TRUST* cleavage (i.e., more alienation) and on the *REGIME* cleavage (i.e., more authoritarianism) is strongly associated with a higher likelihood for an RWP vote. Overall, the strongest micro-foundations of RWP votes across European democracies are more extreme nativist positions on the *MIGRATION* cleavage and more extreme system aversion on the *TRUST* and *REGIME* cleavages.²⁰

¹⁸SOM Table S1 provides descriptive statistics for all variables. SOM Notes S3 provide more details on all variables.

¹⁹To understand these coefficients, one needs to recognize that the ideological cleavage variables are coded low to high from the conservative end (low scores) to the progressive end (high scores).

²⁰An additional analysis in SOM Table S6 tests whether there are potential interaction effects between our main cleavages and individuals' socioeconomic status. We only find significant effects for the sexuality, the migration, and the sustainability cleavages. The results paint no uniform picture but rather confirm our initial findings. In the interaction with these variables and in comparison to the middle class as reference category, the upper class is less likely to vote for RWP when combined with higher emancipative values and more support for migration. Again in comparison to the middle class, the lower class shows more support for RWP even in the presence of more liberal individual cleavage positions.

Table 1. Explaining RWP vote

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Lower class	.94 (.11)	1.07 (.12)	1.06 (.12)	1.04 (.12)	1.06 (.13)
Lower-middle class	.99 (.06)	1.04 (.07)	1.04 (.07)	1.04 (.08)	1.04 (.07)
Center-middle class (reference category)					
Upper-middle class	.78*** (.04)	.76*** (.04)	.76*** (.04)	.76*** (.05)	.75*** (.04)
Upper class	.62*** (.09)	.59*** (.08)	.59*** (.08)	.59*** (.09)	.58*** (.08)
Trust cleavage (centered and standardized)	.83 (.10)	.84 (.10)	.84 (.10)	.87 (.10)	.85 (.10)
Market cleavage (centered and standardized)	.91* (.04)	.90* (.04)	.90* (.04)	.90 (.05)	.90* (.05)
Migration cleavage (centered and standardized)	.65*** (.04)	.65*** (.04)	.65*** (.04)	.64*** (.04)	.65*** (.04)
Sexuality cleavage (centered and standardized)	.85* (.07)	.83* (.06)	.83* (.06)	.80** (.06)	.83* (.06)
Sustainability cleavage (centered and standardized)	.91** (.03)	.90** (.04)	.90** (.04)	.91*** (.02)	.90** (.04)
Regime cleavage (centered and standardized)	.87*** (.04)	.88** (.04)	.88** (.04)	.89** (.04)	.87** (.04)
Age		.99** (.00)	.99** (.00)	.99** (.00)	.99** (.00)
Age ²		1.00*** (.00)	1.00*** (.00)	1.00*** (.00)	1.00*** (.00)
GDP growth (annual %)		1.05 (.10)	1.08 (.14)	.94 (.07)	1.10 (.12)
International migrant stock (% of population)		1.05 (.10)	1.05 (.10)	1.02 (.10)	1.08 (.10)
Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)		1.00 (.00)	1.00 (.00)	.80 (1.00)	1.00 (.01)
Unemployment, total (% of total labor force)		.85 (.11)		.89 (.09)	0.99 (.14)
Regime Corruption Index			.44 (.91)		
Gender Inequality Index				.26 (2.494)	
Sustainable Development Index					.12 (.22)
<i>Akaike Information Criterion</i>	21468	21338	21346	19130	20894
<i>Bayesian Information Criterion</i>	21574	21497	21504	19296	21060
Intraclass corr.	.83	.82	.84	.80	.82
Country waves	54	54	54	54	51
Observations	48508	48398	48398	44159	46204

Odds ratios (exponentiated coefficients); cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The observation that country-level differences in migration stocks and policy performance show no significant RWP vote impact on their own is somewhat surprising but should not bother us here. The key point is that these country-level differences do not disturb the uniform impact of the RWP vote's micro-foundations. In other words, the micro-foundations function in a generic manner across the country-level differences between the EU's national electorates.

Conclusion

Multilevel evidence from EVS/WVS data across the EU-27 electorates confirms that individuals' inclination to cast a vote for their country's major RWP party has a significant, albeit statistically weak, micro-foundation in socio-economic vulnerabilities. Indeed, although members of the least

vulnerable upper-middle and upper classes are less likely to vote for RWP parties than the lower, lower-middle, and center-middle classes, these differences are small in scope. More importantly, RWP vote inclinations are anchored in particular psychological orientations, including a general system aversion manifest in distrust in democracies' political institutions (i.e., *TRUST* cleavage) and support for authoritarian leadership at the expense of democratic governance (i.e., *REGIME* cleavage). The psychological anchors of RWP support also involve a reactionary conservative mainstream-distance on post-industrial ideological cleavages centering on *SEXUALITY* (i.e., patriarchal gender and fertility norms instead of sexual self-determination), *SUSTAINABILITY* (i.e., job preservation instead of environmental protection), and—more than anything else—*MIGRATION* (i.e., rejection instead of inclusion of immigrants). These micro-foundational anchors of RWP support are uniform in the sense that they operate in the same fashion across country-level differences in migration stocks and policy performance on matters of economic prosperity and physical security.

In the aggregate, electorates' overall conservative extremism across the three post-industrial ideological cleavages associates just significantly and weakly with the same electorates' overall socio-economic vulnerability ($r = .28, p = .010$) across 84 country-by-time units.²¹ Electorates' overall conservative extremism, in turn, associates strongly with their overall system aversion on the *TRUST* and *REGIME* cleavages combined ($r = .86, p < .001, N = 101$).

These findings echo the political sociology/psychology literature in this field on a broader evidence base and in a more nuanced manner as concerns the specificities regarding socio-economic inequalities and ideological as well as systemic cleavages. The findings are also compatible with the *democracy falling* narrative.

But compatibility is not confirmation. Specifically, evidence about socio-economic and politico-psychological anchors of RWP support, no matter how strong, does by no means prove the claim that the explanation of the massive increase in RWP support roots in these very anchors. The latter would be the case, if—and only if—the characteristics constituting these anchors had been rising as well. Indeed, to confirm the *democracy falling* narrative, there needs to be a demonstrable growth in the electorates' socio-economically vulnerable class segments as well as in these segments' conservative extremism and systemic aversion. And this growth must have happened in such orchestration that a *dynamic* association between the rise in electorates' RWP votes, on the one hand, and an expansion of these electorates' conservative extremism and systemic aversion, on the other, can be established. Yet, such a dynamic relationship is inexistent. The rise of the EU electorates' RWP vote simply does not map on a corresponding increase in these electorates' conservative extremism and system aversion. The exact opposite is the case: both conservative extremism and system aversion shrank, even among the electorates' socio-economically most vulnerable lower and lower-middle class segments.²² Therefore, class polarization over ideological and systemic political cleavages shows no sign of a generic increase either. All of this contradicts the key trend assumptions of the *democracy falling* narrative.

To defend the *democracy falling* narrative against our non-evidence for positional polarization, one might argue that—while positional distances might not have increased—the emotional *salience* of these distances might very well have grown. Plausibly, an increase in emotional salience has fueled “affective” polarization: even though voters' cleavage positions have not grown more distant, voters in different positional camps adopted more hostile views of each other.

²¹The correlation of conservative extremism with socio-economic vulnerability is stronger when class membership is measured via citizens' self-placement into one of five ascending social classes ($r = .62, p < .001, N = 61$).

²²Across the EU-27 electorates, the share of citizens belonging to the lower and lower-middle class segments shrank from 39% in the mid-late 1990s to 29% in the late 2010s/early 2020s (in terms of subjective class self-placement, the shrinkage is from 38 to 32%). Conservative extremism over the three post-industrial ideological cleavages (*MIGRATION*, *SEXUALITY* and *SUSTAINABILITY* combined) shrank from 48 to 39%, while systemic aversion over the *TRUST* and *REGIME* cleavages remained constant at 42%. Even among the lower and lower-middle class segments alone, these figures dropped from 51 to 44% (conservative extremism) and from 45 to 44% (systemic aversion).

It is a noteworthy limitation of our data that we have no direct measure of either emotional saliency or affective polarization. Hence, more research in this area is needed. However, the argument that *affective* polarization has increased in spite of non-existing *positional* polarization is inherently implausible. Indeed, if voters become emotionally more adamant about their cleavage positions and begin to feel more hostile toward voters with different positions, an urge for positional distancing would follow suit as an emotional stabilization mechanism to cement contrast to the opposite camp. The inevitably resulting positional radicalization would manifest itself in positional distancing at the group level and positional extremity at the individual level. The data for twenty-seven EU electorates over a timespan of twenty-five years provide no evidence for this. Assuming that affective and positional distancing operate in symbiosis, non-evidence for growing positional distancing strongly suggests that affective distancing cannot have grown dramatically either. But as said, more research on this issue is needed.

Taking these pieces together, the tendency of the *democracy falling* narrative to bash voters for the electoral rise of RWP is mistaken. If the problems of democracy that explain the electoral success of RWP do not primarily reside in extremist and polarizing ideological shifts on the side of the electorates, these problems must root somewhere else. And, if in democracy's demand-supply relationship between public opinion and public policy, the demand side cannot be identified as the main source of the problem, we logically turn to the supply side as the location of this "somewhere else."

Although this is speculation, our suspect is the academization of the political and media elite. With 90% and more of these elites holding a university degree, certain cartel tendencies kicked in through which parties and the media—including those on the center-right side of the spectrum—implement more liberal-progressive policies on migration, sexuality, and sustainability issues than their clienteles in the electorate support. The accruing representation deficits became visible in declining voter turnout, reflecting citizens' emigration into the growing camp of nonvoters.²³ Since nonvoters do not matter in electoral competition, their ideologically conservative preferences could be ignored, thus reinforcing existing representation gaps, with the result of growing frustration and anger in the nonvoter camp. As long as the established parties and media exercised a recruitment and agenda-setting monopoly, which decided who had access to the political arena and what could be said in public discourse, the growing nonvoter camp posed no problem to the established party and media cartels. With the occurrence of social media, the monopolies of the pre-RWP cartel era have been radically broken, and RWP parties now articulate (in a vulgar language that was previously banned under journalistic standards) the concerns of large segments of the nonvoter camp (see Schäfer *et al.*, 2023; Peffley and Rohrschneider, 2023).

No matter how despicable one might find the language and policy positions of RWP parties, as long as democracies' institutional guardrails are strong enough to block RWP parties' attacks on liberal constitutional principles, the electoral success of these parties might simply be a sign that democracies' seismographic function to indicate representation deficits does actually work. Electoral RWP success also functions as a display of how much the liberal-progressive agenda of an academically educated elite cartel overwhelms sizeable voter segments with more traditional and conservative positions.

Speaking about knowledge gaps, the biggest shortcoming in existing cross-national data collections is the lack of panel studies in which the same individuals are interviewed repeatedly. In the absence of such data, dynamic public opinion/public policy relationships can only be established in the aggregate but not among individuals. From both a multilevel and a life course perspective, this is a serious limitation in studying societies' politico-psychological dynamics. It would be easy to overcome this shortcoming if the ESS, EVS/WVS, and other repeated cross-

²³Remarkably, the voter clientele across the EU-27 electorates that is closest to the RWP voters' conservative ideological distance and their system aversion are nonvoters (SOM Table S1b).

national data collections ended their interviews with a question asking respondents if they are ready to leave their email address for another survey in the future.

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Data availability statement. Data is available on request. Please contact the authors.

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