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Democratic Deconsolidation Reconsidered: Support for Democracy Recovers Among Young Europeans, Broad Decline in Africa

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Recent debates on 'democratic deconsolidation' raise three key questions: are younger people less supportive of democracy; where is this occurring; and is the trend worsening? This paper addresses these questions by comparing African and European democracies using five rounds of the Integrated Values Survey and nine rounds of the Afrobarometer. We apply age-period-cohort-interaction models to assess generational support for democracy and openness to authoritarian alternatives; we also differentiate democratic trajectories across regions. In Africa, the dominant pattern is a general downward trend in democratic support and rejection of authoritarianism, in some cases led by younger cohorts. In Europe, although cohort effects continue to reflect declines in democratic support that were concentrated among younger age groups in the past, support for democracy subsequently recovered among more recent cohorts. However, some European electoral democracies show a rise in openness to authoritarianism, especially among young cohorts.

deconsolidation; public opinion; young people; democratic attitudes; democratic support; APC analysis; regime preferences

Introduction

Recent years have seen intense debate over whether consolidated democracies face "deconsolidation," especially regarding declining public support for democracy. Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) argue this decline reflects a generational cohort effect, with younger cohorts less supportive than older ones, rather than a transient age effect. This claim has faced extensive critique (Claassen and Magalhães 2023; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017; Grassi et al. 2024; Kriesi 2020; Norris 2017; Voeten 2016; Wuttke 2022; Zilinsky 2019) leaving no consensus on whether the trend exists, where it occurs, or how to interpret it.

This study addresses unresolved questions about generational support for democracy by employing age–period–cohort (APC) models, which reduce risks of conflating age and cohort effects or neglecting period influences. Unlike prior research largely focused on Europe and North America, this analysis compares European and African democracies which enables systematic cross-regional and cross-regime comparison. Drawing on the World and European Values Surveys alongside the Afrobarometer, we evaluate whether younger cohorts show diminished democratic support, whether they display greater openness to authoritarian alternatives, and whether this trend is gradual or driven by a distinct "shock" cohort.

These questions are situated within the broader literature on democratic (de-)consolidation. Consolidation involves entrenched democratic legitimacy, procedural norm commitment, civil society institutionalisation, and widespread liberal-democratic attitudes (Inglehart 1997; Levitsky and Way 2006; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Linz and Stepan 1996; Przeworski and Limongi 1997). Deconsolidation is marked by rising anti-democratic actors, norm erosion, weakening public support for democracy, and

openness to authoritarianism (Foa and Mounk 2016; Linz and Stepan 1996). While modernisation theory holds that support for democracy should be resilient due to a self-reinforcing cycle (Lipset 1959), recent declines in democratic freedoms in countries such as the US, Hungary, Poland, Mauritius, and South Africa challenge this assumption (V-Dem Institute 2025).

Generational attitudes are critical for assessing democracy's resilience. Public concerns mirror academic debates: for example, in 2025 a British news outlets claimed over half of UK Gen Z favoured dictatorship (Ahmed 2025). However, clarifying respondents' understanding of dictatorship, Duffy and Morini (2025) found only 6% genuinely supported a dictatorial system and argued that such exaggerations were harmful. Similarly, Mattes and Richmond (2015) challenged narratives of South African youth disillusionment, though 2024 election coverage depicted the "born-free" generation as alienated from democracy (Mark 2024; Onishi and Searcey 2024). These cases reveal widespread generational anxieties and underscore the need for comparative, methodologically rigorous analyses that accurately map generational political change.

Literature Review

Foa and Mounks' (2016, 2017) youth deconsolidation thesis argues that young people's democratic attitudes are pivotal to democracy's future. Since younger generations eventually supplant older ones, today's youth trends may shape tomorrow's politics. This has placed the question of whether younger cohorts are less supportive of democracy at the centre of debates on democratic deconsolidation. The youth deconsolidation thesis has sparked three interrelated debates: (1) whether younger generations genuinely support democracy less than older ones, and in which regions this

occurs; (2) whether observed youth declines reflect disaffection with democracy or simply higher democratic expectations; and (3) whether each successive generation is less supportive than its predecessor, or if particular cohorts are uniquely affected by historical shocks.

(1) A major criticism of Foa and Mounk's thesis is that generational decline is geographically limited. While age-period-cohort (APC) studies on this topic are rare, one such study shows that younger cohorts in the USA are less supportive of democracy (Claassen and Magalhães 2023), another finds young people more open to alternatives to democracy in *some* European societies (Wuttke et al. 2022, 426). Studies without APC controls yield mixed results: declines in some European countries (Foa and Mounk 2016), in Eastern Europe specifically (Voeten 2016), or no decline (Foa et al. 2020a; Kriesi 2020; Zilinsky 2019).

In the Global South, evidence is sparse and there are seemingly no age-period-cohort studies. Afrobarometer data indicate higher acceptance of authoritarian alternatives among younger groups in many African countries, alongside a rise over time across age-groups (Afrobarometer 2024). The Open Society Foundation (2023) found similar patterns, while Foa et al. (2020a) observed declining *satisfaction* with democracy across all age groups in sub-Saharan Africa, reversed in recent survey waves.

H1: Younger cohorts are less supportive of democracy than older cohorts.

(2) Another central debate concerns whether declines among youth reflect only *specific* support for democracy (short-term evaluations of current governments) or more fundamental *diffuse* support (long-term commitment to democratic values, norms, legitimacy) (Easton 1975). Foa and Mounk's thesis targets diffuse support, countering a prevalent view that lower youth support signals a desire for better, not weaker,

democracies (Norris 2017; Welzel 2021). Supporters of this optimistic view argue that the youth deconsolidation thesis mistakes unconcerning declines in specific support for concerning declines in diffuse support. To reduce this ambiguity, we also analyse rejection of non-democratic alternatives, consistent with Linz and Stepan's (1996, 16) conception of attitudinal consolidation as strong popular belief in democracy as the best form of governance *and* rejection of non-democratic alternatives.

H2: Younger cohorts are more open to authoritarian alternatives than older cohorts.

(3) The final debate concerns whether support for democracy declines progressively with each younger cohort or is concentrated in cohorts shaped by specific shocks. Foa and Mounk (2016, 7–8) predict a continuous generational decline, with the youngest least supportive. In contrast, Grassi, Portos, and Felicetti (2024) find 25–34-year-old Europeans less supportive than 18–24-year-olds, attributing this to formative experiences during the Great Recession and Euro Crisis. Similar regional effects are noted for southern Europe (2021). By contrast, of African countries were less affected by the financial crisis (Stewart 2012).

H3a: Support for democracy decreases progressively among younger cohorts.

H3b: A recession "shock" generation exists in Europe, but not in Africa.

Lastly, we consider variation in the extent and trajectory of democracy. Foa and Mounk's thesis emerged from the study of "wealthy consolidated democracies" in Western Europe and North America (2016, 14), yet little comparative research examines deconsolidation across different levels of democratic consolidation. To address this, we classify different types of democracies (Lührmann et al. 2018), explained in what follows.

Data & Methods

Data

We use three main data sources: the Integrated European Values Study/World Values Survey, the Afrobarometer, and V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index. The European Values Study (EVS 2022) and World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al. 2024) are large-scale, repeated cross-sectional surveys widely used to examine democratic attitudes (e.g., Belchior and Teixeira 2023; Foa and Mounk 2017; Nkansah and Bartha 2023; Wuttke et al. 2022). As the World Values Survey's coverage of Africa remains limited, African trends are instead derived from harmonised Afrobarometer data across nine rounds (1999–2022).

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (Coppedge et al. 2024; Pemstein et al. 2024) provides an expert-based, multidimensional measure of democratic quality and underpins the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology (Lührmann et al. 2018). We use this typology to distinguish electoral from liberal democracies and democratic trajectories (see Appendix A1). For example, South Africa, a liberal democracy from 1999, has been reclassified as electoral since 2013 and is therefore coded "Electoral Democracy: Downgraded." This yields three types of democracies in Africa and five in Europe (Figure 1). Appendix A1 provides detailed survey descriptions, respondent numbers, and ambiguous classifcations.

Figure 1. Sample of European and African countries and democratic trajectory
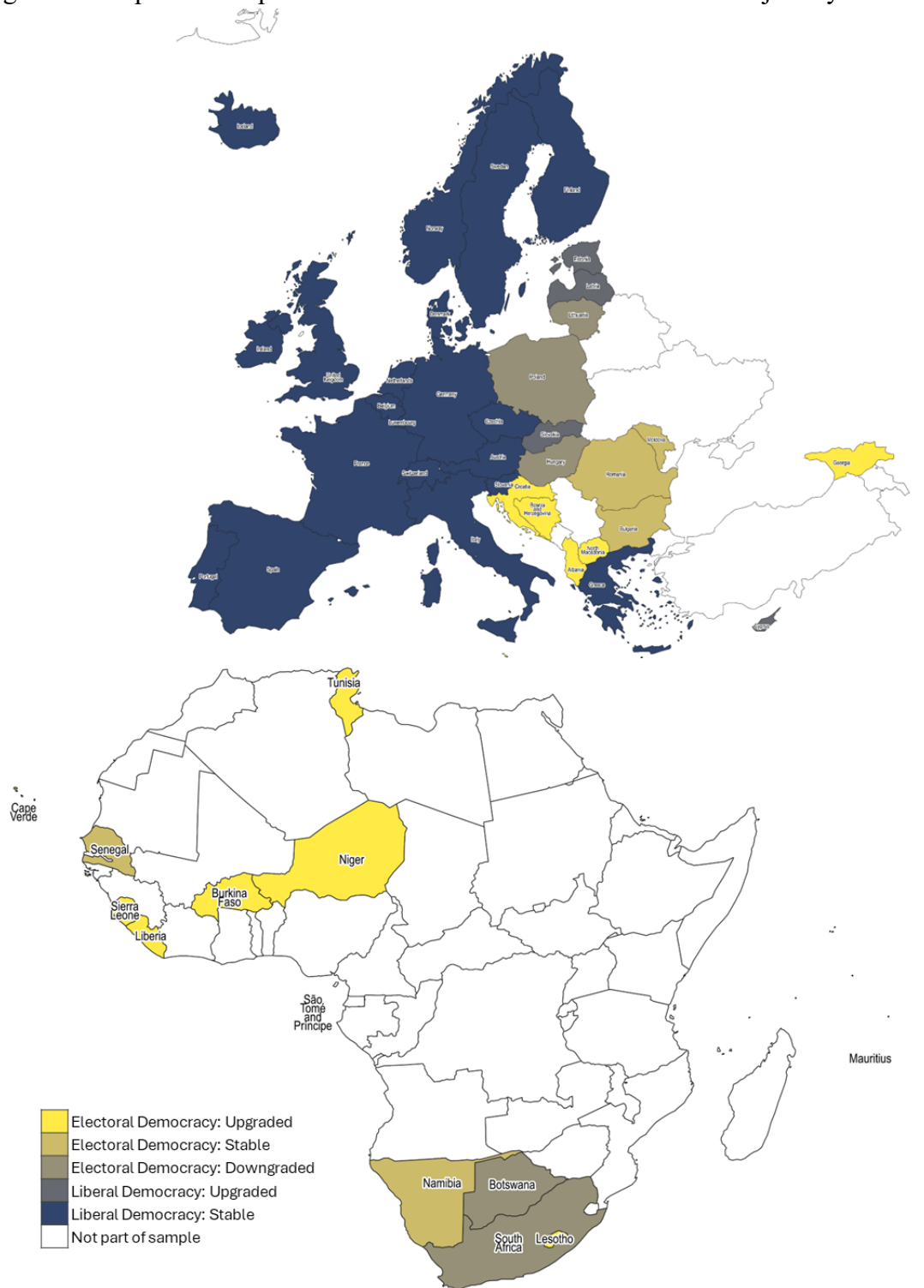
Variables

Diffuse support is measured using the Integrated Values Survey item rating "Having a democratic system" on a four-point scale, and the Afrobarometer item contrasting

democracy with non-democratic preferences. Rejection of authoritarianism is assessed via disapproval of a "strong leader" or "army rule" in the Integrated Values Survey, and of abolishing elections or military governance in the Afrobarometer. For analysis, the two disapproval items were averaged into a single index, with all scales normalised to a 0–1 range. These measures are standard in studies of diffuse democratic support in Europe (Erhardt and Filsinger 2024; Foa and Mounk 2019) and Africa (Mattes 2019; Ntodwa et al. 2024). Full item wordings are provided in Appendix A2.

Statistical Approach

We utilize the age–period–cohort (APC) framework to determine whether observed outcomes reflect ageing ("age"), socio-historical conditions affecting all individuals simultaneously ("period"), or birth-year groups sharing formative socio-political experiences ("cohort"). APC analysis estimates the relative contribution of these three temporal dimensions.

The dominant statistical approach employs generalised additive models (e.g., Grasso 2014) to estimate *outcome = age + period + cohort*. However, given the inherent interdependence of these dimensions, we assume that historical events exert maximal influence during the "formative years" (approximately ages 16–25) (e.g., Bietenbeck et al. 2025; Helgason and Rehm 2023; Mannheim 1928/1952a). This is addressed in age–period–cohort–*interaction* (APCI) models (Luo and Hodges 2022), which capture cohort effects via age–period interactions: if period effects are consistent across age groups, this absence of significant interactions indicates there are no cohort effects.

In our analysis, *period* is operationalised by survey rounds (e.g., Wuttke et al. 2022) – and *age* is grouped into seven standard categories (Foa et al. 2020b; Grassi et al. 2024; Zilinsky 2019): 18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65–74, and 75–84 years.

Respondents aged 85+ are excluded due to small sample sizes. Further methodological details appear in Appendix A3.
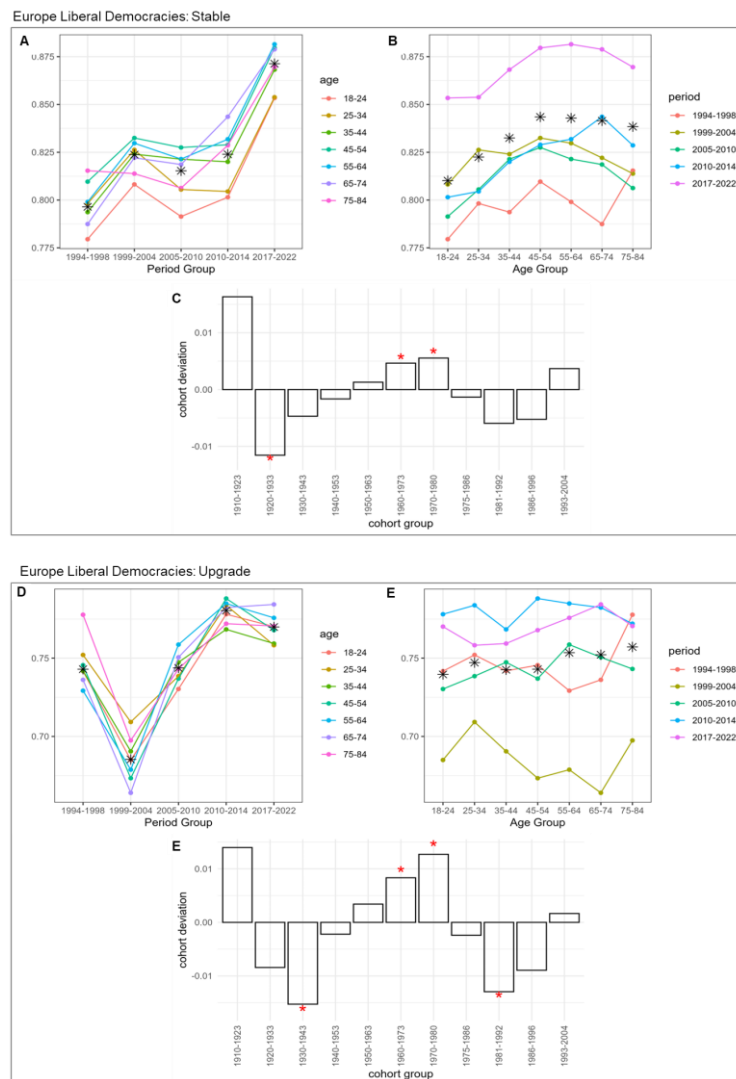
Results

Hypothesis 1

H1: Younger cohorts are less supportive of democracy than older cohorts.

European liberal democracies. Figure 2 displays APCI estimates of period, age, and cohort effects, with cohorts defined by age–period interactions and periods aligned with Integrated Values Survey rounds. Significant deviations would indicate divergence from expected aggregate age and period effects. In European countries that have retained their liberal democratic status since 1994 ('stable liberal democracies'), democratic support*,* already high, has steadily increased (period effect, Figure 2D). Younger cohorts generally follow this trend without significant deviation (Figure 2F), providing no support for Hypothesis 1. An age effect remains, with younger cohorts consistently less supportive than older groups (Figure 2E). In European democracies 'upgraded' from electoral to liberal since 1994, support stays generally high (Figure 2A). The 1980s birth cohort shows lower-than-expected support (Figure 2D), partially supporting Hypothesis 1, further discussed under Hypothesis 3.

Figure 2. European Liberal Democracies: Main Period (A), Main Age (B), and Cohort Deviation (C) Effects for Support for Democracy

Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis, *p* < .05, (two-tailed tests). Stable liberal democracies: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain. Upgraded liberal democracies: Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia.

European electoral democracies. Regardless of regime type and trajectory, democratic support has increased across age groups, especially after 2010 (Figures 3A, 3D, 3G). In stable and upgraded electoral democracies, the youngest cohorts display lower support than expected from age and period effects, supporting Hypothesis 1 (Figures 3C, 3F). However, the support of these young cohorts diverged from the general positive trends between 2005–2010, and has since *risen* again alongside older cohorts (Figures 3A, 3D). The cohort effect thus points only to a temporary youth decline, rejecting Hypothesis 1 (Figure 3K).

Figure 3. European Electoral Democracies: Main Period (A), Main Age (B), and Cohort Deviation (C) Effects for Support for Democracy
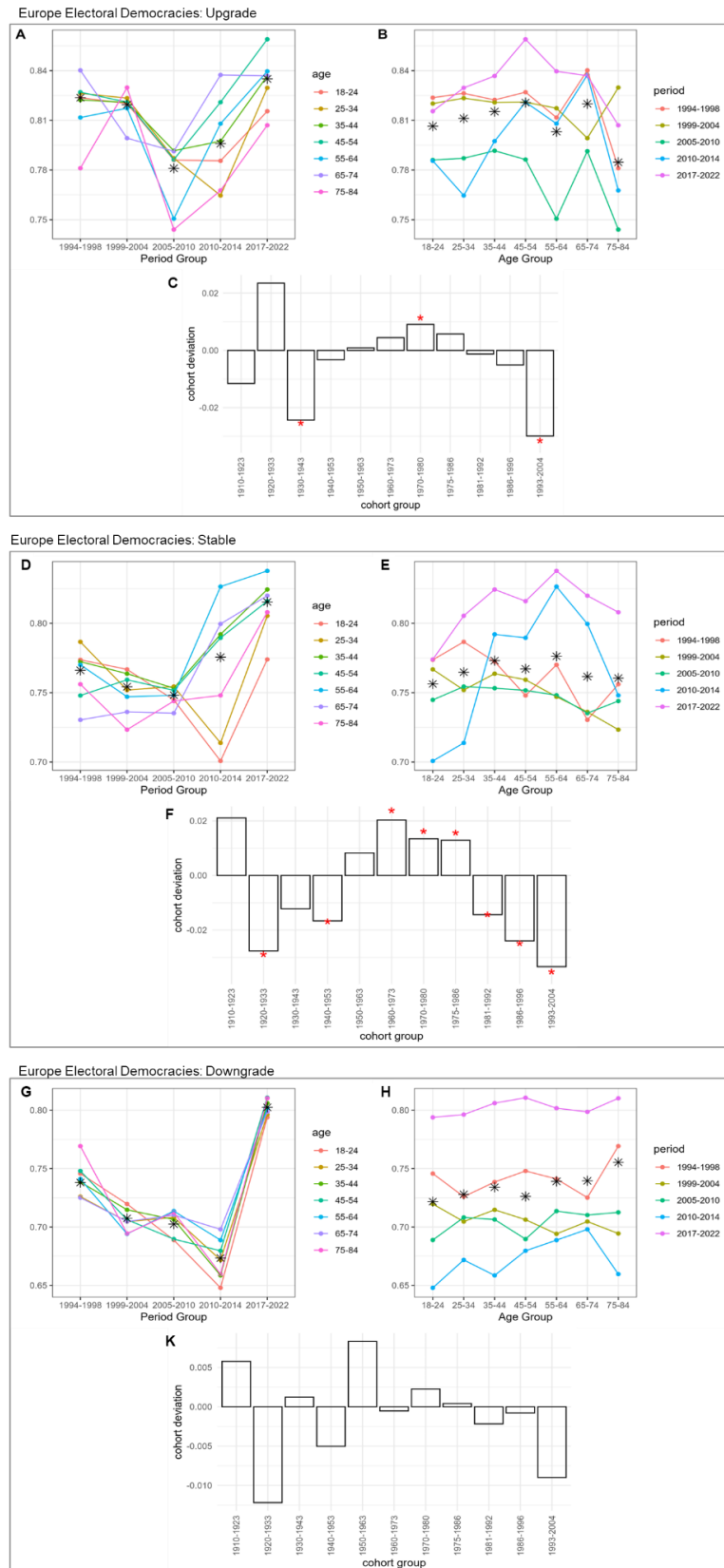
Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis, *p* < .05 (two-tailed tests). Upgraded electoral democracies: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, North Macedonia. Stable electoral democracies: Bulgaria, Malta, Moldova, Romania; Downgraded electoral democracies: Hungary, Lithuania, Poland.

African Electoral Democracies. Period effects across African electoral democracies are similar regardless of regime trajectory. Support declined until about 2005, rose for a decade, then fell again after 2015 (Figures 4A, 4D, 4G). Downgraded democracies show a recent spike in support (Figure 4G). Age effects show younger cohorts consistently have slightly lower support than middle-aged groups (Figures 4B, 4E, 4H). Hypothesis 1 holds only for stable electoral democracies, where the youngest cohorts are less supportive beyond age and period effects (Figure 4F). There is a mostly negative period trend since 2014, which means young cohorts lead a more general decline in democratic support in African stable electoral democracies (Figure 4D). In African democracies with regime changes – upgrades or downgrades – youth support aligns with age and period effects, rejecting Hypothesis 1 (Figures 4C, 4K).

Figure 4. African Electoral Democracies: Main Period (A), Main Age (B), and Cohort Deviation (C) Effects for Support for Democracy
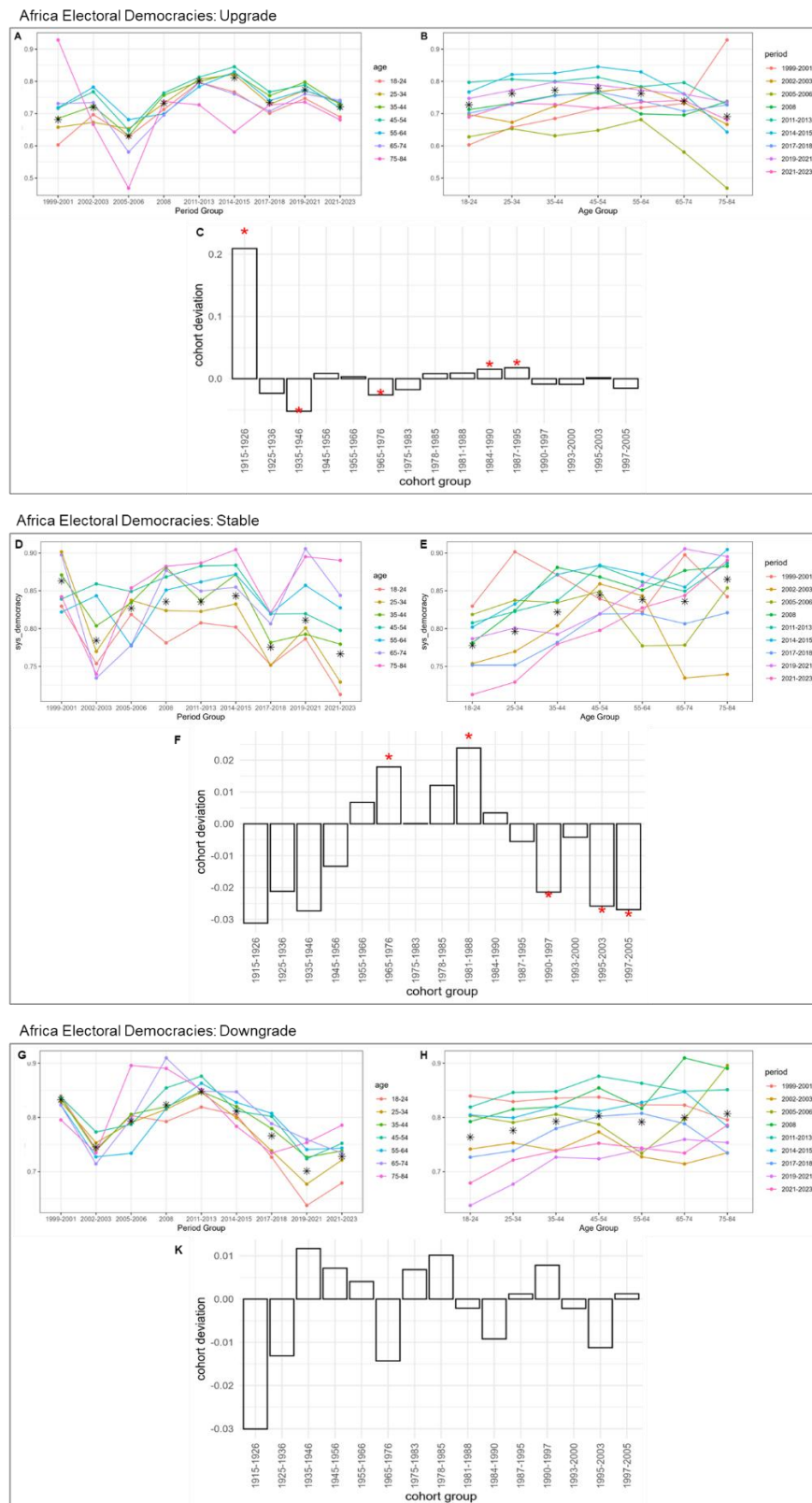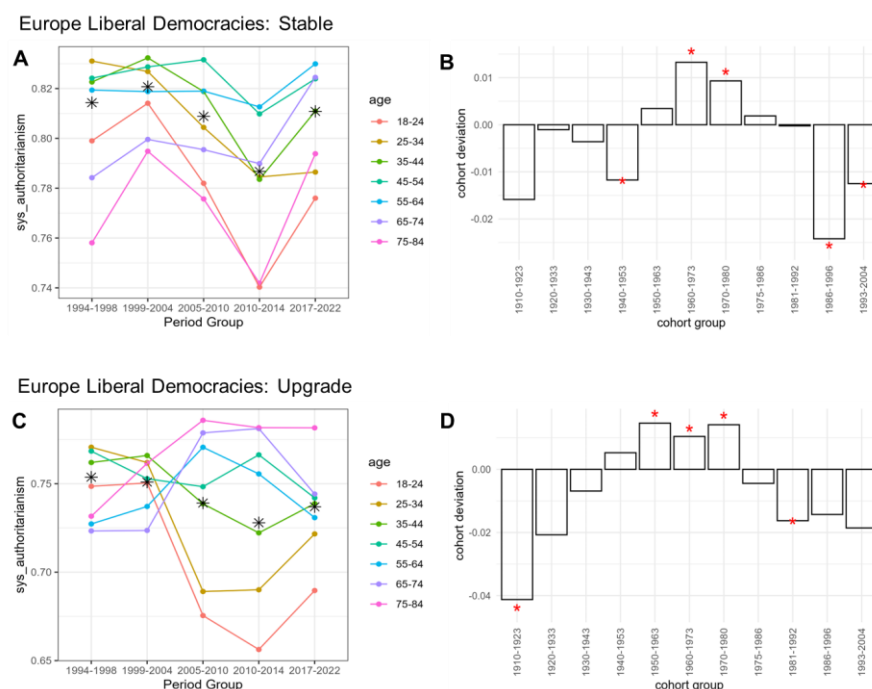

Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis, *p* < .05 (two-tailed tests). Upgraded electoral democracies: Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Liberia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tunisia. Stable electoral democracies: Cape Verde, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal; Downgraded electoral democracies: Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa.

Hypothesis 2

H1b: Younger cohorts are more open to authoritarian alternatives than older cohorts

European Liberal Democracies. In stable liberal democracies, rejection of authoritarian alternatives fell between 1999–2014, then recovered especially among the youngest and oldest (Figure 5A). Despite this recovery, the two youngest cohorts show significant negative cohort effects, supporting Hypothesis 3 (Figure 5B). In upgraded liberal democracies, rejection remains high but dropped sharply among the youngest groups between 1999–2005, with 18–24-year-olds' rejection continuing to decline until rising after 2017 (Figure 5C). Despite this recovery, negative cohort effects linger for the youngest cohorts (Figure 5D), indicating slower-than-average recovery of the rejection of rather than growing authoritarianism. An age effect persists in both stable and upgraded liberal democracies, as young age groups are less critical of authoritarianism than average throughout periods.

Figure 5. European Liberal Democracies: Main Period (A) and Cohort Deviation Effects (B) Rejection of Authoritarianism
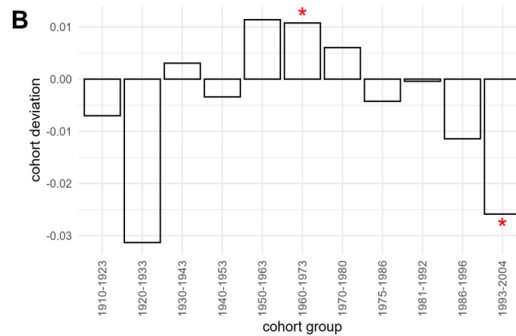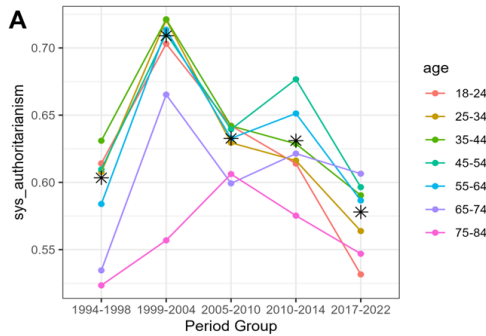

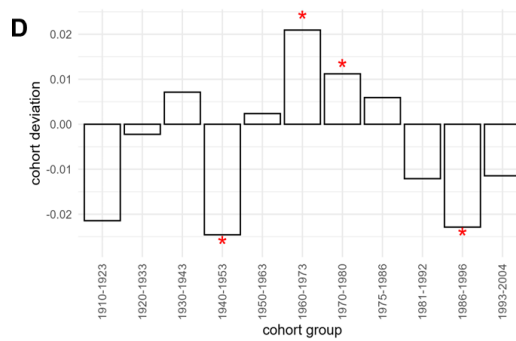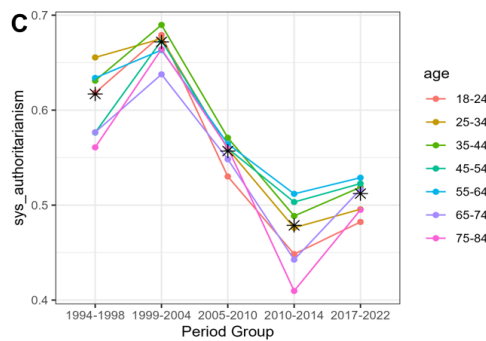*Notes.* Results of an APCI-analysis, *p* < .05 (two-tailed tests).

European Electoral Democracies. European electoral democracies, independent of their trajectory, show cohort effects among the youngest cohorts (Figure 6), supporting Hypothesis 3. Period effects clarify group differences: In upgraded electoral democracies, rejection has declined across all ages since 1999, remaining lower than in stable liberal democracies, with younger cohorts driving this trend (Figures 6A, 6B). Stable electoral democracies also saw a post-1999 decline, before recovery in the most recent round (Figure 6C); however, the youngest (18–24) experienced a sharper dip and retain negative cohort effects (Figure 6D). In downgraded electoral democracies, rejection remains relatively high (Figure 6E). However, it fell among 18–24-year-olds around 2010, with only partial recovery after and lingering negative cohort effects (Figures 6E, 6F). Thus, Hypothesis 3 holds across all groups, though stable and downgraded democracies reflect temporary youth shocks, while upgraded democracies exhibit a sustained downward trend led by younger cohorts.

Figure 6. European Electoral Democracies: Main Period (A) and Cohort Deviation Effects (B) Rejection of Authoritarianism
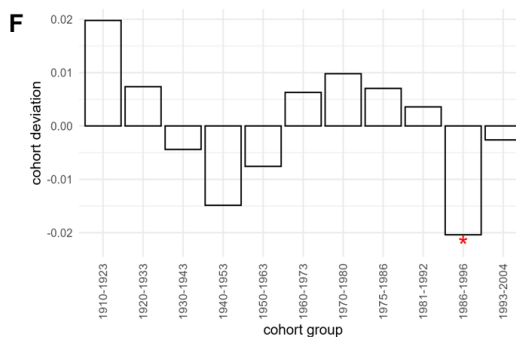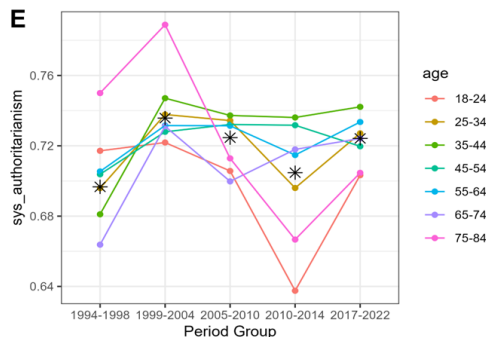

Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis specifying a Gaussian link function. *$p < .05$, (two-tailed tests).

African Electoral Democracies. All African electoral democracies have seen declining rejection of authoritarian alternatives over the past decade (Figures 7A, 7C, 7E). In upgraded African democracies, youth rejection levels fall with the general trend but display a positive cohort effect, indicating relative resistance and leading to rejection of Hypothesis 3 (Figure 7B). Stable democracies show a sharper decline among the youngest (18–24) between 2017–2021, yielding a significant negative cohort effect that supports Hypothesis 3 (Figure 7D). In downgraded democracies, the overall

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decline is milder but steepens for the youngest after 2021, with this cohort driving the decline and showing a significant negative cohort effect, supporting Hypothesis 3 (Figure 7F).

Figure 7. African Electoral Democracies: Main Period (A) and Cohort Deviation Effects (B) Rejection of Authoritarianism
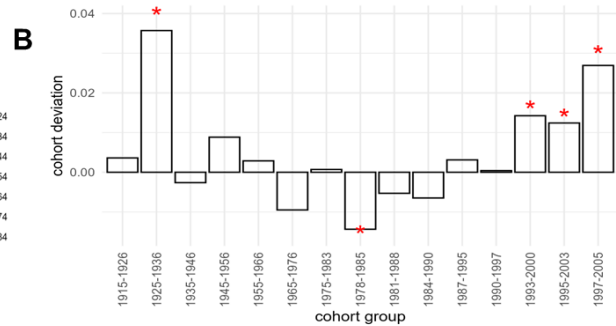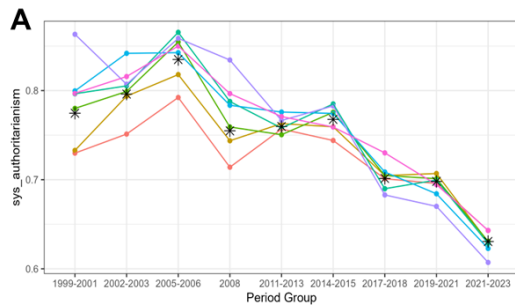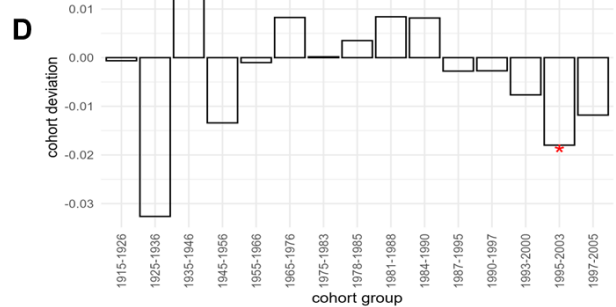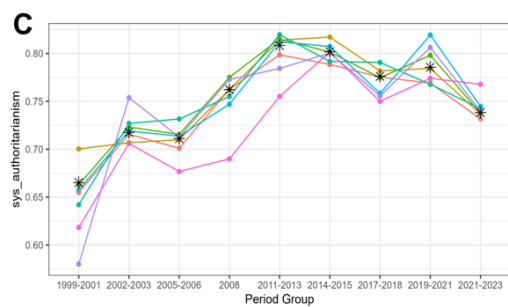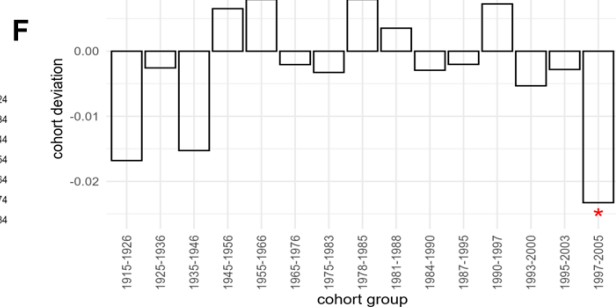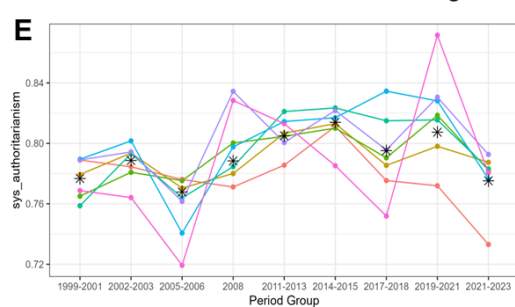
Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis, *p* < .05 (two-tailed tests).

Hypothesis 3

H3a: Support for democracy decreases progressively among younger cohorts.

H3b: A recession "shock" generation exists in Europe, not in Africa.

Hypothesis 3a initially appears to hold for stable electoral democracies in Europe and Africa, where the three youngest cohorts show progressively lower democratic support beyond age and period effects (Figures 3F, 4F). In European stable democracies, younger cohorts diverged from older groups between 2005–2010 but *have since partly converged*, retaining a cohort effect amid overall gains. In stable African electoral democracies, the decline among younger cohorts *continues* through the latest survey round (Figure 4D), indicating sustained erosion; thus, Hypothesis 3a strictly applies only to Africa. No evidence supports a Great Recession "shock" generation in Africa (Figures 4C, 4F, 4K). In European upgraded liberal democracies, the cohort aged 18–24 during the Recession and Euro Crisis shows notably lower support in, consistent with Hypothesis 3b.

Discussion and Conclusion

Popular support for democracy is fundamental to the stability and resilience of democratic governance, a point emphasised by thinkers from Plato (Plato et al. 2007) to Dahl (1971), to Diamond (1999). While democratic consolidation involves several dimensions (Levitsky and Way 2006; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Linz and Stepan 1996; Przeworski and Limongi 1997), this study focused on the critical and contested domain of attitudinal (de)consolidation (Claassen and Magalhães 2023; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017; Grassi et al. 2024; Kriesi 2020; Norris 2017; Voeten 2016; Wuttke et al. 2022; Zilinsky 2019).

We compared African and European democracies using the Integrated Values Survey and the Afrobarometer. Applying age-period-cohort-interaction models (Luo and Hodges 2022), we analysed generational support for democracy and openness to authoritarian alternatives, grouping countries by region and democratic trajectory via V-

Dem's Regimes of the World index. Our analysis emphasises interpreting cohort effects alongside period effects, revealing five distinct patterns of democratic support and authoritarian rejection across the eight country groups:

(1) *Youth-led Generalised Attitudinal Deconsolidation*: Characterised by young people leading a broader decline in democratic support/rejection of authoritarianism, producing distinct youth cohort effects. It is the most concerning subtype, as society-wide declines spearheaded by young people combined with cohort replacement may accelerate democratic erosion.

(2) *Generalised Attitudinal Deconsolidation:* Here, period effects reveal a widespread decline in democratic support/rejection of authoritarian alternatives across most age groups, with youth declining at similar rates and no significant cohort effect. Although less alarming than the youth-led subtype, its broad scope remains a serious threat.

(3) *Youth-resisted Generalised Attitudinal Deconsolidation*: In this pattern, young people show a more cautious decline than older cohorts, generating a cohort effect counter to youth-led decline. Observed only in African upgraded electoral democracies' rejection of authoritarianism, this resistance may slow deconsolidation but does not negate the overall decline.

The remaining types share two features: a past decline and subsequent *recovery*, making subtypes (4) and (5) less concerning than (1), (2), and (3). The difference between (4) and (5) lies in whether the past decline is (4) only concentrated among younger age groups or (5) across all ages but more pronounced in youth.

(4) *Youth Cohort Effect After Temporary Age-Sensitive Downturn*: Characterised by past declines in youth support/rejection (sometimes including the oldest groups) while

other cohorts remained stable or improved. These cohort effects then diminish as youth attitudes recover, narrowing generational gaps.

(5) *Youth Cohort Effect After Temporary Generalised Downturn*: This pattern involves a widespread decline in democratic support across most or all age groups, with particularly strong effects on youth during their formative years. Although this creates a distinct youth cohort effect, subsequent youth cohorts bound alongside a broader recovery, distinguishing subtype (5) from (1).

Building on Wuttke et al. (2022, 423) who argue that openness to authoritarianism should inform analyses of democratic support, we treat both as distinct but equally important dimensions: Figure 8 situates the eight country groups within a matrix intersecting both dimensions and see Table 1a and Table 1b for separate typologies. Guided by this matrix (Figure 8), we revisit our three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 investigates whether and where youth attitudinal deconsolidation occurs (Claassen and Magalhães 2023; Inglehart 2016; Voeten 2016). Surprisingly, stable liberal European democracies – often the focus of scholarly attention in these debates (Grassi et al. 2024; Kriesi 2020; Wuttke et al. 2022; Zilinsky 2019) – show the least evidence of youth-led deconsolidation (see Figure 8). This discrepancy may arise from prior studies inadequately disentangling age, cohort, and period effects (Foa and Mounk 2016; Voeten 2016). In stable European liberal democracies, younger people consistently display lower democratic support (as an age effect), yet the overall pattern corresponds to Types (4) and (5) – past downturns followed by recovery. Although youth cohort effects exist in European democracies, they coincide with positive period trends, making them less alarming than generalised declines. An exception are upgraded European electoral democracies, where youth-led general declines in rejection

of authoritarianism occur. Conversely, all African democracy groups exhibit at least one sub-type of generalised attitudinal deconsolidation (Figure 8). Downgraded African electoral democracies reveal declining rejection of authoritarian alternatives, whereas stable and upgraded democracies show erosion in both democratic support and authoritarian rejection across age groups.

Hypothesis 2 considers whether youth scepticism reflects constructive democratic critique (Norris 2017) or signals a shift from democratic values (Foa and Mounk 2016), indicated by attitudes towards authoritarian alternatives. We find that younger cohorts in several regions exhibit declining rejection of authoritarianism compared to older cohorts (see Figure 8). Assessing both dimensions is vital; for example, downgraded African electoral democracies show little decline in democratic support but significant declines in authoritarian rejection (Figure 8). When negative trends appear in both dimensions among youth, it challenges the 'critical citizens' idea that youth simply hold higher democratic expectations.

Hypothesis 3 investigates whether support declines progressively across generations or if specific cohorts are uniquely affected by historical shocks. Both Type (4) and (5) correspond to a 'recession cohort,' shaped by the Great Recession/Eurozone crisis during formative years, as previously studied in Western and Southern Europe (Grassi et al. 2024; Tsatsanis et al. 2021). Such shock-induced cohort effects could signal long-term political consequences of economic crises, i.e., possibly fostering cohorts especially susceptible to anti-democratic agitation even after the crisis passes.

In stable African electoral democracies, the three youngest cohorts exhibit declining democratic support compared to their predecessors. These countries remained stagnant electoral democracies without liberal democratic phases since at least 1999

discouraging younger generations who lack direct experience of democratic progress, unlike older cohorts who experienced third-wave transitions. Consequently, younger cohorts grow increasingly pessimistic. This stagnation-driven decline contrasts with Claassen (2020) who links declining democratic support to democratic improvements. Further cross-regional research is necessary to ascertain whether generational disillusionment arises from democratic stagnation, backsliding or advancement.

Our findings reveal pronounced attitudinal deconsolidation in Africa, challenging the Europe-focused literature. Most European democracies, aside from upgraded electoral regimes, exhibit cohort effects tied only to past economic shocks rather than sustained decline. In contrast, youth-led deconsolidation in stable African electoral democracies is particularly concerning. Declining youth support is a key predictor of democratic backsliding (Claassen 2020), particularly in countries with large youth populations (Kwak et al. 2020).

While our analysis does not establish causality for regional or generational differences, it suggests that democracy's level of consolidation (RoW-types) and trajectory impact generational support for democracy and, in Europe, past economic shocks likely shaped youth attitudes. Future research could investigate these potential causes alongside political disengagement (Belchior and Teixeira 2023) or generational economic outcomes (Romero-Vidal and Talukder 2025). Only by disentangling the forms, and understanding the drivers, of attitudinal deconsolidation can scholars and policymakers formulate interventions to prevent short-term disaffection from escalating into systemic democratic decay.

Figure 8. Attitudinal Deconsolidation Types

Attitudinal Deconsolidation Type	Support for Democracy					
	(1) Generalised: Youth-led	(2) Generalised	(3) Generalised: Youth-resisted	(4) Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Age-Sensitive Downturn	(5) Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn	None
(1) Generalised: Youth-led	AFR Electoral: Stable			EUR Electoral: Upgrade		AFR Electoral: Downgrade
(2) Generalised						
(3) Generalised: Youth-resisted		AFR Electoral: Upgrade				
(4) Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Age-Sensitive Downturn					EUR Liberal: Upgrades	
(5) Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn				EUR Electoral: Stable		EUR Liberal: Stable EUR Electoral: Downgrade
None						

Rejection of Authoritarian Regimes

Table 1a. Attitudinal Deconsolidation Types per Democratic Trajectory: Europe

Region & Democratic Trajectory		Upgrade	Stable	Downgrade
Support for Democracy	European Liberal Democracies	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn	none	/
	European Electoral Democracies	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp, Age-Sensitive Downturn	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Age-Sensitive Downturn	none
Rejection of Authoritarian Alternatives	European Liberal Democracies	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Age-Sensitive Downturn	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn	/
	European Electoral Democracies	Youth-led generalised attitudinal deconsolidation	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn	Youth Cohort Effect After Temp. Generalised Downturn

Table 1b. Attitudinal Deconsolidation Types per Democratic Trajectory: African Electoral Democracies

Region & Democratic Trajectory	Upgrade	Stable	Downgrade
Support for Democracy	none	Youth-led generalised attitudinal deconsolidation	Generalised attitudinal deconsolidation
Rejection of Authoritarian Alternatives	Youth-resisted generalised attitudinal deconsolidation	Youth-led generalised attitudinal deconsolidation	Youth-led generalised attitudinal deconsolidation

Data Availability Statement

All rounds of the Integrated Values Survey, of the Afrobarometer, and the V-Dem Regime of the World Index are publicly available. Upon acceptance for publication, the authors will make the replication code for merging and analysing the data available via the BJPolS Dataverse site.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix

A1 Sample Overview

Table A1a gives an overview of the specifics of the population surveys.

Table A1a. Sample Characteristics

	World Values Survey	European Values Study	Afrobarometer
Rounds used in analyses	Integrated Values Survey Trend file 1981-2022 (EVS 2025c): 1994-1998, 1999-2004, 2005-2010, 2010-2014, 2017-2022		1999-2001, 2002-2003, 2005-2006, 2008, 2011-2013, 2014-2015, 2017-2018, 2019-2021, 2021-2023
Target population	Residents 18+ years (regardless of nationality, citizenship, language)		Citizens 18+ years (excludes non-citizens)
Sampling method	Combined probability/ stratified	Until 2008: combined probability/stratified Since 2008: probability	Stratified along first-order administrative divisions and rural/urban Primary sampling units: Census Enumeration Areas, probability (Afrobarometer 2022, 32)
	Primary sampling units (route in case of random route sampling) to not exceed 10 respondents		Primary sampling units to not exceed 8 respondents
Interview method	face-to-face, telephone in remote areas		Face-to-face
Sample size	1200+ (typically) per country-year		1200+ (typically) per country-year
Weighting	Redressing: region, age, gender (EVS 2022, 21)		Redressing: urban/rural Since 2008: probability weights (Afrobarometer 2022, 60)
	Each country per year weighted equally in analyses		
Further information	(WVS 2020)	(EVS 2025a, 2025b)	(Afrobarometer 2025)

The *V-DEM Liberal Democracy Index* (Coppedge et al. 2024; Pemstein et al. 2024) is an expert index that utilizes a multifaceted approach to assess the quality of democratic governance. This index involves the consultation of five experts per country-year case, who provide their insights on a range of indicators designed to evaluate the integrity

of elections, the provisions for suffrage, the freedom of association and expression, the observance of legal equality, individual liberties, and the constraints imposed by the judicial and legislative branches on the executive (Nord et al. 2025). The resulting Liberal Democracy Index is continuous from 0 to 1, although the highest empirical score in 2024 was .88 for Denmark. The *Regimes of the World* typology draws on the Liberal Democracy Index to differentiate between 'electoral' and 'liberal' democracies (Lührmann et al. 2018). The two categories share the characteristics of multiparty, free and fair elections, and institutional prerequisites for democracy. However, electoral democracies do not satisfy minimal standards for liberal principles or the rule of law (Lührmann et al. 2018, 63). While such a clear-cut classification might exaggerate the differences between countries that fall into separate categories (Nord et al. 2025, 50–51), it allows us to differentiate groups of relatively more consolidated (liberal) vs relatively less consolidated (electoral) democracies and exclude non-democracies.

We used the RoW typology to identify electoral and liberal democracies at the time of the start of the most recent survey rounds in both Europe and Africa and to characterize the democratic trajectory of these countries since the first survey round included in the analysis. For instance, Belgium has been a liberal democracy from 1994 to 2017, so we classify it as "Liberal Democracy: Stable". South Africa, on the other hand, had been a liberal democracy according to the RoW classification since 1999 but has been an electoral democracy since 2013 and therefore we classify it as "Electoral Democracy: Downgraded". We thus end up with three different types of current democracies in Africa (electoral democracies that have been stable, up- or downgraded – there are no liberal African democracies at the time of the most recent round of the Afrobarometer) and five different types in Europe (electoral democracies that have been stable, up- or downgraded, as well as liberal democracies that have been stable or upgraded).

Figure 1 provides an overview of all countries in the sample and how they are classified, while Appendix A1 lists all countries in each category including number of respondents. Two countries/territories in the EVS/WVS – Andorra and Northern Ireland – were excluded due to the absence of V-DEM data. Montenegro, Ghana, Malawi and Kenya were also removed due to their frequent regime changes, which prevent clear classification within democratic trajectories. Several other countries experienced brief deviations in regime type, but, given the sensitivity of the RoW classification (where minor variations can affect cut-off thresholds) they were retained in the sample (see Tables A1 for details).

Table A1b. Integrated European & World Values Surveys Rounds 3-7: Liberal Democracies in 2017 with Regimes of the World Classification based on 1994–2017

Country/RoW-Type 1994 to 2017	upgraded	stable	Total
Austria	x	6136	6136
Belgium	x	7358	7358
Cyprus[a]	4050	x	4050
Czechia	x	10920	10920
Denmark	x	8104	8104
Estonia	7389	x	7389
Finland	x	6963	6963
France	x	8189	8189
Germany	x	18687	18687
Greece	x	3842	3842
Iceland	x	5029	5029
Ireland	x	4242	4242
Italy	x	10174	10174
Latvia[b]	5957	x	5957
Luxembourg	x	2821	2821
Netherlands	x	12296	12296
Norway	x	6654	6654
Portugal	x	4953	4953
Slovakia[c]	6567	x	6567
Slovenia	x	7595	7595
Spain	x	15168	15168
Sweden	x	8615	8615
Switzerland	x	8298	8298
Great Britain	x	11743	11743
Total	23963	167787	191750

ᵃ(Cyprus has been classified as electoral democracy since 2023 after the cut-off in 2017). ᵇLatvia was classified as electoral democracy in 2013 and 2016. (ᶜSlovakia has been classified as electoral democracy since 2018).

Table A1c. Integrated European & World Values Surveys Rounds 3-7: Electoral Democracies in 2017 with Regimes of the World Classification based on 1994–2017

Country/RoW-Type 1994 to 2017	downgraded	stable	upgraded	Total
Albania	x	x	4968	4968
Bosnia and Herzegovina	x	x	5636	5636
Bulgaria	x	7165	x	7165
Croatia	x	x	5211	5211
Georgiaᵃ	x	x	8404	8404
Hungaryᵇ	8147	x	x	8147
Lithuania	5975	x	x	5975
Malta	x	3362	x	3362
Moldovaᶜ	x	4589	x	4589
Poland	8996	x	x	8996
Romania	x	11126	x	11126
North Macedoniaᵈ	x	x	4667	4667
Total	23118	26242	28886	78246

Notes. ᵃGeorgia was classified was electoral autocracy in 2008-2009. (ᵇHungary has been classified as electoral autocracy since 2018, after the cut-off in 2017). ᶜMoldova was classified as electoral autocracy in 2005-2009. ᵈNorth Macedonia was classified as electoral autocracy in 2012-2016.

Table A1d. Afrobarometer Rounds 1-9: Electoral Democracies in 2021 with Regimes of the World Classification based on 1999–2021

Country/RoW-Type 1999 to 2021	downgraded	stable	upgraded	Total
Botswana	10798	x	x	10798
Burkina Fasoᵃ	x	x	7200	7200
Cabo Verde	x	9795	x	9795
Lesotho	x	x	10735	10735
Liberia	x	x	7198	7198
Malawi	x	13215	x	13215
Mauritius	6000	x	x	6000
Namibia	x	10782	x	10782
Nigerᵇ	x	x	5998	5998
São Tomé and Príncipe	x	3596	x	3596
Senegal	x	9600	x	9600
Sierra Leoneᶜ	x	x	5981	5981
South Africa	19209	x	x	19209
Tunisiaᵈ	x	x	5999	5999
Total	36007	64558	43111	143676

Notes. ᵃBurkina Faso was classified was electoral autocracy in 2015 (and since 2022 after the cut-off in 2021). ᵇNiger was classified as electoral autocracy in 2009-2010 (and since 2023).

[c]Sierra Leone was classified as electoral autocracy in 2012 (and since 2023). [d](Tunisia has been classified as electoral autocracy since 2023).

A2 Variables

Table A3. Items for support for democracy and rejection of non-democratic alternatives

Diffuse support democracy	
Integrated Values Survey	"Having a democratic system" rated "very good" to "very bad" (4-point scale)
Afrobarometer	Choice between: "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government", "For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have", "In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable"
Rejection authoritarian alternatives	
Integrated Values Survey	"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" and "Having the army rule the country" rated "very good" to "very bad" (4-point scale)
Afrobarometer	"Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything" and "The army comes in to govern the country" rated "strongly disapprove" to "strongly approve" (5-point scale)

Notes. The two items on disapproval of non-democratic political systems were combined into one index (mean average) for inclusion in the analysis. We use the full scales for the analysis normalized to a range of 0-1. Item-non-response are treated as random and exclude from the analysis (Hu et al. 2025).

A3 Statistical Approach

Our hypotheses require age-period-cohort analyses to determine whether the outcome variables are a product of getting older (age), the historical context (period), or the shared experiences of people belonging to a generation (cohort). To that end, age-period-cohort analyses ascertains the relative contribution of the three time-related variables to the outcome in question. "Age" is defined as the current age of an individual at the point of data collection. "Period" refers to the broad socio-historical influences that affect all individuals living through that period of time, often necessarily defined in research by the different rounds of a repeated survey (e.g., Wuttke et al. 2022). "Cohort" denotes groups of individuals who were born at a similar time and thus also share other commonalities such as being in their formative years during the same period.

Dominant statistical frameworks for age-period-cohort analysis utilize generalised additive models to differentiate these effects, estimating them as the outcome variable = age + period + cohort effect (e.g., Grasso 2014). However, age, period, and cohort effects are inherently interdependent. Mannheim (1928/1952b) and later Sears (1975) both emphasised that the point in one's life (age) that one experiences significant historical events (period) mediates the strength of the period effect. Mannheim argued that individuals are most influenced by these events during their 'formative years' (which he suggested was in the range of 18 to 25). Those older than this he considered to have more set worldviews and be less strongly affected by events, while those who were younger than this range may not fully process or understand the events in a meaningful way at the time. In other words, this literature conceptualizes cohorts as period *minus* age (Luo and Hodges 2022). This indicates that the dominant generalised additive age-period-cohort models are insufficient as they cannot circumvent the inherent challenge of differentiating between invariantly conflated variables.

In order to address this conceptual discrepancy, Luo and Hodges (2022) have proposed the age-period-cohort-interaction model (APCI), which assesses the cohort effect through age-by-period interactions. This model enables the assessment of whether cohorts deviate from the main effects of age and period. In instances where period effects are consistent across age categories, the presence of a statistically significant interaction between age and period is rendered moot and the hypothesis of cohort effects would be rejected. As the authors point out, the notion that cohort effects are age-by-period interactions has been present in the literature for decades (Clogg 1982; Fienberg and Mason 1985; Holford 1983). The APCI model appropriately aligns statistical modeling with this concept of cohort effects.

Hence, we applied the APCI model to test our hypothesis. As a generalised model, it is specified as (Luo and Hodges 2022):

$$g\left(E(Y_{ij})\right) = \mu + \alpha_i + \beta_j + \alpha\beta_{ij(k)},$$

for age groups $i = 1, 2, \dots, a$, periods $j = 1, 2, \dots, p$, and cohorts $k = 1, 2, \dots, (a + p - 1)$. $E(Y_{ij})$ is the expected value of the outcome variable Y (support for democracy, rejection of authoritarian alternatives) for the ith age-group and jth period, and g is the link function (generalised model). μ is the global mean, α_i stands for the mean difference from the global mean μ associated with the ith age-group, β_j is the mean difference from the global mean μ associated with the jth period, and $\alpha\beta_{ij(k)}$ finally is the age-by-period interaction term between the ith age-group and jth period group that corresponds to the effect of the kth cohort on the outcome variable Y. The effect of a cohort includes multiple age-by-period interaction terms that lie on the same diagonal in a table with ages in the rows and periods in the columns.

The APCI model has recently been implemented as an R package (Xu 2025) which we utilize to estimate the age-by-period interactions in testing our hypothesis, specifying a Gaussian link function. A notable disadvantage of the APCI model is its incapacity to "freely" define cohorts. As they are conceptualized as interaction effects, their definition is contingent upon the categorization of the age and period variables. Since neither the Integrated Values Survey nor the Afrobarometer are yearly surveys but were repeated in (slightly irregular) intervals, the cohorts follow suit and are hence also irregular.

The age categorization needs to sufficiently differentiate between various younger cohorts and identify those in their formative years. We categorize age into seven groups, that follow commonly used classifications (Foa et al. 2020b; Grassi et al. 2024; Zilinsky 2019): 18-24 years, 25-34 years, 35-44 years, 45-54 years, 55-64 years, 65-74 years, 75-84 years. People aged 85 and older are excluded, because they make up a very small portion of the sample, especially outside of western Europe.
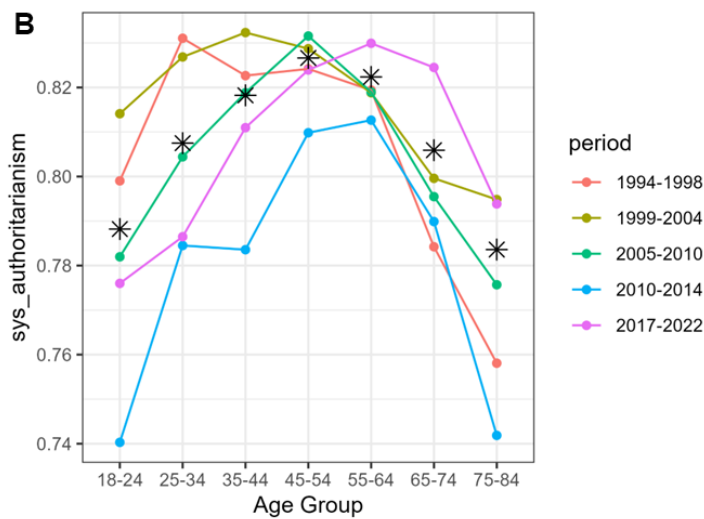
A4 Rejection of Authoritarian Alternatives to Democracy: Age Effects

Figure A3a. European Liberal Democracies: Main Age Effects Rejection of Authoritarianism

Europe Liberal Democracies: Stable
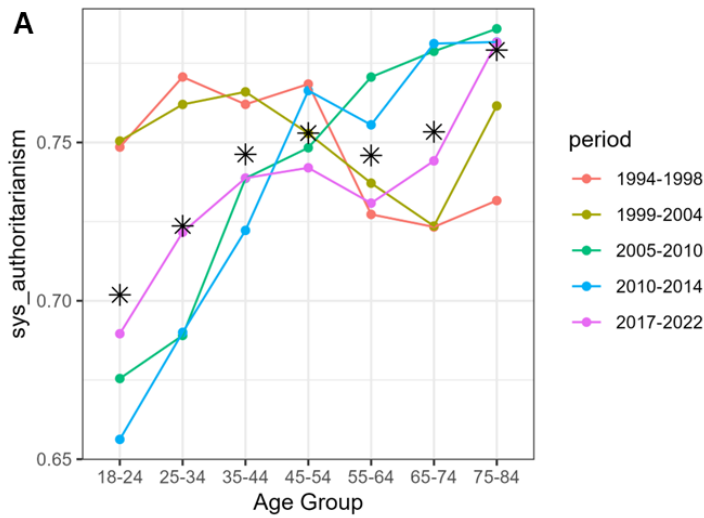
Europe Liberal Democracies: Upgrade

Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis specifying a Gaussian link function. Stable liberal democracies: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain. Upgraded liberal democracies: Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia.
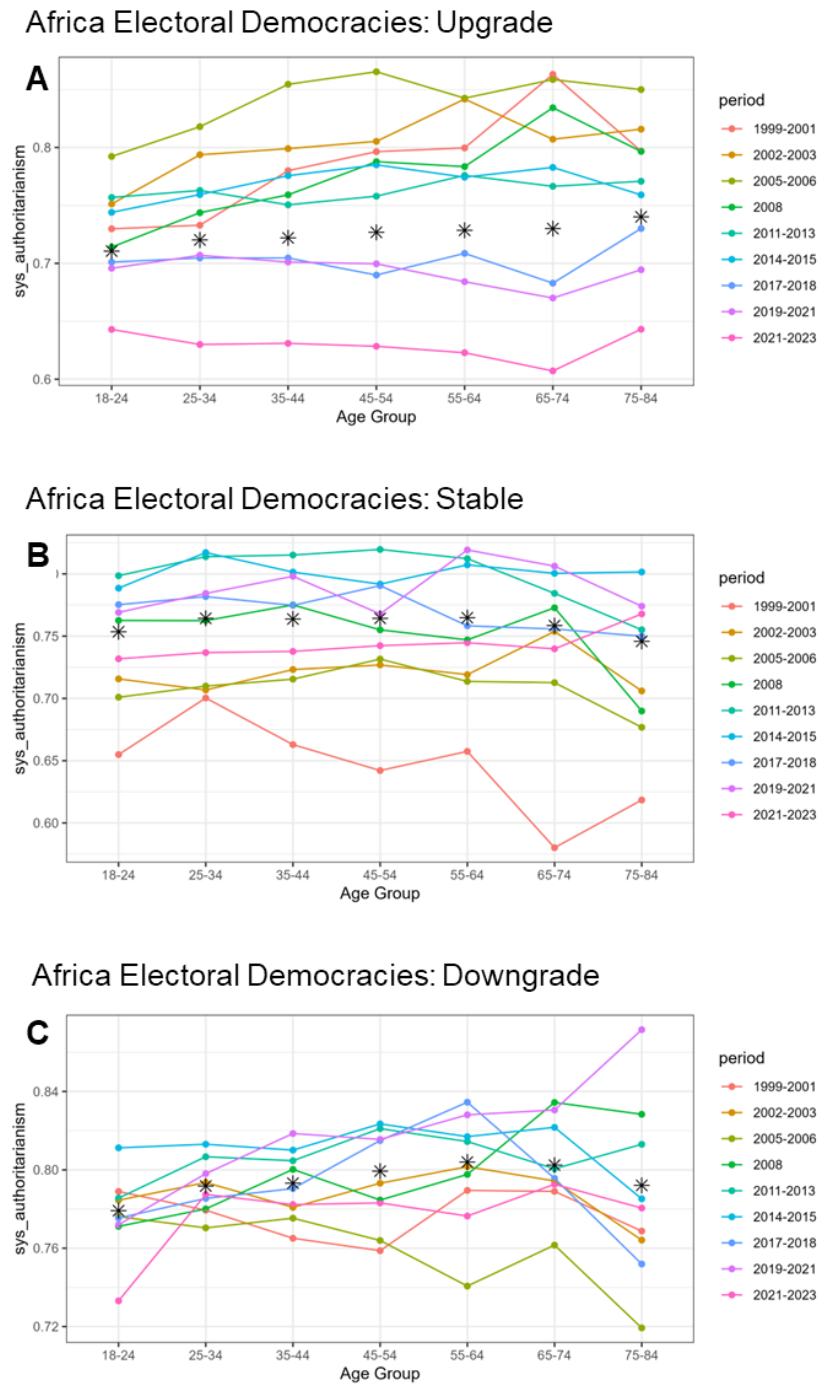
Figure A3b. European Electoral Democracies: Main Age Effects Rejection of Authoritarianism
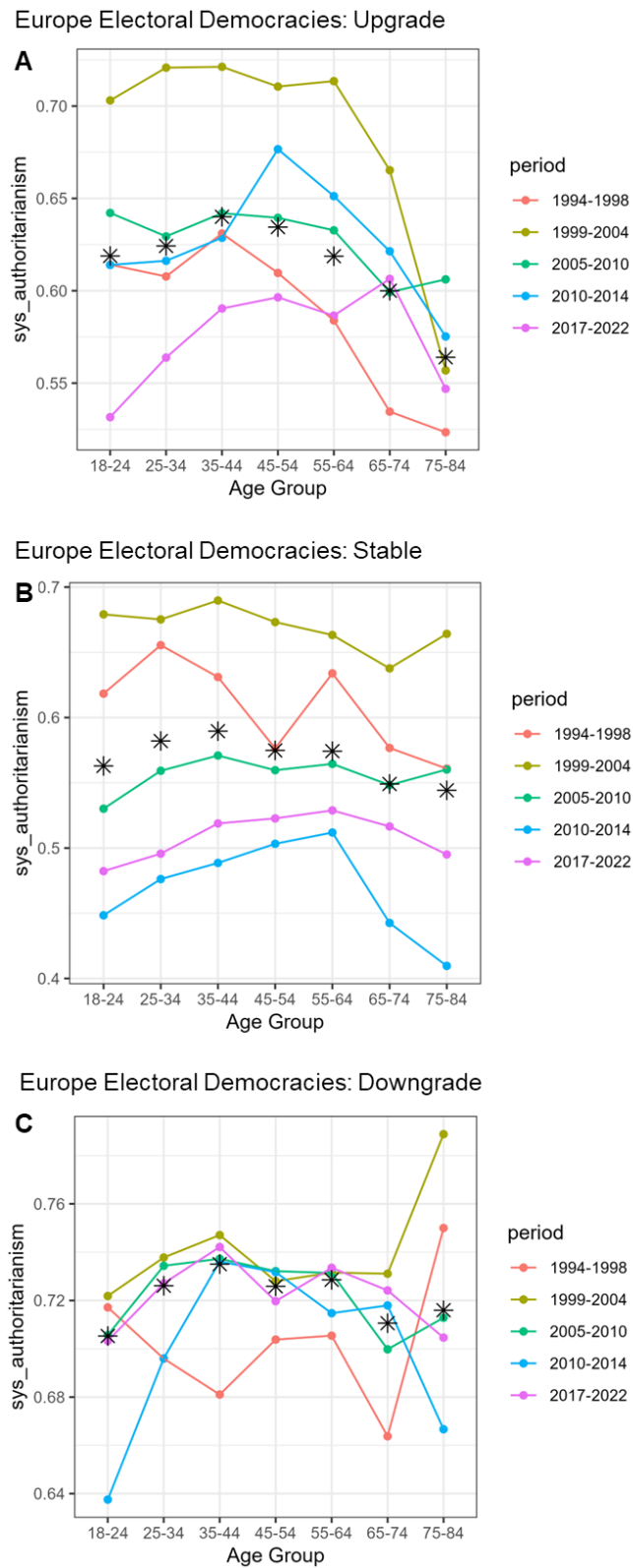
Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis specifying a Gaussian link function. Upgraded electoral democracies: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Georgia, North Macedonia. Stable electoral democracies: Bulgaria, Malta, Moldova, Romania; Downgraded electoral democracies: Hungary, Lithuania, Poland.

Figure A3c. African Electoral Democracies: Main Age Effects Rejection of Authoritarianism

Africa Electoral Democracies: Upgrade

Africa Electoral Democracies: Stable

Africa Electoral Democracies: Downgrade

Notes. Results of an APCI-analysis specifying a Gaussian link function. Upgraded electoral democracies: Burkina Faso, Lesotho, Liberia, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tunisia. Stable electoral democracies: Cape Verde, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal; Downgraded electoral democracies: Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa.