




## Beyond the transnational cleavage: differentiation of democratic values in Europe

Aleksandra Sojka, Kavyanjali Kaushik, Monika Eigmüller & Hans-Jorg Trenz


**To cite this article:** Aleksandra Sojka, Kavyanjali Kaushik, Monika Eigmüller & Hans-Jorg Trenz (29 Jan 2025): Beyond the transnational cleavage: differentiation of democratic values in Europe, *European Politics and Society*, DOI: [10.1080/23745118.2025.2451203](https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2451203)


**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2451203>

 View supplementary material 

 Published online: 29 Jan 2025.

 Submit your article to this journal 





 Article views: 140

 View related articles 

 View Crossmark data 



# Beyond the transnational cleavage: differentiation of democratic values in Europe

Aleksandra Sojka <sup>a</sup>, Kavyanjali Kaushik <sup>b</sup>, Monika Eig Müller <sup>c</sup> and Hans-Jorg Trezn <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Sciences & Carlos III-Juan March Institute, University Carlos III of Madrid, Getafe, Madrid; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Sciences, University Carlos III of Madrid, Getafe (Madrid), Spain; <sup>c</sup>Interdisciplinary Centre for European Studies (ICES), Europa-Universitaet Flensburg, Flensburg, Germany; <sup>d</sup>Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between the transnational cleavage and support for democratic values in six European countries (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland, and Spain). Drawing on original survey data, we investigate to what extent identities, migration attitudes, and voting behavior align with support for and opposition to three core democratic values: gender equality, judicial independence, and freedom of expression. Our findings reveal a nuanced landscape of value differentiation rather than strict polarization. While cosmopolitan identities and pro-immigration attitudes correlate with higher support for most democratic values, the communitarian side shows alignment with certain liberal principles, such as freedom of expression. Additionally, social media use emerges as a significant variable, amplifying the alignment of cleavage indicators with democratic values among politically active users. These results challenge the notion of clear-cut value polarization and highlight the complexity of democratic value alignment in contemporary Europe. The study underscores the importance of context-specific dynamics and the evolving role of digital media in shaping political and value-based divisions.

## KEYWORDS


Democratic values; identity; migration attitudes; radical right

## 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) was founded on a set of core values – human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights. In this tradition, the EU actively seeks compliance and solidarity within its member states to advance these democratic values (Deutsch et al., 2006; Wallaschek, 2019). Accordingly, European integration is expected to lead to value convergence (Akaliyski et al., 2022) via, among others, the socialisation of new generations of Europeans into a community of shared values (Eig Müller & Trezn, 2020).

**CONTACT** Aleksandra Sojka  asojka@clio.uc3m.es  Department of Social Sciences & Carlos III-Juan March Institute, University Carlos III of Madrid, Calle Madrid 126, 28903 Getafe, Spain

This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online version. Please see Correction (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2480400>)

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2451203>.

© 2025 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

However, the anticipated harmonisation of democratic values is challenged by persistent value differentiation within European societies. These divides stem not only from entrenched traditional values, such as authoritarianism (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), but also from the erosion of liberal value consensus in the face of socio-political disruptions (Zielonka, 2018). Emerging cultural and social conflicts – centred on issues like multiculturalism, religion, sexuality, and reproductive rights – further accentuate such divisions (Teney & Rupieper, 2023).

At the same time, scholars of European politics have been arguing that we are witnessing a re-structuring of political conflict on the continent beyond the classical ‘frozen’ cleavages of social class, centre-periphery and left-right ideologies that distinguished post-war partisan politics in Western democracies (Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; De Wilde et al., 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2012; Teney et al., 2014). Recent scholarship points at several variants of how such a new divide within European societies finds expression in political contestation. Hooghe and Marks introduced the GAL-TAN distinction in party politics with ‘Green, Alternative, Liberal’ parties mainly supporting post-materialist values and ‘Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist’ parties favouring a strong, law-and-order state committed to defending national interests and sovereignty (Hooghe et al., 2010). The latter was later rearticulated as a broader transnational cleavage, organised around the political backlash against European integration and immigration (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Others identify a new cleavage that divides populations into hostile camps of integrationist versus demarcationists, characterised by different experiences and perceptions of the effects of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2012; Teney et al., 2014) and pitting cosmopolitan values against communitarian ones in the struggle over borders and rules of social inclusion and exclusion (De Wilde et al., 2019). Finally, Norris and Inglehart have presented their cultural backlash thesis of the rise of authoritarian populism as older generations’ response to the perceived threats of globalisation and value change (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Traditionally, cleavage theory conceptualised political conflict as rooted in socio-structural divisions, with cleavages marked by shared values and political representation (Marks et al., 2022; Bornschier, 2010). As left-right cleavages decline, scholars increasingly emphasise the growing salience of value-driven conflicts, leading to the emergence of new political actors and alignments (Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In this article, we connect the recent literature on the re-structuring of political conflict in Europe to research on democratic values. In particular, we want to empirically test whether patterns of support for and opposition to democratic values constitute yet another dimension of the new cleavage dynamic in Europe. By focusing on democratic values, we aim to contribute to the broader cleavage theory by demonstrating how studying patterns of value orientations can help illuminate the nuanced ways in which societal divisions are structured and politicised. However, we maintain that these values are expressions of, rather than synonymous with, the cleavages they signify. This perspective on value conflicts is instructive for contrasting the simplistic dichotomy of social polarisation with a differentiated understanding of the complexity of contemporary social divisions.

Using an original dataset from the project “Value Conflicts in a Differentiated Europe” - ValCon,<sup>1</sup> we ask whether citizens increasingly divided along the transnational cleavage also differ in their support/rejection of democratic values. To explore this question, we select three core EU democratic values – gender equality, freedom of expression, and independence of judiciary – and explore their patterns of support and opposition. We then examine whether such support/opposition aligns with individual positions in relation

to three key indicators of the new transnational cleavage: national identification, migration attitudes, and radical right vote.

Furthermore, we also consider how changing media diets of European citizens could contribute to the structuring of democratic values in relation to the new cleavage. Many researchers have expressed deep concern about the emergence of social media and its role in undermining the quality of democracies (for an overview of recent empirical evidence, see Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). From the perspective of the present study, and given the increasing importance of digital communication, what matters is whether we can observe the existence of different value communities, further amplified by differing patterns of media consumption and exposure to political interactions. Social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of value differentiation along cleavage lines. However, it is important to distinguish between the underlying cleavage structure and the mediated expressions of value alignment, which may not fully capture the complexity of societal divides. Therefore, we also systematically explore social media use as a potential intervening variable for value differentiation. To test such possibility, we identify individuals who use such platforms extensively for political and non-political purposes and contrast their attitudes to non-users of social media.

Our findings challenge the idea of European societies divided into two distinct clusters of opposing values along the lines of the new cleavage: overall, citizens in the six European countries in our study overwhelmingly support key democratic values. Within this context of prevailing democratic consensus, our study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, we show that orientations towards democratic values do not neatly map onto the new cleavage; rather, they remain differentiated. Specifically, while support for gender equality and independence of judiciary are strongly associated with the cosmopolitan side of the transnational cleavage, support for the liberal value of freedom of expression is not. Those who oppose immigration and hold an exclusive national identity tend to support freedom of expression more than immigration supporters and inclusive nationals. Secondly, our research also highlights that different approaches to the cleavage operationalisation yield varying degrees of its association with specific democratic values. While identity and immigration attitudes constitute relatively strong indicators of value orientation along the cleavage, radical-right vote constitutes a less reliable means of aligning people into value clusters cross-nationally. Finally, we show that the spread of digital media could be contributing to the (mis)perception of such value differentiation, as we find some evidence of a stronger alignment of cleavage indicators and democratic values among politically active social media users.

The paper is structured as follows: we begin by developing our theoretical arguments and presenting our expectations regarding each of three cleavage indicators, their association with democratic values and the anticipated impact of social media use. Then, we introduce our analytical approach, data, and results. Finally, we conclude by discussing our findings and their implications for the cleavage theory.

## **2. Democratic values and the new fault line in European societies**

Growing political polarisation poses a challenge to liberal democracies all over the Western world. Such polarisation is largely taking place along a new cleavage that has developed in response to the perceived costs and benefits of globalisation and increasing

transnationalism. The transnational cleavage is socially structured along the lines of education, income, and employment as transnationalisation generates winners and losers with different lifestyles and political preferences (Reckwitz, 2020). The resulting political conflict cannot be easily accommodated by the traditional political party landscape (Kriesi et al., 2012). As a result, new radical right-wing parties emerge to exploit this new line of conflict and mobilise voters (Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

However, scholars of the transnational cleavage also argue that beyond such structural defining elements, the new cleavage is essentially driven by conflicts about values (Marks et al. 2022). This suggests an intrinsic relationship between support of core democratic values and such broader political realignment. The main objective of this study is to empirically verify this assumption. Thus, we ask, to what extent the emerging societal and political divisions deemed as the transnational cleavage also structure support for democratic values in European societies?

In this study, we conceptualise democratic values as normative principles that are central to liberal democracy. By contrast, the transnational cleavage refers to a societal and political divisions arising from globalisation and transnationalisation, often expressed through differences in identity, attitudes toward migration, and voting behaviour. The nexus between transnational cleavages and support for core democratic values is discussed by Norris and Inglehart (2019) according to whom a trajectory of value change is a shared trend across the West, including Europe. From this perspective, individuals hold consistent ideological views and attitudes across a range of policy choices that align with a liberal-non liberal axis. Although survey respondents may express varying attitudes towards specific issues (e.g. they may support women's right to an abortion while opposing gun control), the overall 'relative conservatism and liberalism' of each cohort remains consistent (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 98–100). Accordingly, from this perspective, people can be grouped into different clusters of liberal and non-liberal values that oppose each other in a stable and organised way. Within these opposing clusters, values can be allocated as a package that is either supported or rejected.

In contrast, we argue that democratic values cannot be defined in substantive terms; rather, they are given meaning in procedural terms based on their relationship to each other, and they are justified in a particular context (Habermas, 1996). Under such assumption of value pluralism, we must accept that simple dichotomies of liberal versus conservative clustering might not fully capture the complexities of value alignment. For instance, individuals along the transnational cleavage who hold an exclusionary national identity, often expressed through concerns about ethnic, religious, racial or cultural preservation of the native population (Mudde, 2007), may simultaneously support gender equality. This paradoxical value support can be interpreted as the instrumentalisation of gender equality and feminist discourse, where rhetoric contrasting 'Western women's rights' with the rights of women in other nations, especially Muslim countries, is advanced to reinforce exclusionary national identity and simultaneously deflect accusations of sexism and discrimination (Cabezas, 2022; Farris, 2017). Furthermore, nationalist actors and radical-right parties strategically embrace the liberal rhetoric – specifically on issues related to immigration, gender equality, LGBTQI rights, and freedom of speech – to broaden their appeal, shape mainstream narratives and politics on democratic issues, and normalise their extreme right positions (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018; Akkerman et al., 2016; Brubaker, 2017; Krzyżanowski & Ekström, 2022).

Given this potential for value pluralism, we need to empirically test the extent to which support or opposition to core democratic values aligns with the new transnational cleavage. While Norris and Inglehart (2019) take value alignment along a liberal and illiberal axis as a manifestation of a transnational cleavage, we want to consider the possibility that people who are strongly opposed to transnationalism may still be strong supporters of some liberal values while rejecting others.

Our selection of three core democratic values is based on the expectation of a possible incongruence between support of democratic norms and the position of individuals vis-à-vis transnational processes of socio-economic change. Each of these values presents a distinct set of underlying attitudes that motivate support or opposition independently of whether these individuals align along a transnational cleavage. Specifically, we consider *Freedom of expression* as aligned with the liberal and illiberal-authoritarian axis, *Gender equality* as aligned with the liberal and illiberal-authoritarian axis, and *Independence of judiciary* as aligned with a traditional-modernist axis. By acknowledging that support of different democratic values might be motivated differently, we can thus account for the recent trend of an adaptation of liberal values by ultra-nationalists, a phenomenon that can be traced back to a possible incongruence in values: individuals who, for example, hold ultraliberal views on freedom of expression but still embrace traditionalist views on gender roles or reject limitations on popular sovereignty by national or international courts.

Having clarified our choice of democratic values, we now introduce our operationalisation of the transnational cleavage. We consider three cleavage indicators of key relevance for understanding the restructuring of societies along the response to transnationalisation: national identity, migration attitudes, and radical right vote. For each of these key indicators of the transnational cleavage, we review recent literature to explain how they operationalise different aspects of the new cleavage and to formulate our hypotheses regarding the way in which we expect them to structure support for core democratic values in European societies.

### **2.1. National identity**

Existing research shows a stable link between acting and feeling European and a general transnational orientation in Europe (Kuhn, 2015). People who have lived and studied abroad, have international contacts, speak foreign languages, and maintain international friendships are much more likely to exhibit pro-European attitudes than those without such experiences (Fernández et al., 2016; Kuhn, 2015). Yet these studies do not establish a causal relationship between transnational orientation and European identification. Instead, they point to age and education as important predictors of a European identity, suggesting that younger and more educated people are more likely to develop European identification than those less educated and older (Birch, 2016; Hakhverdian et al., 2013). The significant impact of education and occupation on pro-transnational attitudes may be attributed to people's inclination to maximise their own utility: better-educated and mobile elites, who are on the winning side of European integration, are more likely to express European identification (Bornschieer, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2008).

We also know that people's subjective perceptions of themselves as winners or losers play a crucial role in their positioning vis-à-vis globalisation and European integration

(Díaz-Lanchas et al., 2021; Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2006; Teney et al., 2014). Those who feel they are on the losing side of supranationalisation are more inclined to perceive these developments as a threat. However, the extent to which these factors merely describe the emergence of individual attitudes towards the EU or point to a broad societal divide is an open empirical question. Those who argue for the emergence of a new transnational cleavage interpret attitudes towards the EU and the question of a European identity as a proxy for general cosmopolitan attitudes.

Thus, our first operationalisation of transnational cleavage examines the various configurations of national and European identity, which in turn should be aligned with both cosmopolitan pluralism (Merkel & Zürn, 2019) and democratic values such as gender equality, freedom of speech, and judicial independence (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Kennedy, 2013). Some scholars have even used democratic values as a proxy for European identification (Oshri et al., 2016). Accordingly, it can be assumed that people who identify as Europeans are more likely to agree with the core (democratic) values of the EU than those who identify exclusively with their nation state. Thus, we expect the following alignment between democratic values and the cleavage:

*H1: Individuals who hold an exclusive national identity will be less supportive of liberal democratic values than those who hold an inclusive identity.*

It should be noted, however, that the relationship between democratic values and European identity may vary significantly by country (Kennedy, 2013). Whether 'European identity' can serve as a proxy for cosmopolitan attitudes and translates into cosmopolitan values depends largely on the country and its political culture. Therefore, our analysis will also address the possibility of such heterogeneous effects.

## **2.2. Migration attitudes**

According to some authors, the new societal cleavage emerges primarily along attitudes toward immigration (Ademmer & Stöhr, 2019; Schäfer, 2022). Zürn and de Wilde (2016) argue that the class consciousness of frequent travellers translates into cosmopolitanism, while the class consciousness of those who cherish their homeland translates into communitarianism. Thus, while cosmopolitans tend to embrace immigration, communitarians are more sceptical about it. Accordingly, perceptions of transborder mobility constitute a central indicator of the new cleavage. In the European context, the profound societal impact of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 brought immigration to the forefront of debate in EU member states. Yet while attitudes towards immigration have exposed the new fault line of social conflict, the extent to which this new cleavage has supplanted or displaced the old right-left divide in politics is debatable.

On the one hand, the issue of immigration is often perceived as an economic matter: increased immigration means more direct competition in the labour and housing markets, especially for those in the lower classes. In this sense, attitudes towards immigration are also always a socio-economic issue (Engler & Weisstanner, 2020). Right-wing populists exploit this sentiment by associating economic hardship with immigration, thereby attributing adverse socio-economic developments to the latter. Several empirical studies have linked anti-immigration stances to (perceived) job insecurity, fear of downward social mobility, or social chauvinism (De Koster et al., 2013; Engler & Weisstanner, 2020).



On the other hand, many scholars point out that anti-immigration attitudes are mainly driven by cultural factors (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Mutz, 2018; Oesch, 2008). Accordingly, Hooghe and Marks (2018) argue that the new transnational cleavage is most sharply differentiated along the inclusion/exclusion axis – that is, along the line that divides individuals who welcome cultural diversity from those who perceive immigration as a threat to national and cultural (ethnic) identity. If this is indeed the case, we can group value preferences into liberal-democratic and nationalist-authoritarian clusters on the basis of people's attitudes towards immigration. Thus, in terms of support/opposition to democratic values, we hypothesise that:

*H2: Individuals who oppose immigration will be less supportive of liberal democratic values than those who view immigration favourably.*

### **2.3. Radical-right vote**

One of the most significant features of the new transnational cleavage is the emergence of new political entrepreneurs who position themselves outside the traditional left-right cleavage, coupled with an electorate that is increasingly inclined to vote for populist parties. Both left-wing and right-wing populists share a dissatisfaction with the existing democracy and a rejection and distrust of the elites, especially the national government and supranational political entities like the EU. However, right-wing populism is also directed against other elements of mainstream politics. As Guth and Nelsen (2021) note, right-wing populists focus their critique on the tenets of a liberal post-material society such as 'immigration and multiculturalism, globalism, feminism, environmentalism, and preoccupation with LGBT rights' (2021, p. 455).

Cleavage theory explains the emergence of such parties as driven by the need to represent these new social conflicts in party politics (Hooghe et al., 2002). According to Norris and Inglehart (2019), the rise of right-wing parties is a reaction to the increasing liberalisation of Western societies and the desire to create parties that firmly oppose mainstream politics on cultural grounds. Challenging the right-left cleavage in party politics, voters reject the growing openness of nation-state politics, society, and the economy. These voters oppose liberal elites and their projects, especially the European Union, both economically and culturally. Against this background, we derive the following hypothesis on how support for democratic values is structured in relation to the radical right vote:

*H3: Radical-right voters will be less supportive of liberal democratic values than voters of other parties.*

It is worth noting, again, that the strength of this tenet varies by country. Recent research suggests that the new cleavage has not succeeded in displacing the old left-right positioning of parties equally in all European countries (Hutter et al., 2018; Van der Brug & van Spanje, 2009). Our study contributes to this debate by taking country differences into account.

### **2.4. Media consumption**

Finally, and in the context of what Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) call 'disrupted public spheres,' we need to consider how the shift from traditional media to social media has fundamentally transformed the public sphere in Europe, significantly influencing



national identity, immigration attitudes, and the rise of radical-right vote. Well-functioning democracies are held together by a unitary public sphere facilitated by traditional media, which provide a shared platform for news and information, and exchange of opinions on controversial issues. While traditional media served by professional journalism continues to guarantee the diversity of political views and plural opinion exchanges across political camps, the online and social media platforms often constitute closed information worlds that lack intermediaries to moderate the diversity of opinions. It is often argued that social media's algorithm-based design fosters echo chambers and filter bubbles, where individual views are more likely to be reinforced than challenged (Levy & Razin, 2020). This could possibly lead to a strengthening of ideological positions and reinforcement of preexisting beliefs, such as extreme stances on nationalism or immigration, as users engage primarily with content that validates these sentiments.

Another important transformation in the wake of social media has been the normalisation and mainstreaming of the post World War II taboos of nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and antisemitic expressions (Wodak, 2015). In comparison with non-users, social media users are more exposed to hate speech, defamation, and anti-gender discourses due to a link between misogyny and online cultures, and are more likely to perceive immigration as a symbolic threat (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ging & Siapera, 2018). Social media mechanisms driving this trend are the reduced gatekeeping capacity of traditional media, which filtered out such content, and the rise of media consumers as media producers, which has enabled individuals who felt marginalised within democratic setups to expand the boundaries of acceptable speech and propagate anxieties about national security, hostility and hate speech against foreigners, and a strong 'our nation first' policy (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Consequently, social media act as fertile grounds for those who hold nationalistic sentiments, view immigration as a threat and support radical parties, since these marginalised groups now have platforms to gain visibility for their narratives, find like-minded individuals, and organise communities that challenge the EU's democratic value consensus. This amplification effect on existing cleavages is crucial for understanding how social media influences democratic value orientation and shapes real-world political actions and behaviours, such as voting and political mobilisations.

Thus, drawing on existing studies, and building on our previous hypotheses on the link between the cleavage and the democratic values, we formulate the following hypothesis on the amplifying role of digital communication for these dynamics:

*H4: The negative association between exclusive national identity, opposition to migration or radical right vote and support for democratic values, will be stronger among the political users of social media.*

### 3. Methods and data

This study aims to understand how democratic value beliefs relate to the transnational cleavage in European politics, operationalised by the character of national identity, attitudes towards immigration, and voting behaviour. The main question of the study is to what extent the emerging transnational cleavage structures democratic values in European societies. To address this question, we first map democratic values on our three

cleavage indicators. We then test whether the associations observed descriptively hold when controlling for a number of relevant socio-economic variables, and whether social media use moderates these associative relationships.

Our study tests cleavage theory for six European nations (France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Poland and Spain). These countries were carefully selected to enhance the external validity of our findings and represent a diverse cross-section of Europe. The selection criteria included geographic diversity, varying political cultures, levels of economic and social development, cultural values, and the strength of radical right parties. We included countries from different regions of Europe – Western (France, Germany), Southern (Italy, Spain), and Central (Poland), as well as a representative from the North-Western region (Ireland). This geographical variation ensures that our findings are not region-specific but have broader applicability. While Poland is the sole representative of Central Europe, it provides critical insights due to its unique political landscape and strength of the radical right, which was still in ruling government until the last election of 2023. The countries also exhibit different levels of economic and social development. For instance, Germany, France and Ireland are among the more economically developed nations in the EU, whereas Poland represents a more emerging economy, while Spain is a more affluent country where the Eurozone crisis has had a particularly devastating impact. This variation allows us to introduce the variation in economic conditions, which could influence value polarisation and political behaviour. The presence and strength of radical right parties were highly important in our case selection. While countries like France and Italy have strong radical right movements, Ireland's lack of such a party offers a contrasting context. This inclusion helps us understand value polarisation across different political landscapes. We use the ValCon survey, an original survey of 12,000 individuals (N = 2,000 per country)<sup>2</sup> from these countries with questions exploring political value orientations, identification, migration attitudes, voting behaviour, and social media use (Díez Medrano et al. 2024).

### **3.1. Dependent variables: democratic values**

We select three key democratic values related to the foundational values of the European Union: gender equality, rule of law, and freedom of speech. For each of these values, we include an item in our survey which has been used in previous research to operationalise the value. These items translate the abstract concepts of democratic values into concrete assertions that survey respondents can evaluate and express their beliefs. While multidimensional measures were initially considered, these single items were selected due to their theoretical salience and reliability as standalone indicators. We acknowledge that these choices may not capture the full complexity of the values but argue that they represent core constructs recognised in the literature. For each item we recode responses into three categories: 'Support,' 'Oppose,' and 'Don't know':

For *Gender equality*, the statement reads 'Women should be treated equally in the labour market.' Gender equality as a value encompasses many dimensions (e.g. education, politics, family roles). This question narrows the scope to the labour market, a critical area where gender disparities are often evident, such as in wages, hiring, promotion, and workplace rights. Moreover, by focusing on the labour market, the question captures a tangible

and widely understood aspect of gender equality. In terms of our underlying model of value pluralism, this item captures the traditionalist-modernist axis of value conflicts.

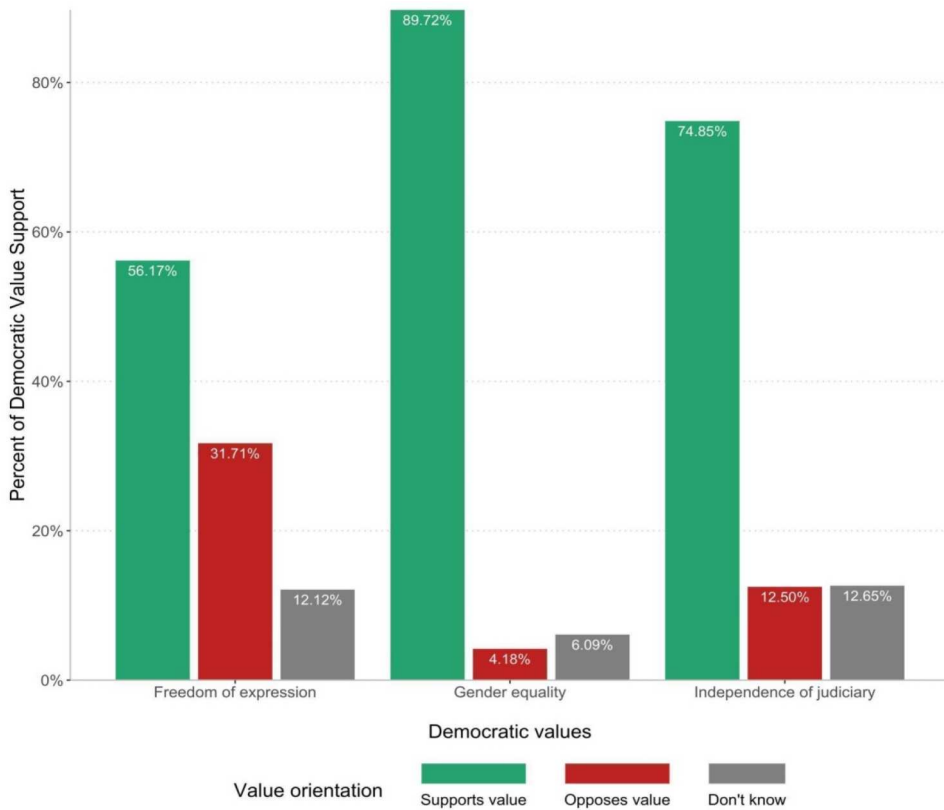
On *Independence of judiciary*, the statement reads ‘Judges should be appointed and be able to decide without interference from the government.’ While judicial independence is an abstract principle of the rule of law, the question translates this value into two specific dimensions which can be weighed by the respondent. On the other hand, the appointment process, as judicial appointment without undue government influence reflects institutional independence at the selection stage and the ability to decide cases free from government interference captures the functional independence of the judiciary. Measuring attitudes toward this principle provides insight into support for broader democratic values, such as checks and balances and the separation of powers. Since law is defined in a universal way – especially in the EU, where democratic norms are shared – we assume that the rule of law is cosmopolitan. Therefore, this item approximates the communitarian–cosmopolitan axis of the value conflict in the way in which legal restrictions on popular (national) sovereignty are accepted or not.

For *Freedom of expression*, the statement reads ‘There should be no limits to what people and the press can say in public.’ This survey question operationalises freedom of speech by presenting a concrete, measurable, and normatively charged assertion. It assesses whether individuals endorse unrestricted expression for both private citizens and the press. In terms of our underlying model of value pluralism, this item comes closest to the liberal–illiberal–authoritarian axis of value conflict.

We plot the results for the three selected value items (Figure 1) and find that support for *gender equality* is the highest in our sample, with nearly 90 per cent of respondents indicating their support for women’s equality in the labour market. Only a minority (4 per cent) opposes the value, and approximately 6 per cent say that they are unsure about their opinion (Don’t know – DK). Respondents also show strong support for the value *independence of the judiciary*, with nearly 75 per cent of participants agreeing that judges should be appointed and make decisions without interference from the government. Approximately 12 per cent each oppose this idea or remain undecided. *Freedom of expression* is the least supported value, with only some 56 per cent of the respondents willing to remove all restrictions on what people and the press can say in public. Nearly one in three respondents (32 per cent) support restrictions on freedom of expression, while about 12 per cent remain unsure. Therefore, we observe a clear democratic consensus on gender equality and the independence of the judiciary, and respondents in the six countries are somewhat more divided about the value of free speech, with a majority still supportive of the value.

### 3.2. Independent variables

The first indicator of transnational cleavage, *Identity*, is measured by the survey question: ‘Do you see yourself as ... ? 1. Only [NATIONAL] 2. [NATIONAL] first and then European 3. European first and then [NATIONAL] 4. Only European.’ The last three categories are merged to form the inclusive identification category, so that individuals can be distinguished on the basis of two main identification categories: ‘inclusive identity’ (0) and ‘exclusive national identity’ (1).



**Figure 1.** Support for and opposition to democratic values in six European countries. Data: ValCon survey, 2021.  $N = 12,000$ .

The second indicator of the cleavage, attitudes towards *Immigration* is operationalised with a dummy variable that measures people's responses to the following survey item: 'Ethnic/Religious minorities and immigrants are destroying all that is good about our country.' If an individual responds as 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree,' they are coded as opposing immigration (1) while those who reply with a 'Strongly disagree' or 'Disagree' are coded as supporting it (0).

Finally, voting for a *Radical right party* (RRP), is measured with a dummy variable based on the question: 'If next week a national election to the [COUNTRY] took place, which party would you vote for?' Those who said they would vote for a radical right party<sup>3</sup> are coded as (1) and those who would vote for any other party are coded as (0).

While scholars have used all of these indicators to assess the meaning and impact of the transnational cleavage, it is important to note that they are not interchangeable. We report the descriptive results for the different indicators of the cleavage (Table 1). Exclusive national identity emerges as the most widespread (28.8 per cent of respondents self-identify as exclusively national). However, only half as many individuals admit to supporting radical right parties (14.7 per cent). Opposition to immigration (24.4 per cent) is slightly less widespread than exclusive national identity, but much more common than voting for a RRP.

**Table 1.** Distribution of respondents across three transnational cleavage indicators.

| Cleavage indicators         | Overall (N = 12.000) |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Identification</b>       |                      |
| <b>Exclusive</b>            | <b>3.452 (28.8%)</b> |
| Inclusive                   | 7.942 (66.2%)        |
| Don't know                  | 606 (5.1%)           |
| <b>Immigration attitude</b> |                      |
| <b>Against</b>              | <b>2.959 (24.7%)</b> |
| In favour                   | 7.578 (63.2%)        |
| Don't know                  | 1.463 (12.2%)        |
| <b>RRP vote</b>             |                      |
| <b>Yes</b>                  | <b>1.759 (14.7%)</b> |
| No                          | 7.727 (64.4%)        |
| Don't know                  | 2.514 (21%)          |

Data: ValCon survey, 2021.

Finally, *social media use* is measured using a categorical variable that distinguishes ‘political users’ from ‘non-political users’ and ‘non-users’ of social media on the four most popular social media platforms: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Users and non-users are identified based on the frequency with which they accessed any of these platforms in the month prior to the survey. Individuals who accessed any of the social media platforms daily, almost daily, two or three times a week, once a week, two or three times a month, or once a month are coded as ‘users.’ Those who had never used these platforms or had not accessed them in the last one month are coded as ‘non-users.’ Once we have coded the users and non-users of social media based on the frequency of usage in the last month,<sup>4</sup> we further distinguish social media users as political and non-political if, in addition to accessing social media platforms, they also started political discussions and had political arguments on these platforms (see the Appendix for the full phrasing of these items). This operationalisation helps us to more clearly identify and analyse the behaviours and impacts of politically engaged users compared to those who use social media for other reasons. Following the arguments presented in the theoretical framework, the type of use is crucial because political engagement on social media platforms directly influences the formation and reinforcement of political identities and attitudes. For instance, those who actively engage in political discussions are more likely to encounter and spread nationalist and anti-immigration information than those who are active on social media but do not participate in political discussions.

Descriptively, the use of social media for political purposes is more closely associated with an exclusive national identity, anti-immigration attitudes, and voting for the RRP than non-political social media use (see Table 2). For example, among respondents using social media for political purposes, opposition to immigration is significantly higher (29.6 per cent) than among non-political users of social media (20.6 per cent). Similarly, among political users of social media, 18 per cent are RRP voters and only 13 per cent indicate they vote for these kinds of parties among non-political users and even less, 11 per cent, among non-users. These results indicate that political social media use could indeed be considered a relevant intervening variable for the alignment between cleavage indicators and democratic values.

**Table 2.** Transnational cleavage indicators by type of social media use.

|                              | User<br>Political user<br>(N = 4215) | User<br>Non-political user<br>(N = 5933) | Non-user<br>(N = 1828) | Overall<br>(N = 12000) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------------------|
| Identification               |                                      |  |                        |                        |
| <b>Exclusive national</b>    | <b>1305 (31%)</b>                    | <b>1542 (26%)</b>                        | <b>602 (32.9%)</b>     | <b>3452 (28.8%)</b>    |
| Inclusive national           | 2721 (64.6%)                         | 4071 (68.6%)                             | 1132 (61.9%)           | 7942 (66.2%)           |
| Don't know                   | 189 (4.5%)                           | 320 (5.4%)                               | 94 (5.1%)              | 606 (5.1%)             |
| Immigration attitude         |                                      |  |                        |                        |
| <b>Opposition</b>            | <b>1248 (29.6%)</b>                  | <b>1224 (20.6%)</b>                      | <b>483 (26.4%)</b>     | <b>2959 (24.7%)</b>    |
| Support                      | 2607 (61.9%)                         | 3974 (67%)                               | 984 (53.8%)            | 7578 (63.2%)           |
| Don't know                   | 360 (8.5%)                           | 735 (12.4%)                              | 361 (19.7%)            | 1463 (12.2%)           |
| Vote for radical-right party |                                      |  |                        |                        |
| <b>Yes</b>                   | <b>760 (18%)</b>                     | <b>782 (13.2%)</b>                       | <b>212 (11.6%)</b>     | <b>1759 (14.7%)</b>    |
| No                           | 2711 (64.3%)                         | 3858 (65%)                               | 1144 (62.6%)           | 7727 (64.4%)           |
| Don't know                   | 744 (17.7%)                          | 1293 (21.8%)                             | 472 (25.8%)            | 2514 (21%)             |

Data: ValCon survey, 2021.

### 3.3. Analytical strategy

To investigate the relationship between citizens' democratic value orientations and the transnational cleavage, we first look at the value differences on both sides of the divide. For this purpose, we compare the share of support for the three value items across the three cleavage indicators.

In a second step, we develop a set of logit models to verify whether the observed differences between groups relate to the cleavage and are not simply due to the compositional effects across the groups. We control for gender, age, education level, type of habitat (urban-rural), negative perception of economic situation, and use of traditional (TV and radio, print newspapers, and digital news outlets) and social media, distinguishing between political/non-political and non-users with respect to social media (see Table A2 in the Appendix for a summary of variables).

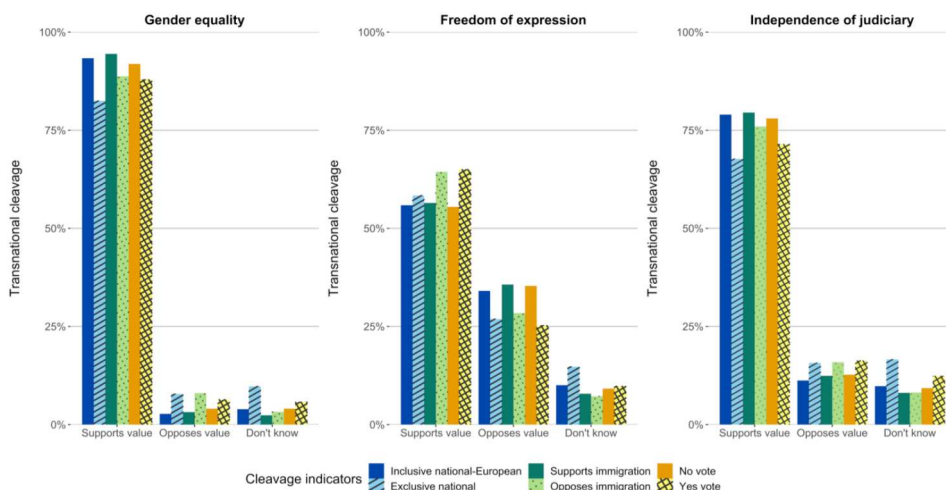
All three indicators of the cleavage are introduced into the models simultaneously. Although they aim to capture the same concept of transnational cleavage, the fact that these indicators do not highly correlate suggests that we can introduce them as independent variables in the same model.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, all models include country-fixed effects to control for contextual factors associated with cross-country differences.

Finally, to test the moderating effect of social media use, we conduct interactions between political and non-political use of social media and the indicators of the transnational cleavage.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Descriptive analysis

Our descriptive analysis reveals a nuanced differentiation in value orientations based on the transnational cleavage, rather than strictly polarised camps (Figure 2). We find an overall prevailing support for gender equality and the independence of the judiciary, but we also see that such support aligns even more strongly with the cosmopolitan side of the cleavage. Freedom of expression, on the other hand, is supported to a greater extent by those located on the communitarian side of the cleavage, while cosmopolitans are split on the issue.



**Figure 2.** Support for democratic values across the three transnational cleavage indicators. Data: ValCon survey, 2021.

In line with our procedural understanding of value pluralism, therefore, we encounter significant differences in how democratic values align with the transnational cleavage. The value of freedom of expression is reclaimed here by those who are further removed from the democratic value consensus. This could be a way to challenge other democratic values, such as reclaiming freedom of expression to challenge consensus on gender equality or spread anti-immigrant discourses.

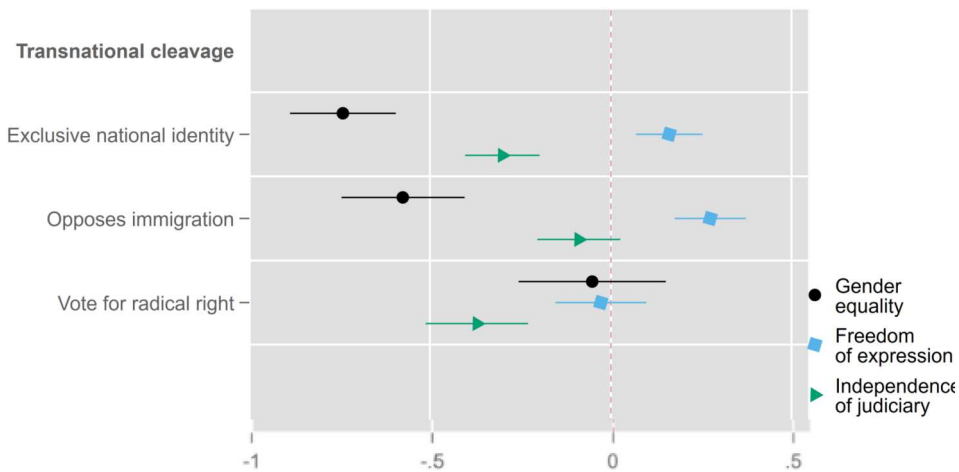
However, not all three indicators of the transnational cleavage are equally related to value polarisation in European societies. Our findings indicate that exclusive nationals contest the values of gender equality and independence of judiciary, while differences vis-à-vis these two values among immigration supporters and opposers and RRP voters and non-voters are relatively narrow. For the value of freedom of speech, RRP vote and opposition to immigration are the key indicators of democratic value polarisation (Figure 2).

#### 4.2. Regression analysis

The results of logit models (Figure 3) further confirm the findings of our descriptive analysis. Support for /opposition to democratic values do not fall neatly along either side of the transnational cleavage fault line. Rather than being locked into polarised clusters of liberal and conservative values, people hold differentiated attitudes towards values when mapped on to the three indicators of the cleavage.

The most widely supported of the three values, *Gender equality*, is also the one that turns out to be the most strongly contested on the demarcation side of the cleavage: exclusive identifiers and those opposed to immigration are significantly more likely to oppose gender equality than those on the integration side of the cleavage. Voting for a RRP, on the other hand, is not significantly correlated with opposition to gender equality. While this runs counter to our theoretical expectations, the finding is consistent with a growing body of work on 'sexually-modern nativists' that highlights differentiated levels





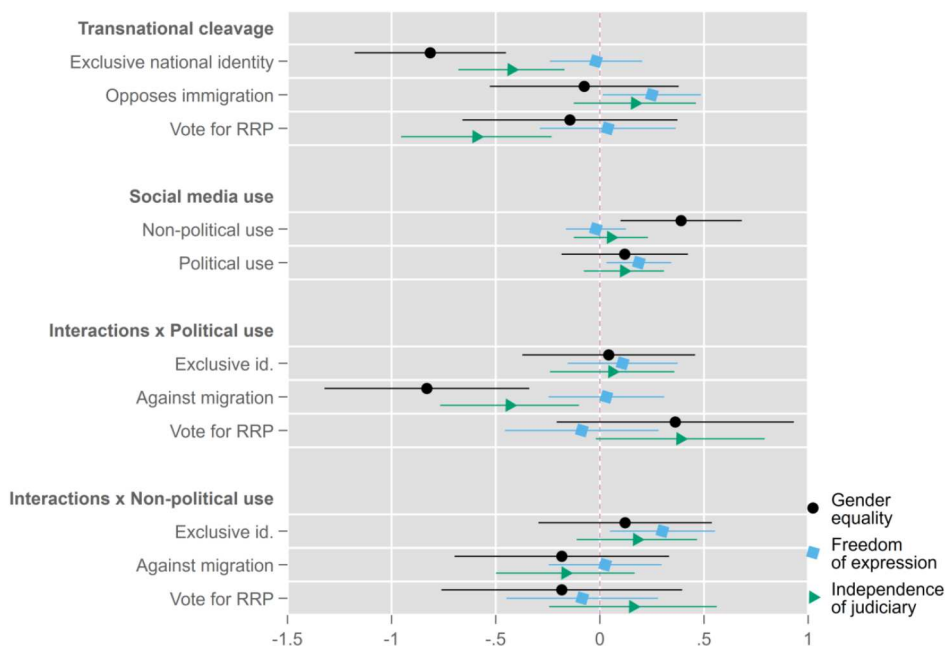
**Figure 3.** Coefficients from logit models of democratic value support. Note: DV: Support for the value in question.  $N = 11,872$ . All models with country FE and control variables included, coefficients not shown. All variables are standardised to compare the magnitude of effects across variables. Tables with full models can be found in the Appendix. Data: ValCon survey, 2021.

of values support among radical-right voters (Farris, 2017; Spierings et al., 2017). This nascent body of research shows that the most important factors affecting voting for radical-right parties are immigration and nationalism, while the gap between GAL-TAN voters on issues of gender equality has actually narrowed over the years (Lancaster, 2019). Moreover, when gender equality does seem to play role for radical-right parties, it is often to support anti-immigrant and anti-Islam discourses (Akkerman, 2015).

Support for the value *Independence of judiciary* aligns with the cleavage rather consistently. The negative coefficients indicate that exclusive national identification, opposition to immigration, and voting for a radical-right party are all associated with a decrease in support for judiciary independence (although the effect of opposition to immigration is not statistically significant).

Finally, *Freedom of expression* has the most differentiated pattern of support. For this value, the coefficients are positive for exclusive identifiers and those opposed to immigration, in sharp contrast to the (negative) coefficients obtained for the other two democratic values: gender equality and judiciary independence. Our findings indicate that exclusive nationals and those opposed to migration are significantly more likely to support the value of freedom of expression than inclusive nationals and those in favour of immigration, with the positive effect of opposition to immigration slightly stronger than that of identity. Again, we find no effect in the case of RPP voters.

These results point to a differentiated support and the lack of a clear-cut line of polarisation over democratic values along the lines of the transnational cleavage. In particular, freedom of expression is supported more by those with exclusive national identities and those opposed to immigration, even though this value is typically seen as a liberal democratic value. This finding, while contrary to our theoretical expectations, seems in line with how scholars, as well as journalists, activists, politicians, and the general public decry the growing appropriation of freedom of expression by exclusionary nationalists and



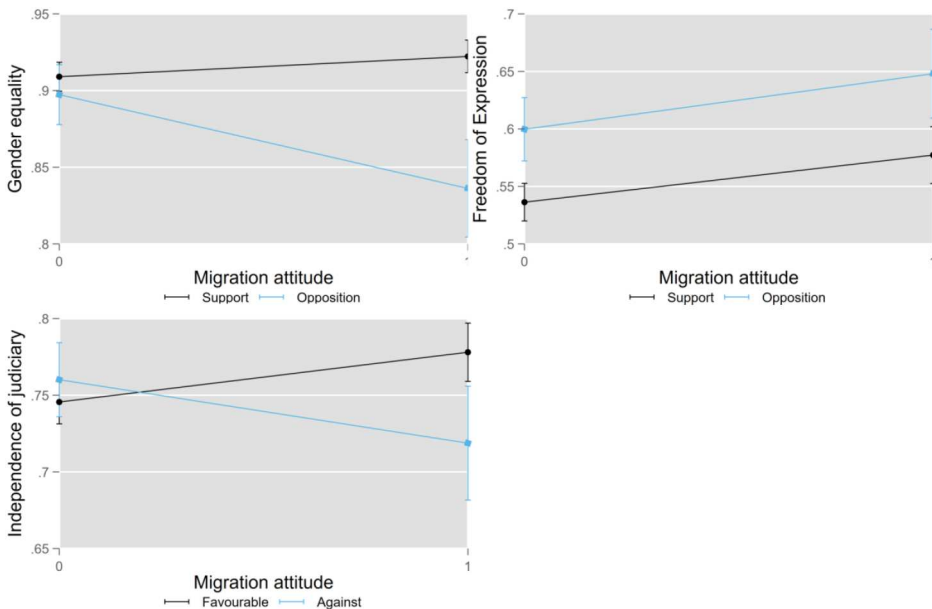
**Figure 4.** Coefficients from logit models of democratic value support, models with interactions. Note: Coefficients from logit models graphed with coefplot. DV: Support for the value in question.  $N = 11,872$ . All models with country FE and control variables from the previous model included, coefficients not shown. All variables are standardised to compare the magnitude of effects across variables. Tables with full models can be found in the Appendix.

anti-immigration political actors and supporters. The value is increasingly (mis)used as a shield to normalise political discourse built around nationalism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia (Wodak, 2021). The notion of political correctness in this context has also been criticised by RRPp, which claim such restrictions on speech are devised by the political left to impose their ideology on a ‘silent majority’ and stifle political opinion (Sparrow, 2002).

#### 4.3. The mediating role of social media?

Finally, we turn to the models that test for possible interactions between social media use and transnational cleavage indicators (main results in Figure 4, full regression tables in the Annex). We aim to check whether support for the three democratic values is structured differently along the cleavage for users and non-users of social media (Figure 4). In other words, we are interested in testing whether the degree of alignment between the cleavage and democratic values could vary for different types of users of social media. We find two sets of interaction terms that yield significant results.

Firstly, *political use of social media* among those who oppose immigration is associated with stronger value polarisation along the cleavage lines (compared to non-users). Among political users of social media, those who oppose immigration are also significantly less likely to endorse the value of *Gender equality* (83 per cent) than those who support immigration (92 per cent). This translates into a 9 percentage point decrease in



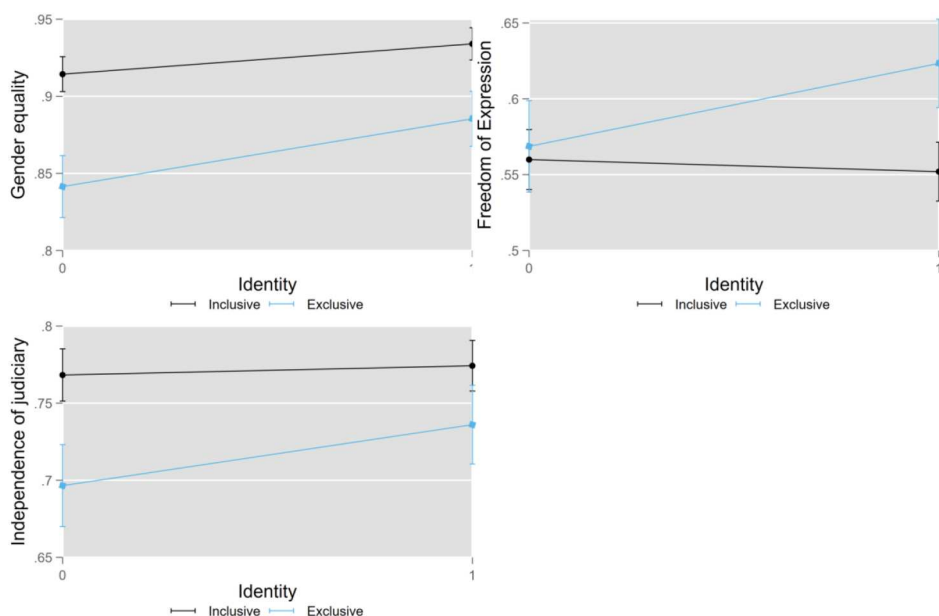
**Figure 5.** Predictive margins of interaction between political use of social media and views on migration, with 95% CIs. Note: Calculated from models in Figure 4. Political use of social media: 0 – Non-user, 1 – Political user.

the likelihood of supporting gender equality among politically active social media users, depending on their attitude towards immigration (Figure 5 graphs the detail of this interaction). For the *Independence of judiciary*, the difference is smaller (6 percentage points) but also statistically significant and similarly mediated by a stronger value polarisation along the transnational cleavage among political social media users (Figure 5).

Second, the *non-political use of social media* among exclusive identifiers also reinforces value polarisation around the freedom of expression (Figure 6). The probability that one will endorse the value of *freedom of expression* is similar for non-users of social media (approximately 55 per cent), regardless of the character of their national identity. Among non-political users of social media, however, exclusive identifiers have a significantly higher probability (62 per cent) of endorsing this value – a difference of 7 percentage points. These findings suggest that value polarisation could also increase among non-political users of social media, but only for a specific aspect of democratic beliefs: freedom of speech.

Finally, it should be noted that when we account for these interactions, some differences among the key variables of interest come to light (Figure 4). The association between migration opposition and contestation of *Gender equality* becomes insignificant. Moreover, the association between *Freedom of expression* and exclusive national identity disappears. These results suggest that the observed alignment between democratic values and the transnational cleavage, could be somewhat more prevalent among social media users, and, thus driving the previously observed main effects.

The above findings reveal partial support for our H4, pointing to evidence of a stronger alignment of cleavage indicators with democratic values among those who use social



**Figure 6.** Predictive margins of interaction between social media non-political use and identity, with 95% CIs. Note: Calculated from models in Figure 4. Use of social media: 0 – Non user, 1 – User, Non-political.

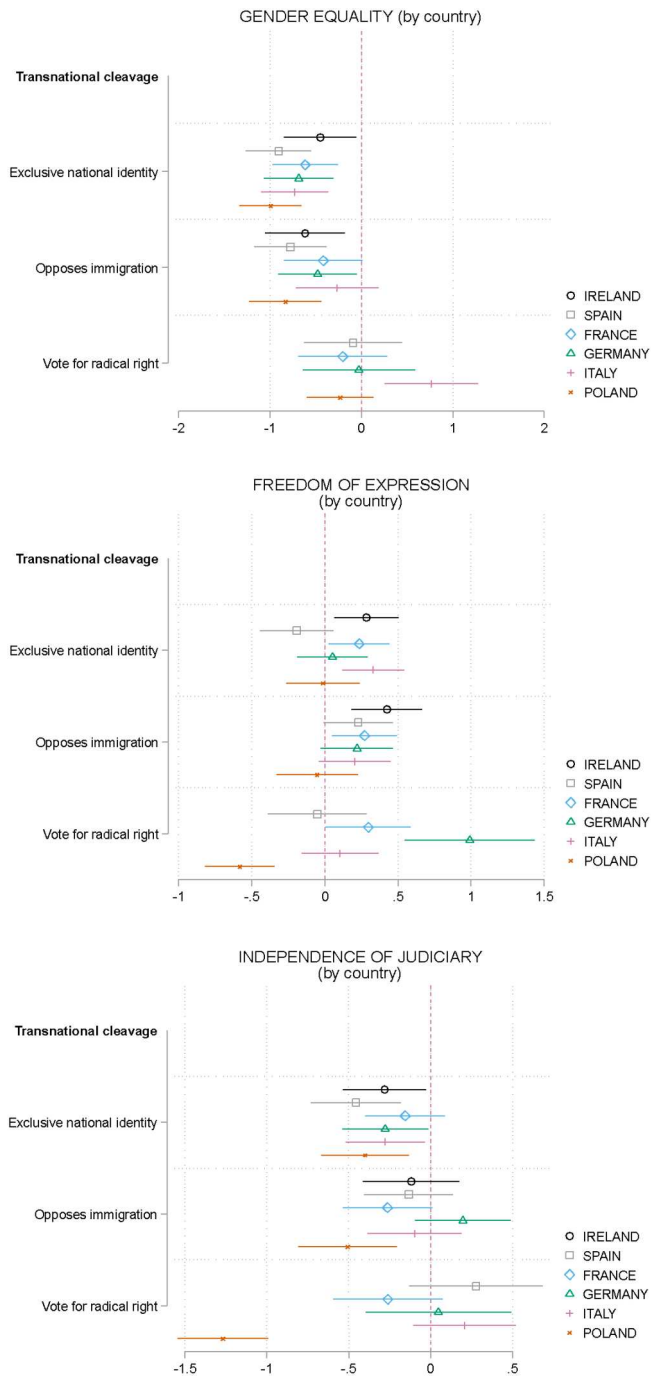
media politically when compared to non-users. Attitudes towards migration and the character of identity (but not RPP vote) become more relevant to understanding differences in the embrace of democratic values among political users of social media. However, because these effects vary across cleavage indicators, type of democratic value, and type of social media use (political/non-political), they need to be tested in future research to ensure a robust causal identification.

#### 4.4. Robustness checks: country effects

Finally, we replicate our models for each country in our survey to check whether (a) the patterns observed in the pooled models hold for the individual countries, or whether (b) we can observe heterogeneous context-specific effects. The key results of these regressions are plotted below (Figure 7, full regression tables can be found in the Appendix).

We observe similar patterns of association between the three values and the transnational cleavage indicators in the country models, confirming the results of our pooled analyses (Figure 7). Overall, exclusionary national identity and opposition to immigration tend to be negatively associated with individual support for gender equality and judiciary independence and positively with support for freedom of expression. However, some significant contextual differences between the countries can be detected.

The most notable cross-country differences emerge with reference to the link between *Radical right party vote* and the embrace of democratic values. RRP vote does not correlate with the embrace of *Gender equality* value outside of Italy, where a positive association



**Figure 7.** Coefficients from single-country models. Note: Coefficients from logit models graphed with coefplot. DV: Support for the value in question. All models include all control variables from the pooled model, coefficients not shown. All variables are standardised to compare the magnitude of effects across variables. Tables with full models can be found in the Appendix.

with support for gender equality can be observed. We find more pronounced country-specific sub-trends for the other two values. In Germany, the RRP vote has a remarkably strong positive association with the value of *Freedom of expression*. This seems logical, given the repeated attempts of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party to redefine the country's hate speech laws (including proposals to explicitly protect local Germans from racism) and alter how freedom is interpreted in key national discourses (Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022). Similarly, given the strong politicisation of the issue of *Independence of judiciary*, and a very critical stance on EU-wide standards in this respect articulated by Poland's ruling Law and Justice (Pech et al., 2021), it is unsurprising that voting for the party correlates with significantly lower level of support for the value.

Beyond the specificities of the RRP vote we find a couple more outliers. In Spain, exclusionary national identity is linked to lower levels of support for *Freedom of expression*, against the overall trend observed in our study. The latter could be potentially linked to the debates surrounding the Catalan conflict, where exclusive Spanish identity has become associated with diminished support for the freedom to express different political views on this issue. Finally, opposition to immigration is also linked to greater support for judicial independence in Germany.

Overall, we find that identity and migration attitudes provide a more reliable way to capture the association between the cleavage and democratic values across countries than vote. The results of the RPP vote illustrate how the radical right utilises support for or opposition to democratic values to mobilise voters. In so doing, they respond to nationally embedded understandings of these values and use them to different extents, depending on their specific electoral strategy.

## 5. Discussion: new cleavage and new value divide or persisting consensus on values?

Europe is seemingly experiencing a polarisation over democratic values. In this paper, we ask to what extent these value conflicts are related to the transnational cleavage as identified in recent scholarship on the reactions to globalisation and European integration. Researchers have identified several potential driving factors of the new cleavage and we put them to a test with a view on democratic value polarisation. Our empirical findings suggest that current transnational cleavage theory can be qualified in important respects. Instead of a clear-cut picture of value polarisation in Europe, we observe a nuanced and complex landscape of value differentiation and contestation. We do not find evidence of the population grouped into two antagonistic camps of either opponents or supporters of liberal-democratic values. In the six European countries analysed in this article, a general consensus regarding democratic values persists. Their populations generally embrace liberal-democratic values, expressing the greatest support for gender equality, followed by the independence of the judiciary and then freedom of expression. In no country, we find, does a majority or significant minority oppose any of these key values or express anti-liberal and authoritarian attitudes.

Secondly, these core values are not supported or opposed as a package, but rather contested within the context of thematically and culturally contextualised debates and potentially shifting alliances. We also find some differences between the six countries,

underscoring the unique political constellations that shape the formation of the political right in each of them. For example, the correlation between right-wing voting and endorsement of the value of free speech in Germany can be attributed to radical right mobilising strategy during the pandemic. However, it is not exclusive to Germany as we also find a similar effect in France. Considering this mixed picture, we reject our hypothesis (H1) that assumes a clear-cut polarisation of value attachment between inclusive cosmopolitans and exclusive nationalists and we qualify H2 and H3 to state that radical-right voters and strong opponents of immigration indeed tend to be less supportive of liberal values than voters of other parties and people with a positive attitude towards immigrants, but that (depending on the context) they may also embrace selected values – or even utilise them as part of their mobilisation efforts.

Lastly, we find some evidence of a stronger alignment of cleavage indicators and democratic values among active social media users. Intensive political use of social media correlates with stronger alignment between the cleavage and support for gender equality and independence of judiciary. These findings partly support H4. However, this association only applies to selected values and individuals who already hold pre-established anti-immigration attitudes when they enter social media platforms. Their (greater) political engagement on social media is, it would seem, partly motivated by their illiberal worldviews. Social media platforms then could reinforce these views through selective exposure and echo chambers, where users predominantly encounter content that aligns with and further entrenches their beliefs. As a result, we can hypothesise that users who initially enter social media with anti-immigration attitudes are likely to become more entrenched in these views over time. This feedback loop plays a crucial role in solidifying their support for extreme positions and further polarising democratic values. From this perspective, social media does not merely reflect existing political divides; it actively shapes and deepens them by reinforcing and amplifying specific ideological positions. Our findings are in line with recent scholarship studying content prioritisation mechanisms on social media, which shows that algorithms not only foster like-minded information environments, but also promote polarising and emotionally charged posts (Brady et al., 2017; Milli et al., 2023) rather than diverse and balanced content to boost user engagement and financial profits, attracting those who are most likely to seek these platforms to gain validation and legitimacy for their marginalised political positions through controversial content such as biased or fake narratives.

Finally, our findings highlight the new mobilisation strategies of populist right parties. These actors do not necessarily seek to foment confrontation through a radical rejection of liberal values; rather, they often instrumentalise different value attachments in their political campaign efforts or remain ambivalent in their interpretation of these values and their different contexts of application. Scholars have noted how radical-right parties have managed to ‘shake off’ the stigmatisation associated with their anti-pluralistic and illiberal platforms, by strategically employing liberal discourse and claiming to be the defenders of liberal democratic values (Griffin, 2000; Halikiopoulou et al., 2013). Their goal is to (re)interpret liberal democratic values and reshape their meanings to align with the agendas of the radical right (Allchorn, 2020). In this sense, we find that radical right parties show flexibility in their ability to alternately question and embrace liberal-democratic values. Our survey data suggest that this flexible approach towards value



differentiation is not just a strategy designed to shed stigmatisation, but could be also partly a response to the preferences of their voters.

Extrapolating these findings, one can speak of a new trend towards 'libertarian authoritarianism' (Amlinger & Nachtwey, 2022; Lütjen, 2022). In this trend, anti-liberal forces increasingly adapt to liberal values (like freedom of expression) and incorporate them as central demands in their political repertoires. However, it is important to note that such 'mainstreaming' of right-wing politics is highly contingent on the specific country and issue at hand (Mudde, 2019; Wodak, 2021). In general, however, we can observe further value differentiation arising from these selective mainstreaming strategies. In particular, radical-right actors strongly advocate for freedom of expression as an open invitation to voice non-pluralistic or even xenophobic attitudes, justify the exclusion of immigrants, and provoke or insult others on the basis of their political views (Pilkington, 2016).

Our study shows that this form of right-extremist 'libertarian authoritarianism' resonates with those sectors of the population who embrace values of individual freedom while being highly intolerant towards migrants and minorities. This resonance might be partly explained as an effect of the pandemic, during which our survey responses were collected (Winter/Spring 2021) accounting for the salience of populist mobilisations around the value of freedom in response to the concerns and fears of citizens, many of them still isolated in lockdown.

Finally, the number of respondents who consistently reject liberal values while being exclusively nationalistic, anti-immigrant, and right-wing extremist is very small. Rather than this small extremist minority, what should be troubling is the more nuanced field of contestation of liberal values that spans the political party spectrum and the media sphere and is populated by shifting alliances of groups that may have different motivations and pursue different strategies to reject some values and embrace others.

## 6. Conclusions

Our study offers important insights into the structuring of a transnational cleavage, which recent scholarship has approached by dividing populations politically in two opposing camps of nationalists and cosmopolitans. In addressing this new divide, we need to ask critically whether we are dealing with long-lasting formations (Enyedi, 2008) characterised by a combination of social-structural, ideological/normative and behavioural/organisational divisions (Bartolini, 2005). Recent scholarship has moved away from identifying cleavages via structural criteria, focusing instead on more issue-specific divisions. This scholarship suggests that the cultural or identitarian preferences of electorates (for example, their views on migration or on European integration) cause them to align on either side of these divisions (Green-Pedersen, 2019). To be able to see them as part of a broader cleavage, such issue-specific contestations would need to be driven not only by shifting interest constellations, but also by a deeper individual attachment to values and identities.

Our data does not support the theory that a new cleavage in the form of a new cultural divide has consolidated in the population at large. Value conflicts do not automatically translate into new social and political cleavages, but rather point to shifting alliances and context-bound, issue-specific constellations of actors. As we have stressed throughout this paper, a pluralist understanding of democratic values prevails – one that is highly

tolerant to contestation. Conflicts over values are fought among individuals, which makes group-specific value attachment in the defence of particular interpretation of values unlikely or unstable. In other words, this basic condition for the emergence of social cleavages and its translation into political mobilisation remains unmet. Conflicts around core democratic values emerge from complex value attachment patterns among different populations, influenced by generational, gender, class or national differences. These factors carry more weight than clear, nationally-transnationally aligned identity markers.

In the absence of a clear division between supporters and opponents of liberal-democratic values, it is not appropriate to speak of affective polarisation and deep social divisions within European societies (in contrast to the United States) (Hobolt et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Rather than a new social cleavage polarising European democracies, our data clearly show that authoritarian attitudes remain marginal, and that radicalisation primarily coalesces around specific political fringe themes, sometimes artificially amplified by the digital media. Moreover, the clear differences between the countries we studied indicate that instead of uniform new cleavages in Europe, we are dealing with issue- and country-specific conflicts that are making their way into the political contest differently. Social media platforms, with their algorithm-driven, emotionally charged content are playing a significant role in this amplification by creating feedback loops that reinforce existing beliefs and drive political engagement around fringe themes.

Finally, it must be noted that while our study looks at six European countries, selected to maximise the amount of difference in terms of historical legacies, economic development or presence of radical right, they are not representative of the whole of Europe. Therefore, future studies will further explore the validity of our findings for the whole of Europe, or for specific regions, such as the Nordic countries, missing from our sample and possible outliers in terms of the alignment between democratic values and the new transnational cleavage. In spite of such limits to our research, we hope to show that, instead of seeking an encompassing new cleavage line that divides European democratic societies, future research should focus on examining persisting country differences and context-dependent variables.

## Notes

1. Project "Value Conflicts in a Differentiated Europe" - ValCon (2020-2024), funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.
2. The ValConsurvey (Díez Medrano et al., 2024) was conducted by Ipsos, which interviewed a representative sample of the population aged 18–65 in each of the six countries from April to May 2021, using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) and Ipsos online panels. The sample is representative of each national population's distribution by age and gender. We use post-stratification weights to make sure the national samples are also representative in terms of education levels.
3. Radical right parties included are Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, the National Rally and *Debout la France* in France, *Lega Nord* and *Fratelli d'Italia* in Italy, VOX in Spain, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS – Law and Justice) and *Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość* (Confederation Liberty and Independence) in Poland.
4. We acknowledge that self-reported digital media use can differ from actual usage. Studies such as by Parry et al. (2021) highlight discrepancies between self-reported and logged digital media use, suggesting that self-reports may not always accurately reflect true usage patterns. These authors recommend combining self-reports with objective measures like

digital trace data to improve accuracy and provide a more comprehensive understanding of media use behaviours. Such approach could be indeed more precise in terms of the measuring the exact intensity of use. However, since our main interest is in a more general measure of political/non-political use of social media, we consider our approach to be robust and adding these methodologies beyond the scope of the current study.

5. To ensure that the results are not affected by multicollinearity problems, we also run a set of robustness checks adding the indicators separately to the models. The main results do not vary in these models.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The research developed for this paper has been generously funded by the Volkswagen Foundation in the framework of the project ValCon “Value conflicts in a differentiated Europe: The impact of digital media on value polarization” (2021–2024).

## ORCID

Aleksandra Sojka  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8031-6272>

Kavyanjali Kaushik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8612-0051>

Monika Eigmüller  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2065-0951>

Hans-Jörg Trenz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3479-7498>

## References

- Abou-Chadi, T., & Krause, W. (2018). The causal effect of radical right success on mainstream parties' policy positions: A regression discontinuity approach. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), 829–847. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123418000029>
- Ademmer, E., & Stöhr, T. (2019). The making of a new cleavage? Evidence from social media debates about migration. *Kiel Working Papers* 2140, Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW Kiel).
- Ahmed, S., Hsueh Hua Chen, V., Jaidka, K., Hooi, R., & Chib, A. (2021). Social media use and anti-immigrant attitudes: Evidence from a survey and automated linguistic analysis of Facebook posts. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 31(4), 276–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1929358>
- Akaliyski, P., Welzel, C., & Hien, J. (2022). A community of shared values? Dimensions and dynamics of cultural integration in the European Union. *Journal of European Integration*, 44(4), 569–590. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1956915>
- Akkerman, T. (2015). Gender and the radical right in Western Europe: A comparative analysis of policy agendas. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49(1–2), 37–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1023655>
- Akkerman, T., de Lange, S. L., & Rooduijn, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687988>
- Allchorn, W. (2020). Free speech defenses and the far right: The cases of Tommy Robinson, Geert Wilders and Milo Yiannopoulos. *EuropeNow*. <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/01/15/free-speech-defences-and-the-far-right-the-cases-of-tommy-robinson-geert-wilders-and-milo-yiannopoulos/>.
- Amlinger, C., & Nachtwey, O. (2022). *Gekränkte Freiheit. Aspekte des autoritären Liberalismus*. Suhrkamp. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315687988>
- Bartolini, S. (2005). *Restructuring Europe. Centre formation, system building and political structuring between the nation-state and the European Union*. Oxford University Press.

- Bartolini, S., & Mair, P. (1990). *Identity, competition and electoral availability: The stabilisation of European electorates 1885-1985*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, W. L., & Pfetsch, B. (2018). Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication*, 68(2), 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqx017>
- Birch, S. (2016). Our new voters: Brexit, political mobilisation and the emerging electoral cleavage. *Juncture*, 23(2), 107–110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12003>
- Bornschieer, S. (2010). The new cultural divide and the two-dimensional political space in Western Europe. *West European Politics*, 33(3), 419–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402381003654387>
- Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralised content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(28), 7313–7318. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1618923114>
- Brubaker, R. (2017). Between nationalism and civilizationism: The European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(8), 1191–1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>
- Cabezas, M. (2022). Silencing feminism? Gender and the rise of the nationalist far right in Spain. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 47(2), 319–345. <https://doi.org/10.1086/716858>
- De Koster, W., Achterberg, P., & van der Waal, J. (2013). The new right and the welfare state: The electoral relevance of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism in The Netherlands. *International Political Science Review*, 34(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512112455443>
- Deutsch, K. W., Burrell, S. A., & Kann, R. A. (2006). Political community and the North Atlantic area: International organization in the light of historical experience. In M. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (Ed.), *Debates on European integration* (pp. 68–86). Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Wilde, P., Koompans, R., Merkel, W., Strijbis, O., & Zürn, M. (2019). *The struggle over borders: Cosmopolitanism and communitarianism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Díaz-Lanchas, J., Sojka, A., & Di Pietro, F. (2021). Of losers and laggards: The interplay of material conditions and individual perceptions in the shaping of EU discontent. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3), 395–415. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsab022>
- Díez-Medrano, J., Sojka, A., Kaushik, K., Trenz, H.-J., Eigmüller, M., Verbalyte, M., & Wallaschek, S. (2024). Value Conflicts in a Differentiated Europe: The Impact of Digital Media on Value Polarisation in Europe (ValCon). GESIS, Cologne. ZA7747 Data file Version 1.0.0, <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14286>
- Eigmüller, M., & Trenz, H. J. (2020). Werte und Wertekonflikte in einer differenzierten EU. In A. Grimmel (Ed.), *Die neue Europäische Union: Zwischen Integration und Desintegration* (pp. 33–56). Nomos.
- Engler, S., & Weisstanner, D. (2020). Income inequality, status decline and support for the radical right. In R. Careja, P. Emmenegger, & N. Giger (Eds.), *In The European social model under pressure* (pp. 383–400). Wiesbaden.
- Enyedi, Z. (2008). The social and attitudinal basis of political parties. *Cleavage Politics Revisited. European Review*, 16(3), 287–304.
- Farris, S. R. (2017). *In the name of women's rights: The rise of femonationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Fernández, J. J., Eigmüller, M., & Börner, S. (2016). Domestic transnationalism and the formation of Pro-European sentiments. *European Union Politics*, 17(3), 457–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116516633536>
- Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (2018). Special issue on online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 515–524. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447345>
- Green-Pedersen, C. (2019). *The reshaping of west European party politics: Agenda-setting and party competition in comparative perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Griffin, R. (2000). Interregnum or endgame? The radical right in the 'postfascist' era. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5(2), 163–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713682938>
- Guth, J. L., & Nelsen, B. F. (2021). Party choice in Europe: Social cleavages and the rise of populist parties. *Party Politics*, 27(3), 453–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819853965>
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Polity Press.

- Hainmueller, J., & Hiscox, M. J. (2006). Learning to love globalization: Education and individual attitudes toward international trade. *International Organization*, 60(2), 469–498. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818306060140>
- Hakhverdian, A., van Elsas, E., van der Brug, W., & Kuhn, T. (2013). Euroscepticism and education: A longitudinal study of 12 EU member states, 1973–2010. *European Union Politics*, 14(4), 522–541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116513489779>
- Halikiopoulou, D., Mock, S., & Vasilopoulou, S. (2013). The Civic Zeitgeist: Nationalism and liberal values in the European radical right. *Nations and Nationalism*, 19(1), 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2012.00550.x>
- Hobolt, S. B., Leeper, T. J., & Tilley, J. (2020). Divided by the vote: Affective polarization in the wake of the Brexit Referendum. *British Journal of Political Science*, 51(4), 1476–1493. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125>
- Hooghe, L., Bakker, R., Brigevech, A., de Vries, C., Edwards, E., Marks, G., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M., & Vachudova, M. (2010). Reliability and validity of measuring party positions: The Chapel Hill expert surveys of 2002 and 2006. *European Journal of Political Research*, 49(5), 687–703. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01912.x>
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2018). Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises. Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1), 109–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279>
- Hooghe, L., Marks, G., & Wilson, C. J. (2002). Does left/right structure party positions on European integration?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 35, 965–989. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001041402236310>
- Hutter, S., Kriesi, H., & Vidal, G. (2018). Old versus new politics: The political spaces in Southern Europe in times of crises. *Party Politics*, 24(1), 10–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068817694503>
- Inglehart, R., & Baker, W. E. (2000). Modernization, cultural change, and the persistence of traditional values. *American Sociological Review*, 65(1), 19–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240006500103>
- Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change and democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22(1), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>
- Kennedy, R. (2013). The role of supranational identity in promoting democratic values. *European Union Politics*, 14(2), 228–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116512466604>
- Kitschelt, H., & Hellemans, S. (1990). The left-right semantics and the new politics cleavage. *Comparative Political Studies*, 23(2), 210–238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414090023002003>
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Helbling, M., Hoeglinger, D., Hutter, S., & Wüest, B. (Eds.). (2012). *Political conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S., & Frey, T. (2008). *West European politics in the age of globalization*. Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Krzyżanowski, M., & Ekström, M. (2022). The normalisation of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism: Discursive practices in media, journalism and the wider public sphere/s. *Discourse & Society*, 33(6), 719–729. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095406>
- Kuhn, T. (2015). *Experiencing European integration. Transnational lives and European identity*. Oxford University Press.
- Lancaster, C. M. (2019). Not so radical after all: Ideological diversity Among radical right supporters and its implications. *Political Studies*, 68(3), 600–616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719870468>
- Lehmann, P., & Zehnter, L. (2022). The self-proclaimed defender of freedom: The AfD and the pandemic. *Government and Opposition*, 59(4), 1109–1127. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.5>
- Levy, G., & Razin, R. (2020). Social media and political polarisation. *LSE Public Policy Review*, 1 (1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.5>
- Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (1967). Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments: An introduction. In S. M. Lipset & S. Rokkan (Eds.), *Party systems and voter alignments: Cross-national perspectives* (pp. 1–64). Free Press.

- Lorenz-Spreen, P., Oswald, L., Lewandowsky, S., & Hertwig, S. (2023). A systematic review of world-wide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(1), 74–101. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1>
- Lucassen, G., & Lubbers, M. (2012). Who fears what? Explaining far-right-wing preference in Europe by distinguishing perceived cultural and economic ethnic threats. *Comparative Political Studies*, 45(5), 547–574. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011427851>
- Lütjen, T. (2022). The anti-authoritarian revolt: Right-wing populism as self-empowerment? *European Journal of Social Theory*, 25(1), 75–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211027113>
- Marks, G., Attewell, D., Rovny, J., & Hooghe, L. (2022). Cleavage theory. In M. Riddervold, J. Trondal, & A. Newsome (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises* (pp. 173–193). Palgrave.
- Merkel, W., & Zürn, M. (2019). Kosmopolitismus, Kommunitarismus und die Demokratie. In J. Nida-Rümelin, D. Daniels, & N. Wloka (Eds.), *In Internationale Gerechtigkeit und institutionelle Verantwortung* (pp. 67–102). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110615876-007>
- Mihelj, S., & Jiménez-Martínez, C. (2021). Digital nationalism: Understanding the role of digital media in the rise of ‘new’. *Nationalism. Nations and Nationalism*, 27(2), 331–346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12685>
- Milli, S., Carroll, M., Wang, Y., Pandey, S., Zhao, S., & Dragan, A. D. (2023). Engagement, user satisfaction, and the amplification of divisive content on social media. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2305.16941>.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. Polity Press.
- Mutz, D. C. (2018). Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(19), E4330–E4339. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Core.
- Oesch, D. (2008). Explaining workers’ support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland. *International Political Science Review*, 29(3), 349–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512107088390>
- Oshri, O., Sheaffer, T., & Shenhav, S. R. (2016). A community of values: Democratic identity formation in the European Union. *European Union Politics*, 17(1), 114–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116515608957>
- Parry, D. A., Davidson, B. I., Sewall, C. J. R., Fisher, J. T., Mieczkowski, H., & Quintana, D. S. (2021). A systematic review and meta-analysis of discrepancies between logged and self-reported digital media use. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5(11), 1535–1547. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01117-5>
- Pech, L., Wachowicz, P., & Mazur, D. (2021). Poland’s rule of law breakdown: A five-year assessment of EU’s (In)Action. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 13(1), 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-021-00151-9>
- Pilkington, H. (2016). *Loud and proud: Passion and politics in the English defence league*. Manchester University Press.
- Reckwitz, A. (2020). *The society of singularities*. Polity Press.
- Schäfer, A. (2022). Cultural backlash? How (not) to explain the rise of authoritarian populism. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(4), 1977–1993. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123421000363>
- Sparrow, R. (2002). Talking sense about political correctness. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 26(73), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050209387772>
- Spierings, N., Lubbers, M., & Zaslove, A. (2017). Sexually modern nativist voters: Do they exist and do they vote for the populist radical right? *Gender and Education*, 29(2), 216–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1274383>
- Teney, C., Lacewell, O. P., & de Wilde, P. (2014). Winners and losers of globalization in Europe: Attitudes and ideologies. *European Political Science Review*, 6(4), 575–595. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773913000246>
- Teney, C., & Rupieper, L. K. (2023). A new social conflict on globalisation-related issues in Germany? A longitudinal perspective. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 75(1), 205–234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-023-00884-5>



- Van der Brug, W., & van Spanje, J. (2009). Immigration, Europe and the 'new' cultural dimension. *European Journal of Political Research*, 48(3), 309–334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.00841.x>
- Wallaschek, S. (2019). The discursive construction of solidarity: Analysing public claims in Europe's migration crisis. *Political Studies*, 68(1), 74–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719831585>
- Wodak, R. (2015). Mainstreaming: the normalization of exclusion. In *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean* (pp. 177–190). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446270073>
- Wodak, R. (2021). *The politics of fear: The shameless normalization of far-right discourse*. Cambridge University Press.
- Zielonka, J. (2018). *Counter-revolution: A liberal Europe in retreat*. Oxford University Press.
- Zürn, M., & de Wilde, P. (2016). Debating globalization: Cosmopolitanism and communitarianism as political ideologies. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 21(3), 280–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1207741>