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Preprint / Preprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wuttke, A., Gavras, K., & Schoen, H. (2020). Have Europeans Grown Tired of Democracy? New Evidence from 18 Consolidated Democracies, 1981-2018. *British Journal of Political Science*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-67475-6>

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Have Europeans Grown Tired of Democracy? New Evidence from 18 Consolidated Democracies, 1981-2018. *Alexander Wuttke, Konstantin Gavras, Harald Schoen*

This is an uncorrected pre-print of a study accepted for publication at the British Journal of Political Science. Preliminary citation for the study:

Wuttke, Alexander; Gavras, Konstantin; Schoen, Harald (forthcoming): “*Have Europeans Grown Tired of Democracy? New Evidence from 18 Consolidated Democracies, 1981-2018*”, British Journal of Political Science.

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Abstract

Democracies without democrats are not sustainable. Yet, recent studies argue that Western citizens are turning their backs on the system of self-governance, thereby eroding the societal foundations of consolidated democracies. We contribute to discussions about citizen support of democracy by 1) analyzing new cross-national survey data in 18 European countries that enable assessing the temporal and geographical generalizability of previous findings; 2) disentangling age-, cohort-, and period effects, thereby aligning the analytical methods with the theoretical arguments; 3) transparently reporting the entire evidence derived from pre-registered analyses to avoid cherry-picked findings. Our findings show that citizens of consolidated democracies continue to endorse self-governance. Yet, in some but not all countries, there is evidence for a growing number of ‘*democrats in name only*’, particularly among the young generation. These findings suggest a second phase in research on democratic fatigue that broadens the analytical scope for the multi-faceted nature of democratic support.

Keywords

Illiberal democracy; Populism; APC analysis; Regime Preferences; Institutional Trust; political interest; Open Science; Civic Culture

Introduction¹

Taking seriously that “one of the greatest threats to democracy is the idea that it is unassailable” (Carey et al. 2019), scholars respond to current challenges to democratic principles and practices by revisiting a foundational question of modern political science (Easton et al. 1995): what are the pre-requisites for a stable and healthy liberal democracy and to what extent are these conditions currently met? As any democratic system requires a sufficiently large number of citizens who want to govern themselves (Almond and Verba 1963; Claassen 2019), one line of literature focuses on citizen attitudes. Examining “democracy’s fading allure” (Plattner 2015), scholars in this line of research investigate whether Western citizens are still supportive of the democratic system they live in (Mattes 2018). In view of rising populist and authoritarian leaders, scholars fear that ideas might have taken ground, which are incompatible or in tension with democratic core components (Canovan 1999; Caramani 2017). More and more citizens might consider democracy merely one of several viable options instead as the only legitimate form of government, thereby challenging democracy’s role as “the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 15). Against this backdrop, several scholars (Denemark et al. 2016a; Foa and Mounk 2017a; Mounk 2018; Wike and Fetterolf 2018) claim to have identified a turning point in the historical development of democracy: as consolidated democracies can no longer rely on the unshaken support of its citizens it once again seems conceivable that long-established democracies could regress into some kind of nondemocratic regime.

Most prominently, Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017a, 2017b) argued that citizens of consolidated democracies – in particular, the youngest generations – are turning their back on liberal democracy. The democratic deconsolidation hypothesis has sparked a ferocious debate. Critics challenged the hypothesis’ validity on theoretical and empirical grounds, objecting that

¹ The interactive Shiny appendix, containing supplementary evidence, further information on methods and the pre-registration plan, can be accessed at: http://bit.ly/democratic_deconsolidation. Replication material is available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/BW5J3>.

arguments and evidence were unconvincing and cherry-picked. According to critics, when considered in its entirety the data did not indicate an erosion of support for democracy (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Inglehart 2016; Kirsch and Welzel 2019; Norris 2017; Voeten 2017; Zilinsky 2019). This state of affairs leaves those interested in reliable answers on whether democracy's attitudinal foundations are eroding with considerable uncertainty about what political science can tell about this important question of contemporary politics.

In an attempt to provide timely and unbiased evidence about the dynamics of democratic support in Western democracies, this study makes three contributions to overcome shortcomings in the ongoing scholarly debate: First, it is the first study in this literature that makes serious attempts at disentangling period, life-cycle, and cohort effects, thereby examining the proposed generation-based arguments with adequate analytical methods. Second, this study relies on a recently published dataset, thereby responding to calls for enhancing the slim body of longitudinal evidence on the development of democratic support. Finally, by following a pre-registered protocol and reporting the study's entire evidence in an interactive companion website, we attempt to ensure that the reported findings are neither selectively reported nor polished in one direction or the other.

In a nutshell, the analysis of survey data from 18 European democracies suggests that attitudes toward democracy remained stable and on a high level when queried as a generic term. However, in some but not all countries, there is evidence of growing susceptibility to regime types that are incompatible with established notions of liberal democracy, particularly among the young generation. In the concluding section, we discuss how these seemingly contradictory findings can be reconciled.

How trends in democratic support come about

Proponents of the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis allude to contemporary economic and socio-cultural transformations as origins of the alleged tendencies toward growing disenchantment with democracy in Western societies. In these propositions, generational arguments play a central role, pointing to the young generation as the vanguards of democratic decline (Denemark et al.

2016a; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017a). Recent birth cohorts are seen as most susceptible to growing democratic disaffection because, for one, they are hit hardest by recent economic crises in several European countries, potentially undermining their confidence in the prevailing political system (Mounk 2018). What is more, due to their socialization experiences in the age of individualization and digitalization, the natural properties of democracy's decision-making processes might be at odds with the preferences of today's young generation. Whereas recent birth cohorts have grown accustomed to highly individualized consumer products and a fast-reacting media environment, democracy's institutions are slow by design and do not necessarily respond to individual preferences but they prescribe collectively binding decisions (Gurri 2018; Streeck 2016). As a consequence, today's young generation may become more disenchanted with democratic politics and potentially more open to alternative forms of governing.

However, the expectation of growing democratic fatigue, especially among the young, stands in contrast to modernization theory. Modernization theory posits not the erosion of democracy's attitudinal foundations but that they will grow even stronger from one generation to the next (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Kirsch and Welzel 2019; Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). According to modernization scholars, in the wake of a universal value change, assertive orientations that are more prevalent among older cohorts shift toward self-expressive, emancipative orientations that are more prevalent among younger generations who grew up in secure material environments. As a result, the young generation may be more critical of political authorities and institutions but more steadfast in their support for the principles of self-governance.

Note that, in these discussions, scholars occasionally refer to the 'young generation' without clearly defining generational boundaries or work with a differing set of cohort operationalizations (e.g., Foa and Mounk 2017a, 6, 2017b, 10; Norris and Inglehart 2019, 36). This vagueness partly reflects the fact that various macro-level mechanisms are at play. Influences such as the economic crisis hit a well-defined cohort of individuals during their formative phases but other influences such as the 'fifth wave' of information technology (Gurri 2018) characterizes the formative years

of a larger and less clearly defined cohort. While democracy-undermining influences may be most forceful the later a person was born, no clear criterion exists to delineate younger from older birth cohorts. Nonetheless, we can conclude that skeptics and advocates of the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis disagree about differences in democratic support between older and younger birth cohorts and, by implication and more fundamentally, about the prospects that generational replacement holds for mass support for the democratic system of governing.

Less controversial than the presence of generational disparities is the claim that democracy is facing challenges that may shake confidence in the democratic polity, regardless of generational affiliation. Hence, another conceivable pathway of eroding support for democracy is that the recent economic and political crises and other processes such as the diminishing steering capacities of nationalized democracies may undermined democratic support in the form of period effects, i.e., uniform decreases from one point in time to the next irrespective of an individual's position in the life-cycle and generational affiliation (Mounk 2018; Streeck 2016). What remains disputed, however, is whether these period effects merely affect short-term political orientations such as party preferences or whether they have begun to erode foundational attitudes toward democracy such as support for the principles of self-governing.

Altogether, basic empirical facts on crucial aspects of Western societies are contested. This uncertainty reflects various short-comings in the existing scholarly literature.

Strengthening the reliability and validity of findings in a contested field of research

The topic's longitudinal nature calls for survey questions that were asked repeatedly over a relatively long period of time. Yet, time-series data on democracy-related questions are scarce. Hence, it remains unclear whether the findings presented by prior research indicate short-term fluctuations or long-term trends (van der Meer 2017). Responding to calls from all sides of the debate for more comprehensive survey data, this study thus uses recently published cross-national data that allow to properly identify how democratic support has developed over time and across generations (Foa and Mounk 2016, 10, 2017a, 10; Voeten 2017, 1).

Although most time-series do not cover long time periods, the respective surveys often contain a multiplicity of measures for assessing political support on the citizen level (Mattes 2018). While a large number of indicators reflects the complex nature of democracy, it also hinders the comparability of studies, thereby contributing to the ambiguity of existing research. Moreover, considering the vast array of analytical options, each with possibly different outcomes, it is no wonder that authors frequently suspect that some findings in the scholarly controversy were reported selectively in a way that fits the authors' claim (Alexander and Welzel 2017; Norris 2017, 5; Voeten 2017, 1).

In this study, we respond to the challenges for knowledge accumulation that result from researchers' ample degrees of freedom in a contested field of social inquiry in the following way. Before obtaining the data, we documented the analytical strategy and all indicators we consider relevant for assessing democratic support in a public pre-analysis plan.² What is more, although limitations of space prohibit reporting the entire body of evidence, we transparently report all findings in an easy-to-use interactive companion website. These procedures bind our hands to intentional or unintentional misuses of analytical discretions and provide the reader with unbiased and unrestricted access to the collected evidence (Wuttke 2019).

To strengthen the validity of the substantive findings and to increase its informational value in testing the mechanisms that may underlie distinct patterns of attitude shifts, this study employs statistical techniques to separate distinct attitudinal trends. Attitudinal trends may stem from period effects that reflect shifts in the marginal distribution of attitudes, e.g., in response to external shocks, that do not vary by age or generational affiliation. Alternatively, such trends may reflect generational disparities that affect the distribution of attitudes in society over time through generational replacement. Time may also play a role as life-cycle effects that are hard to disentangle

² We pre-registered research question, data, selection and priority of indicators, analytical strategy and robustness tests and inferential rules. In the appendix, we describe and justify (mostly minor) deviations from the pre-analysis plan. The pre-analysis can be obtained at: [Insert link after peer review, anonymized PAP is attached to submission files]

from generational effects from a cross-sectional perspective. Yet, life-cycle effects usually have no ramifications for attitudinal trends at the societal level and are thus of limited relevance for the state of democracy (Norris 2017, 9f; Voeten 2017, 5).³ Hence, each temporal effect entails distinct implications for the future distribution of attitudes. What is more, because the temporal effects relate to distinct theoretical arguments, disentangling cohort, period, and life-cycle effects advances testing the theoretical mechanisms proposed in the debate on democratic deconsolidation. Finally, aggregate-level stability when observed in descriptive studies may overshadow countervailing attitudinal dynamics of period and cohort effects that could be revealed when separating these effects. While the existing literature often relies on less demanding methods (e.g., Denmark et al. 2016b; Foa and Mounk 2017b; Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Voeten 2017) which run the risk of conflating temporal effects there are thus good reasons to employ statistical techniques to discern the distinct temporal pathways that may underlie attitudinal trends toward democratic deconsolidation.

Data and research design

We analyze data from the European Values Survey, including the recently released fifth wave (EVS 2019). We consider all European countries in the analyses which are classified as consolidated democracies according to the Polity IV index plus France. Because attitude trends may differ across countries, we report results for each country separately. Evidence on seven additional European democracies is reported in an interactive Shiny Web Application that accompanies this study (<http://bit.ly/Democratic-Deconsolidation>).⁴

Bearing in mind the wealth of relevant indicators and the limitations of space, we only report the development of selected indicators in the main text. Indicator selection was guided by

³ Significant changes in the age composition of the electorate may lend some importance to life-cycle effects.

⁴ In addition to the established data collection via personal interviews, EVS wave 5 has an additional, experimental self-administered data collection mode. In line with EVS recommendations, responses from the self-administered data collection modes are not included in the analysis because mode effects might impair comparability across survey waves. Analyses on the extended dataset including self-administered data collection modes are reported in the appendix and suggest slightly weaker support for democracy among the youngest generation.

data availability (indicators must have been surveyed in at least three EVS survey waves) and by substantive arguments. Given their character as “backbone of the measurement of support for democracy” (Mattes 2018), it does not come as a surprise that citizens’ regime preferences are central to current scholarly debates (Foa and Mounk 2016; Voeten 2017). EVS employs the following questions to capture them: *“I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? 1) Having a democratic political system 2) Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections 3) Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country 4) Having the army rule the country”*. In the main text, we use this question to report on respondents’ preferences for democratic and authoritarian systems of government, respectively. As the second concept of key interest, we analyze the development of institutional trust, which also played a role in the current debate (Voeten 2017). For compact reporting, we created an unweighted summary index of confidence in those institutions that are affected by or involved in the process of democratic decision making: the parliament, the justice system, and the civil service (see interactive appendix for results on single indicators).

The main text focuses on these primary indicators, but we complement the reported evidence with condensed conclusions on substantively related secondary variables that tap into more specific attitudes towards democracy and other cultural and political orientations with relevance for democratic stability. The full results on the latter are available in the interactive appendix. The appendix also reports tabulated results and findings on (mostly statistically insignificant or small) life-cycle effects. As they are of key importance to the over-time development of popular support of democracy on the aggregate level, the main text focuses on period and generational disparities.

As main analytical strategy for discerning age, period, and cohort effects, we employ generalized additive models (GAM, Grasso 2014). We include the survey years as fixed effects for

the period effects and recode age to a three-level categorical variable (15-29, 30-59, 60+).⁵ Often referred to as the “problem of generations” (Mannheim 1970), operationalizing birth cohort and specify generational boundaries is less straightforward. Generational boundaries are rarely self-evident and their specification is even more complex in cross-national analyses since formative phases and events may differ across countries. Because ill-specified thresholds run the risk of hiding meaningful patterns, we refrain from deriving a comprehensive categorization of cohorts. Instead, we estimate smoothed nonlinear cohort effects that retrieve any cohort commonalities among groups of individuals born in temporal proximity. This exploratory approach is particularly useful for the purpose of this study as we focus on the attitudes of the young as one select birth cohort. In doing so, we can examine whether younger birth cohorts differ from older birth cohorts without setting rigid a priori boundary specifications and thus minimize the risk of overlooking meaningful disparities that are related to a person’s time of birth.

To assess the magnitude of attitudinal dynamics, we visualize predicted cohort and period effects with simultaneous intervals (Simpson 2018) based on the observed values approach (Hanmer and Kalkan 2013). Because APC analyses are sensitive to modeling choices, we replicated the analyses using the robust hierarchical APC method, which are reported in the appendix (Bell and Jones 2015, rHAPC.). The rHAPC is more conservative concerning generational effects than the GAM and tends to under-estimate generational effects (Bell and Jones 2018), particularly when they are nonlinear such as when one cohort stands apart from preceding generations. We consider GAM as primary model and consider results as less robust when not supported by both models. Hence, in the interpretation of the results, we focus on cases in which the evidence is consistent across models, and we mention substantial inconsistencies.

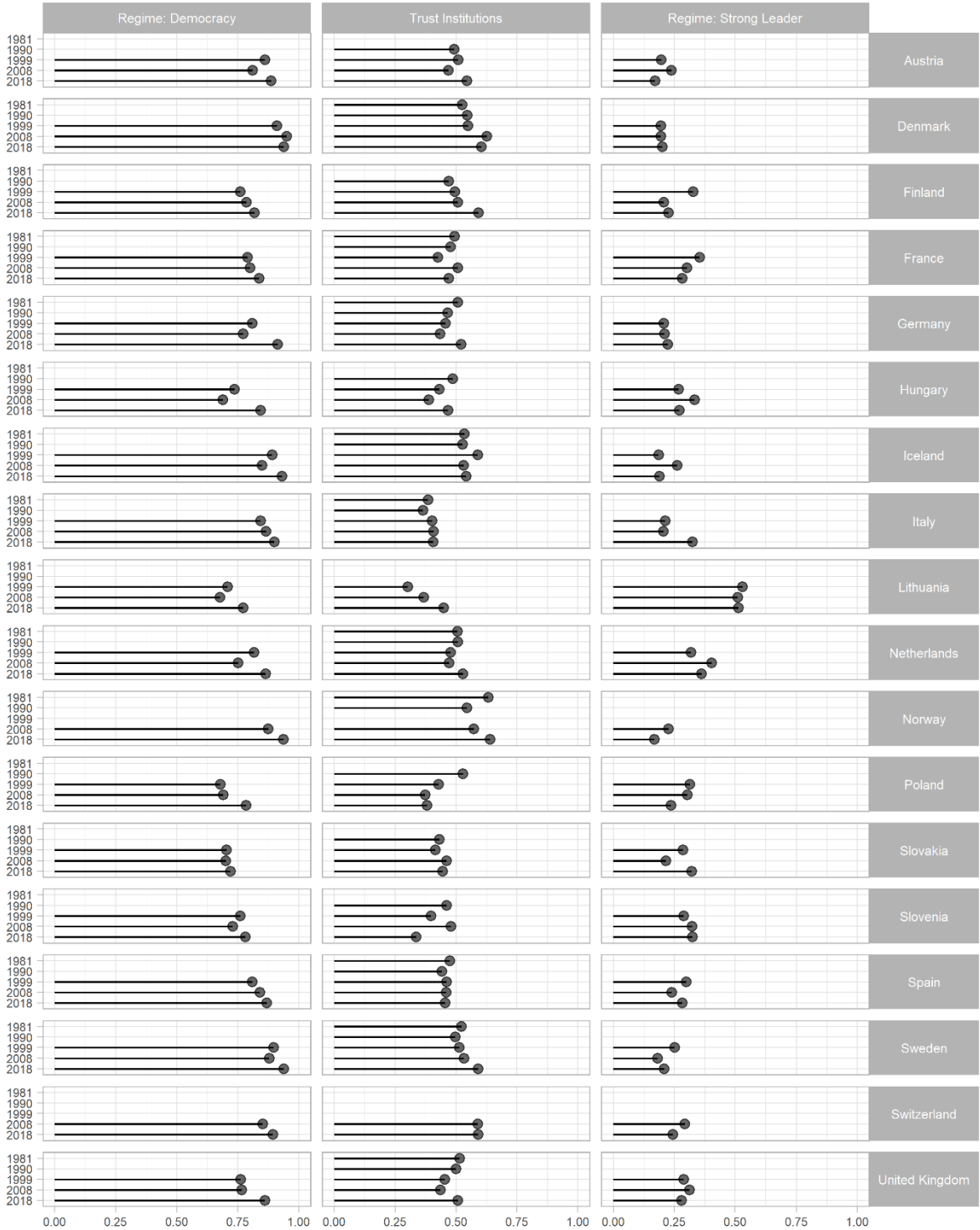
⁵ Additional information on the method is provided in the appendix.

Results

We begin our inquiry of changes in support for democracy with a brief descriptive overview of the marginal distribution of the study's central indicators (Figure 1). Inspecting the development of citizens' self-reported preference for a democratic system over the past decade, the overall trend suggests *stronger* support for democracy in the vast majority of European societies, on an already high level. A small decline in democratic regime preferences is visible in Denmark, but notable increases can be observed in countries such as Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

The dynamics of institutional trust show similar patterns. Although confidence in the institutions of democracy diminished in a few countries (e.g., Slovenia), by and large, the past decade was characterized by stability or rebounds of institutional trust in most countries. Democratic institutions bolstered the trust of its citizens in a diverse set of countries such as Germany, Hungary, Norway, and the United Kingdom.

Figure 1 Trends in Average Levels of Democratic Support over time



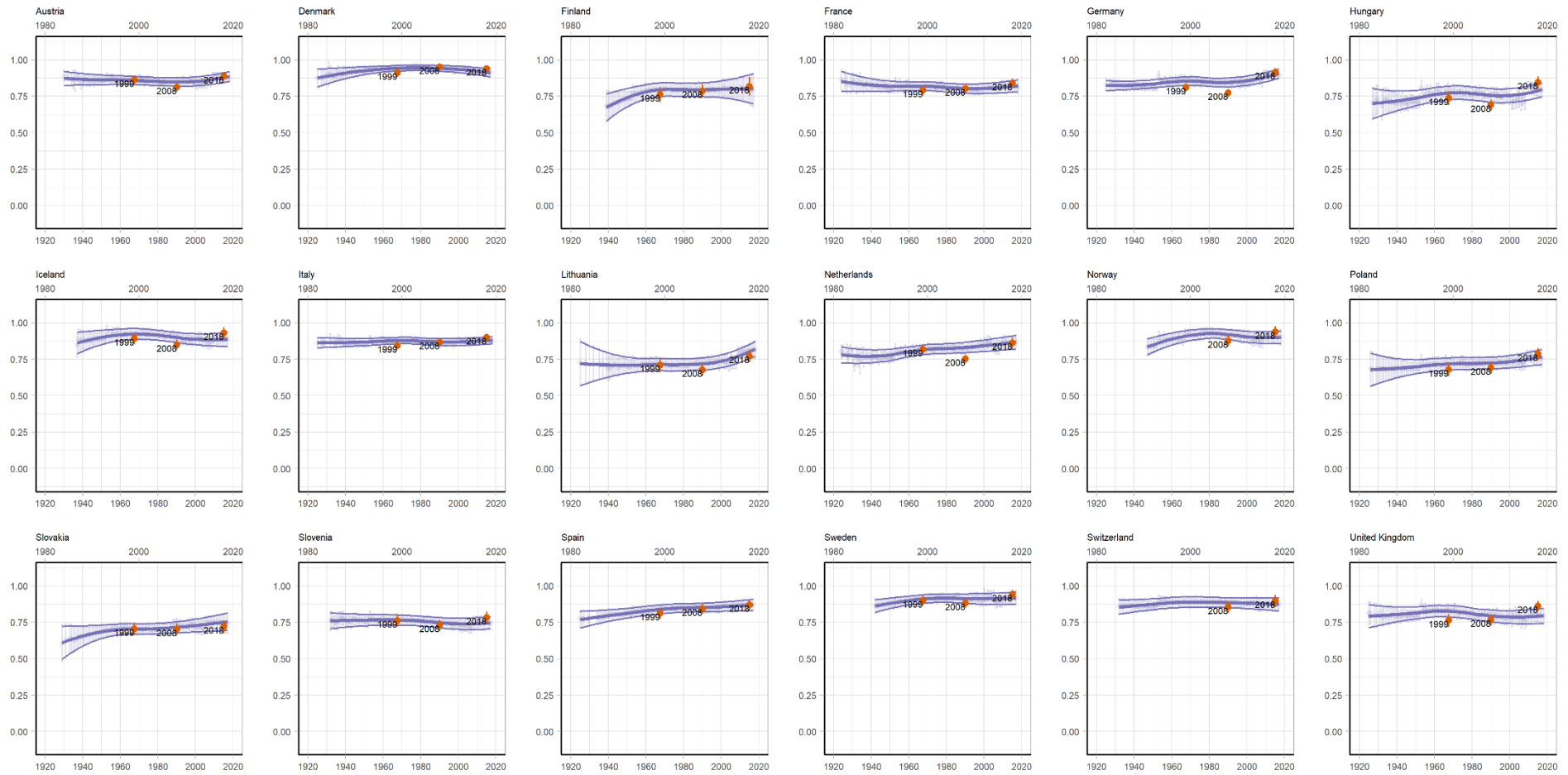
The picture is more mixed with regard to authoritarian regime preferences. On average, the citizens of Italy, Slovakia, and Spain now more strongly support a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament than they did a decade ago. Still, in the majority of countries,

undemocratic strongman governance has not grown more popular or has even lost support (e.g., Hungary, the Netherlands, and Poland).

Taken together, the raw distribution of indicators of democratic support does not reveal much evidence in favor of the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis. None of the reported indicators consistently declines across most countries; likewise, no country consistently exhibits a decline in all indicators. Still, descriptive evidence cannot conclusively refute the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis. For instance, if only the very recent birth cohort differs from previous generations then – due to their small share of the population – even a strong decline in democratic support among the young might not lead to discernible trends in overall levels of support. Also, it is conceivable that period and cohort effects point in different directions thereby offsetting each other. Therefore, in the following analysis, we disentangle these temporal effects to separately report period and generational effects.

Figure 2 enables us to take a deeper dive into the dynamics underlying the preferences for a democratic system of government. Cohort effects are represented by the curve in purple. Specifically, the curve shows predicted attitude levels for cohort members who turned 18 years of age at the respective time shown on the x-axis. Visualizing period-specific dynamics from one survey wave to the next while controlling for life-cycle and cohort effects, the red dot shows how period effects affect mean attitude levels over time.

Figure 2 Cohort and Period Effects on Democratic Regime Preferences



Notes: Shown are predicted mean values for period and cohort effects derived from GAM analyses using an observed value approach with simultaneous confidence intervals. For the cohort plots in blue, smoothing splines are overlaid on the yearly predictions displayed in the background. Red dots represent period effects, showing predicted mean levels in the respective survey year.

The GAM results presented in Figure 2 show that the recent rise in democratic regime preferences is mainly due to period effects. After controlling for life-cycle and cohort effects, the average respondent in virtually all European countries favors the democratic system of government more strongly today than in the preceding survey wave a decade ago. Generational effects on democratic regime preferences are less pronounced. Most European citizens strongly prefer a democratic system of government, independent of their cohort affiliation. In some countries, such as Spain and the Netherlands, democracy is more strongly endorsed by the most recent birth cohorts than by earlier generations. Importantly, the more sophisticated GAM analysis thus provides no evidence that cohort and period effects might have worked in different directions, which could have created the false impression of stability in the descriptive analysis. Challenging the democratic deconsolidation hypothesis, period and cohort effects instead indicate stability or even a strengthening of democratic regime preferences.

Although these findings do not support the notion that support for democracy has been eroding, subtle, yet consequential changes in citizen attitudes toward the democratic system might still have taken place. To begin with, regime preferences may remain unchanged, but respondents could attach lower importance to living in a democracy. However, an analysis of the importance respondents ascribe to living in a democratic country provides not much evidence for shifts in perceived importance between time periods or across generations (except for a moderate generational decline in Sweden and the United Kingdom, see appendix).⁶

In another scenario of subtle changes, abstract democratic regime preferences remain stable while citizens withdraw support for the very institutions that embody this form of government. Traditionally, one line of research has interpreted low levels of institutional trust in an optimistic way – as signaling the vitality of a critical citizenry who holds politicians accountable while

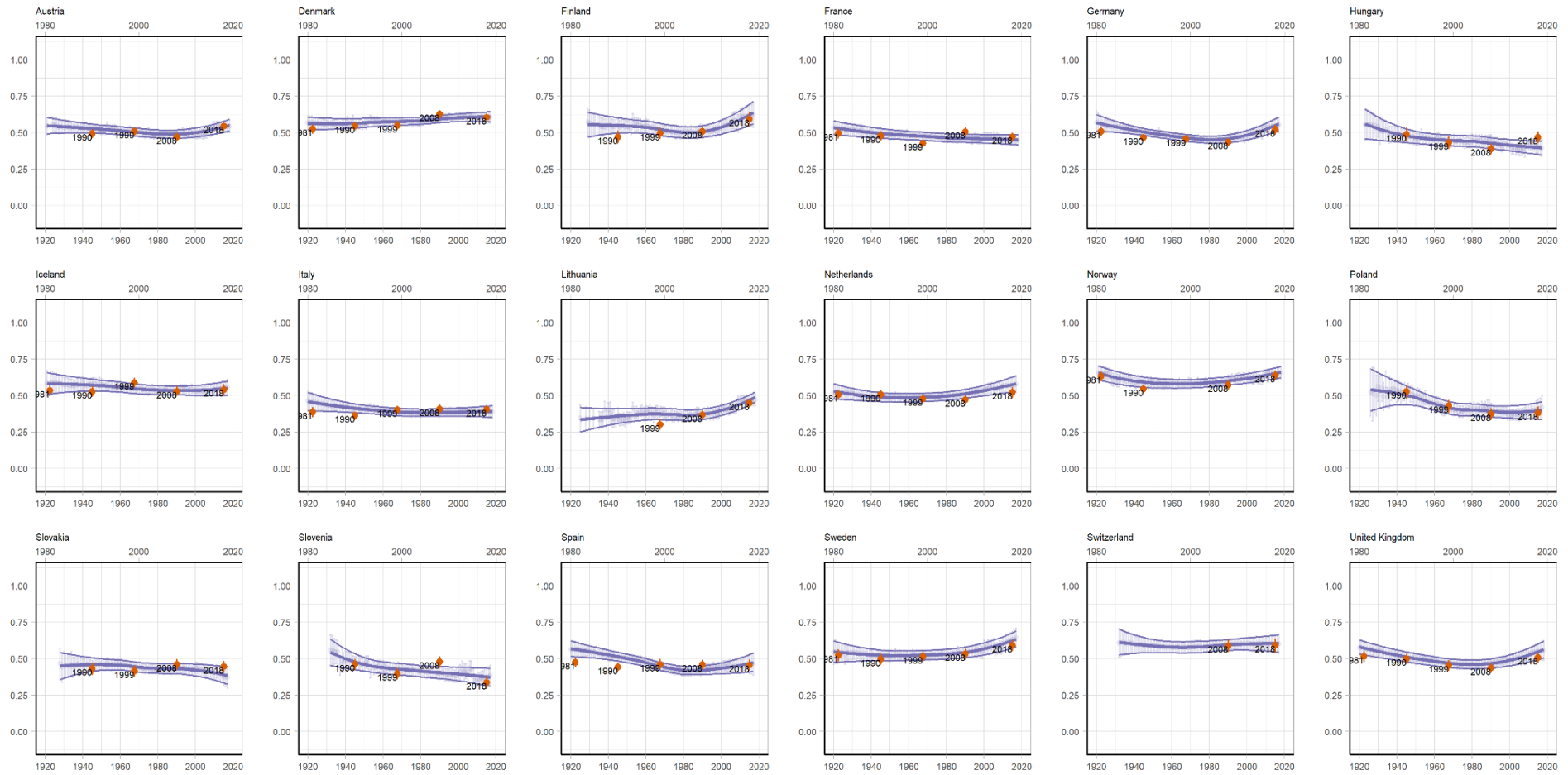
⁶ Question wording: “*How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?*”, 10-point scale ranging from “*not at all important*” to “*absolutely important*”.

remaining steadfast supporters of democratic principles (e.g., Norris 2011). More recently, however, some scholars expect growing distrust as a result of disenchantment with the democratic process more generally. In this vein, it is argued that an increasing number of populist citizens adhere to the idea of self-governance but reject those checks and balances on the popular will which courts and parliaments occasionally impose (Mounk 2018; Wike and Fetterolf 2018). Also, recent generations may perceive democracy's deliberately slow pace and their mutually restraining institutions as inferior to the hyper-responsive media and technology young citizens experience in other life domains (Gurri 2018; Mounk 2018).

However, Figure 3 shows that the dynamics in institutional trust mirror the evidence on democratic regime preferences: Generational effects are fairly modest, and period effects often point upward. In a broad set of countries, period effects fostered confidence over the past decade, often substantially (e.g. Austria, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Sweden, UK). Hence, starting from a rather low level of confidence, democracy's institutions could regain trust in many European countries. For instance, among the average Austrian citizen period effects led to an increase of confidence in democratic institutions from 0.47 [95% CI: 0.44 – 0.50] to 0.55 [0.52 – 0.57] scale points over the past decade. All in all, the findings on confidence in democracy's institutions is further assurance that support for democracy remains firm.

Thus far, the findings did not lend much credence to the claim that democratic deconsolidation has been taking place in advanced democracies. This does not rule out, however, that alternative forms of government gain traction among the public. Stronger support for other regime types diminishes democracy's relative advantage over potential competitors and may thereby call into question the defining criterion of consolidated democracies as societies where "support for antisystem alternatives is quite small" and, therefore, "democracy is the only game in town" (Linz and Stepan 1996, 14–15).

Figure 3 Cohort and Period Effects on Trust in Democratic Institutions

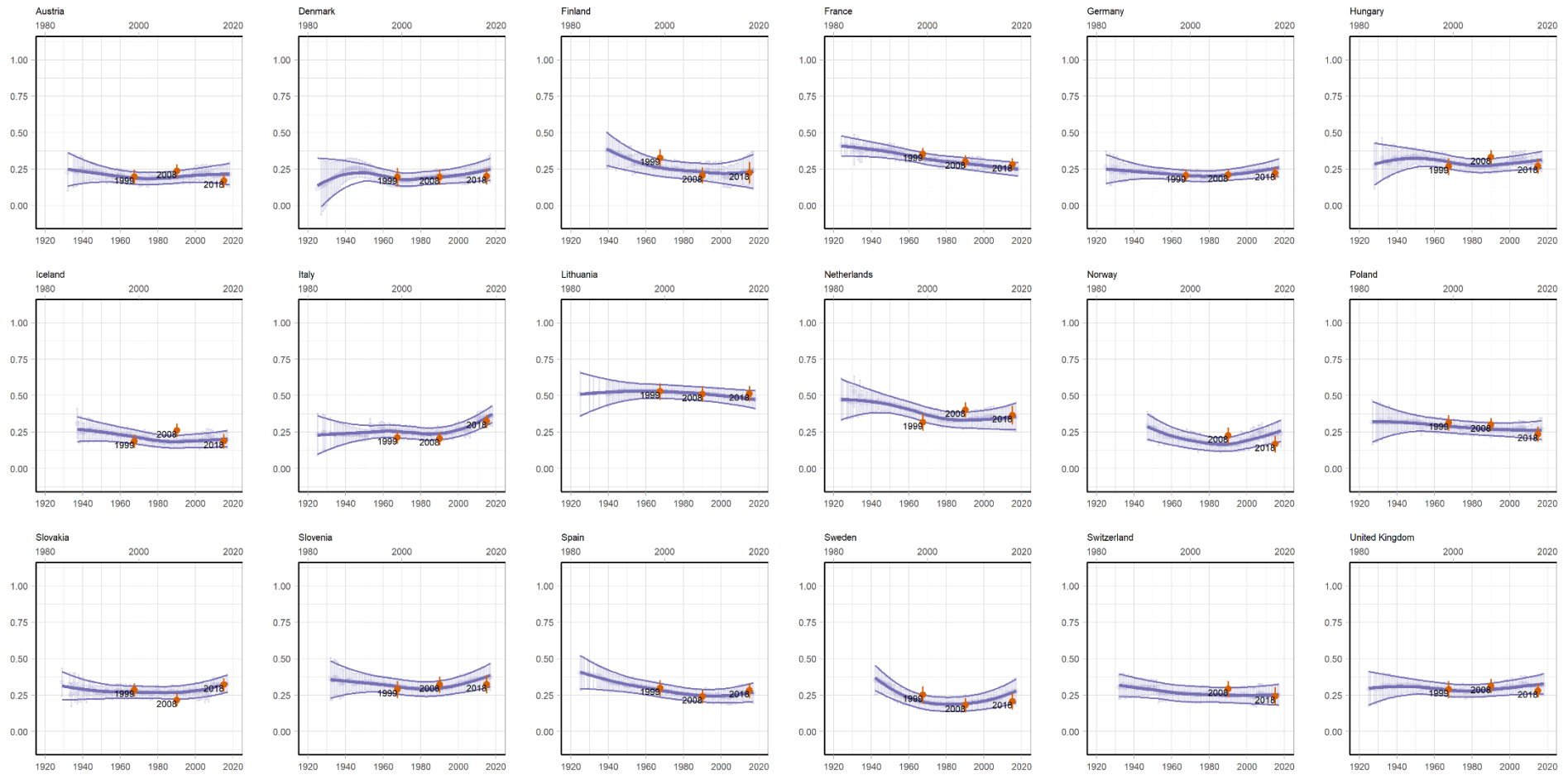


Notes: Shown are predicted mean values for period and cohort effects derived from GAM analyses using an observed value approach with simultaneous confidence intervals. For the cohort plots in blue, smoothing splines are overlaid on the yearly predictions displayed in the background. Red dots represent period effects, showing predicted mean levels in the respective survey year.

In order to find out whether citizens consider democracy as the only legitimate regime type or merely as one of the various viable options, we relied on the EVS indicators tapping into evaluations of different types of government, led by the military, by experts instead of the government, or by a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or parties. Because support for authoritarian forms of government is at the center of contemporary scholarly attention, we report the results on anti-democratic preferences for a strong leader in the main text and the remaining indicators in the appendix. Notably, these indicators show inconsistent, but significant dynamics in democracy-related attitudes.

To begin with, the citizenries of most democracies under study have not substantially changed their opposition to strongman government over the past decade and continue to flatly reject this way of governing (Figure 4). Some countries do exhibit considerable period effects, however. Most notably, in light of the country's political turmoil and instability Italians have become more open to authoritarian government; in 2008, the predicted attitude level in Italy was at a low estimate of 0.21 [95% CI: 0.16 – 0.25] and increased to 0.32 [0.28 – 0.36] in 2018. However, the patterns are not consistent across Europe; in some countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland period effects on support for authoritarian regime types point downward.

Figure 4 Cohort and Period Effects on Authoritarian Regime Preferences



Notes: Shown are predicted mean values for period and cohort effects derived from GAM analyses using an observed value approach with simultaneous confidence intervals. For the cohort plots in blue, smoothing splines are overlaid on the yearly predictions displayed in the background. Red dots represent period effects, showing predicted mean levels in the respective survey year.

The generational patterns reveal surprising results. The democratic deconsolidation hypothesis suggests the highest susceptibility to authoritarian regime alternatives among the youngest cohort (Foa and Mounk 2017b) whereas modernization theory would predict strongest support among older cohorts, particularly the interwar generations (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Across countries, there is no consistent evidence for either prediction. Generational disparities are narrow in most cases. Notably, in a handful of countries, the observed patterns are compatible with both of the seemingly rivaling models. In places such as Norway and Sweden, we observe U-shaped curves; cohorts who came of age in the protest-ridden 1960s and 1970s are strongly opposed to authoritarian government, but both older and the youngest birth cohorts are more open to a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament. (U-shaped curves are even more prevalent in generational effects on the cultural role of authorities and, as an inverted U-curve, also on political interest, see appendix). Notably, even these generational disparities suggest that generational replacement is unlikely to lead to an erosion of democratic support in the near future. Instead, those older generations with above-average inclinations for authoritarian regimes will be replaced with young cohorts that show similar orientations, leaving the average support for this regime type at the societal level virtually unchanged. Altogether, regardless of whether generational patterns show flat or U-shaped curves, in the medium-term generational replacement is not on track to fundamentally shift support for strongmen government in Europe.

Do other indicators of regime preferences show more worrying signs of increasing openness to non-democratic alternatives? The preference for experts instead of governments making political decisions is subject to some inter-temporal dynamics, but they do not show a consistent pattern. Expert governments have become more widely accepted among the younger generations in Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Yet, period effects show decreasing levels of support over time in Germany, Lithuania, Poland, and Switzerland (see appendix). Military rule remains disavowed as a form of government throughout most of the continent. Neither period nor cohort effects point toward greater acceptance in the majority of countries. Yet, again in a few

countries –France, Norway, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom– the favorability of a military takeover has increased as of late, particularly among the most recent generation (see appendix for full results). Further supporting the idea that the young generation in selected countries has grown more comfortable with a political role of the military, an increasing share of the young generation in the named countries tends to consider army takeover a legitimate element of democracy, in case of incompetent governments.⁷

What do our findings imply for the regime preferences of the most recent generation that received much attention in scholarly debates? The results suggest that members of this cohort remain committed to democracy as a viable system of government. At the same time, in some countries, the youngest cohorts are also more receptive to other regime alternatives that promise clear and fast decisions. However, these dynamics toward non-democratic regime types occur only in a minority of European societies, and they are limited in magnitude. The findings thus attest to the importance of monitoring generational disparities in regime preferences. However, while the dynamics presented here give reason for attentiveness, these modest attitude changes alone unlikely pose a severe threat to the societal underpinnings of democracy in European societies.

⁷ Question wording: “Many things are desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means ‘not at all an essential characteristic of democracy’ and 10 means it definitely is ‘an essential characteristic of democracy’”. Analyzed answer options: “people choose their leaders in free elections”, “the army takes over when government is incompetent”, “civil rights protect people from state oppression”. Note that time-series data on these indicators are only available on few survey waves and only when merging EVS and WVS data sets, potentially introducing sampling and measurement biases and thus impairing over-time comparability. Findings indicate no period and cohort effects on perceiving civil rights and free elections as elements of democracy. The generational disparities concerning military takeover were indicated by GAM analysis but not by the rHAPC analysis, rendering these generational effects less robust.

Conclusion

A thriving democracy must command the support of its people. Yet, no free society can force its citizens to accept the prevailing political order. Therefore, liberal democracies live by pre-requisites they cannot guarantee themselves (Böckenförde 1976, 60), rendering the self-rule of sovereign citizens an inherently ambitious and precarious form of government. In times of growing pressure on long-standing institutions and the principles of liberal democracy, it is worthwhile to take seriously recent evidence that suggests a significant decline of support for democracy among the citizens of Western societies. In order to examine the validity of this claim, we analyzed recent survey data from eighteen European countries on various indicators of democratic support employing adequate statistical techniques to disentangle cohort, life-cycle, and period effects.

The most consistent finding throughout the entire sample of advanced European democracies indicates strong and continuing support for the democratic system of government. Preferences for a democratic system of government remain stable just as levels of self-reported importance to live in democratic polities; confidence in democratic institutions has even grown as of late. These results thus cast doubt on far-reaching claims about wide-spread and increasing democratic fatigue as there is no evidence that the citizens of democratic societies are growing tired of governing themselves.

In some, but by far not all European societies, however, we found changes in what ‘democracy’ means to citizens and evidence of increased susceptibility to alternative systems of governing, particularly among the youngest generations. Hence, recently born citizens in some countries are less decisively opposed even to regime types that are clearly at odds with fundamental principles of liberal democracy, especially, when compared to the protest-generation who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s who appears to be some kind of champions of self-governance.

To understand how we can reconcile the co-occurrence of these two findings – support for democracy remains stable while support for undemocratic alternatives rises in some populations – , it is instructive to recall the nature of the political challenges that democracies currently face.

Whereas in previous decades the Western democracy was challenged by systems of an entirely different type, nowadays critiques and assaults on democratic politics are brought forward in the name of democracy itself (Krastev and Holmes 2019; Runciman 2018). In this vein, it may not be surprising that our findings align with recent studies which also showed stable support toward ‘democracy’ as an abstract term (Zilinsky 2019) but substantial variation in what citizens associate with this concept (Kirsch and Welzel 2019). Hence, some citizens may exhibit a growing but somewhat indeterminate openness for trying other than the established forms of political governance which these citizens do not see as incompatible with their unshaken preference for a democratic system of government. Yet, considering that some of these tentatively considered regime preferences do stand at odds with established principles of (liberal) democracy, the burgeoning evidence of *democrats in name only* may introduce a second phase in research on democratic fatigue. For future research, the relevant question seems less about whether citizens of consolidated democracies support the generic concept of democracy. Instead, the pressing questions rather concern the liberal-democratic quality of citizens’ regime and process preferences (e.g., Carey et al. 2019; Graham and Svobik 2019; Wuttke et al. 2020): Building on the idea that how we want to govern ourselves is a multi-faceted concept, future research should examine whether the values, norms, and attitudes of self-proclaimed democrats are compatible with normatively derived notions of democracy, particularly its liberal variant.

A comprehensive approach at the study of democratic support that accounts for the complexity of multi-faceted regime and process preferences may help assess today’s political realities and may promote the integration of those theoretical perspectives on democratic deconsolidation that we considered as competing in this study. For instance, drawing from the competing perspectives on democratic support, the tenet of the ‘dialectic of democracy’ (Blühdorn 2019) argues that cultural value change may indeed promote support for democracy. Specifically, it is argued that the growing emphasis on self-realization in the age of digitalized consumer capitalism creates demands for political institutions that allow one to express identities that are

highly fragmented and frequently changing (Blühdorn 2019; Gurri 2018). The specific type of democratic politics envisaged by this line of reasoning, however, is both hard to capture with existing survey measures and hard to reconcile with representative democracy in its current form. With a different focus, the theory of pernicious polarization (Somers and McCoy 2019) describes phenomena that may find some reflection in established survey measures on nondemocratic regime preferences but whose implications for citizen process preferences are more complex than most indicators can capture. Therefore, established survey measures show us that citizens have not given up on the idea of democracy. However, integrating insights from multiple perspectives may help to devise measures and analytical designs that move beyond a uni-dimensional conception of democratic support as either high or low. In effect, it may prove useful in getting a grasp of the complexities of how the multi-faceted regime and process preferences of democratic citizens change in the wake of current social transformations.

For political science, it thus remains a key task to continuously assess the state of consolidated democracies by observing a broad array of individual-level indicators. This study is an attempt to contribute additional evidence to this enterprise in a transparent and impartial way. At this point, it suggests caution against reports about the breakdown of public support for democracy in Europe. However, the evidence does not rule out the possibility that conceptions and preferences concerning the political order will undergo significant and worrisome changes in the years and decades to come. Political scientists are thus well advised to continuously have a close look at the health of democratic support in order to avoid the embarrassment of once being forced to announce that the patient died years before without anybody taking notice.

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