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Democratic conflict and polarization: healthy or harmful?

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Abstract: Several developments over the past decade in Western democracies have sparked worries about political stability. Among them, the rise of radical political parties, heated polarization around questions of immigration, nationalism, or social liberalism, and – in some instances – even attacks on democratic institutions, stand out. However, conflict and choice between clearly distinctive alternative ideas of how societies and economies should be governed are at the heart of democracy. Democracy needs competition and conflict. But where is the line between healthy and harmful conflict and polarization? In this paper, we explain that an interpretation of today's state of democratic conflict as chaotic, fragmented or volatile is misleading. Rather, Western democracies are in a process of a fundamental restructuring of the main political dividing lines: a new social cleavage between universalistic and particularistic ideas of social, economic, and political organization, between openness and closure, has been emerging over the past decades. This conflict is rooted in social groups defined by education, occupation, and territory, it relates to underlying collective identities on both sides, and it will dominate democratic party competition for the foreseeable future. It is not per se harmful to democracy, but reflects genuinely different visions of desirable social order. However, under certain conditions, it can turn on democracy itself. The last part of this paper then discusses the functional and dysfunctional implications of polarized political conflict for democracy. To what extent is conflict and polarization healthy and under what conditions is it likely to endanger the very legitimacy and institutional stability of democracies? Building on existing knowledge about the dynamics of polarization, we discuss political and institutional means to contain polarization and to protect democratic stability.

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Democratic Conflict and Polarization: Healthy or Harmful?

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Her research has been published in the most renowned outlets of the profession, such as the *British Journal of Political Science, Comparative Political Studies,* the *Journal of Politics, Cambridge University Press* and *Oxford University Press.* She has won several prizes and grants, including a European Research Council (ERC) starting grant.

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A co-authored book by Simon Bornschier and Silja Häusermann (jointly authored with Lukas Haffert, Marco Steenbergen, and Delia Zollinger) entitled *Cleavage Formation in the 21st Century – How Social Identities Shape Voting Behavior in Contexts of Electoral Realignment* will appear with Cambridge University Press in 2024.

Abstract

Several developments in Western democracies over the past decade have sparked worries about political stability. Standing out are the rise of radical political parties, heated polarization around questions of immigration, nationalism, or social liberalism, and – in some cases – attacks on democratic institutions. However, conflict and choice between clearly distinctive alternative ideas of how societies and economies should be governed are at the heart of democracy. Democracy needs competition and conflict. But where is the line between healthy and harmful conflict and polarization?

In this paper, we explain that an interpretation of today's state of democratic conflict as chaotic, fragmented, or volatile is misleading. Rather, Western democracies are in a process of a fundamental restructuring of the main political dividing lines. Over the past decades a new social cleavage has been emerging between universalistic and particularistic ideas of social, economic, and political organization, between openness and closure. This conflict is rooted in social groups defined by education, occupation, and territory. It relates to underlying collective identities on both sides, and it will dominate democratic party competition for the foreseeable future. It is not per se harmful to democracy but reflects genuinely different visions of desirable social order. However, under certain conditions, it can turn on democracy itself.

We thus examine the functional and dysfunctional implications of polarized political conflict for democracy. To what extent is conflict and polarization healthy and under what conditions is it likely to endanger the very legitimacy and institutional stability of democracies? Building on existing knowledge about the dynamics of polarization, we discuss political and institutional means to contain polarization and to protect democratic stability.

Introduction

Liberal democracy is widely regarded as one of the most important and valued social achievements in Europe and the Americas over the past century. In essence, it is about competition for power between different programmatic visions, ideas, and worldviews in free and fair elections, in the context of institutions that guarantee individual liberties and the rule of law. However, developments of the past decades have sparked worries about the stability of democracy in the future. These worries relate to the rise of new radical parties, to the emergence of deeply divisive topics on the agenda of Western democracies, as well as to several instances of open attacks on and contestation of democratic legitimacy.

Regarding political parties, we indeed have been observing the emergence of new radical parties on the fringes of the ideological spectrum across the universe of developed democracies. On the right, far-right nationalist parties have achieved massive electoral gains over the past decades, at the expense of conservative, confessional and liberal parties, which had clearly dominated electoral democracy before 1945, and remained among the most powerful parties after the war. On the left side, green and left-liberal parties, radical-left and left-populist parties have come to challenge the dominance of mainstream socialist and social democratic parties, which had contributed to both the emergence and the pacification of the political class conflict between labor and capital in the second half of the 20th century. On both sides of the "old" left-right divide, the traditional mainstream parties have lost up to half of their vote shares compared to the height of their power post-1945. Figure 1 illustrates

Fig. 1   **Average vote shares of ideological party families over time in Western Europe (1830−2015)**
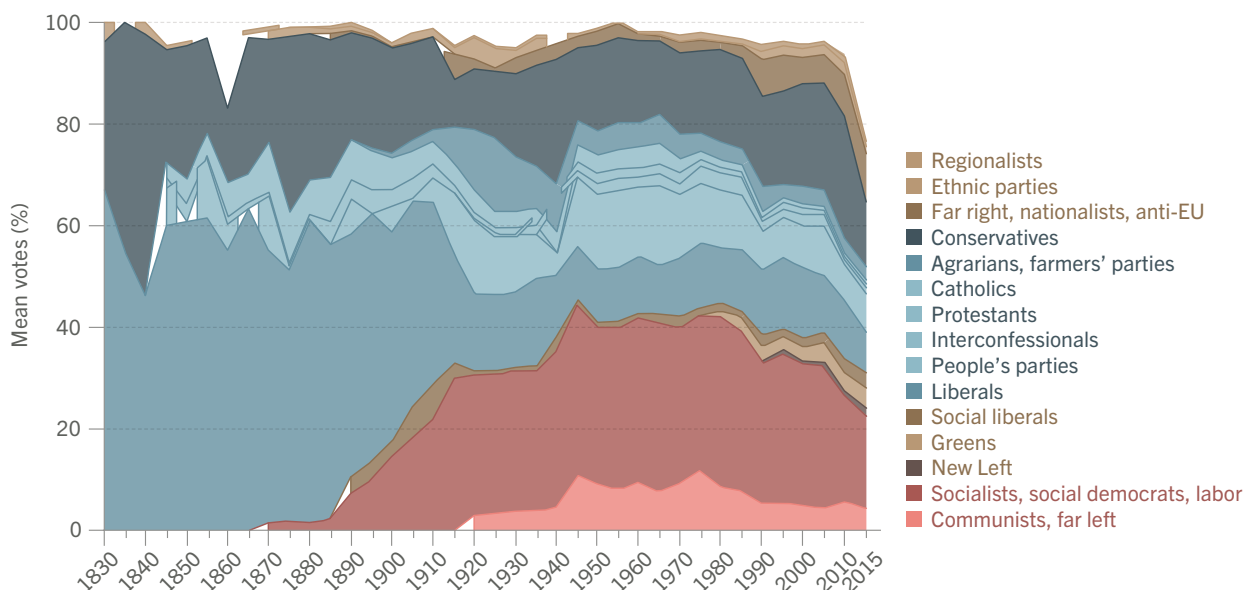
Source: Caramani (2023).[3]

Fig. 2 **Average programmatic polarization between political parties on issues of economic distribution (economic) and of sociocultural policies (cultural) over time**
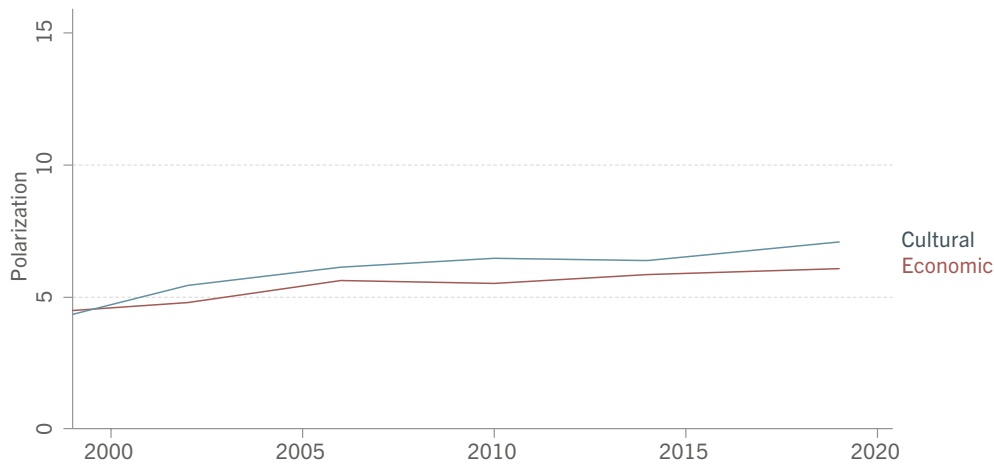
Source: Koedam et al. (2023) based on expert data.[4]

this process of decline of the so-called "mass parties" for Western Europe, and the fragmentation of the party spectrum through the rise of challenger parties.

The increasing fragmentation of the party system reflects the manifestation of new issues that are dividing citizens and parties. Indeed, it is notably the new challenger parties of the left and right that have put questions of immigration and international openness, social liberalism, inclusion and minority rights front and center on the agendas of Western democracies. Today, parties, voters and the media not only pay at least as much attention to these "new" issues than to traditional distributive questions (think of economic policy, market regulation or redistribution as topics at the heart of the "old" left-right divide), these issues are also increasingly the reasons why citizens cast their vote for a party in the first place.[1,2] Looking at European and North American politics today, these questions seem difficult to pacify, instead holding the potential for relentless polarization. In standard measures of political polarization (as shown in Figure 2), we thus observe a slow, but continuous increase in polarization between political parties across Western democracies. Figure 2 also reveals that polarization over sociocultural topics is now stronger than that over economic-distributive questions.

Recently, worries about democratic stability have also been sparked by instances of deliberate attacks on democratic institutions or the contestation of election results on the part of radical competitors that lost elections. The events around the election and voting out of President Trump in the U.S. are, of course, the prime example. The 2021 capitol riots constituted a point of culmination, leaving many observers around the globe in disbelief and worry about the resilience of liberal democracy. However, the attacks on U.S. democratic institutions had, of course, started much earlier and in varied, more subtle ways.[5,6] Democracy's enemies have been various in different historical periods, ranging from violence-prone minorities to the military overthrowing elected governments. However, "democratic backsliding" – a term coined in political science to describe and analyze the weakening of democratic institutions and practices – reflects a danger that comes from within the political system, when elected leaders themselves

6 January 2021, Capitol riot

Source: https://www.cfr.org/blog/two-years-after-january-6-some-reasons-optimism (visited: 09.06.2023).

Cover of the July 30, 2016 edition of *The Economist*

Source: https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2016-07-30 (visited: 09.06.2023).

endanger democracy. Today, this process is driven by far-right parties and politicians attacking the power of judges, the independence of the media, or the fundamental rights of minorities in countries as diverse as Poland, the U.S., Brazil, Denmark, or Switzerland.

Because democracy is endangered by actors situated at the fringes of the political spectrum, these recent developments have led citizens, observers and scholars alike to fear that it is *ideological polarization* – i.e. the growing distance between the alternatives that voters are presented with in a democratic election – that endangers democracy.

However, while these are hugely important questions and well-founded worries, it is important to take a step back and ask: What is actually new and different about programmatic polarization today? In this paper, we will first argue that while the level and nature of polarization is not new, it revolves around new issues and is mobilized by new actors in today's politics. Many observers in Western democracies are taken aback by the current dynamics of party polarization, because the era of relative programmatic convergence in the 1980s and 1990s seemed to suggest that ideologies were losing their grip of Western electorates. Hence, what today we may misread as chaos, volatility and an

apparently ever more important role of individual politicians in shaping the fortunes of political parties, are in fact "symptoms" of the formation of a new political cleavage that is likely to structure Western democracies in the foreseeable future. We find that a fundamental antagonism between universalistic and particularistic visions of society has emerged throughout the Western world, although to different extents and at different speeds.

It is important to take a step back and ask: What is actually new and different about programmatic polarization today?

In the final part of the paper, we then address evaluative and pragmatic questions. Should we be worried about the sustainability of liberal democracy? Programmatic polarization along the new cleavage is not necessarily dangerous for democracy, as conflict and the choice between clear alternatives are important, "functional" elements of democracy. However, weak institutions, institutionalized power asymmetries or technocratic abortions of democratic government may fuel polarization to an extent that it can indeed undermine democracy itself.

What is new about the polarization we are concerned about today?

The current era of political polarization is by no means a novelty in democratic history. In the 20th century, the religious cleavage – between different denominational factions on the one hand, as well as between the church and the state on the other hand – and the economic class cleavage were the most important fault lines in society. They defined the terms along which citizens set their political priorities and claims, and (new) political parties mobilized voters and integrated them into the democratic system by staking out positions along these two cleavages.

The class cleavage between labor and capital, organized by conservative, liberal and social-democratic mass parties, was the key conflict in Western societies in the mid-20th century, and we tend to underestimate its divisiveness.[7] Levels of labor conflict and strikes between the 1920s to the 1950s testify to an era of profound division and polarization. What we call the "democratic class compromise" refers to the pacification of this polarized cleavage by means of policies – a compromise encompassing mainly the protection of ownership and markets, combined with market regulation and a far-reaching redistribution of income and revenues through the state.[8] And while these were deeply divisive times, they also allowed for the mass mobilization of citizens via elections, and for the formation of stable political identities and ideological blocks. Increasingly proportional democratic systems ensured for interest representation and the strong links between political parties and social groups helped to stabilize democracy itself.

A second potential misunderstanding is the widespread idea that today's polarization is different in nature from polarization in earlier times. Indeed, some speculate that today's polarization is more "affective" (i.e. more laden with political affect, rather than based on rational preferences) than previous eras of political division, because current debates on nationalism, immigration, diversity and international integration revolve around issues of "identity" and group-belonging, rather than material distribution. However, all political cleavages entail conflicts over both material and symbolic resources, and to become durable, they need to be affectively charged. Being a "worker" or a "Catholic" was no less a political identity than what we observe today in conflicts between voters self-identifying as urban or rural, progressive or conservative, cosmopolitan or patriotic.[9] And the mobilization of workers or Catholics strived for material resources just as much as for dignity, social status and recognition.[10] Therefore, the juxtaposition of past democratic conflict as rational and materially grounded and of today's divisions governed by affect and centering on identity issues falls short of identifying the distinctive features of current polarization.

Finally, some fear that current levels of polarization have reached new levels of intensity, as people isolate in communicative "echo chambers" via partisan and social media. And while it is true that online communication has clearly transformed dynamics of media diffusion and consumption, research shows that exposure to like-minded information is driven more by individual choices than by social media

algorithms.[11] In addition, varying the exposure to content from like-minded sources on social media does not relate to levels of polarization in beliefs and attitudes.[12] Furthermore, news media was very clearly and strongly intertwined with political cleavages in the 20th century, as well. In the era of religious and class cleavage formation, most citizens lived in milieux that were thoroughly entrenched in one ideological side or "pillar" – what social scientists call the "pillarization of society"[13] – through schools, newspapers, residential segmentation, associations, and leisure.

So why then do many share the impression of democracy being endangered by the level and type of polarization we have been observing over the past twenty years?

One key to understanding this perception has been masterfully theorized by Harvard political scientist Peter Hall[14] who distinguishes three periods in the evolving relationship between the sphere of markets and the sphere of politics since 1945. While the post-1945 "era of modernization" was a period of primacy of democratic contention around class conflict, it was followed by an "era of liberalization" between the 1980s and the early 2000s, in which the economic market logic took primacy over politics. This resulted in a certain degree of programmatic convergence of the main political parties, not least in the context of the formation of the European internal market and the transfer of political authority to supranational institutions whose governance followed a technocratic, rather than a political logic. Many political scientists have studied this process of party convergence and have highlighted its problematic implications for democratic legitimacy and responsiveness, as voters are confronted with dramatically reduced levels of programmatic choice. Peter Mair[15] famously labelled this process of liberal convergence the "hollowing of Western democracy".

With the emergence of the radical left and the far right in the advanced democracies, as well as the return of macroeconomic interventionist policies in the wake of the Great Recession, Western democracies have clearly left this "era of liberalization" behind, entering a new era marked by the primacy of heightened political conflict. Indeed, with the emergence of new challenger parties, responsiveness and political engagement have generally increased, albeit – of course – at the cost of heightened polarization, and a decline in electoral stability and predictability.

Hence, polarized conflict today should not be compared with the exceptional period of convergence that span the 1980s to early 2000s, but rather to mid-20th century dynamics of democratic contention. At the same time, it is true that today's conflict revolves around new issues, for which a broad societal compromise – comparable to the "democratic class compromise" of the second half of the 20th century – has not yet been found. Compromise may also be harder to achieve as many issues at stake are not material in kind. Consequently, they might be harder to negotiate and the "losers" of the compromise more difficult to compensate.

Compromise may be harder to achieve, harder to negotiate and "losers" more difficult to compensate as many issues at stake are not material in kind.

Finally, the divide between universalism and particularism entails not only substantive policy issues (such as the level of immigration or the extent of international integration) but touches upon the understanding and definition of democracy itself. While the far right defends a conception of democracy based on popular majority rule, left parties on the opposite end of the divide stand for the defense of a broader definition of liberal democracy: as a regime of rights, separation of power and citizen

participation.[16,17] Think of the conflicts over the independence and power of the judiciary that have been launched in many countries over the past years by the far right, such as in Poland, the U.S., Italy, Switzerland, or Hungary. Such debates go straight to the heart of the institutional democratic governance and, indeed, have a very fundamental quality.

Hence, while there are several aspects that distinguish current dynamics of democratic polarization from earlier periods thereof, we need to keep in mind that programmatic polarization is not new, that it has always entailed affective and identity-related components, and that to an important extent, programmatic differentiation is functional for the quality of democracy. Indeed, if the choice of options is restricted, and parties do not represent the divisions that citizens consider salient, then democracy loses much of its normative weight. Programmatic polarization among citizens and parties cannot and should not be seen as necessarily dangerous or something that needs to be averted, for example via technocratic interventions or the banning of parties, since such strategies tend to fuel populism. This is especially true if the issues at stake in the democratic conflict are deeply rooted in society. As we will argue in the next section, this is indeed the case for the current divide between universalistic and particularistic visions of society.

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Factors accounting for the polarized conflict between universalism and particularism

Phases of political convergence and polarization alternate in democratic regimes. The recent period has certainly been one of polarization. Why? The public focus on particular leaders or events – think of President Trump or Brexit – may seem to suggest that political polarization itself originates in top-down strategies of leaders and powerful interests. However, the pervasiveness of the emerging polarization across all Western democracies, as well as a tremendous amount of research over the past decade show that the current dynamics of polarization have much deeper structural roots. Leaders and events may fuel, exacerbate or exemplify the divide that characterizes today's democracies, but

they are expressions of it, rather than its root cause.

Western economies and societies have undergone tremendous structural change over the past three to four decades. These processes of structural change have been both social and economic in nature, as they encompass – on the side of society – a massive educational expansion and the transformation of gender roles and family structures, just as much as – on the side of the economy – the globalization of markets and production chains, and processes of deindustrialization and automation. Furthermore, these developments have resulted in an increasing concentration of social

Fig. 3   Inequality and the decline of the middle class in the U.S. and Western Europe
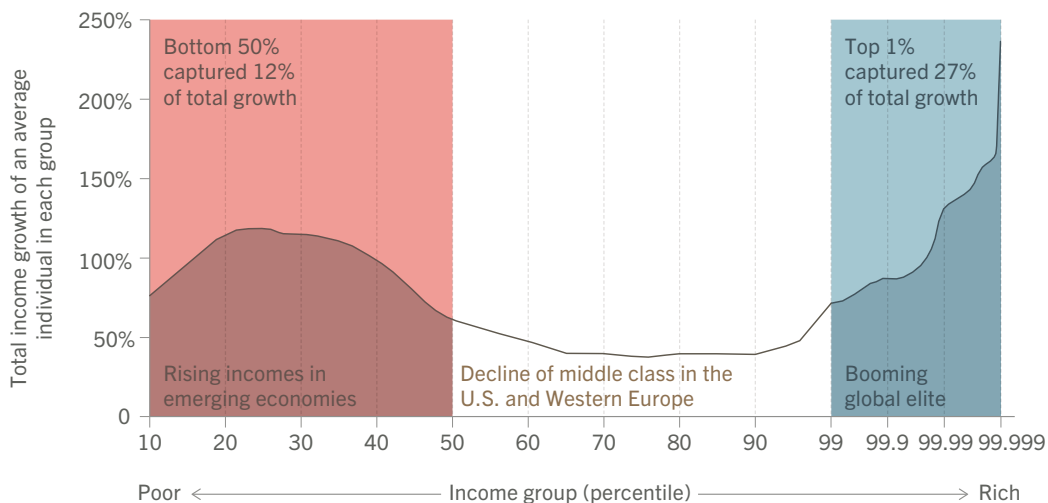
Source: Stiglitz (2018).[23]

Fig. 4   **Employment in agriculture, industry, and services over time**
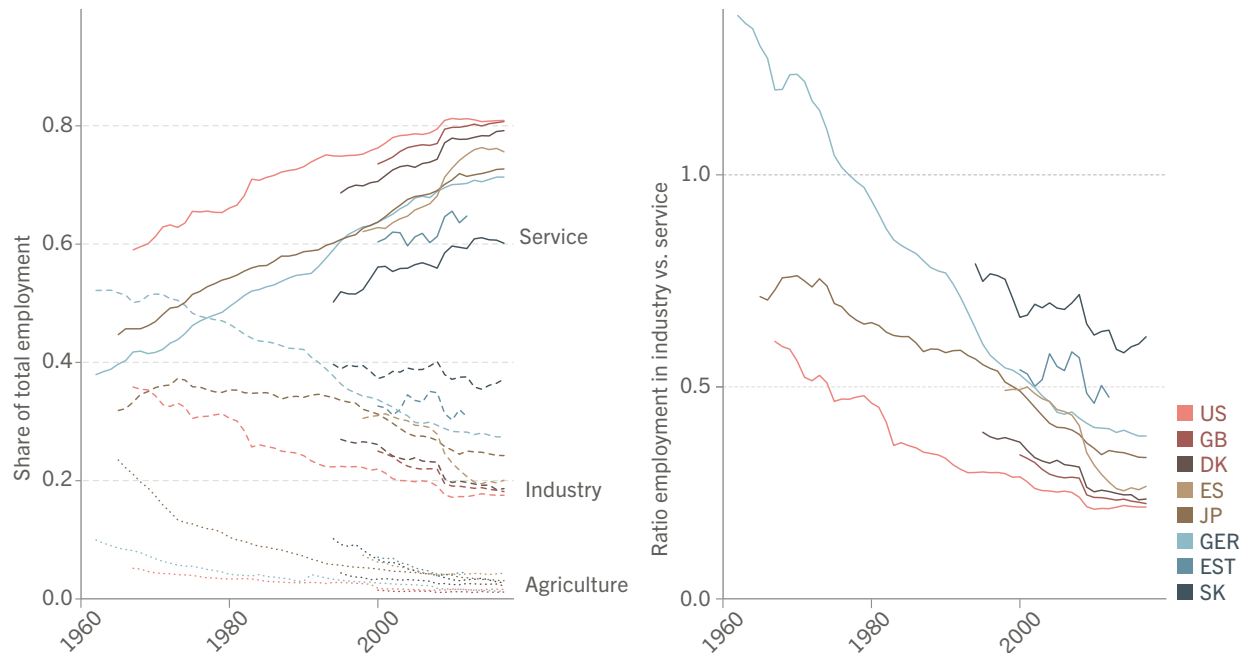
Source: OECD Data, from Garritzmann et al. (2022).[24]

and economic resources and opportunities in urban centers at the expense of remote regions. The key divide in Western democracies today opposes citizens and parties who support these transformations and those who are skeptical of them or reject them outright. The underlying motivations for either welcoming or opposing social and economic change are both material and cultural in nature, but it is important to recognize that the current processes of democratic polarization are not purely ideological, but very real in that they are anchored in the fabric of society. Structural changes have deeply transformed the living conditions, opportunities, and perspectives of different social groups in very unequal ways. And while both the "winners" and the "losers" of structural change tend to be mobilized politically on the basis of cultural messages and ideological appeals by new left and far-right parties, the structural roots of the new divide are both social and material.

We illustrate these structural transformations using three economic and political indicators: income inequality, occupational change, and the eroding organization of labor. Figure 3 shows the famous graph by Milanovic based on the World Inequality Report 2018. It illustrates that in the wake of globalization, deindustrialization and technological change, the middle classes in

Leaders and events may fuel, exacerbate, or exemplify the divide that characterizes today's democracies, but they are expressions of it, rather than its root cause.

Western democracies have experienced the lowest levels of income growth – in some instances even relative losses – while the gains of economic growth were concentrated among the elite. It is important to notice that the relative lagging behind of

Fig. 5 **Average union density rates and wage coordination in 18 advanced Western democracies 1960−2013**
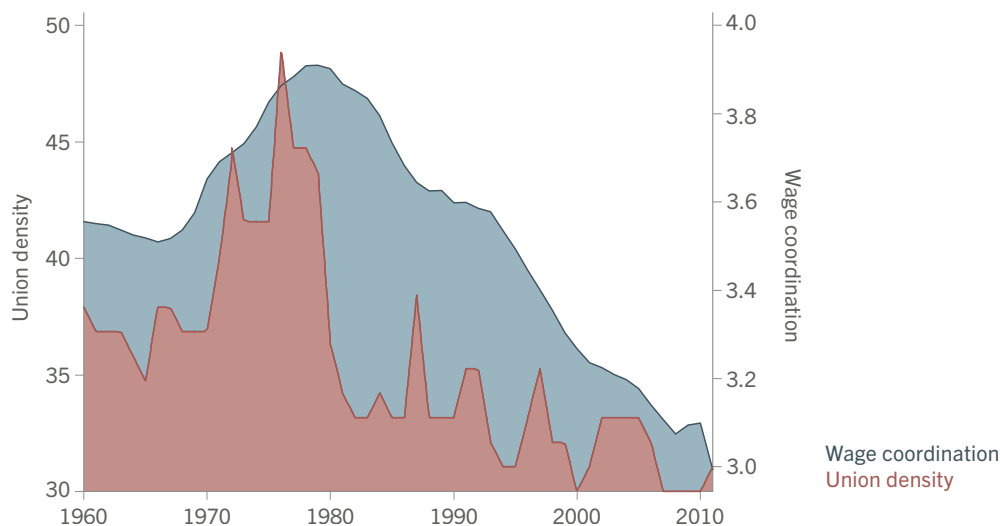
Source: Iversen and Soskice (2020) p. 106.[25]

the middle classes in these societies affects not only very large parts of the population, but also social classes that previously belonged to the main "winners" of economic growth and development, in particular the skilled industrial working classes. Their experience over the past decades has been one of *relative* decline, not only in income, but also in terms of opportunities and political power.

Regarding opportunities, Figure 4 illustrates the tremendous transformation of employment across sectors in Western democracies since 1960 by highlighting the U.S. and several European economies. While employment in the industries has basically been cut in half, service-sector jobs have seen a massive expansion. Moreover, occupational expansion takes place in very different types of employment: Job growth has been strongest in (high-)skilled, interpersonal, creative and cognitive employment in private and public organizations.[18] This differential occupational growth changes the material and social prospects and opportunities for different social groups. Women and the high-skilled belong to the relative winners of this development, while the low-skilled and (male) routine workforce see their opportunities

decline. Such experiences of rise and decline trigger not only material grievances, but also in terms of social status and recognition, and they manifest themselves in support for parties that either support or reject social modernization.[19,20,21]

The erosion of the skilled manufacturing workforce is also directly reflected in its declining political power. Both wage coordination and union density have plummeted in parallel to occupational structural change (see Figure 5). Labor unions have a much harder time organizing workers in the expanding service employment, not least because of the more decentralized location of employment. In addition, skilled service workers – if they organize at all – tend to do so more often in professional organizations than in encompassing trade unions, which fragments and undermines their political clout.[22]

All these indicators reflect clearly economic-structural processes of expanding or declining resources and opportunities, but they also entail transformations in the social realities of different social groups that go far beyond material resources. While for some social groups, the decline of the industrial society has opened up new

opportunities for development, as well as new sources of autonomy and recognition, other groups have experienced this decline as an erosion of a system of social order, values and recognition in which their social and political status was higher and secure. There is also a strong spatial component to this transformation, with social and economic resources concentrating in urban centers.[25] This spatial dimension famously led Rodriguez-Pose[26] to interpret the rise of right-wing populism as the "revenge of the places that don't matter". This description is telling as it points to questions of threats to status, recognition and identity as key motivations of political resentment and upheaval, rather than material grievances alone.

Thinking about current democratic divisions along the lines of shifting distributions of opportunities and social status allows us to understand the emergence of the so-called "new left" and the "far right" at the two extremes of the polarization we observe today.

Indeed, the social movements of the 1980s and 1990s mobilized around questions of social peace, international solidarity, gender equality, environmental protection, and social liberalism more generally. These movements were sustained by exactly those social groups who saw their economic and social opportunities expand in the wake of

deindustrialization: the expanding educated middle classes, large parts of them female and urban. Their priorities, needs and demands entered the political agenda and deeply transformed left politics across Western democracies, which is reflected in the "new left" label.[27] The mobilization of far-right parties from the late 1990s onwards can be seen as a direct reaction to this emergence of the new left, as it developed its program in straight antagonism to the agenda of the new left.[28] Over time, this antagonism between one extreme advocating the progressive "opening" of societies across borders, social groups and norms, and the other extreme defending existing boundaries and norms has crystallized into a new, polarized cleavage between "universalistic" and "particularistic" visions of social governance.

For political scientists, a political divide is a cleavage if it is clearly rooted in social structure, divides political groups along lines that they themselves identify with collectively, and is mobilized by political organizations. Today's polarization between the far right and the new left is in the process of developing into exactly such a cleavage. While the structural roots of the divide are very clear and material, the collective identities and claims with which voters are mobilized are primordially sociocultural. In a comparative research project, we studied the notions of "us" and "them" that

Fig. 6 **Education level, class, urban-rural residence and gender as determinants of closeness towards groups defined as "cosmopolitans", "being down-to-earth and rooted to home", and "having a migration background"**
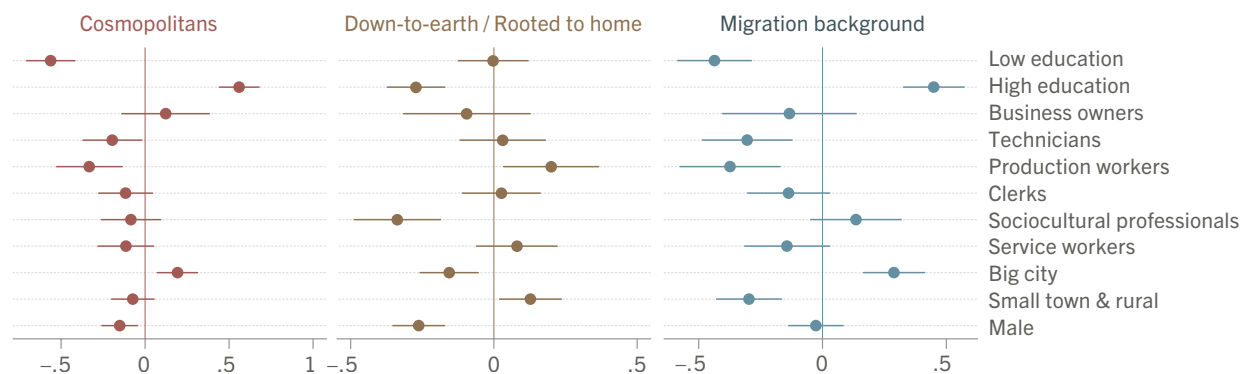
Source: Own analysis, based on data from Bornschier et al. (2024).[29]

underlie voting for the far right and the new left, and found identification with people "who are down-to-earth and rooted to home", "cosmopolitan" or "who have a migration background" to be the most polarizing between voters of different education levels (high vs. low), occupational classes (e.g. production workers vs. sociocultural professionals) or urban and rural residents (see Figure 6). In other words: Even though the roots of current democratic polarization are structurally entrenched in material conditions such as education, class or residence, the collective political identities they generate are first and foremost sociocultural in nature.

This is the reason why the universalistic and particularistic appeals of new left and far-right parties in terms of immigration, borders, inclusion and diversity, international integration etc. resonate so strongly with electorates that are defined by education, income, and place. Figure 7 shows how the collective identities rooted in social structure translate into politicized antagonisms between left-liberal and far-right parties. In most countries, the core antagonism with respect to these identities is between the new left and the far right, who have become by far the strongest contenders along the new cleavage. The liberal category in Figure 7 pertains mainly to

Emmanuel Macron's voters, who resemble those of the new left with respect to their position regarding universalism (but not on the economic divide).

Even though the roots of current democratic polarization are structurally entrenched in material conditions, the collective political identities they generate are first and foremost sociocultural in nature.

Spatial dynamics of concentration reinforce and exacerbate this divide in similar ways across countries. Figure 8 shows for the U.S., France and Germany how the far-right vote concentrates in regions that have been hit hardest by processes of economic and social decline over the past decades.

The upshot of this section is that the current process of polarization in Western democracies is not merely an expression of fragmentation, volatility or power-greedy leaders strategically igniting polarized conflict. Rather, it has deep social and

Fig. 7   **Identity divergence between supporters of party family blocks in 4 countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, UK)**
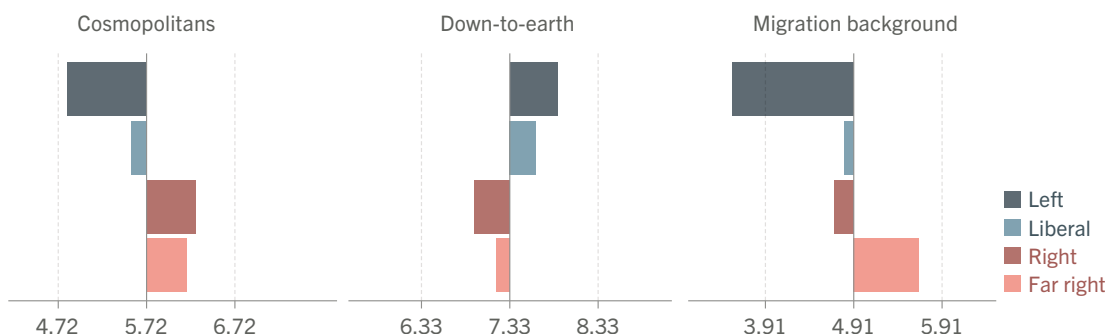
Note: Bars show how the voters of the party blocks deviate from the country average in their feelings of closeness or distance (0-10) to three social groups: "people who are down-to-earth and rooted to home", "cosmopolitan people", and "people with a migration background".

Source: Own analysis, based on data from Bornschier et al. (2024).[29]

Fig. 8   **Shares of far-right voting (Trump, Le Pen, AfD) in the U.S. (2020), France (2017), and Germany (2017)**
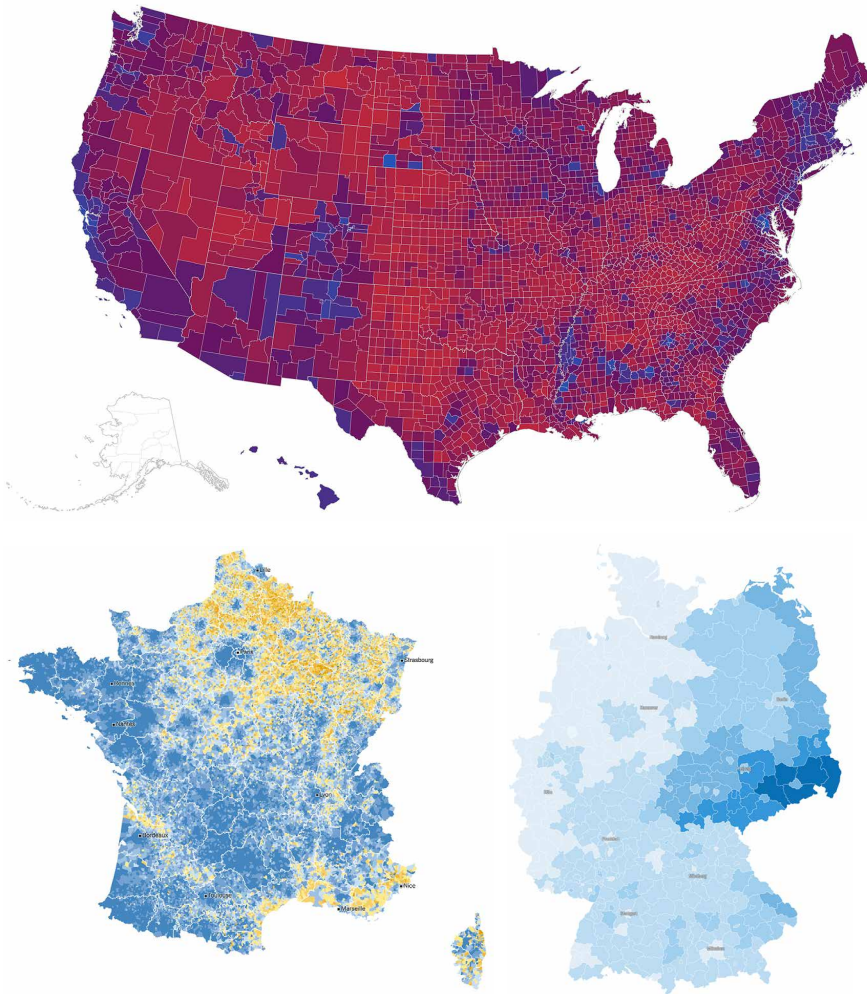
Note: The three maps show the shares of far-right voting in the respective countries. For the U.S., the Trump votes are shown in red (Biden votes in blue). For France, the yellow areas represent Le Pen votes (Macron votes are blue). The map of Germany shows the shares of Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD) voting in blue.

economic roots and reflects a genuine structural divide. The implications of this finding are several: One is that the divide is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Another is that it will be hard to pacify with economic policies alone. Our societies will have to develop strategies and institutions to cope with this type of political polarization in ways that do not endanger the democratic system itself.

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Cross-national variation in cleavage formation

The new cleavage between universalism and particularism has emerged across all Western democracies over the past decades, as its roots in social structure would lead us to expect. The structural transformations outlined in the previous section are characteristic of all advanced democracies, with some nuances. Nonetheless, there is of course variation across countries in the speed at which the cleavage has crystallized, and regarding the actors that have mobilized and represented it most successfully.
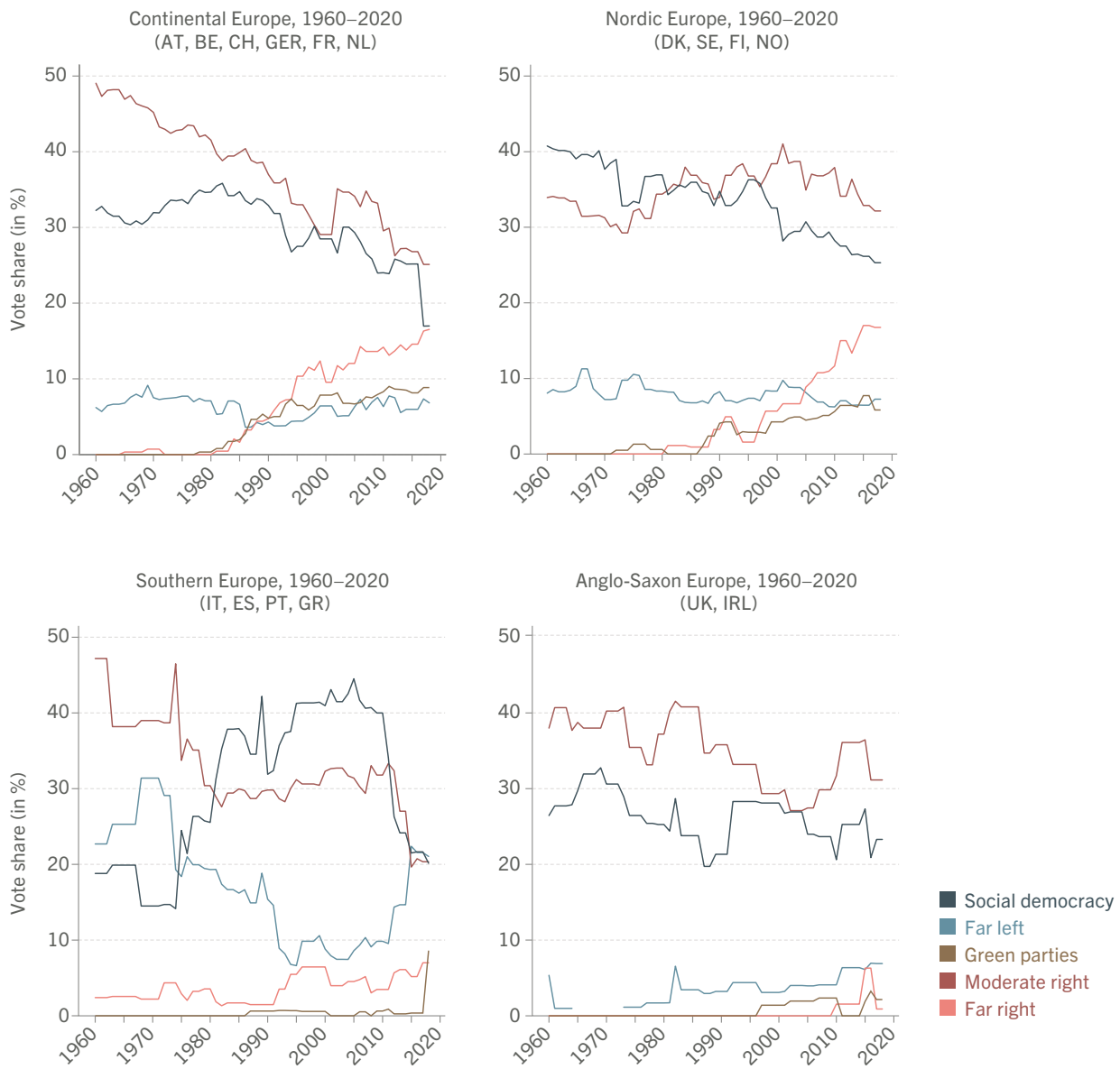
In several countries, such as France, Austria or the U.S., the divide between universalism and particularism has become the dominant political dividing line, exemplified by the clear antagonisms in presidential elections between liberal candidate Macron and far-right candidate Le Pen in France (2017 and again in 2022), green candidate van der Bellen and far-right exponent Hofer in Austria (2017), or the Democrats Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden who stood against Donald Trump – who ran as a Republican, but is widely considered to be an exponent of the far right – in two U.S. presidential elections (2016 and 2020).

In other contexts, the antagonism between a green/left-liberal camp on the one hand and the far right on the other hand has clearly emerged, as well, but it plays out alongside the economic cleavage that sets mainstream left and right parties apart. Nonetheless, we see parties with clear new left and far-right profiles here as well, reflected in the Germany's Green party and the Alternative for Germany (AfD), with similar contrasts discernible in the Scandinavian democracies and in Switzerland (see pages 18–20).

Hence, while we observe the decline of mainstream parties – affecting both social-democratic parties and those of the moderate right – and the concomitant rise of challenger parties across all countries, this process has occurred to different extents and at different levels of speed. Figure 9 shows the development of party vote shares in national elections over time, grouped by the main West European regions. We see that the emergence of far-right and green challenger parties has been most pronounced in continental and Nordic democracies of Europe, whereas in Southern Europe, the radical left plays a more important role than the Greens in challenging the established social-democratic parties. The contrast is most striking, however, with the UK and Ireland, where majoritarian electoral institutions stabilize the size of the mainstream labor and conservative parties. It would be wrong, however, to interpret the more stable vote shares of these mainstream parties as evidence of party system stability. Rather, similar to the U.S. development, the new left and far right are gaining ground *within* the traditional parties, contributing to intense struggles over control of the parties.

Fig. 9   **Development of electoral shares in national elections for different party families over time**

Continental Europe, 1960–2020
(AT, BE, CH, GER, FR, NL)

Nordic Europe, 1960–2020
(DK, SE, FI, NO)

Southern Europe, 1960–2020
(IT, ES, PT, GR)

Anglo-Saxon Europe, 1960–2020
(UK, IRL)

Social democracy
Far left
Green parties
Moderate right
Far right

Source: Own analysis, based on data from ParlGov (https://www.parlgov.org/).

Switzerland: from consensus to polarization

Demonstrations for equal rights for women and sexual minorities in Zurich, 1979.

Source: Keystone.

Demonstration against Switzerland joining the European Economic Area, 1991.

Source: Keystone.

Switzerland has long been seen as the prototypical case of a stable consensus democracy, characterized by moderate levels of party polarization and power-sharing institutions at the levels of elections (PR electoral system), government (grand coalition), and territorial organization (federalism). And while the power-sharing institutions have (so far) largely remained in place, the Swiss party system has since the 1990s become one of the most polarized in Europe.

Switzerland has also historically been no stranger to party polarization. Both the "Kulturkampf" between Catholics and Protestants, as well as the class conflict between the labor movement and the right-wing parties were particularly salient and contentious in the late 19th and early 20th century. It is only with the adoption of power-sharing institutions in industrial relations ("social partnership" from the late 1930s onwards) and in government formation (the "magic formula" adopted in 1959, including the four largest parties in the government coalition) that political conflict was moderated. However, this centripetal dynamic of conflict moderation and consensus-building eroded quickly from the 1980s onwards, when a very strong mobilization of new social movements on the left — leading to the emergence of green, left-alternative and feminist parties — was soon met with an equally successful mobilization on the far right. Hence, Switzerland was deeply affected by the new cleavage polarization already in the 1990s, with citizens and parties debating issues of gender equality, immigration, and European integration.[30]

**Fig. 10 Educational composition of major Swiss parties**
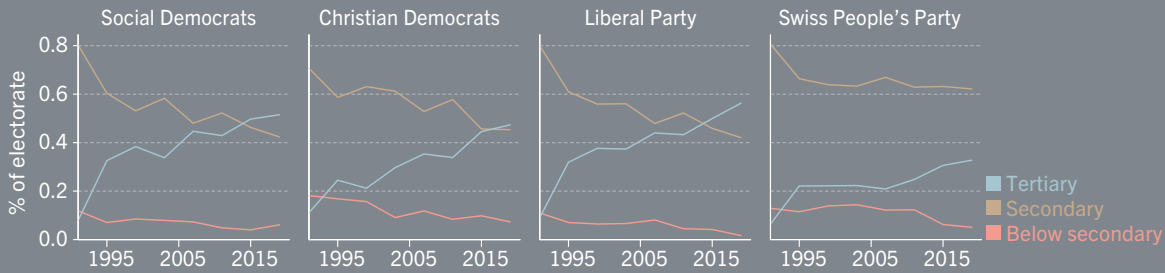
Source: Traber and Zollinger (2024), based on SELECTS data.[30]

Why did Switzerland experience such an early and pronounced dynamic of polarization? The answer lies in structural, strategic, as well as institutional factors. Structurally, deindustrialization, as well as the comparatively late processes of educational expansion and labor market feminization changed Swiss society profoundly and rapidly from the 1980s onwards. These processes fueled a strong mobilization of the growing educated middle classes in the context of the new social movements of the time: Citizens mobilized in large numbers to protest for peace, environmental protection, equal rights, and the free choice of lifestyles. The Swiss Social Democratic party strategically adapted to these changes very early on, integrating the topics and claims of the new social movements, and thereby mobilizing an entirely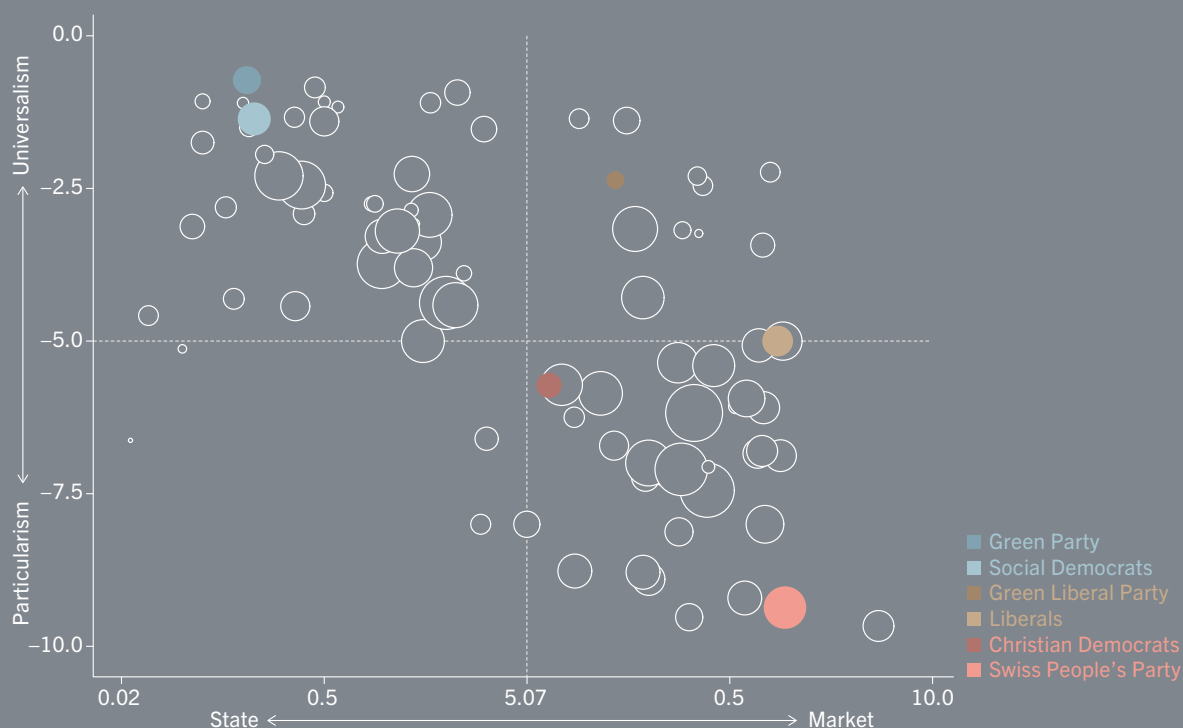 new electorate among educated middle class voters.[31] This strategic repositioning of the mainstream left in Switzerland contributed to an early antagonism between a strong "new" green-left pole in the Swiss party system and a national-conservative counterposition embodied in the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Indeed, the SVP experienced the steepest electoral triumph of all European far-right parties already in the 1990s, at the expense of the liberal and Christian democratic parties, and integrating many smaller far-right competitors. Figure 10 illustrates how educational expansion in Switzerland ushered into a fundamental transformation of party electorates, with most parties now counting a majority of highly educated voters in their electorate. The SVP is the typical exception in this respect, as it remains the only party mobilizing a majority of voters without tertiary education.

Fig. 11 The erosion of government consensus in Switzerland, 1941—2023
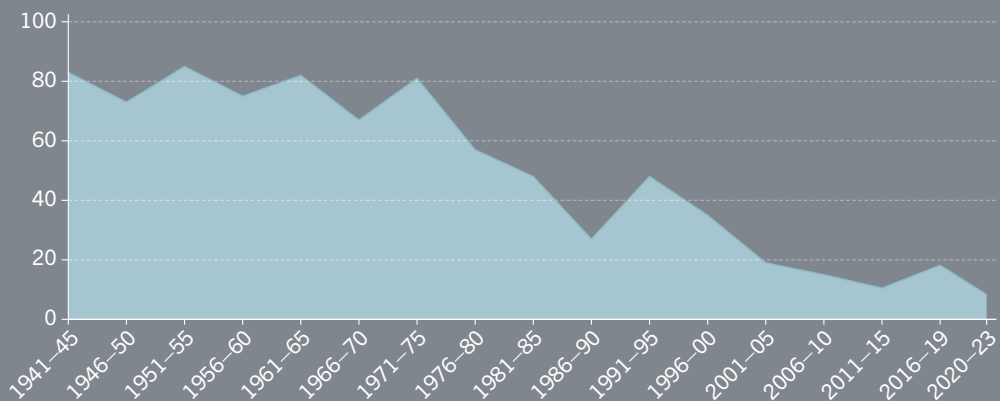
Source: Vatter, Adrian (2020), p. 540.[33] With updates by the original author based on data from Swissvotes (2023).

Fig. 12 **Positioning of parties in the ideological space in Switzerland and Western Europe (Swiss parties highlighted)**

Legend:
- Green Party
- Social Democrats
- Green Liberal Party
- Liberals
- Christian Democrats
- Swiss People's Party

Axes: Universalism / Particularism (vertical), State ← → Market (horizontal)

Source: Zollinger (2022), based on expert data. (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ajps.12743).[34]

While citizens and political parties became ever more antagonistic, the Swiss institutions of power-sharing and proportionality remained in place. Even though the grand government coalition between the Social Democrats (SP), the Liberal Democrats (FDP), the Christian Democrats (CVP / now Mitte) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) was slightly modified in the early 2000s (with the CVP losing one seat to the SVP), it has so far survived. However, party polarization has left deep traces on the functioning and effectiveness of the Swiss democratic institutions, which require broad compromises and consensus for effective governance. In particular, party polarization has led to a massively increased use of direct democracy as a means of electoral competition[32] and to the erosion of consensus in the federal government. Figure 11 tellingly illustrates the declining ability of the "magic formula" to achieve consensus. The share of popular votes for which all government parties adopt the same voting recommendation has declined from almost 80 to near zero percent in only four decades.

The erosion of consensus coincides and results from the programmatic party polarization Switzerland has been experiencing for the past decades. In comparison with the other West European countries (Figure 12), the Swiss party system even emerges among the most polarized. This is true with regard to the "old" economic divide over state intervention or market liberalism, as well as with regard to the "new" divide between universalism and particularism (in fact, in Switzerland, these two cleavages coincide to a large degree). What is particularly remarkable about Switzerland is the fact that we find the two strongest parties — SVP and SP — at the extremes of programmatic competition. In the concluding section to this paper, we show that even affective polarization in Switzerland has reached similar levels to the U.S. However, while the clash between consensus-requiring institutions and party polarization leads to serious problems of reform deadlock (in important policy areas such as the EU-Swiss relations or old-age pension reform), we explain in the conclusions why the risk of democratic backsliding remains much lower in Switzerland than in contexts such as the U.S.

Between healthy competition and dangerous polarization

At various points already, we have highlighted that a certain degree of programmatic polarization is necessary for democracy to function. Parties that take clear and distinctive positions allow voters to orient themselves in politics, to acquire information on the available options, and to identify parties that best represent their interests and preferences – and this applies also to voters who opt for moderate competitors. Most importantly, according to eminent political theorist Robert Dahl, it is one of the defining features of democracy that policymakers *respond* to the demands of citizens.[35] Furthermore, there is ample evidence that the programmatic convergence of parties fosters disaffection, which results in declining turnout and opens space for populist challengers who stake out more clear-cut policy proposals for voters who do not find their preferences represented in parties' political offers.

At the same time, polarization often implies a strengthening of populist forces. While populism can thus help to bring disaffected citizens back into the political arena, its majoritarian vision of democracy disregards minority rights and institutions – such as the judiciary and parliaments – which put checks on executive power. This dilemma, while well recognized in political science,[16] is not easily solved: On the one hand, voters supporting populist parties indeed stand out for their radical preferences either in economic terms (in the case of voting for radical populist left), or with respect to the issues associated with the universalism-particularism cleavage (as research on the radical populist right shows). In other words: their political preferences are genuine and seek democratic representation. The popular notion that populist voters are not actually radical, but merely wish to signal their discontent with established political parties is mistaken. On the other hand, their representation may undermine certain aspects of democracy: The erosion of *liberal democracy* – which is captured in the term "democratic backsliding" – is driven precisely by populist leaders that win power and seek to remodel democracy's institutions.

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Polarization therefore seems to endanger democracy chiefly where radical populists succeed in winning decisive executive power. In Western Europe's political systems combining parliamentarism with multiparty representation, this is unlikely. For one thing, the fact that the universalism-particularism cleavage is rooted in social structure confines the radical populist right's appeal to certain segments of the population, while making its discourse unattractive for many others. Indeed, electorates have not become more anti-immigrant overall over the past decades.[36] It is rather that a loud minority today succeeds in making itself heard, while the dominance of the traditional state-market and religious cleavages kept the issue of immigration off the political agenda until roughly the 1970s. For another thing, polarization by its very nature strengthens the forces on *both* sides of a divide. Consequently, many citizens forcefully oppose the radical right's assault on immigration,

gender equality, and minority rights such as those concerning the LGBTQI+ community. These social groups are strongly aligned with the new left, and out of reach for the radical populist right. Consequently, the very nature of polarization puts an effective check on the power of populists, perhaps even more so than the institutional checks and balances designed to diffuse political power.

Of course, the conditions that safeguard liberal democracy from its challengers are not evenly distributed around the world, and not even within the old democracies of Western Europe and Northern America. Donald Trump's disrespect for democratic institutions is well known, and in the more recent democracies with more fragile institutions, examples of elected leaders that hollow out liberal democracy abound – think of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the governments headed by the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Narendra Modi in India. These examples alert us to the importance of a balance of power between the main political contenders (or party camps) in securing democracy. Among the examples just cited, many do not belong to the established and economically advanced democracies, and the balance of power is tilted in favor of ideologically radical incumbents who may have better chances of winning power because of the fragmentation of their prodemocratic opponents. Indeed, while the opposition to such radical governments often rallies voters that oppose the degradation of democracy, it is not ideologically united in the way the new left is in Western Europe. It is thus the weakness of the underlying "symmetrical" cleavages structuring the party system that puts these democracies at risk, rather than excessive polarization.

This makes the U.S. an important and interesting case. Why is the danger of polarization spinning out of control more real in the country with the world's oldest constitution, while this is much less the case in Western Europe? The most obvious reason is that presidential systems are far less equipped to handle polarization than parliamentary systems of governance. In the latter, the prime minister by definition enjoys support by a parliamentary majority (or at least a plurality in the case of minority governments), while the separate election of the executive and legislative powers in presidential systems often brings leaders to power that lack legislative support. Populist or radical presidents then find it difficult to put into practice the policies for which they have received a popular mandate, leading them to attack the legislative and judicative powers to break the institutional deadlock.

But there are also more specific factors at play in the U.S. case. In fact, the Republicans only won a popular majority once since 1988, and in all other instances won only due to the overrepresentation of rural, conservative districts, without receiving a majority of the popular vote. In a new, provocative book, Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that U.S. institutions grant excessive power to minorities.[6] As the unwillingness of the Republican party to expand its traditional electoral coalition in an increasingly multicultural country makes it difficult for the party to win popular majorities in competitive elections, the party tolerates leaders that resort to undemocratic means to secure power.

Political systems vary in the degree to which they incite cooperation among the main political contenders. If polarized presidential systems constitute one extreme of a continuum, a collegial government such as the Swiss executive council, where the largest parties share power, represents the other pole. Parliamentary systems in Western Europe lie in between the two – but clearly closer to the Swiss case than the U.S. – in forcing parties with contrasting programs to talk to one another and to engage in political compromise. We further reflect on the nature of polarization in different political contexts in the concluding section.

Conclusions: managing democratic polarization

How can societies deal with polarized programmatic conflict? Ideally, the political system produces policies, which entail compensation and foster compromises to maintain both effective governance and social peace. Such substantive pacification of political conflict via policies is, of course, seriously hampered in a context where the antagonism is strong and neither side is willing to give in. Hence, a certain moderation of conflict itself seems rather a precondition than an outcome to policy compromise.

At the level of society, integrative institutions such as strong public schools and universities can play an important role in fostering social cohesion. If such institutions run counter to political dividing lines, they foster multiple belongings of citizens and cross-cutting divides. Experiencing the "political other" in one's social networks contributes to less hostile polarization despite pronounced programmatic differences. In this sense, any services and institutions that create integrative experiences across political divides – from good public transport to public media or well-maintained public spaces – may moderate affective segmentation.

The contrast between Switzerland and the U.S. is instructive and illustrative in this regard. Both countries have reached similar levels of affective political polarization. In other words, political conflict is not only programmatic, but both sides have strong feelings when it comes to their own political camp and when thinking about those on the other side of the cleavage. However, affective polarization in the U.S. is strongly driven by "out-party disliking", i.e. by negative feelings towards the "other side", rather than by positive feelings about one's own political party. By contrast, affective polarization in Switzerland is mainly driven by positive feelings towards the party voters choose in elections. Figure 13 shows this difference based on survey data measuring affect on standard "feeling thermometers". The strong positive identification with one's party in Switzerland has much to do with the multi-party system, allowing voters to identify quite precisely the political party that stands for their policy positions, while this choice is much more constrained in the U.S. two-party system. Beyond this, we can speculate that the lower levels of social, spatial and political segmentation in Switzerland help prevent strong negative affective dislike towards the "other side".

These social dynamics in Switzerland are reinforced by political institutions that require and support the political integration of programmatic adversaries. The collegial grand coalition government may have become less effective in policy output and problem-solving, but it guarantees the integration of political adversaries and their commitment to the political system.
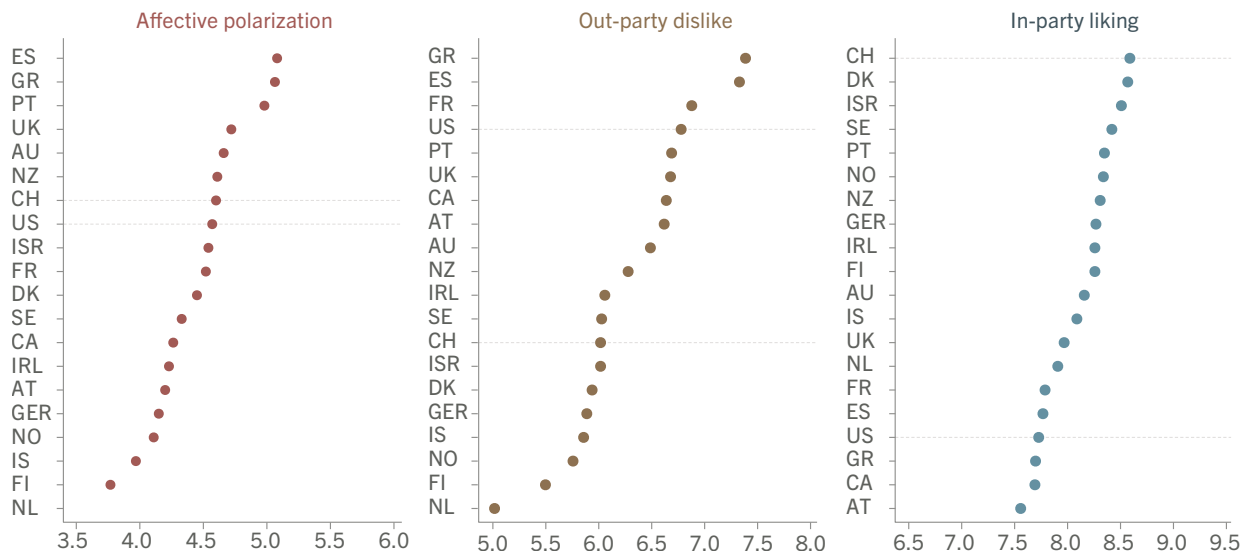

Members of the Swiss government on their annual summer excursion in 2022.

Source: Keystone.

Fig. 13 **Cross-national variation in affective polarization and its components**

Source: Gidron et al. (2020: 23).[37]

Contrast this with the majoritarian U.S. presidential elections, which are extremely contested. Even after one side has won the presidential elections, polarization continues and both sides try to block each other from achieving policy outputs. This frustration reinforces polarization and encourages attacks on the very institutions, especially when these are weak.

Finally, a word on technocratic government as a solution to political polarization and deadlock is in order. While technocracy – e.g., by means of caretaker governments or non-partisan technocratic governments – may seem a tempting "way out" of democratic polarization, it may yield returns on policy effectiveness only in the short run. When technocratic governments are formed in a context of crisis – think of Italy in between 2021 and 2022 under former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi or the Monti cabinet that governed between 1993 and 1994 – populist parties tend to see their vote shares rise in the following elections. When polarization and programmatic conflict is real and rooted in society, it seems more promising to develop ways to integrate, rather than bypass it.

When polarization and programmatic conflict is real and rooted in society, it seems more promising to develop ways to integrate, rather than bypass it.

After President Trump's State of the Union Address in 2020, House Speaker Pelosi ripped a copy of his speech when he refused to shake her hand.

Source: Reuters.

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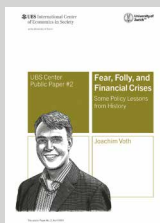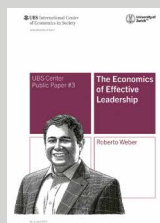
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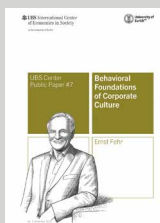The Economics
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