TRUEDEM
Trust in European Democracies

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Emerging Political Cleavages, Ideological Party Polarization, and Political Trust in European Politics

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Party politics and political trust

- The concern with political (institutional) trust is deeply rooted in ensuring the survival of representative democracy.
- Political trust is an essential attitude that translates directly in political behaviour, both in competitive elections and beyond.
- European political systems operate as party democracies, whereby parties play a crucial role in linking citizens' preferences and views on important policy issues to the decision-making process.
- The regular and legitimate functioning of parties is therefore a key condition for the stability of the democratic system and trust in democracy (and its institutions) in general.
- On the contrary, citizens disenchanted with politics and dissatisfied citizens with low levels of political trust are more likely to cast votes for challenger parties, i.e. antiestablishment, populist, and/or radical parties.

European party politics under reconstruction

- While most of the 20th century could be described as the age of parties, the modernization process has created tremendous changes and many Western democracies have shifted from "class-based" to "multidimensional" ("multiconflictual") party systems.
- The salience of the classic long-established cleavages focused on economic distribution has declined, and instead new demands came to the forefront of the agenda, with the new cultural and quality-of-life issues (such as the environment, sustainable development, immigration and other liberal policies) becoming more salient.
- Furthermore, citizens have increasingly perceived established parties as elite-driven, unrepresentative, and untrustworthy in recent decades.
- These changes have resulted in a gradual weakening of partisan identifications among voters and, as a consequence, in an increase in electoral volatility, both within-system and extra-system (particularly due to the rise in popularity of challenger outsider parties that accentuate a strong anti-institutional impulse in the latter case).

Objectives

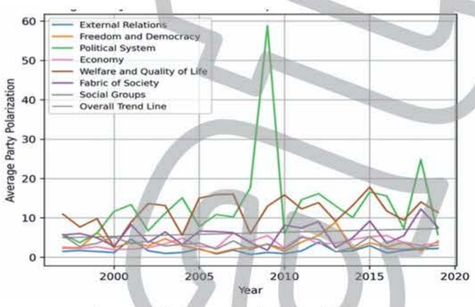
- The rise of political polarization has reflected the set of new and realigned cleavages.
- Since polarization represents "the quality of party competition", the question is how the party system polarization affects political trust.
- Hence, the paper explores the dynamic relationship between emerging political cleavages, party system polarization, and political trust, focusing specifically on how ideological party polarization affects trust in partisan political institutions, such as the government, parliament and parties.
- More specifically, we ask how party system polarization and trust in political institutions are correlated.

Methods and Data

- We used a fixed-effects (FE) model, regressing the outcome variables on our quantitative measure of ideological party polarization.
- Specifically, we regressed trust in parties, national parliaments, and national government on our measure of ideological party polarization, aggregated in the respective Manifesto project domains: "external relations," "freedom and democracy," "political system," "economy," "welfare and quality of life," "the fabric of society," and "social groups."
- We chose the FE model to account for unobserved heterogeneity across countries and over time, therefore controlling for time-invariant characteristics within countries.
- However, due to autoregression in our data, which persisted despite using various methods to control for it, such as Feasible Generalized Least Squares, we chose the First Differences estimator. This approach helped us obtain results where the model's residuals did not exhibit significant autocorrelation, enhancing our results' robustness.
- When estimating the models, the causality from party system polarization to political trust was assumed.
- To this end, the Eurobarometer data on political trust and the Manifesto Project data on how different political parties express their ideological stances over time (between 1990 and 2019) were utilized. Combining these data, a panel dataset of 155 observations was created.

Results

- The research confirms that average polarization of the European party systems is increasing slightly over time, with the "political system", "welfare and quality of life", and "fabric of society" domains appearing to be the drivers of this upward trend.
- These findings also support the assumption that different issue domains exhibit different degrees of party polarization.



- In contrast, in the case of the macro-level relationship between ideological party polarization and trust in partisan political institutions, the initial expectations that a higher level of party system polarization fuels the decline in political trust were not confirmed.
- Indeed, the research suggests that there exist significant relationships only for two ideological and issue domains, namely "freedom and democracy" (negative and significant estimates for the outcome variables trust in parties and parliaments) and "social groups" (positive and significant estimates for the outcome variables trust in parties, parliaments, and the government).
- Conversely, the research did not provide conclusive evidence for the other five ideological and issue domains as the estimates were not statistically significant, and therefore it is not possible to draw meaningful conclusions about how these ideological domains are correlated with political trust.
- Nevertheless, the original assumption that polarization within each issue dimension has varying impacts on political trust has been confirmed.

Table 1: First Differences Regression Results

	Outcome Variables		
	Trust in Political Parties	Trust in Parliament	Trust in Government
external_relations	-0.996	-0.970	-2.365
	(0.756)	(1.604)	(1.919)
freedom_democracy	-1.387**	-2.566**	-1.111
	(0.417)	(0.612)	(0.868)
political_system	-0.335	-0.954	-0.993
	(0.390)	(0.943)	(1.227)
economy	-1.222+	-0.865	-1.336
	(0.666)	(1.984)	(2.453)
welfare_quality_life	-0.060	-0.509	-2.583
	(0.641)	(1.625)	(1.800)
fabric_society	-1.357	-4.717+	-4.114+
	(0.908)	(2.355)	(2.251)
social_groups	2.191*	4.996**	6.447**
	(1.005)	(1.574)	(1.644)
Obs	58	58	58
Adj. R^2	0.284	0.245	0.248
F-stat	2.892	2.365	2.402

Why It Matters

- The study sought to explore the dynamic relationship between party system polarization and political trust as a powerful resource for political legitimacy and a determinant of regime stability.
- Even though the present study cannot determine exactly what the relationship and causality between emerging political cleavages, party system polarization, and political trust are, its results provide valuable insights into the potential impact of ideological party polarization on trust in political institutions.
- Specifically, the chosen methodology enables to identify how ideological party polarization and trust in political institutions correlate. Indeed, provided the direction of causality is correctly identified, the results may be an important step towards providing important insights into how ideological party polarization affects trust in political institutions.