



D2.2: Report on long-term trends in the symptoms/effects of the Representative Disconnect across Europe

WP2 – Contextual analysis of disconnect: long-term trends

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1 Introduction

This deliverable 2.2 presents a preliminary analysis on the long-term trends characterising the emergence of a “representative disconnect” between citizens and their representatives, focusing on its supposed symptoms and effects, such as: whether citizens still firmly support democracy, their levels of trust in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy, and, finally, aggregate over time and across countries levels of electoral participation. The achievement of this goal relies on Deliverable 2.1, which collected existing mass surveys to compile a list of batteries and items that can allow us to describe the long-term trends of several indicators and identify similarities and differences. Deliverable 2.2 is a natural link between the already mentioned D2.1 and Task 2.3 whose aim is to theorise on the symptoms and effects of the representative disconnect.

In the REDIRECT project the term “disconnect” is defined as the multidimensional phenomenon of regression of the *demos-kratos* linkage involving institutional, behavioural and affective components. The call from which the REDIRECT project descends described the current state of representative democracy as being in flux, pointing to several challenges triggered by cultural, social and economic factors. Without engaging in the endless (and to a certain extent pointless) attempt to define whether or not these challenges amount to a crisis, we can however start from the consideration that both academics and observers describe some of the changes affecting our democratic systems as signs of a more general malaise experienced by representative democracies in new and old representative democracies.

The theoretical framework of the REDIRECT project “starts from the assumption that the political system of representative democracy is embedded in a broader representative ecology and that such interaction is vital for the legitimate and efficient functioning of the political system” (D1.1, p. 17). The representative system has an institutional component that has been evolving in the 19th and 20th centuries, whose main pillars are legislative assemblies, political parties and the party system, the traditional channels of intermediation between citizens and the governing capacity. The broader representative ecology consists of civil society in all its possible articulations (advocacy organisations, the media, and social movements). It is assumed that support for the representative democratic regime, trust in political institutions and the decision to contribute to the life of the political system are essential and determined by the effective interaction between the institutional machinery of the representative systems and the broader ecology in which they operate. On this the present document is meant to develop the discussion set also by deliverable 1.3 on the forms and dimensions of the “representative disconnect” (D1.3, p. 38).

At this stage, this deliverable gathers analyses and interprets the trends of some commonly adopted indicators of democratic dissatisfaction in the eighth countries which are central to the REDIRECT project: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland and the United Kingdom. The next section discusses these indicators and their theoretical significance. Next, we proceed to analyse their trends in the last decades and we discuss their significance for our endeavour.

2 Literature review: dimensions and trends

The academic and intellectual debate over the health of democracy is currently characterised by some ideas, which are not new but have recently acquired new momentum. This cultural climate can be summarised as follows: citizens in the Western world are increasingly indifferent to democratic principles, dissatisfied with the performance of democratic political systems, and lack trust in political institutions. The explicit or implicit risk is that these factors may eventually trigger democratic deconsolidation. Given this picture, it is not surprising that political science has devoted increasing attention to the evolving relationship between citizens and their democratic institutions. In this vein, REDIRECT aims to understand whether and to what extent the gap between the populace and the political system designed to represent them has recently increased. Following a consolidated tradition (Dalton 2004; Ferrín and Kriesi 2016, 2025; Martini & Quaranta 2020; Montero & Torcal 2006; Norris 1999, 2011; Pharr et al. 2000; van Ham et al. 2017; Van der Meer 2017), to comprehensively understand this complex issue, we go beyond the analysis of single survey items and produce a simultaneous examination of multiple indicators of citizens' support for the political system.

This deliverable focuses on four key indicators: support for the democratic regime, satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions, and electoral turnout. The first three are widely studied as viable survey measures to tap into different levels of system support. Referring to the Eastonian distinction between diffuse and specific support, support for democratic principles is a form of diffuse support, trust for political institutions is quite specific, while satisfaction with how democracy works is in between the other two. In addition to citizens' orientations, we also consider voter turnout as a behavioural aspect of the disconnection. While these indicators have often been studied in isolation, we argue that analysing them jointly provides a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of democratic health and potential disconnection (Thomassen 2015; Zmerli & Van Der Meer 2017). By examining long-term trends across European countries, we aim to shed light on the nature and extent of democratic disconnection. This approach allows us to discern whether observed changes represent critical declines, cyclical fluctuations, or more complex patterns that vary across different political contexts (Norris 2011; Pharr et al. 2000). Our analysis is grounded in the understanding that democracy requires not only functional institutions but also citizen engagement and support to thrive (Diamond 1999; Linz & Stepan 1996). Therefore, negative trends in these indicators, particularly when observed in tandem, may signal challenges to democratic consolidation or stability.

In the following sections, we will delve into each of these four dimensions, discussing their conceptual foundations, measurement challenges, and the ongoing scholarly debates surrounding their trends and implications.

2.1 Support for the democratic regime

The evaluation of the democratic regime refers to how citizens are committed to the ideals and principles inspiring democratic systems. This concept is crucial in understanding the legitimacy and stability of democratic regimes. As Linz and Stepan (1996) argue, democratic consolidation relies on three processes: behavioural, constitutional, and attitudinal consolidation. While

the first two involve institutional and elite-level factors, the third – attitudinal consolidation – directly relates to citizens’ evaluations of democracy. Diamond (1999, p. 65) emphasizes that for democracy to be consolidated, it requires “broad and deep legitimation, such that all significant political actors, both at the elite and mass levels, believe that the democratic regime is the most appropriate for their society, better than any other realistic alternative they can imagine”. This legitimacy is partly achieved when democracy produces outcomes that meet citizens’ preferences and expectations (Morlino & Montero 1995; Chu et al. 2008).

Support for democracy has been incorporated into numerous comparative surveys, enhancing our understanding of both established and emerging democracies (Chu et al. 2008; Klingemann & Fuchs 1995; Norris 1999; Rose et al. 1998). Long-term trends in the evaluation of democracy have been the subject of several studies, revealing complex patterns across different regions and time periods. Foa and Mounk (2016) analysed data from the World Values Survey and found a decline in support for democracy in several Western countries, particularly among younger generations. They argue that this trend could signal a “deconsolidation” of democracy in these nations. However, their findings have been contested by other scholars who suggest that support for democracy remains relatively stable in most established democracies (Alexander & Welzel 2017; Voeten 2017). At the same time, when focusing on the European context research has provided a more detailed picture. Specifically, newer democracies have often found more volatile patterns as studies on post-communist countries in Eastern Europe have shown initial enthusiasm for democracy following the fall of authoritarian regimes, followed by periods of disillusionment and subsequent stabilization (Pop-Eleches & Tucker 2017; Rose et al., 1998). Blurred support for democracy also exists in more long-established Western European political systems: while support self-governance, in certain countries (e.g., Denmark, France, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom) there is growing evidence of an increasing number of supporters for non-democratic alternatives (expert government or army rule), especially among the younger generation (Wuttke et al. 2022). The most extensive studies, observing democratic support for about 90 countries from the 1990s to the 2010s, found that there is not a uniform trend across the globe but we can observe cases of decline, stability or even rising support. In any case, contrary to the more specific form of support that is captured by the question on satisfaction with how democracy works, these fluctuations are not related with measures of government effectiveness, suggesting that support for democracy has more principled foundations (Claassen & Magalhães 2022).

However, the interpretation of these trends remains a subject of ongoing debate in the field of political science, not least because different studies often encompass different aspects of democratic support: support for democratic principles themselves, for representative forms of government, and for national constitutional frameworks. While this conceptual overlap is partly inevitable given the nature of democratic systems, it may help explain variations in support levels across different national contexts with distinct institutional traditions. In addition, recent research indicates a significant evolution in the interpretations that citizens attribute to the concept of democracy over time, as evidenced by a survey that examines the populace’s understanding of democracy (Knops et al., 2024).

It should be noted that this methodological discussion has also given new impetus to the study of the different meanings citizens from different countries attach to the concept of democracies, distinguishing between views of democracy focused on a procedural understanding of democracy, so elections and the equality before the law, that is an electoral and a liberal view of democracy, from more substantive interpretations centred on policy outcomes or more popular understandings promoting direct forms of democracy or even populist views of democracy (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016, 2025).

In summary, while widely used in comparative political research, the measurement of support for the democratic regime faces significant challenges in terms of validity and comparability. Similar to the issues raised by Canache et al. (2001) regarding satisfaction with democracy (see below), this indicator can be interpreted in multiple ways, potentially leading to ambiguity in survey responses and subsequent analyses. Standard survey measures of support for democracy refer to abstract and complex notions which can be understood differently across times and places (for instance, in low- and high-income countries, or by highly and poorly educated citizens). This comparability challenge may also stem from distinct historical trajectories and institutional arrangements adopted in the different national contexts which may have in turn shaped how democracy has evolved and is practiced. These historical-institutional differences influence both how democracy functions and how citizens interpret and evaluate it. To address this problem, several attempts have been made to develop more precise measures of support for democracy (Claassen et al. 2024) but the theoretical precision of new batteries come at the expense of longitudinal comparability.

2.2 Satisfaction with democracy

Satisfaction with democracy is one of the most widely used indicators for the measurement of public support. There is a large amount of longitudinal data on people's satisfaction levels with the functioning of their democratic systems worldwide (Ferrín, 2016). Yet, there is no consensus on what dimensions of political support it represents (Canache et al. 2001) and its trends and dynamics are still debated. Given the ambiguity of the wording of the question, which implicitly requests respondents to make a comparison while omitting any explicit basis of comparison, there is wide space for interpreting the question differently: the standard question to measure SWD may capture support for incumbent authorities, or more support for the formal and informal constitutional structure of the political system. The question may also reflect the level of satisfaction with policy outputs (Grönlund & Setälä 2007)

Empirical analyses may help understanding the kind of support that is captured by the question. One explanation is articulated by Aarts and Thomassen (2008) who tried to assess the relationship between the type of democracy and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy. They concluded that people who are relatively satisfied with the representation and accountability functions of their democracy also express satisfaction with democracy in general. Linde and Ekmen (2003) view satisfaction with democracy as an indicator of regime performance, measuring the practicality of the democratic system. Grönlund and Setälä (2007) have assessed the impact of satisfaction with democracy on voter turnout claiming that overall satisfaction with

the democratic system correlates with trust in democratic institutions. Their conclusion is that at the macro level, the positive effects of trust in parliament and satisfaction with democracy on voter turnout are clear. However, at the individual level, satisfaction with the democratic system does not convincingly increase the likelihood of voting.

Despite being used in numerous studies, the validity and comparability of measures of satisfaction with democracy have come under scrutiny by a multitude of scholars. Canache and others (2001) have identified five views regarding the meaning of satisfaction with democracy: first, SWD is viewed as an indicator of support for incumbent authorities; second, as an indicator of system support which refers to a nation's system of government; third, as a summary indicator of individual-level satisfaction for different aspects of the political system; fourth, some scholars acknowledge the inherent ambiguity of the measure but they are ready to accept it for the importance of having the results in longitudinal perspective (Kaase 1988); finally, others call for avoiding the use of satisfaction with democracy as an item due to its unacceptable ambiguity.

According to Canache et al. (2001) the level of political support for satisfaction with democracy may vary among individuals and nations, as it can mean different things to different respondents with varying levels of political knowledge. In other words, satisfaction with democracy is primarily based on the citizen's idea of democracy, hence requires taking into consideration the differences among individuals and countries (Ferrín 2016). As Valgorosson and Devine (2022) stress, democratic satisfaction represents just one measure of all political science literature, and single survey analyses have the potential fallaciousness. Thus, satisfaction with democracy necessitates a cautious approach regarding its singular utilization as an indicator of political support in evaluating representative disconnect. Empirically, the limits of the SWD indicator can be reduced focusing on similar countries: for instance, in the European context there is evidence that satisfaction with democracy depends more on the output legitimacy of the political system than on other dimensions (Papp et al. 2024). Based on this consideration, with regard to the countries studied in the REDIRECT project, we assume that SWD is a composite indicator of support giving a disproportionate weight to the evaluation of policy outputs.

2.3 Institutional trust

"Trust" can be defined as an expectation about the future behaviour of another party, which we consider to be beneficial to us or at least not detrimental. Thus, the propensity to trust may be described as our subjective assessment of the other party's trustworthiness, which has to comply with some trust-warranty qualities. When trust is oriented towards institutions, the various organizations and structures that form the backbone of a democratic system, we define it as institutional trust or political trust, more generally (Levi & Stoker 2000; Citrin & Stoker 2018). This includes trust in governmental bodies (such as parliaments, courts, and executive agencies), as well as non-governmental institutions that play crucial roles in democratic societies (like the media, civil society organizations, and educational institutions) (Newton et al. 2018; Zmerli & Van Der Meer 2017). In democratic systems, institutional trust serves as a vital link between citizens and the structures that govern and shape their society. High levels of trust

can facilitate effective governance, policy implementation, and social cohesion, while low trust may lead to political apathy, instability, or the rise of anti-establishment sentiments (Newton 2001)

The trajectory of institutional trust has been a subject of significant debate among political scientists. Some scholars argue that there has been a general decline in trust across many democratic institutions in recent decades (Dalton 2008; Norris 2011). This trend has been particularly noted in Western democracies, where trust in governments, parliaments, and political parties has often shown downward trajectories. However, the picture is more complex when considering different types of institutions and various national contexts. For instance, Rothstein and Stolle (2008) found that trust in implementing institutions (like the police, legal system, and social services) has often remained more stable than trust in representative institutions (like parliaments and political parties). In newer democracies, especially those transitioning from authoritarian regimes, trust patterns often show more volatility. Initial high trust levels following democratic transitions can be followed by periods of disillusionment as citizens grapple with the realities of democratic governance. (Catterberg & Moreno 2006) Cross-national studies have revealed significant variations in institutional trust across different countries and regions. These differences have been attributed to various factors, including historical legacies, institutional performance, economic conditions, and cultural values (van der Meer 2017). Yet, if we focus on the European context over the last decade and trust towards representative institutions – the national parliament, the government and the political parties – a decline of political trust seems to have involved a majority of countries (Martini & Quaranta 2020).

Measuring trust in institutions presents a complex set of challenges. The multidimensional nature of institutional trust is a primary consideration. As Rothstein and Stolle (2008) point out, trust can vary significantly across different types of institutions, necessitating nuanced measurement approaches that capture this complexity. For instance, citizens may exhibit different levels of trust in representative institutions (like parliaments) compared to implementing institutions (like courts or the police). The contextual variation in the meaning and implications of institutional trust poses another significant challenge, particularly for cross-national comparisons. Marien (2011) emphasizes that the interpretation of trust measures can differ across political and cultural contexts, making it difficult to ensure measurement equivalence in comparative studies. What constitutes high trust in one society may be considered low in another, reflecting different historical experiences, cultural norms, and expectations of institutional performance. Another key consideration is the distinction between short-term fluctuations and long-term trends in institutional trust. Newton et al. (2018) highlights the importance of distinguishing between temporary changes in trust levels, which may be influenced by current events or economic conditions, and more fundamental, long-term shifts. This distinction is crucial for accurately interpreting trust data and its implications for democratic stability. The relationship between institutional trust and democratic performance is also a subject of ongoing debate. While some level of trust is necessary for democratic stability, as argued by Easton (1975), scholars like Norris (1999) contend that very high levels of trust are not always beneficial for democracy. For instance, when institutions are not trustworthy, trusting them would be paradoxical (Norris, 2011). In fact, it might be said that a degree of scepticism towards insti-

tutions can be healthy, promoting accountability and reform. This nuanced perspective underscores the need for careful interpretation of trust measures in the context of broader democratic processes.

Van der Meer and Zmerli (2017) emphasize the importance of considering institutional trust in conjunction with other indicators of democratic health, such as political participation, satisfaction with democracy, and support for democratic values. This multi-faceted approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of institutional trust in democratic systems. Zmerli and Newton (2008) advocate for approaches that distinguish between different types of institutions and account for varying cultural and political contexts. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track changes in institutional trust over extended periods, while controlling for short-term influences, could provide more robust insights into long-term trends and their implications for democratic stability and legitimacy (van Erkel & van der Meer 2016). Moreover, as suggested by Hooghe (2011), combining quantitative measures of trust with qualitative research on the reasons behind trust or distrust in specific institutions could offer a deeper understanding of the dynamics of institutional trust in contemporary democracies. This mixed-methods approach could help uncover the complex factors that shape citizens' trust in their democratic institutions and inform strategies for building and maintaining that trust.

2.4 Turnout

Electoral turnout, defined as the percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in an election, is a fundamental indicator of democratic participation and engagement. In democratic theory, high turnout is often viewed as a sign of a healthy democracy, reflecting citizens' engagement with the political process and the legitimacy of the democratic system (Lijphart 1997). Conversely, low or declining turnout can be interpreted as a symptom of political disengagement or dissatisfaction with the democratic process (Dalton, 2004b). While declining turnout is often viewed with concern, some scholars argue that lower participation rates do not necessarily indicate a crisis of democracy. In some cases, abstention may reflect satisfaction with the status quo rather than disengagement or apathy (Hooghe & Kern 2017). This nuanced perspective highlights the need for careful interpretation of turnout trends and their implications for democratic health. A theoretical discussion of this aspect is left for a later stage of the project.

The literature on electoral turnout trends presents a complex picture. In many established democracies, there has been a general trend of declining turnout over the past several decades (Blais 2007). For instance, studies have shown a consistent decrease in voter turnout in Western Europe and North America since the 1960s (Franklin 2004). However, this trend is not universal, and significant variations exist both between countries and across different types of elections within countries. In newer democracies, particularly those that have transitioned from authoritarian regimes, turnout patterns often show high initial participation followed by a decline as the novelty of democratic elections wears off (Kostadinova 2003). However, these trends can be influenced by a variety of factors, including the competitiveness of elections, the level of polarization, the electoral system, and socio-economic conditions. Cross-national studies have revealed substantial variations in turnout levels across different countries and regions. For

example, some European countries consistently maintain high levels of turnout, while others struggle with chronically low participation rates (Geys 2006). These differences have been attributed to various institutional, socio-economic, and cultural factors. More recently, in contrast to a narrative suggesting trendless fluctuations, recent research by Kostelka and Blais (2021) has identified a clearer downward trend.

Measuring and interpreting electoral turnout presents several important considerations that researchers must navigate. The method of calculation can significantly impact reported figures, with turnout rates varying depending on whether they are based on registered voters or the entire voting-age population (Geys 2006). This discrepancy can lead to challenges in comparing turnout rates across different electoral systems and countries. The presence of compulsory voting laws in some countries adds another layer of complexity to turnout analysis. These laws can artificially inflate participation rates, making cross-national comparisons more difficult and requiring researchers to consider the motivations behind voting behaviour in these contexts (Singh 2011). Additionally, the type of electoral system in place can influence turnout levels. Proportional representation systems, for instance, are generally associated with higher turnout compared to majoritarian systems, highlighting the need to consider institutional factors when analysing participation rates (Blais & Dobrzynska 1998). Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in shaping turnout patterns. Education and income levels are often correlated with voting behaviour, raising important questions about the representativeness of the voting population and the potential for certain groups to be systematically underrepresented in the democratic process (Gallego, 2010). Furthermore, various institutional factors, such as registration requirements, the accessibility of polling stations, and the timing of elections, can all impact turnout rate, underscoring the importance of considering these practical aspects of the voting process in turnout research (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980).

3 Data and method

To assess the state of disconnect across the 4 dimensions just sketched we rely on indicators from 7 different comparative and single-country survey programmes over the last 50 years on our 8 selected countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom.

We first assess support for democratic principles focusing on one question asking on a 4-point likert scale how good or bad citizens considered different ways of governing their own countries, including “having a strong leader who not does bother with parliament and elections”; “having experts that make decisions according to what they think is best for the country”; “having the army rule”; or “having a democratic political system”. We find these items in particular in the European Value Survey series (EVS) and the World Value Survey (WVS). The combination of the two sources of data yields 55,224 interviews conducted between 1996 and 2022 for a total of 37 country-years (36 in the United Kingdom for the item of support for democracy), though we have an unbalanced dataset as in some countries we observe fewer time-points (Belgium has a minimum of 2) than in other countries (Germany has a maximum of 7).

We will then turn our attention to satisfaction with the way democracy works, relying on the standard indicator consisting of a 4-point Likert scale. Following previous attempts to harmonize various sources of data (Martini & Quaranta 2020; Tomescu-Dubrow 2023), when it comes to European countries, the Eurobarometer series (EB) constitutes by far the most exhaustive source of survey data. Launched in 1970 by the European Commission, the EB measures public opinion in European Union member states, it also includes candidate countries and members of the European Free Trade Association. In spite of this, if we pool all the available surveys, we have an unbalanced dataset such that the number of years available is not the same for all countries. In fact, the EB survey included the countries according to their path of accession to either the European Community or the European Union.

Considering our selection of countries, for older democracies and members of the Union, such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, survey data, for example, on satisfaction with democracy started in 1973, while central-eastern European democracies, among which Hungary and Poland joined the Eurobarometer only in the mid-2000s. Last, Norway, a non-member country, was included from 1990 until 1995 and then it re-entered again in 2000. So, for these latter countries, the Eurobarometer series is much shorter. We can partially overcome this problem by considering other comparative surveys, such as the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (CEEB) and the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (CCEB) to increase coverage for our two Eastern European countries, plus the European Values Study (EVS), the World Values Survey (WVS), the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and the Norway Election Study (NES), to increase information for Norway.¹

If we switch our focus to indicators gauging whether citizens tend to trust representative institutions, the overall series becomes shorter as these questions have been consistently asked in Eurobarometer only in more recent years. Our final dataset covers 299 country-year combinations for satisfaction with democracy at the national level, 196 for trust in (national) parliament, 188 for trust in (national) government and 174 for trust in (national) political parties.² For an overview of the full list of surveys used and an extensive formulation of the items, please refer to the Appendix.

To conclude, we measure electoral turnout by resorting to the Voter Turnout Dataset provided by the *Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)*. For the sake of comparability, we have used data for legislative elections (for France we used data from the first round), covering 143 elections across the considered countries.

In the next section, we present the results of a descriptive analysis focused on country aggregate data for each one of these indicators. To ease interpretation, we will only present graphical results while commenting on actual figures in the text. Survey data have been weighted using

¹This procedure has to take into account the difference in the phrasing of the questions and in particular in the alternatives given as responses. Specifically, in the Eurobarometer series trust in political institutions is measured using a dichotomous indicator while in other surveys it is elicited with a 4-point Likert scale.

²For satisfaction with democracy and trust indicators, we tried to ensure comparability of surveys by using, when possible, EB affiliated surveys (CEEB and CCEB). When these were not available, we opted for an alternative among the remaining surveys (CSES, EVS, NES, WVS) which could ensure the most extensive coverage of the examined items. For our indicator of satisfaction with democracy we gather 1,797,912 interviews, for trust in parliament 1,278,527, for trust in government 1,190,001, for trust in political parties 1,060,535.

post-stratification weights following instructions provided along with the datasets. For this, we only provide point estimates without corresponding uncertainties to enhance clarity. For the results in tabular form as well as for the information reporting the considered countries and years (Figures A1-A3) see the Appendix.

4 Results

Public support for democracy is largely assumed to be fundamental for democratic survival. The rationale behind this idea is that democratization is not fully achieved until a majority of the public considers democracy as the only legitimate form of government, and, conversely, reject other non-democratic alternatives in all possible circumstances, even in hard times (Linz & Stepan 1996; Diamond 1999). What do our data suggest about this debate?

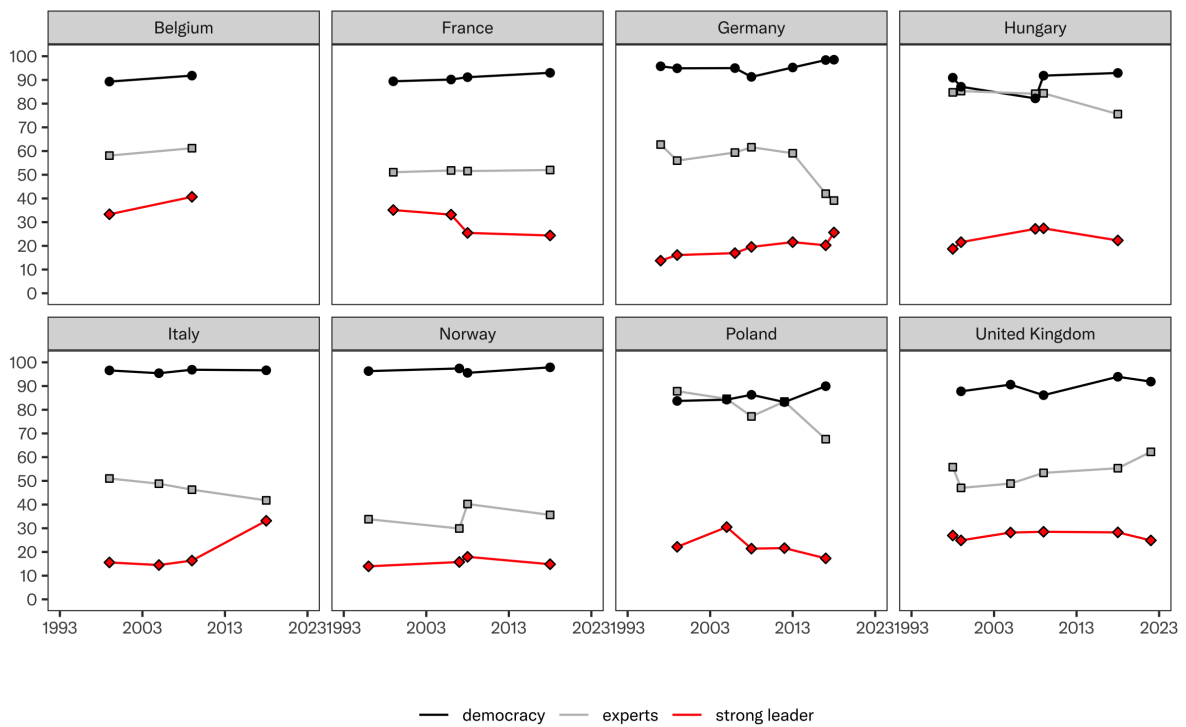


Figure 1: Preferences for alternative types of political systems

We start by analysing citizens' views on different regime types and whether we find any changes across the available years. Figure 1 reports percentages of citizens in our 8 countries that considered it fairly or very good to have a democracy, experts or a strong leader. The first thing we can observe is that, in line with previous findings (Norris 1999; van Ham et al. 2017, Martini 2025), support for democracy as a regime type is very high and generally stable. The mean percentage score across countries and years is 91.9%, with the maximum value recorded in Germany in 2018 (98.5%) and the minimum reached by Hungary in 2008 (82.2%). Overall, the levels of democracy support tend to be lower in Eastern Europe than in the rest of the countries.

However, it captures our attention that a considerable share of people across the examined countries look favourably towards a regime based on technocratic competence. If we look at the av-

erage across countries and years, in fact, the mean percentage score is 58.7, which is a relevant majority of the public. Differently from support for democracy, in this case, we observe an inverse picture with larger portions of the public favouring experts in Eastern Europe (highest in Poland in 1999), despite fluctuations. However, this is also relevant in older democracies, such as Belgium, France and Germany, where those holding this preference are majoritarian (although in Germany we register a declining trend, with a decrease of -23.6% during the period). Unfortunately, we do not have data collected after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which somehow leaves us with a limited picture when it comes to whether favourability towards experts has risen in most recent years due to the need to contain the spread of the virus and contrast its social and political adverse implications.

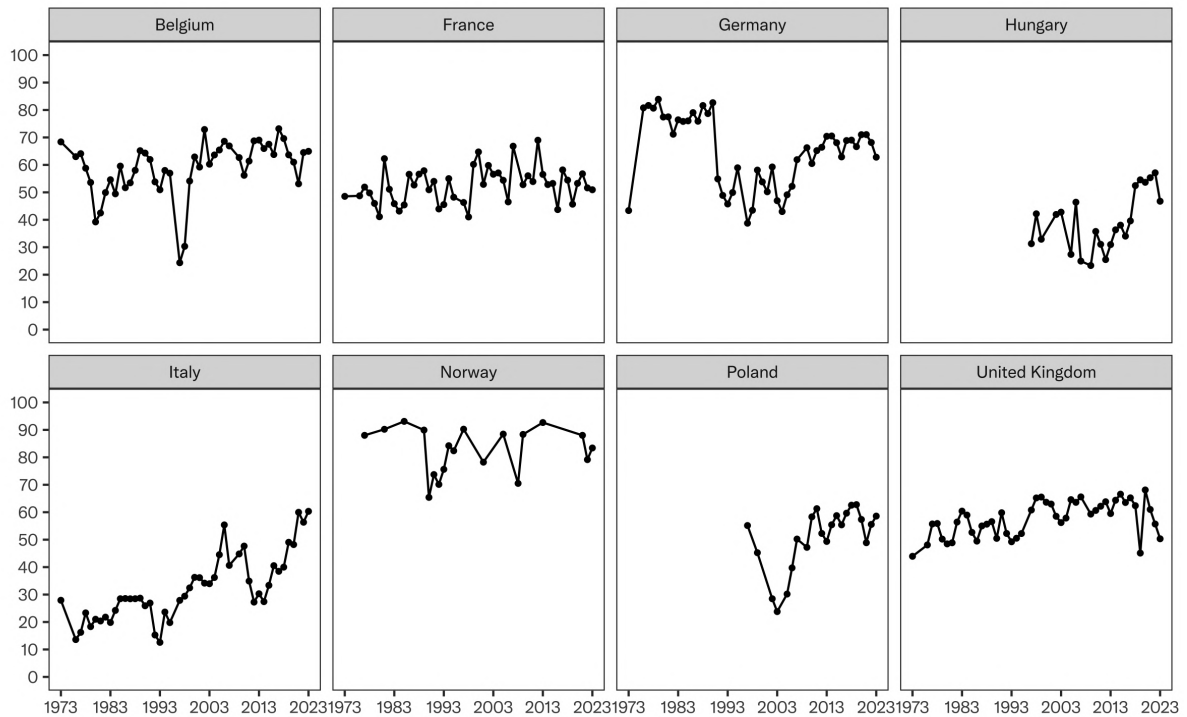


Figure 2: Satisfaction with the way democracy works

If we proceed by considering citizens' preferences for illiberal forms of democracy embodied by a strong leader, as can be clearly seen, this is the least favoured type of regime. At the same time, the share of the public who turn a blind eye to strong leaders is not negligible during the period. Indeed, more than 1 out of 5 on average considers a country governed by a single person without the impediments of a parliament and government as a good form of political system. Moreover, we record high percentages on average, above all, in Belgium (37.0%, though we have only two time-points), and in France (29.5%), and we register the most remarkable increase over time in Italy (+17.5%), a country that, in the most recent year observed in our series, reached the highest percentage (33.2%) as compared to the rest of countries.

Last, the figure does not include the information for preferences towards having the army rule (see Table A1 in the Appendix). While percentages corresponding to this indicator are usually very low in Europe as compared to other continents, it is worth noting that in some coun-

tries, such as Poland, we find relevant levels (average score over the period for this country is 22%).

In sum, in line with previous research (Dalton & Shin 2014; Kirsch & Welzel 2019; Qi & Shin 2011; Martini 2025), although preference for democracy seems to be overwhelmingly high in our countries, this co-exists with support for technocratic or even autocratic types of regimes, such that a relevant share of “democrats in name only” also show leanings towards illiberal forms of political systems, based for instance on strong leadership. This may be due to various reasons, ranging from social desirability to the fact that people might actually attach different meanings to the term “democracy” (Canache 2012; Kiewiet de Jonge 2016).³

Moving now to attitudes towards the working of the regime, our indicator of satisfaction with democracy depicts a more diverse picture. Figure 2 displays the percentage of people that were fairly or very satisfied with the way democracy was working in their country, over the last fifty years in the longest series. As it can be clearly observed, satisfaction with democracy has shown significant fluctuations across various countries, with clear patterns of ups and downs. Furthermore, the extent and direction of these changes differ from country to country, and in several cases satisfaction with democratic performance showed a positive trend during the considered period.

Among the countries with a clear positive trend, we find Italy, a country that has usually been considered as a problematic case of widespread dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, during the period under review, satisfaction increased overall, significantly (+30%), reflecting key milestones in the country’s democratic evolution and the transition from the “First” to the “Second” Republic (Martini & Quaranta 2015), in spite of a relevant decline in satisfaction in the years soon after the 2008 economic crisis. We then find cases such as Hungary and Poland, although the latter showed an initial decline in satisfaction during the first years after the regime transition.

We also find a positive trend in the United Kingdom while in Belgium, this is combined with relevant fluctuations.⁴ Moreover, we have cases in which the situation seems to have remained stable, such as France, while others in which it has decreased. This is the case in Germany, where political satisfaction was very high until the early 1990s, when it dropped with the unification process (with Eastern citizens being traditionally less satisfied, see Fuchs 1999). Last, we report only a small decrease in Norway, although it should be noted that the scores for this country are among the highest in Europe (see also Martini & Quaranta 2020). Following up on this, switching from trends to overall country differences, Italy and Hungary did worse than the

³We can disentangle authentic democrats from those leaning towards strong leadership by combining the two items to achieve a corrected measure of support for democracy. Following (Dalton & Shin 2014), we create an index subtracting ratings of strong leadership from those of democracy. The scale varies between +3, which stands for complete support for democracy and complete rejection of strong leadership and -3, which conversely represents complete aversion towards democracy and complete acceptance of strong leadership. Then, we can group scores according to whether respondents scored positively, favouring democracy, or scored 0 or negatively. This way, we get an adjusted measure of support for democracy which gives still very high levels, though the average of democracy supporters across countries and over time drops to 80.3. We can also get the percentage of autocrats, which if we consider the latest year for each country goes from 9.5% in Norway to 22.5% in the United Kingdom. Again, Italy, which is in the second position (20.7%), saw autocrats growing during the period by +8.2% (see Table A1).

⁴In Belgium a relevant drop occurred during the mid-1990s along with the political events related to the ‘Dutroux scandal’ (Walgrave & Varone 2008)

rest of the countries and Norway and Germany, on the other hand, positioned at the top of the ranking.

If the analysis of satisfaction with democracy provides us with a picture of the large differences among countries and of general optimism, when we look at trust in main representative institutions, the picture becomes gloomier, although we need to keep in mind that the series is now shorter. Indeed, levels of trust in political institutions seem to be lower than levels of democratic satisfaction. Moreover, we can observe that trust in political institutions seems to have remained stable or decreased. This is, in particular, the case of France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, although in the latter trust seems to follow a U-shaped trend, with a recovery starting in the last few years. Then, Germany is the only country in which the trend was positive during the years. Last, we can notice that trends in trust in the parliament, government and parties are not always similar, suggesting that citizens might evaluate these political institutions differently. In this context, it is interesting to see that trust in parties is the institution with the lowest levels overall.

All in all, these results comply with the idea that the standard indicators of satisfaction with democracy and political trust respectively capture the functioning of the regime concerning the general output and specifically to its institutions. So, the two might be more sensitive to contingent changes in the political context than indicators of support for the acceptability of the regime as a form of government, such as economic performance, the quality of government, political competition and election outcomes (Martini & Quaranta 2020). Last, although both political satisfaction and trust share an evaluative component, the two types of support point to two different objects, that is either the democratic process in general or the main actors of representation, such as political parties, in the case of trust. This might explain, at least in part, the slightly different pictures we get from the two indicators.

Let's conclude our investigation by looking at electoral turnout. For this, Figure 4 shows the percentages of people who cast a ballot in each one of the elections held in our countries since the end of the Second World War (for Western countries), or its transition to democracy (for Eastern countries). We first notice that, in most of the countries, trends are negative. Countries with the largest loss in participation were Italy (-25.3%), United Kingdom (-23.9%), and France (-15.1%), with a positive rebound in turnout in the latter case in the last elections. Also, Norway experienced an erosion in turnout, but this contraction was very mild. Despite fluctuations, turnout remained pretty stable in Germany and Hungary. On the other hand, after an initial decline, this increased significantly in the last elections in Poland. A different story applies to Belgium, where turnout was considerably high during the period, likely due to compulsory voting which is in force in the country, with a slight negative trend in the last decade. Overall, turnout was traditionally lower in newer Eastern European democracies.

5 Concluding remarks

This deliverable had the objective to contribute to the diagnosis of the representative disconnect, by analysing and visualising the long-term trends of its most likely symptoms and effects: trust

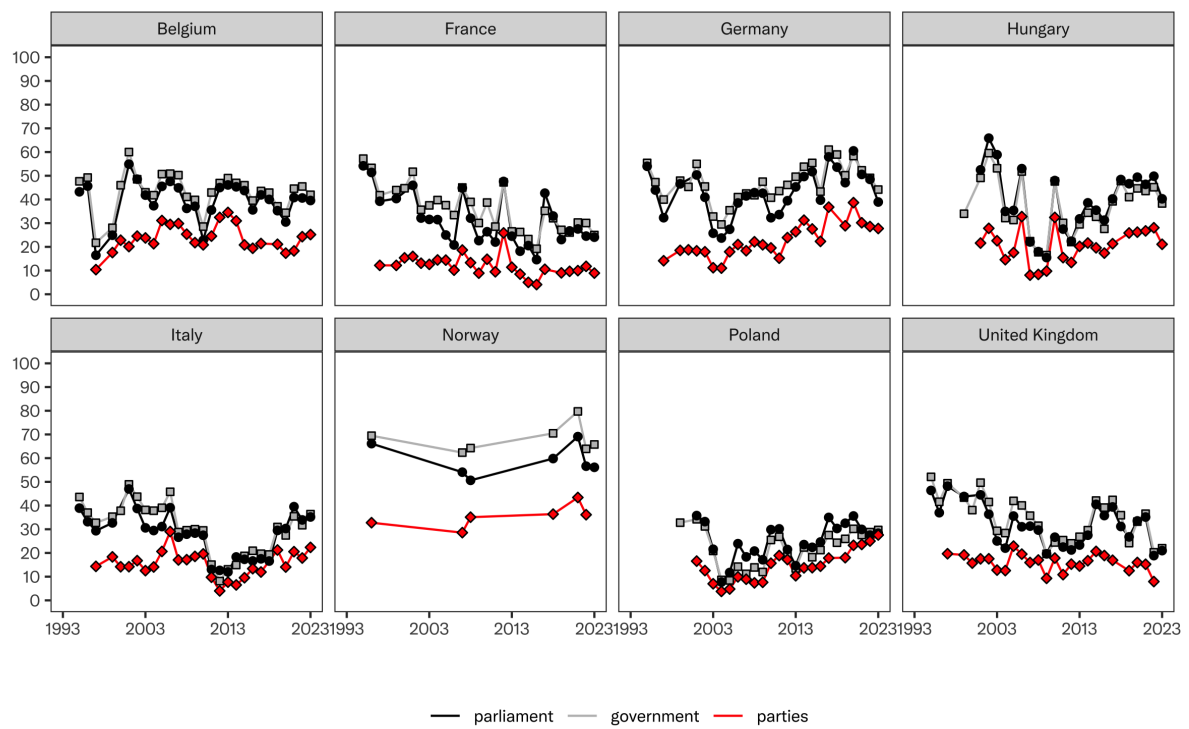


Figure 3: Trust towards main representative institutions

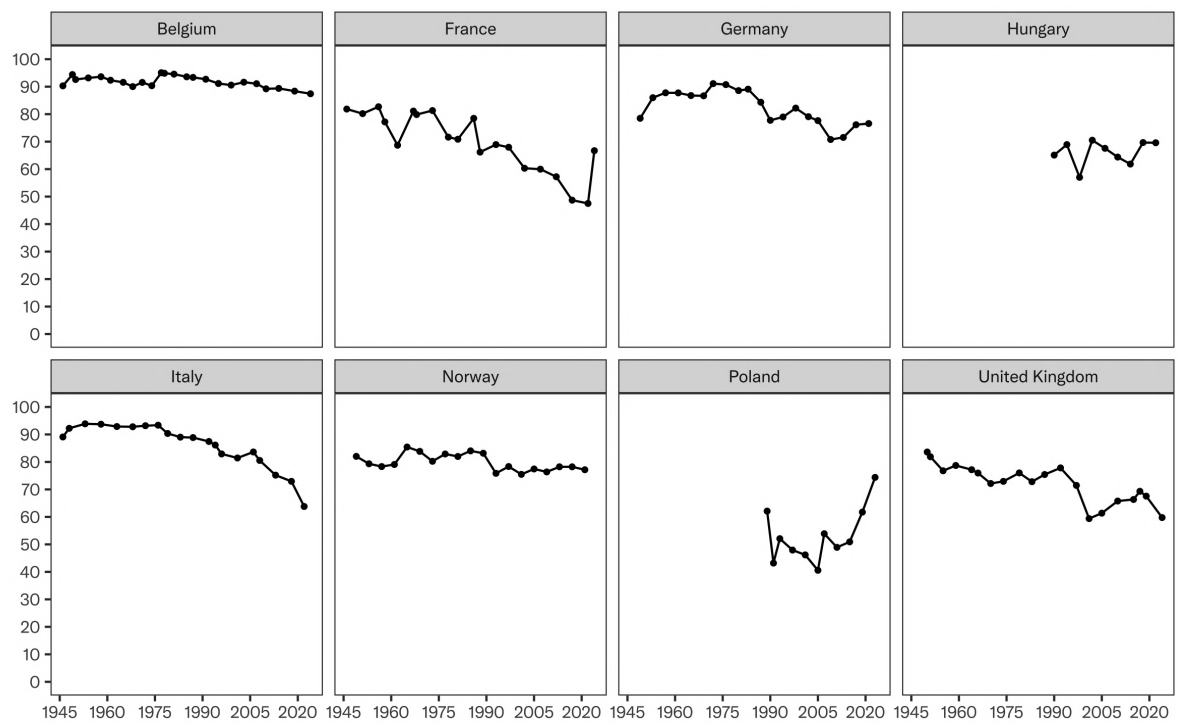


Figure 4: Electoral turnout

in political institutions, satisfaction with democracy, evaluation of democracy and electoral participation. The REDIRECT project starts from the assumption that if a disconnection between citizens and the representative system exists, it springs from the interaction between the institutional components of our democracies and the broader ecology in which they operate. To this end, we combine a variety of surveys and pool corresponding data to analyse trends about some relevant dimensions of citizens' views and evaluations of democracy and participation in the main channel of democratic competition, that is elections, to explore the democratic disconnect in 8 very different European democracies which are the core group of countries compared in the REDIRECT project.

We extend previous research by offering a review of the theoretical literature and results based on more recent data. These can be summarized as follows:

- Levels of support for democracy are still high in Europe, although we might have a relevant share of self-proclaimed democrats that favour alternative regime types, namely technocratic and (to a lesser extent) autocratic forms of government. If democracy support should not co-occur with support for autocratic forms of government, we do see that this is not always the case.
- Levels of satisfaction with democracy seem to be higher than those of trust in the traditional institutions of representation, and in some countries, democratic satisfaction has been on the rise. It has to be noticed that this took place in countries with traditionally lower levels of satisfaction.
- By contrast, trust has remained stable or even declined. In this respect, trust in parties is among the lowest.
- Concluding on turnout, the situation is pretty mixed with countries who saw a relevant decrease while others in which the situation was more stable.

The major finding of this first analysis of the data is that in this historical phase support for democratic principles and satisfaction with democracy coexist with low levels of trust towards representative institutions. Coming back to the theory, we should be cautious to optimistically interpret this distrust as a healthy scepticism towards politicians, because a considerable proportion of citizens are also rather supportive of non-democratic principles such as technocracy and authoritarianism. It remains to be established whether the two factors are causally linked, i.e., whether a low level of trust in parties, parliaments and governments leads to a higher level of support for non-democratic regimes. In the next steps we might consider expanding the scope of the analysis in the following directions:

- Theorize and explore the different conceptions of democracy implied by citizens indicating support for technocratic or authoritarian versions of democracy (see on this e.g., Chapman et al. 2023; Martini 2025);
- Include possible indicators about the affective dimension of the disconnect (see D2.1);
- Explore over time trends and country differences across different social and political groups along ideology (left-wing versus right-wing citizens), vote (populist versus main-

stream voters) and socio-economic status (men vs women, and young versus old citizens) (see e.g., McDermott & Jones 2022; Martini & Quaranta 2020; Quaranta & Martini 2025; Wuttke et al. 2022);

- Explore more other possible behavioural symptoms of the disconnect beyond voting (protest, and other forms of retreating from participating in politics);
- Engage with more correlation or regression analysis exploring factors explaining over time trends. On this, we could increase the number of countries to leverage on statistical power (this will be in case informed by Task 2.4).

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7 Appendix

7.1 List of surveys

Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)

- CSES1-5

European Value Study (EVS) and World Value Survey (WVS)

- EVS Trend File 1981-2017 (3.0.0) (GESIS data catalogue)
- WVS Trend File (1981-2022) (4.0.0) (WVS website)

Eurobarometer (EB)

- Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File
- Eurobarometer 44.1
- Eurobarometer 44.2bis
- Eurobarometer 48.0
- Eurobarometer 51.0
- Eurobarometer 54.1
- Eurobarometer 56.2
- Eurobarometer 57.1
- Eurobarometer 58.1
- Eurobarometer 60.1
- Eurobarometer 61.0
- Eurobarometer 63.4
- Eurobarometer 65.2
- Eurobarometer 68.1
- Eurobarometer 70.1
- Eurobarometer 71.3
- Eurobarometer 72.4
- Eurobarometer 73.4
- Eurobarometer 76.3
- Eurobarometer 77.3
- Eurobarometer 79.3
- Eurobarometer 81.4
- Eurobarometer 83.3
- Eurobarometer 85.2
- Eurobarometer 87.3

Candidate Country Eurobarometer (CCEB)

- Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2001.1
- Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2002.2
- Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2003.2
- Candidate Country Eurobarometer 2004.1

Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (CEEB)

- Central and Eastern Eurobarometer 1990-1997 - Trends CEEB1-8.

Norwegian Election Study

- 1977
- 1981
- 1985
- 1989
- 2009

7.2 Question wording

Support for different regime types

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?

- Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections
- Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country
- Having the army rule the country
- Having a democratic political system

1. Very good
2. Fairly good
3. Fairly bad
4. Very bad

Satisfaction with democracy

On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works (in your country)?

1. Very satisfied,
2. Fairly satisfied
3. Nor very satisfied
4. Not at all satisfied

I

Trust in institutions

I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.

- The (national) Parliament
- The (national) government
- Political parties

1. Tend to trust it
2. Tend not to trust it.

7.3 Data countries and years

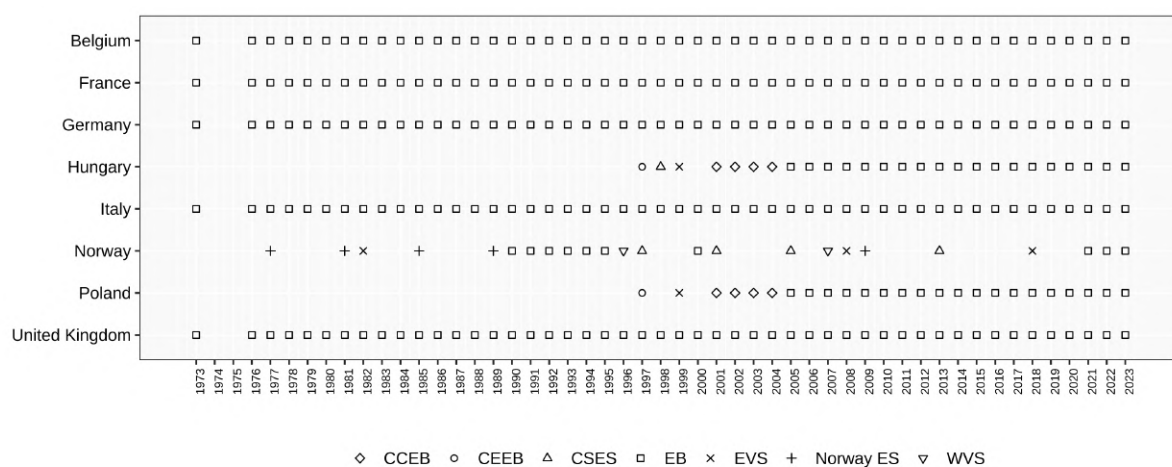


Figure 5: Overview of the available survey data and sources for preferences for different regime types.

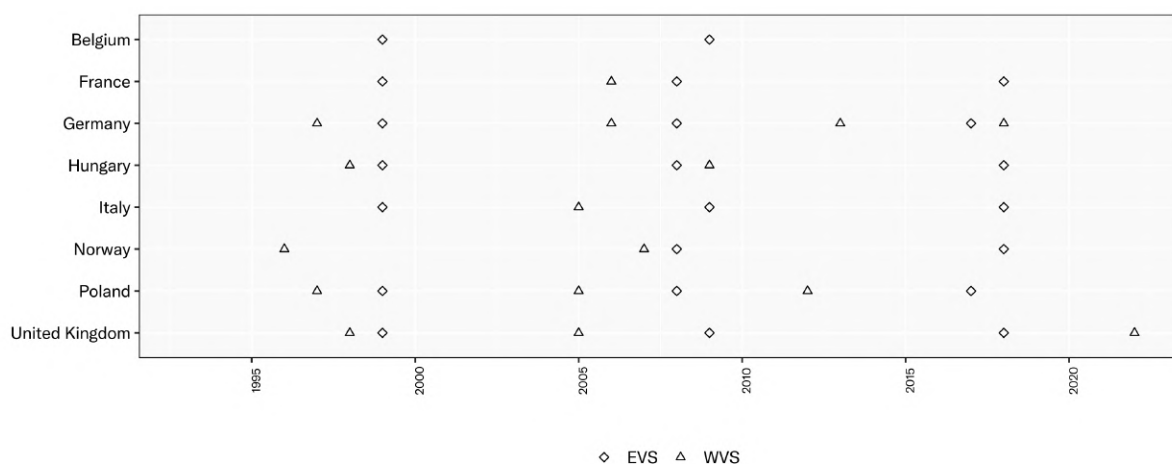


Figure 6: Overview of the available survey data and sources for satisfaction with democracy and trust in institutions.

Note: for year 1990, Norway includes two different surveys conducted by EB and EVS, respectively. The figure provides an overview of the data used, showing the countries and years for

which there is information for at least one indicator among those of interest: satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament, trust in government and trust in political parties.

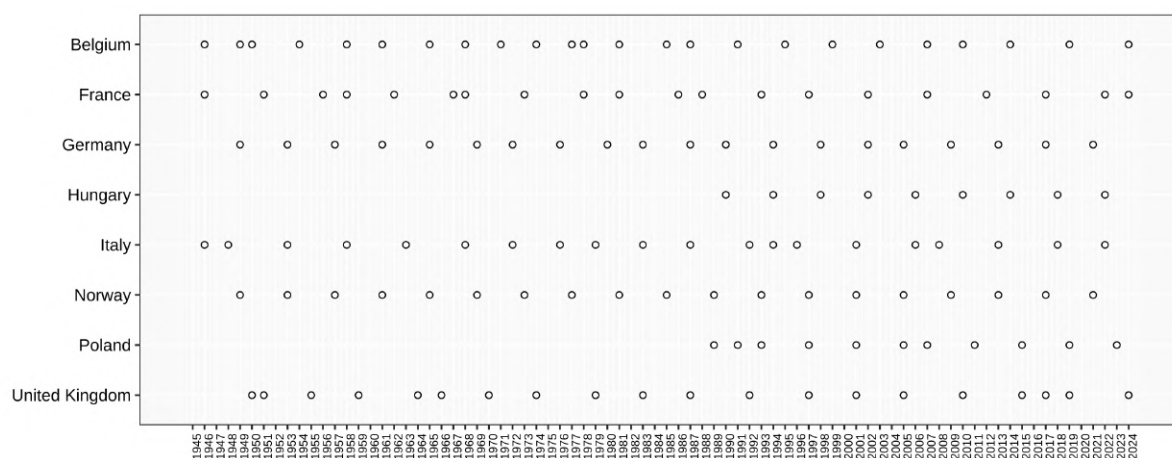


Figure 7: Overview of the available elections by countries and years.

7.4 Results

Table 1: Support for alternative regime types.

Country	Year	Strong leader	Experts	Army	Democracy	Democrats	Autocrats
Belgium	1999	33.32	58.08	4.48	89.30	71.54	28.46
Belgium	2009	40.67	61.20	7.72	91.82	64.13	35.87
France	1999	35.12	51.06	3.99	89.43	70.74	29.26
France	2006	33.17	51.80	11.37	90.17	71.21	28.79
France	2008	25.46	51.55	5.02	91.16	77.68	22.32
France	2018	24.37	52.00	13.07	93.01	78.92	21.08
Germany	1997	13.75	62.74	1.45	95.76	88.50	11.50
Germany	1999	16.12	55.96	1.58	94.91	85.08	14.92
Germany	2006	16.94	59.37	3.21	94.99	84.74	15.26
Germany	2008	19.55	61.61	1.93	91.29	81.86	18.14
Germany	2013	21.57	59.08	4.15	95.25	83.78	16.22
Germany	2017	20.23	42.00	1.85	98.39	87.63	12.37
Germany	2018	25.64	39.11	1.07	98.53	86.33	13.67
Hungary	1998	18.72	84.76	4.93	90.94	81.93	18.07
Hungary	1999	21.55	85.30	3.14	87.13	76.43	23.57
Hungary	2008	27.16	84.17	6.13	82.22	66.69	33.31
Hungary	2009	27.39	84.36	7.56	91.80	74.33	25.67
Hungary	2018	22.28	75.58	6.98	92.94	81.55	18.45
Italy	1999	15.57	51.00	4.37	96.60	87.51	12.49
Italy	2005	14.48	48.80	6.50	95.41	88.69	11.31
Italy	2009	16.36	46.28	4.65	96.89	87.95	12.05
Italy	2018	33.16	41.77	10.43	96.65	79.28	20.72
Norway	1996	13.94	33.82	4.59	96.30	89.92	10.08
Norway	2007	15.76	29.90	5.44	97.43	88.08	11.92
Norway	2008	17.95	40.23	2.33	95.57	86.25	13.75
Norway	2018	14.82	35.64	4.05	97.89	90.54	9.46

Table 1: Support for alternative regime types.

Poland	2012	21.62	83.45	21.66	83.22	73.19	26.81
Poland	2017	17.30	67.58	21.41	89.94	79.02	20.98
United Kingdom	1998	26.95	55.78	6.28	-	-	-
United Kingdom	1999	24.88	47.03	7.02	87.77	76.93	23.07
United Kingdom	2005	28.20	48.85	13.00	90.60	75.74	24.26
United Kingdom	2009	28.51	53.37	9.64	86.14	70.48	29.52
United Kingdom	2018	28.26	55.33	16.19	93.91	77.18	22.82
United Kingdom	2022	24.87	62.24	11.87	91.87	77.48	22.52