RESEARCH REPORT

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Promoting social cohesion and convergence

Social cohesion and inclusive participation in a polarised Europe

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Eurofound

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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Introduction

European democracies have changed considerably in the past 20 years. The enlargement of the European Union brought renewed optimism after the Cold War, and newly formed democracies enjoyed a period of prosperity, until the global financial crisis exposed divergences within the EU and fostered distrust within and between Member States. Moreover, protracted crises caused economic and geopolitical hardship for people and governments. Notwithstanding, Europe has led the way with regard to establishing human rights and gender equality, cultivating a society based on inclusiveness and equal treatment. The way Europeans live and what they believe have also changed drastically, and new technologies offer anyone a chance to engage with others online. Unfortunately, interactions about public issues have become increasingly hostile and aggressive as polarisation – an extreme form of disagreement that gives rise to a conflictual political and social landscape – has increased. This is harmful for both citizens and democracy.

Against this backdrop, it is important to investigate trends in polarisation in public opinion and the possible drivers of these trends, such as political engagement, perception of economic well-being and use of social media. Has polarisation increased in the EU on equality and economic and political issues? What is the role of social media in polarisation, and how can citizens use digital tools in a proactive way? What new forms of democracy can help restore participation and reduce polarisation? This report tackles these questions by analysing data from the European Social Survey and Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey, and presenting four case studies of local, regional and national governments using forums for deliberative democracy to bolster citizen engagement.

Policy context

Social cohesion has been the topic of several policy actions within the EU. The Treaty of Lisbon, which was signed in 2007 and came into force in 2009, aims to foster active citizenship and bolster social cohesion. The Treaty established a new form of participatory democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative, consolidated in Article 11(4) of the Treaty on European Union and Article 24(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Citizens' dialogues and European citizens' consultations were two other major EU initiatives. In recent years, the EU has addressed the current democratic challenge by proposing a new participatory approach, outlined in the *White paper on the future of Europe* advocated by President Juncker. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, President von der Leyen announced the first set of proposals as part of the new European Democracy Action Plan. The plan includes measures to strengthen the democratic process by promoting free and fair elections and strong democratic participation, supporting free and independent media, and countering disinformation. This became more pressing at the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the Russian interference in European elections, as evidenced by the institution of the European Democracy Shield in the new Commission guidelines.

Key findings

- Public opinion is in constant flux. Analysis of trends in polarisation on issues in Member States shows that polarisation has risen, especially on trust in political institutions, with parts of society being completely without trust in these institutions. This was especially evident during the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing the nexus between crisis, austerity and distrust.
- Gender and sexual equality have improved across Member States, and on related issues there is a less conflictual and more accepting opinion landscape.
- Traditional values are negatively correlated with acceptance of immigrants and of gender equality, whereas universalist ones display positive correlations. When looking at political polarisation, both types of values predict increased distrust of political institutions.
- Perceptions of economic well-being, higher education and political engagement play a crucial role in depolarising citizens and increasing trust.
- Support for Ukraine is dwindling. The change in opinions with regard to government efforts in helping Ukraine has mostly been driven by war fatigue, financial insecurity and news consumption on social media.
- Citizens who participated in deliberative processes were highly appreciative of being able to be involved, felt compelled to follow up the related measures and felt more inclined to engage in such processes in the future.

- Regarding deliberative processes, local governments can be a very fertile field for experimentation, provided that political will, sufficient resources and adequate skills are available. Although digital tools are often used, in-person interaction remains the core of deliberative processes.
- Incorporating a range of democratic tools selected to suit the policy context appeals to institutions wanting to increase the inclusiveness of their policymaking.

Policy pointers

- Trust is the glue that keeps citizens and institutions together and a fundamental aspect of social cohesion. Understanding the drivers of polarisation and addressing its main roots are of paramount importance for the proper functioning of democracy. Governments might consider investing in their communication channels and including stakeholders with local reach, such as civil society organisations (CSOs) and social partners.
- Social media and economic hardship are among the main reasons people become polarised against political institutions. Governments might consider addressing the safety of digital spaces, as well as combating misinformation within the remit of the Digital Services Act. This, in combination with measures to secure income, would help depolarise public opinion.
- Less polarised societies would lead to greater stability, as the policymaking agenda would be dictated less by sudden changes in the economic and geopolitical landscape.
- A political system that welcomes citizens' contributions is one that empowers its citizens. Governments might consider encouraging citizens to actively participate in politics and strive for their opinions to be heard. When coupled with a reduction in polarisation, this could create a vibrant political sphere where politicians and policymakers are held accountable by their fellow citizens.
- Deliberative democracy was found to be a valuable tool in bridging the gap between citizens and institutions at the local, regional and national levels. To function properly, deliberative democracy needs funding, institutional support and political buy-in. Without these three key elements, processes cannot ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness, and their chances of success are reduced.
- The institutionalisation of deliberative democracy can foster a dynamic democratic ecosystem that has tailored democratic tools for all policy needs. This provides avenues for citizens to gather and engage in informed and moderated discussions, facilitating the sharing of knowledge and understanding among all groups of citizens.
- Finally, the involvement of social partners and CSOs is fundamental to hold the local and national political fabric together and create an environment in which citizens and institutions listen to each other. CSOs can be the watchdogs of policy implementation and can follow up with citizens.

Introduction

European democracies have seen many changes in the last two decades, from geopolitical shifts and struggles with unity and solidarity to social unrest.

For the EU, the enlargement in 2004 was a historic move, bringing renewed optimism after many decades of tension. In 2016, the Brexit referendum marked the beginning of the end of the United Kingdom's membership of the EU. Alongside the elections in the United States the same year, Brexit became the centre of attention of many political studies, with regard to both the rising profile of anti-establishment parties and the first allegations of foreign agents spreading disinformation and fake news by exploiting social media infrastructures and algorithms (Gorodnichenko et al., 2018). Brexit was the manifestation of long-standing tensions in the EU. The global financial crisis that began in 2007 and its aftermath shook the unity of the EU, drawing attention to the huge differences among Member States and fostering divisions and resentment. This was aggravated by a large inflow of migrants – which peaked in 2015 – as a consequence of the conflict in Syria and violence and unrest in northern Africa. The Dublin Regulation, the EU law that indicates which Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application, was upheld despite the crisis faced by southern countries. This fuelled a sense of distrust towards political institutions and the EU's policies, paving the way for a surge in anti-establishment parties deprecating globalisation, as well as depressing voter turnout (Hooghe, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; OECD, 2020; International IDEA, undated). Moreover, the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by Russia ended decades of peace on the continent and had great repercussions in terms of humanitarian and financial crises, as well as security. It spurred questions relating to European defence, energy provision and new geopolitical alliances in light of the new presidency in the United States.

Nonetheless, Europe has seen the rise of more cohesive policies and improvements in key social indicators. Gross domestic product per capita has risen over the past 20 years, despite the downward trend during the global economic crisis. Similarly, the employment rate has grown notably, reaching 75 % in 2023, while the unemployment rate has decreased. Education levels have increased too. The rate of tertiary educational attainment keeps growing, while the number of young people leaving school early has decreased significantly. In addition, the EU has seen many social improvements, specifically with regard to gender equality. The gender pay gap has reduced, as has the gender gap in part-time employment. However, although European averages show positive results, there are many differences among and within countries. Intersectional vulnerabilities, especially related to financial instability, are still pervasive in European societies, and the rising cost of living has had major political consequences, especially given its context in a time of crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to these vulnerabilities and laid bare the challenges of a world that is highly interconnected both physically – thus allowing the rapid spread of the disease worldwide – and virtually – facilitating the storming of social media and news outlets with inaccurate news and information. News consumption has changed, moving from established media companies to online sources, while the media shift their revenue model from subscription-based to advertisement-based, leading to more sensationalised and continuous news streaming (Contri, 2017; Klein, 2020). Social interactions have also changed dramatically. Online communication and social media redefined the way people talk and organise. Online social movements sprouted, promoting gender equality and human rights, as well as new ways of thinking about democracy (Castells, 2012). From grassroots movements to international organisations, equality and justice were endorsed through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion and equality for all people regardless of their gender, age, ethnicity or sexuality (UN, 2015). In opposition to inclusive values, some online and in-person communities laid the foundations for many fringe and extremist movements (Ebner, 2020). Backlash against ethnic and sexual minorities has been reported in several countries, with bias-motivated speech and violence being perpetrated against LGBTQ+ community members and anti-discrimination laws not being enforced (ILGA Europe, 2025). Similarly, online language has become increasingly violent, fuelling aggressive social norms in online interactions and giving rise to cyber hate and the use of derogatory language (Rösner and Krämer, 2016; Bilewicz and Soral, 2020; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021).

Amid all these changes, it is natural to wonder how social cohesion has evolved, which values and attitudes have changed across the EU, whether instances of polarisation are arising across borders and which citizens are most affected by it. It is important to investigate the phenomenon of polarisation, as it can hurt citizens and liberal democracies by creating great rents in the social fabric. Losing trust and social cohesion means losing the glue that keeps society together, and polarisation in the public sphere has the potential to endanger the proper functioning of democracy.

The report focuses on polarisation in public opinion. Polarisation is multidimensional, which means there are a plethora of possible measures of it. The report distinguishes between 'affective polarisation' and 'issue polarisation', as well as between 'group polarisation' and 'mass polarisation' (see Box 1 for brief definitions). The report investigates issue polarisation, and in particular mass polarisation, as it gathers an overall picture of how public opinion on certain issues has changed over time, offering valuable insights on the evolution of polarisation.

This report builds on previous research carried out by Eurofound in the field of social cohesion and trust and expands on it by analysing issue polarisation and human values as key determinants of social cohesion. Focusing on the impact of human values, economic stability, political engagement and the role of social media, the report aims to understand the dynamics of polarisation over time and how social cohesion has developed in light of the multiple crises faced by Europeans.

Moreover, the report seeks evidence on how to improve social cohesion and political participation. To identify alternative ways of participating in democracy, the report includes four case studies of how deliberative democracy has been employed to address specific policy needs. The case studies are diverse in their institutional contexts, magnitudes, mandates and topics, showing how deliberative processes can be flexible in their application. They focus on:

- the Italian Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood, a transnational bottom-up initiative;
- We Need to Talk, the Belgian citizens' assembly on political parties' funding, a national bottom-up initiative;
- the Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation, a regional top-down initiative;
- in Poland, the Rzeszów's citizens' assembly on climate change, a local top-down initiative.

Policy context

Social cohesion has been the topic of several policy actions within the EU. The challenges faced by representative democracy have led several Member States to adopt new initiatives to boost citizen participation. The Treaty of Lisbon, which was signed in 2007 and came into force in 2009, aimed to bolster social cohesion and enhance the well-being of all citizens by reducing inequality, exclusion and the democratic deficit (Council of Europe, 2007; Bee, 2017). The Treaty established a new form of participatory democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative, consolidated in Article 11(4) of the Treaty on European Union and Article 24(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. However, the initiative has not significantly reduced the EU's democratic deficit as hoped, as the citizens' legislative proposals have had little impact (Ålander and von Ondarza, 2020). Consequently, the initiative underwent a reform, with new regulations effective from January 2020. Citizens' dialogues and the European citizens' consultations were two other major EU initiatives. The EU has addressed the current democratic challenge by proposing a new participatory approach, outlined in the *White paper on the future of Europe* (European Commission, 2017) and subsequently advocated by President Juncker in his State of the Union address (Juncker, 2017). France and Germany have jointly called for strong citizen involvement and a bottom-up process, with EU-wide citizen participation on all discussed issues (Politico.eu, 2019). The joint declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe set out the principles for incorporating citizens' perspectives into policymaking and reform, promoting EU-wide citizen engagement and considering clear legislative responses to both citizens' recommendations and structural reforms. The Conference on the Future of Europe included a series of debates and discussions, running from April 2021 to May 2022. This event served as a 'laboratory' to empirically test the effectiveness of

Box 1: Definitions of polarisation

First, polarisation can be classified as affective or issue polarisation. Affective polarisation reflects conflicts within societies, where people, not opinions, are pitted against each other. It is usually referred to as a growing dislike towards certain groups in society (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). On the other hand, issue polarisation deals with the increased distance between opinions regarding issues of public interest, such as gender equality, human rights and environmental protection. Here, the divide is not inherently between people but between opinions and thus is much easier to measure and quantify.

Second, issue polarisation can be divided into group and mass polarisation. The former reflects conflicts and divides between groups in society, such as supporters of political parties, people in certain income quintiles or members of particular demographic groups (Gercke and Delhey, 2023). Analyses looking at issue polarisation consider individuals as nested, or stacked, in groups; the stronger the polarisation, the more uniformly the groups will think. Conversely, analyses examining mass polarisation look at society as a whole and consider larger trends in public opinion.

deliberative participation not only in the real world but also on a transnational level, which was unprecedented (Alemanno, 2020). The debate stage notably included citizens in three distinct ways, via a digital platform, created for all European citizens to propose ideas and recommendations for discussion in the citizens' panels and the conference plenary; the European citizens' panels, representing citizens' assemblies but set up and put together by the institutions and managed by organisations; and the plenary, which also featured a variety of actors from different governance levels (Blokker, 2022).

Regarding institutional regulations, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, President von der Leyen announced the first set of proposals as part of the new European Democracy Action Plan (European Parliament, 2020). The plan includes measures to strengthen the democratic process by promoting free and fair elections and strong democratic participation, supporting free and independent media, and countering disinformation, with this last aspect being supported by the Digital Services Act as well. This plan became more pressing with the start of Russia's war against Ukraine and the Russian interference in European elections, as clearly mentioned in the State of the Union address (von der Leyen, 2022), as well as in the accompanying letter of intent (von der Leyen and Šefčovič, 2022). The plan's proposals have also been included in the 2023 Commission work programme (European Commission, 2022a). One of the key actions, relating to more transparency in party funding, was to fund civil society groups and structural interventions to encourage deliberative civic engagement and political participation, exemplified by the new wave of citizens' panels, especially on energy efficiency and tackling hatred (European Parliament, 2020). In a similar vein, the newly formed Commission proposed the European Democracy Shield, aimed at countering foreign information and interference in European democracies, as well as disinformation and information manipulation. This tool complements the Digital Services Act and the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act on regulating potentially disruptive technologies and boosting prevention by increasing digital and media literacy (von der Leyen, 2024). Related to this, in December 2024 the European Parliament voted to set up a new special committee to assess EU legislation and measures with regard to foreign interference. The committee held its constitutive meeting in February 2025 (European Parliament, 2025a).

Methodology

This report calculates polarisation using four measures: spread, dispersion, modality and agreement. These measures can be considered separately but work best when combined to offer a more robust picture of polarisation (Bramson et al., 2017). Spread refers to the extent of the distribution of a public opinion variable and how much it differs from a normal distribution. In this case, skewness and kurtosis are used as basic measures. Dispersion refers to how diverse opinions are within a distribution. The higher the dispersion, the more heterogeneous the opinions. In this case, the report uses standard deviation from the median, also called the 'coefficient of consensus' (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988). Another key characteristic of polarisation is modality. Far from being a normal distribution with one peak, polarisation implies two or more peaks in the distribution and thus has a bimodal or multimodal appearance. In this report, bimodality is measured in two ways: the first, more descriptive, method is Galtung's classification of distribution (Galtung, 1969), while the second, more statistically relevant, method is Hartigan's dip test (Hartigan and Hartigan, 1985). The former offers a visual representation of the modality of the distribution, whereas the latter tests the multimodal distribution statistically. Finally, a detailed measure of polarisation is given by Van der Eijk's measure of agreement 'A' (Van der Eijk, 2001). It calculates concentration and dispersion in ordered rating scales, and agreement is defined as clustering around one value. Therefore, polarisation is the opposite of agreement, calculated as inverted and standardised. These measures are shown for the same sample of countries over time to test statistically whether Europe saw a surge in polarisation on key public opinion indicators. Although these measures consider a distribution the unit of analysis, there are limited measures with which to label respondents as polarised or not. In order to suffice for the regression requirements, the report uses the coefficient of consensus to draw differences. The coefficient represents the distance from the median value of a public opinion issue (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988). Should a respondent's answer be less than one standard deviation from the median, that respondent will be labelled as polarised against that issue.

Moreover, the study delves into individual beliefs and value systems by employing the Human Values Scale. Drawn from Schwartz's theory, human values were operationalised and tested in the Schwartz Values Survey in 1992 and were then replicated and corroborated in 82 countries around the world, accounting for cultural differences (Schwartz, 1992, 1994, 2006; Brocke and Bilsky, 2005; Davidov et al., 2008). Answers are centred to correct for individual preferences and individuals' attribution of importance to different values. This entails subtracting the mean

score across all values from a value's raw score (Schwartz et al., 2015).

The report tackles both issue polarisation and the impact of social media on withdrawing support for Ukraine. To investigate issue polarisation, 11 rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) were used. The ESS covers 2002 to 2023, with the latest data available being released in November 2024. It covers most Member States, although not consistently. Hence, European regions, rather than Member States, were employed as geographical units. Trends and drivers of polarisation were measured by means of regression analysis. Meanwhile, the impact of social media was measured by Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey, which collected panel data on the issue in spring 2022 and spring 2024. Withdrawal of support is calculated by coding those who moved from a favourable opinion ('too little or the right amount of aid') on helping Ukrainian refugees to an unfavourable one ('too much aid'). The panel structure enables the tracking of changes in public opinion over time, although results are not generalisable to all European citizens. The drivers of withdrawal of support were analysed using logistic regressions.

Structure of the report

The report is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the topic of polarisation and offers a comprehensive theoretical framework that discusses polarisation's possible causes, implications and consequences. It touches on many relevant aspects of a changing society, including the importance of values in shaping beliefs. The second chapter offers an overview of attitude polarisation over the past 20 years. It does so by including several indicators that aim to cover most, if not all, of the key aspects highlighted in the first chapter. The third chapter delves deeper into polarisation and investigates what drove it in 2023 by means of a regression analysis. The fourth chapter complements the analysis, enriching the static findings with a dynamic model that follows a panel over time, tracking panellists' opinions regarding the war in Ukraine and the determinants of their withdrawal of support. The fifth chapter takes stock of the implications of polarisation in the political sphere and offers new tools, specifically deliberative processes, to extend democratic participation beyond mere voting. The chapter focuses on adequate funding, institutionalisation, embeddedness in social practices, digital tools, perceived efficacy and connection with the public sphere.

1 The dimensions of polarisation in Europe

We all gravitate toward certain narratives. But healthy public debate and deliberative decision-making require that, in addition to defending our preferred narratives, we understand the best versions of the arguments made by others.

Roberts and Lamp, 2021

Democratic societies encompass a multitude of opinions, values and beliefs, and common ground must be found in order for decisions to be made. In such societies, diverging views do inevitably arise. But whereas differing opinions signal a healthy democratic society, polarisation endangers the democratic process by fostering opinions that are incompatible with opposing ones. Polarisation happens when the 'multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly align along a single dimension, crosscutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them"' (McCoy et al., 2018). Polarisation is an extreme form of disagreement and engenders a conflictual ethos of politics, which is termed 'cleavage politics' (Borbáth et al., 2023). Cleavage politics reflects several aspects of polarisation, but refers in particular to the loss of the common ground of moderate viewpoints, while extreme viewpoints thrive (Fiorina and Abrams, 2010). It is important to note, though, that not all issues and not all citizens polarise equally. The relevance of an issue is one of the main factors contributing to polarisation. People will polarise on sensitive or salient topics, while being indifferent to others (Fiorina and Abrams, 2010). Similarly, issues do not exist in a vacuum but are often intertwined with several others, leading people to develop a consistent worldview that consolidates into a political identity (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Based on all this, two different but intertwined types of polarisation can be distinguished: issue polarisation and affective polarisation (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). Although the two entail similar problems, they are fundamentally different. Whereas issue polarisation relates to societal issues, affective polarisation creates in-groups and out-groups, with differences that are harder to bridge than those between individuals with differing viewpoints on the public sphere.

Issue polarisation happens when different groups have incompatible views on economic, social and cultural issues. Kleiner (2018) states that '[issue] polarisation results in an increase in the ideological distance between oppositional factions within society', and thus the divide between those with antagonistic views becomes wider. This has many causes. Some authors mention the loss of or a lack of security (widespread economic and job insecurity, geopolitical change and increasing inequalities) as one of the main reasons for polarisation (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Blockmans, 2020). People feel threatened by ever-changing societies, and governments seem increasingly powerless against the myriad crises Europe has faced in the past 15 years (Krastev, 2017). The most pressing issues in the EU relate to immigration (Grande et al., 2018; Ginsburgh et al., 2021), EU enlargement and European integration (de Vries, 2018), and economic hardship and the changing world of work (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; European Commission: JRC et al., 2021).

In contrast, in affective polarisation the conflict centres not on public issues but on the values and beliefs of people. It refers to the increasing dislike of different political and cultural identities (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). Identity politics transforms diverging public opinion into existential conflict. This is often seen in populist rhetoric, in which the deterioration of living and working conditions are blamed on different 'thems', be they elites, foreign workers or those with an opposing political ideology. Often, the rhetoric pitches globalist values against traditional values (Inglehart and Norris, 2017) and takes the form of a 'cultural backlash' against progressive values that are considered to promote more egalitarian societies while eroding traditional values and national identity. This clash is often referred to as 'culture wars' (Inglehart and Norris, 2017).

As mentioned in the introduction, this report focuses on issue polarisation, as it is easier to measure than affective polarisation, and a large pool of literature has investigated it. A starting point for this report's investigation is to reflect on changes that have happened in the past 20 years in Europe and globally, in order to track the current polarisation landscape. Although many theories compete as to which changes have been the biggest drivers of polarisation, undoubtedly one driving force is globalisation and its winners and losers.

Polarisation and globalisation

Ever since the end of the Second World War, the world has become more interconnected, and international cooperation has been on the rise. This accelerated in the aftermath of the Cold War, when the free market became the main ideology and pro-market reforms set in all around the globe, fostering economic globalisation (Roberts and Lamp, 2021). One of the dominant narratives was that the short-term losses, due to skills becoming obsolete and the relocation of factories to countries with cheaper labour production, would be counterbalanced by long-term gains, such as improved qualifications and cheaper products (Roberts and Lamp, 2021). The global financial crisis that began in 2007 and its aftermath exposed the fallacies of this system and opened the door for rival narratives to emerge. Globalisation was then seen as something to run away from, with economic insecurity and anxiety becoming the main drivers of protectionist agendas on trade (Autor et al., 2020; Roberts and Lamp, 2021; Guiso et al., 2022). In the United States, 'It's the economy, stupid' was the cornerstone catchphrase of Bill Clinton's presidential run in 1992, coined by his strategist James Carville [1]. More than 30 years later, it still seems to hold true. A large pool of literature frames the rise of populist parties and political polarisation as an economic backlash to globalisation (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Krastev, 2017; Rodrik, 2021; Colantone et al., 2022; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). Two competing economic and political narratives have emerged within Western democracies, each appealing to one side of the political spectrum.

On the right of the political spectrum, the current narrative says that globalisation has favoured migrant workers, foreign countries and cheap labour by liberalising trade instead of protecting native workers and businesses (Judis, 2018; Colantone et al., 2022). This creates horizontal (i.e. at the same hierarchy level) friction between native in-groups and foreign out-groups, fostering conflictual attitudes towards immigration and strengthening in-group identity (Strain and Veuger, 2019). This idea is not new. Ever since the mid-1990s, scholars have found that recessionary periods are notable for aggravating social conflicts (Quillian, 1995; Burns and Gimpel, 2000). This is particularly compelling for those of lower socioeconomic status or with less job security, who, in times of crisis, have more at stake (Gidron and Hall, 2017). Moreover, friction is also created between natives promoting the national interest and global elites, adding a new vertical dimension to the conflict. Voting patterns in the aftermath of financial crises in more than 800 elections from 1870 to 2014 show that the main political winners after the crises were far-right parties, whose popularity was fuelled by distrust of outsiders and the protection of national interests (Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2014; Funke et al., 2016).

On the left of the political spectrum, globalisation is accused of favouring big corporations and 'the privileged few', especially at the expense of the Global South and the middle and working classes (Blockmans, 2020; Roberts and Lamp, 2021). Their conflict is directed vertically towards the 1 %, echoing the 'We are the 99%' slogan of Occupy Wall Street (Castells, 2012). Opposing the nativist policies of the right, left-wing populist parties advocate for more redistribution – increasing taxation on the richer strata of the population to then give back to people in lower socioeconomic strata. Whether this narrative is supported by large-scale statistical data is still not clear. When looking at individual changes in financial circumstances among Dutch respondents, Gidron and Mijs (2019) found that the worsening of economic status led to more favourable opinions of redistributive policies. Interestingly, their paper found that an increase in income over time, especially among low-income respondents, led to a sharp rejection of redistributive policies.

Globalisation not only created an interconnected economic world but also favoured cultural change. The post-war economy led to great prosperity and the emergence of welfare states, providing an economically and physically secure life. The cultural revolutions in the United States, Europe and elsewhere, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, had long-lasting impacts on achieving individual and social rights. In particular, the rise of post-materialist values, such as freedom of expression, gender equality and tolerance of gay men and lesbians and foreigners, contributed to creating a more inclusive and accepting society (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Unfortunately, not everyone reaped the rewards. Many people, often older and with a less secure social status, saw the erosion of their traditional values (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). The cultural backlash against post-materialist culture became the new political narrative, revitalising support for xenophobic and authoritarian parties (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). These changes are reflected in the saliency of economic versus non-economic issues, with that of the latter rising dramatically since the post-war period (Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Among non-economic issues, two main polarising ones have gained momentum: immigration and gender and sexual rights.

[1] For a modern application of the phrase, please see https://harvardpolitics.com/its-the-economy-stupid/.

Immigration has been a hot topic for the past two decades. The compounding effects of globalisation and wars around the world have increased the inflow of immigrants. In the case of Europe, immigration has mostly originated from Muslim and African countries, or eastern European countries that have recently joined the EU (Rodrik, 2021). A rich meta-analysis ([2]) showed how the conflictual cultural aspects of immigration – such as identity loss and religious differences – may have economic roots, as low-skilled immigrants can drive the local wages down and affect public service provision, leading to issues of welfare chauvinism (Rodrik, 2021). Moreover, many immigrants in urban areas live, willingly or unwillingly, in immigrants-only neighbourhoods, fostering segregation and increasing the social distance between natives and non-natives (Enos, 2017).

Concerning gender and sexual rights, many efforts have been made since the 1990s to ensure gender and sexual equality, resulting in the right to non-discrimination featured in Chapter 3 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and in United Nations SDG 10. Notwithstanding, the movement has received severe backlash from groups advocating for traditional norms (Mansbridge and Shames, 2008; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018; Verloo, 2018). Since 2015, several movements against same-sex marriage have taken root in Europe, starting in France and spreading to Germany, Italy, Poland and Slovakia (Paternotte, 2015). As mentioned previously, bias-motivated speech and violence are still pervasive in the Member States (ILGA Europe, 2025). Not surprisingly, there is a strong geographical component to the acceptance of sexual equality, with the rural–urban divide evident (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Eurofound, 2023).

In light of such uneven changes in society, it is worth asking whether and how Europe is still bound together.

Polarisation and trust

Trust is at the core of a functioning democracy, as it can be considered the glue that keeps state and citizens together (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017). Citizens who trust institutions are more likely to partake in their democratic duties, such as voting, and to feel more engaged with civil society (Eurofound, 2024). Trusting national institutions is associated with a higher rate of satisfaction when the government has to make drastic decisions, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurofound, 2022a). Trust is determined both culturally, at the national or regional level, and individually. Cultural determinants include such elements as high income and welfare provisions, as well as perceived institutional performance (Boda and Medve-Bálint, 2014; Medve-Bálint and Boda, 2014), whereas individual determinants include education, wealth, employment and optimism (Boda and Medve-Bálint, 2014; Algan et al., 2017; Eurofound, 2018; Eurofound, 2022b). In times of crisis, the relationship between trust and discontent becomes even more delicate. The global financial crisis marked the start of the decline in trust in institutions, as well as the polarisation of trust between citizens and political elites (Algan et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, economic insecurity fuelled political distrust (Algan et al., 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017). Discontent is manifested both at the individual level, when people perceive a worsening of their conditions, and more importantly at the societal level, when citizens experience disappointment in democracy (Laclau, 2005; Giebler et al., 2021). A study found that collective discontent is a strong driver of support for anti-establishment and populist parties (Giebler et al., 2021). The erosion of institutional trust and increased discontent pose a threat to well-functioning democratic governments. Institutional and interpersonal distrust are typical features of anti-establishment and populist rhetoric (Olivera, 2015).

Within this context, polarisation has major implications for social cohesion, such as the lack of acceptance of political compromise, decreased institutional trust, the need for fact-checking of sources and the dehumanisation of political adversaries (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). The lack of political compromise and the erosion of the political middle ground have been integral to the development of a polarised political landscape where fringe ideologies and parties thrive (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008). Politics has shifted from the traditional left–right divide, mostly focused on social-class conflicts, to more personalised and individualised political identities (Inglehart and Norris, 2017), where striking a compromise implies going against one's personal values or beliefs, and hence challenging the way one lives (Klein, 2020).

Moreover, populist narratives have enshrined the conflict against political elites. In the digital era, these messages are easily transmitted and shared on social media. A third of Europeans consume their news online, and half of respondents reported having encountered misinformation at least once in a regular week, even before the COVID-19 pandemic ([3]). More recent findings show that 40 % of Europeans aged 16 to 30 years use social media as their main news source, with a large majority getting their news from Instagram or TikTok

([2]) For a full picture of the meta-analysis, please refer to Table 4 in Rodrik (2021).

([3]) See https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2183_464_eng?locale=en.

(European Parliament, 2025b). Both traditional and digital news media have their sources of bias. Traditional media are sometimes lenient towards authority, for instance when the mainstream media is state owned and promotes government narratives, neglecting alternative views (Donohue et al., 1995; Ceron, 2015). Recent Eurobarometer data from 2022 ([4]) suggest that, across Europe, trust in public media outlets is lowest in Hungary and Poland (Fotopoulos, 2023). Generally speaking, mainstream media offer less polarised views on topics, aligning with attitudes that preserve the status quo and giving less room to fringe voices (Woodly, 2008). By contrast, social media opens up news consumption and creation to anyone. Instead of the top-down approach of mainstream media, there is a bottom-up landscape of 'prosumers' (people who are both producers and consumers). Despite the promise of social media as a new 'virtual agora' (Meraz, 2009), social media news consumption and filter bubbles may pose a threat to the political sphere by promoting misinformation and polarised views that fuel discontent and erode trust (Banks et al., 2020; Eurofound, 2022a). The threat comes from both news consumers and news producers. On the one hand, polarised citizens tend to share the views of their preferred media outlets, especially partisan outlets that push strategic extremism (Glaeser et al., 2005), an aspect that is reinforced where strong partisanship and political sophistication are also present (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). On the other hand, to maximise their political marketing, some producers may push fringe arguments that radicalise consumers (European Commission: JRC et al., 2020).

Reflecting sensational content, online language has become increasingly aggressive and uncivil. At first, researchers thought that anonymity led to a greater sense of freedom to vent when posting comments on blogs (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012). Recent studies have found, though, that anonymity has become less of a driver of aggressive language. Rather, a growing acceptance of aggressive social norms in online interactions has meant that many users consider themselves free of social constraints such as respectfulness and civility, which results in cyber hate and the use of derogatory language (Rösner and Krämer, 2016; Bilewicz and Soral, 2020; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021).

Sensational but misleading arguments have a particular grip on citizens with low media literacy, who struggle with fact-checking and are especially susceptible to misinformation (Khan and Idris, 2019; Najmul Islam et al., 2020). Misinformation becomes even more of a problem when it pertains to topics of public concern, such as pandemics and wars. In 2020, the Pan American Health Organization referred to the proliferation of inaccurate news surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic as an infodemic (PAHO, 2020). Very often, online news during this time was inaccurate or intentionally false, and people consuming news online scored much lower on their knowledge of the virus than those consuming traditional media such as TV, radio and newspapers (Dhanani and Franz, 2020). Russia's war against Ukraine provided another clear example of a disinformation campaign and its effects. Studies reported that disinformation did not have a grip on the general public but found fertile ground in small groups of society (Eady et al., 2023). The creation of echo chambers poses a further risk, fostering the link between social media use and conspiracy theories (Jin et al., 2024). Even when country preferences (Ukraine or Russia) were controlled for, respondents who consumed traditional news were less likely to rate misinformation as true. Notwithstanding, the greatest determinant of believing in misinformation was holding a conspiratorial view of the world, and in some countries this was reinforced by using social media (Zilinksky et al., 2024).

A new nexus: exploring belief systems

Among the relevant factors affecting how citizens shape attitudes is the belief system with which they grew up. Attitudes change over time, especially when life-altering events happen. For instance, previous studies found that parenthood changes views of and attitudes towards gender roles (Baxter et al., 2014) and other public opinion issues (Banducci et al., 2016). Similarly, age and a change in employment or economic security have an impact on attitudes towards public issues such as trade control and migration (Colantone et al., 2022). In contrast, values are quite stable, and they rarely change over the course of a lifetime (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). Schwartz (1992) defines values as abstract goals or motivations that guide the life choices of a person. They motivate actions and transcend specific contexts or situations, and they serve as standards in accordance with which a person directs their life. Values are taught or learned early, during the primary (i.e. from parents) and secondary (i.e. from peers) phases of socialisation (Schwartz, 1992).

Although the literature has investigated the role of values in shaping attitudes, only a handful of studies have tackled the relationship between values and political behaviours, and no agreement has been found among them. When looking at the propensity to vote for

([4]) https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832.

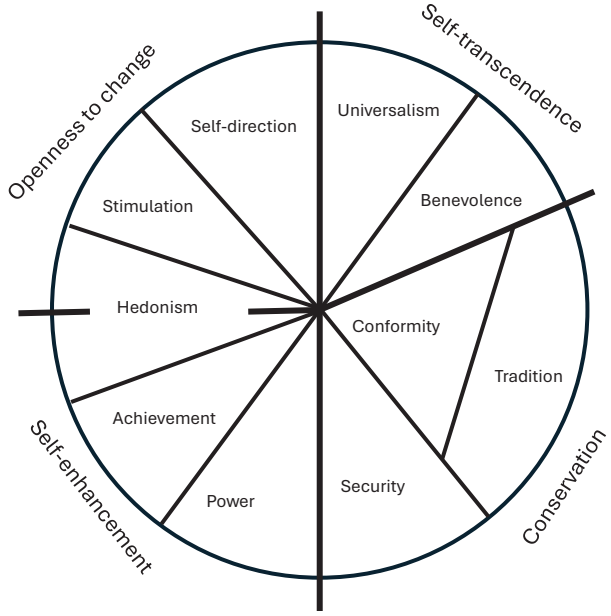
populist parties, de Vries and Hoffmann (2016) did not identify any impact of values, showing how values direct more attitudinal choices rather than what party people vote for. A more recent study tackled the issue by investigating whether some values are good indicators of voting for a populist party on the left or the right (Marcos-Marne, 2022). The author found that the value of security, which is related to the importance of a safe environment for oneself and the people around oneself, has a positive impact on voting for right-wing populist parties, whereas it does not affect voting for left-leaning parties. Although its effect is small, conformity – the value related to self-discipline and self-restraint – is a bipartisan value that predicts against populist votes, as high-conformity respondents are less likely to deviate from established norms and rules, hence rejecting anti-establishment parties. While values significantly affect attitudes towards different topics and groups, values and attitudes coexist simultaneously within an individual, such that determining attitudes based on single values may lead to bias. Previous studies have shown that implying causal relationships between values and political attitudes can result in mixed outcomes (e.g. de Vries and Hoffmann, 2016; Marcos-Marne, 2022) and reductive conclusions (e.g. Kinder, 1998). As one may expect, it is highly reductive to think that voting behaviours and political attitudes have a single determinant, whether it is ideology, values, economic status or social class (Kinder, 1998).

Regarding the measure of values, they are much harder than attitudes to quantify. Notwithstanding, several attempts have been made, for instance Schwartz's Human Values Scale, Inglehart's post-materialist values theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. For the purpose of this study, the Human Values Scale by Schwartz will be used, owing to both its use in the ESS and its replicability in several countries and languages (Schwartz, 2012). Schwartz's theory introduces 10 broad values that can be divided into four main quadrants: self-transcendence, conservation, self-enhancement and openness to change. Moreover, all the values have two additional dimensions: societally focused or personally focused, and anxiety based or anxiety free (Schwartz, 2006, 2012).

As shown in Figure 1, the four quadrants have the following characteristics and reflect the following values.

- **Conservation** includes the values of conformity, tradition and security. It has a societal focus and is anxiety based. It emphasises complying with 'order, self-restriction and preservation of the past'.
- **Self-transcendence** includes the values of universalism and benevolence. It has a societal focus and is anxiety free. It emphasises the well-being and interest of other people over personal interest.
- **Self-enhancement** includes the values of power, achievement and hedonism. It has a personal focus and is anxiety based. It emphasises the pursuit of one's own interest and success over that of others.
- **Openness to change** includes the values of self-direction, stimulation and hedonism. It has a personal focus and is anxiety free. It emphasises independence of thought and readiness for change.

Figure 1: Human values theoretical framework



Source: Schwartz (2012).

As can be observed, the four quadrants are positioned to indicate two main dichotomies: conservation diametrically opposes openness to change. The former reflects conformity to rules and compliance with pre-existing social structures, whereas the latter reflects independent and critical thinking. Similarly, self-transcendence opposes self-enhancement. The former values the well-being of everyone in society, whereas the latter is focused on self-realisation and even dominance over others.

Which issues to consider

The literature mentioned draws attention to some key attitudes that are salient in the political sphere and represent different facets of attitudes and public opinion. These are political issues, including trust in political institutions, views on EU enlargement and satisfaction with democracy; gender and equality issues, especially acceptance of gay and lesbian couples and acceptance of gender equality; and finally, acceptance of immigrants, both socially and economically. These three clusters of attitudes will be further investigated in order to analyse trends and infer whether polarisation has grown over the past 20 years in Europe.

2 Trends in polarisation across Europe

No unified methodology

Public opinion has changed over the past 20 years. It is thus important to track which opinions have changed the most, and whether polarisation has happened over time. Issue polarisation is a multidimensional concept, and the literature is not set on a standard operationalisation of it. Some argue for issue polarisation to be spatially bound (Kleiner, 2018), while others see issue polarisation through the lens of group distance, especially among partisan voters (Esteban and Ray, 1994; Lelkes, 2016; Gercke and Delhey, 2023). In this sense, the literature distinguishes between group polarisation and mass polarisation. Group polarisation considers fractures in society and looks at how far apart different substrata are, especially across party, income or minority divides. This approach sees groups within societies as separate entities, and polarisation is defined as the degree of distinctiveness of their opinions (Bramson et al., 2017; Kleiner, 2018).
The more distinct the groups' opinions are, the more the distribution will have a bimodal shape, showing clear peaks representing the modal opinion for that group (DiMaggio et al., 1996; McCarty et al., 2008). Another indicator of group polarisation is group divergence, measured as the increasing distance between groups' median or mode values. Mass polarisation measures general trends applicable to a society overall without distinguishing between groups (Gercke and Delhey, 2023). Although this approach somewhat loses the group comparison aspect, it is deemed a more feasible way to map the overall polarisation of opinions, especially if the individual is the level of analysis (Lord et al., 1979; Hogg et al., 1990). This report will therefore investigate mass polarisation in European societies.

Several polarisation measures are commonly used, based on the type of polarisation and the scope of the investigation that drives the model specification (Bramson et al., 2017). The first measure commonly used is spread, that is, how wide the distribution is and whether it differs from a normal distribution (Bramson et al., 2017). In this sense, a simple measure of skewness is used, showing whether the distribution is asymmetric and tilts to either end. In public opinion, that indicates a generally more positive or negative opinion on a certain issue. The second measure commonly used is dispersion, which reflects statistical variation (Bramson et al., 2017). When looking at opinions, those that are more diverse will yield opposing or clashing views (DiMaggio et al., 1996). This is generally measured by the standard deviation, the coefficient of variation or the mean difference. This technique, although rather simplistic, enables the categorisation of respondents based on their answers. In fact, the standard deviation used to measure polarisation can be called the 'coefficient of consensus' (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988). Measuring how many respondents are dispersed along the distribution and the extent to which they vary from the median is a simple, yet effective, measure of polarisation. In the report, the standard deviation from the median will be used to group respondents and determine whether they are strongly against something, are part of the middle ground or are strongly in favour. Another relevant measure is coverage, which refers to whether diverse opinions are packed into groups, rather than distributed evenly. Such a distribution would present several sharp peaks, with some distance between the answer categories (Bramson et al., 2017). When coverage combines with dispersion, the distribution displays a key feature of polarisation: bimodality (Fiorina et al., 2005; Bramson et al., 2017).

Measuring polarisation

As mentioned previously, a bimodal or multimodal distribution is a key aspect of polarisation. To investigate the distribution's modality and the associated polarisation of responses in ordered rating scales like public opinion questions, the report employs Galtung's classification of distribution (AJUS) (Galtung, 1969), Hartigan's dip test (Hartigan and Hartigan, 1985) and Van der Eijk's measure of agreement 'A' (Van der Eijk, 2001). For a brief explanation of these measures, see Box 2.

Galtung's AJUS system classifies the type of distribution based on modality, skewness and kurtosis. The outcome of the classification is one of the letters composing 'AJUS': 'A' if the distribution is unimodal with a peak in the centre, 'J' if it is unimodal with a peak at either end, 'U' if it is bimodal with a peak at both ends and 'S' if it is multimodal. For completeness, measures of skewness and kurtosis are provided. A positive skewness involves a tail to the right – with the median value towards the lower end of the *x*-axis – while a negative skewness involves a tail to the left – with the median value towards the higher end of the *x*-axis. Kurtosis reflects the tailedness of a distribution, showing whether outliers are present at both ends of the distribution (Westfall, 2014). Values around 3 are associated with medium kurtosis. Values lower than 3 are associated with platykurtosis, which involves

Box 2: Methodology recap: four measures of polarisation

Polarisation is a multifaceted concept that can be operationalised in many ways. This report examines mass polarisation (i.e. a large-scale trend in polarisation) within the EU on social, economic and political attitudes. As two of the key characteristics of polarisation are bimodality (or a camel-shaped distribution) and a wide spread of opinions, this report employs four main measures to reflect these two aspects.

Galtung's classification of distribution (AJUS). This measure looks at the distribution of a variable and classifies it based on its shape. Whereas 'A' and 'J' represent unimodal distribution, 'U' and 'S' represent bimodal or multimodal distribution. Polarisation happens when the distribution is classified as 'U' or 'S'.

Hartigan's dip test. This measure offers a statistical test for modality. If the test is significant, the distribution is multimodal.

Van der Eijk's measure of polarisation. This measure looks at the level of agreement in a distribution. Polarisation happens when the answers are clustered at the extremes of a scale.

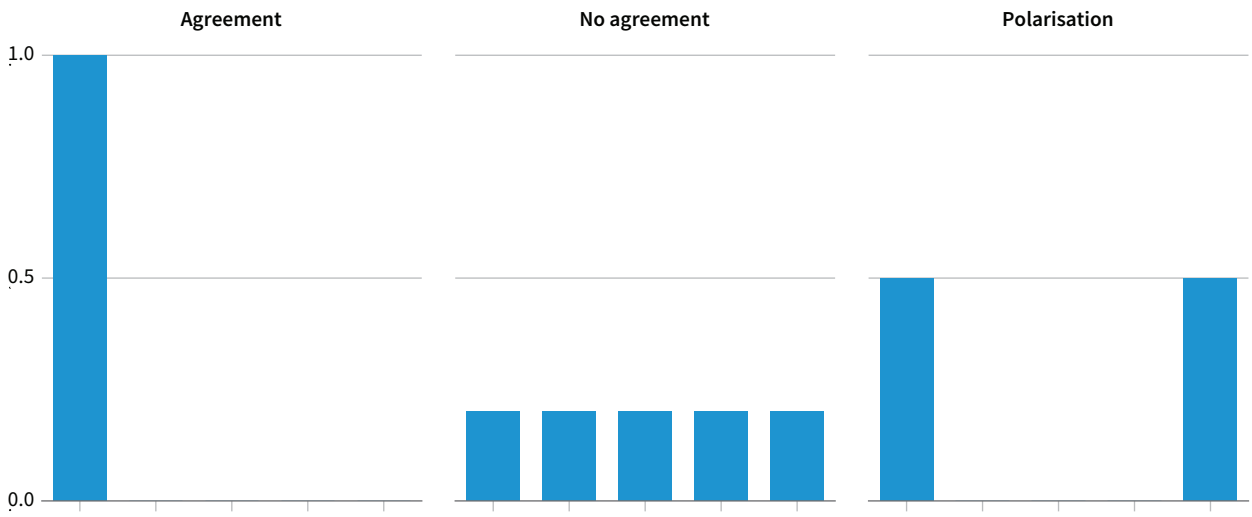
Dispersion of the distribution. This measure provides the spread of the distribution. Dispersion itself does not necessarily measure polarisation, but coupled with multimodality it offers a clear picture of whether opinions are converging or diverging over time.

thinner tails and fewer outliers, whereas values higher than 3 are associated with leptokurtosis, which involves fatter tails and more outliers. Polarisation happens when more respondents are concentrated at either tail, and hence it will be a feature of distributions where the kurtosis value is higher than 3.

Hartigan's dip test is a statistical measure testing unimodality, so it strengthens the results of Galtung's AJUS by adding a degree of significance (Hartigan and Hartigan, 1985). In some cases, when AJUS asserts unimodality, Hartigan's dip test corroborates the graphical assumption. The larger the dip test, the more multimodal the distribution. A *p*-value lower than 0.05 implies a significant multimodality.

Finally, Van der Eijk's 'A' gives a measure of agreement. It calculates concentration and dispersion in ordered rating scales, and agreement is defined as the clustering around one value (Van der Eijk, 2001). Agreement ranges from – 1 (polarisation, meaning that the two most extreme answer categories have the same frequency) to 1 (full agreement, where all cases are in one answer category), with 0 meaning no agreement (all categories have the same frequency). Figure 2 provides helpful examples.

Figure 2: Examples of different levels of agreement using Van der Eijk's model



Note: Van der Eijk's measure of agreement (defined as clustering around one value) ranges from – 1 (polarisation, meaning that the two most extreme answer categories have the same frequency) to 1 (full agreement, where all cases are in one answer category), with 0 meaning no agreement (all categories have the same frequency).
Source: Van der Eijk (2001).

Therefore, Van der Eijk calculated a measure for polarisation that reverses and standardises the agreement value. Whereas agreement ranges from – 1 to 1, polarisation ranges from 0 to 1. If all observations are in the same category, polarisation is 0. If half the observations are in one category and half in a different (non-neighbouring) category, polarisation is 1. If observations are uniformly distributed across all categories, polarisation is 0.5.

The AJUS, dip test and polarisation scale are complementary and are used together as a robustness check for further analysis.

Data: the European Social Survey

To investigate several facets of public opinion polarisation, the following indicators were analysed. The data used come from the ESS, one of the leading representative and comparative surveys on public opinion. The ESS has been conducted every two years since 2002 and contains core questions that are repeated in every round. These questions offer valuable insights into what Europeans think regarding gender equality, human rights, acceptance of immigrants, and trust in and satisfaction with institutions. Moreover, some questions are part of recurring modules and feature on a regular basis. Recently, questions relating to environmental issues have become more salient, but they do not feature in enough survey rounds to significantly estimate polarisation trends on this topic. Similarly, some interesting questions relating to gender equality and the role of social media were asked in specific years and not replicated; hence no trends could be observed. Thirteen indicators have therefore been considered for the trend analysis, in light of their availability and theoretical relevance. Table 1 presents all the indicators and positions them in attitudinal groups.

Table 1: ESS indicators considered in examining trends in polarisation

Group	Question topic	Scale	Years available
Political attitudes	Trust in political institutions (*)	0–10	2004–2023
	European unification should go further or has gone too far	0–10	2004–2023
	Satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in your country	0–10	2002–2023
	Importance of living in a democratically governed country	0–10	2012, 2020
Equality attitudes	Gay men and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish	1–5	2002–2023
	Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children	1–5	2016–2023
	Impact of immigrants on national cultural life	0–10	2002–2023
	Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live (reversed coding)	0–10	2002–2023
	Immigrants should have the right to access social benefits	1–5	2008, 2016
	The government should reduce differences in income levels	1–5	2002–2023
	Men should have a greater right to a job than women when jobs are scarce	1–5	2004, 2008, 2010, 2016
Economic attitudes	Effect of immigration on the national economy	0–10	2002–2023
	Satisfaction with the national economy	0–10	2002–2023

(*) 'Trust in political institutions' is the result of a factor analysis of trust in parties, trust in the national parliament, trust in politicians and trust in the European Parliament (Cronbach's alpha: 0.89).
Source: Authors.

One final caveat is the country coverage. The ESS does not collect data from all Member States, as countries opt in to the survey. This means that, over time, some Member States missed some rounds, and hence they were excluded from the trend analyses as necessary, as they would have skewed the statistics. In order to cover 20 years of trends in public opinion, this report considers four rounds of the ESS: 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023. In total, 14 Member States are covered by data for all four rounds: Belgium, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Hence, the 13 Member States that were excluded from the analysis for certain indicators are Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania. For questions that were asked only in certain rounds, for instance on the importance of democracy and the greater right of men to jobs, new country groupings were created and considered in the analysis.

Results

The following section analyses all the abovementioned indicators by showing their weighted distribution for the years for which data are available at both the EU level (or, strictly, for the 14 Member States considered) and the national level. Moreover, the four measures of polarisation for each indicator are displayed in dedicated tables and their results are interpreted.

Trust in political institutions

Trust in political institutions has been heavily affected by the myriad crises faced by Europe in the past 20 years. As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 3, the highest level of distrust was recorded in 2012, when the median dropped to 3.75 and disparities increased. Van der Eijk's polarisation measure shows an increase from 2006 to 2012 and then dropped back to initial levels in 2023. Over time, there has been a conspicuous and consistent share of respondents who declared having no trust in political institutions. After the financial crisis, the situation improved, with a small increase in the median value for the 14 Member States considered. Despite the improvement, the standard deviation has widened, showing more disparities in the distribution.

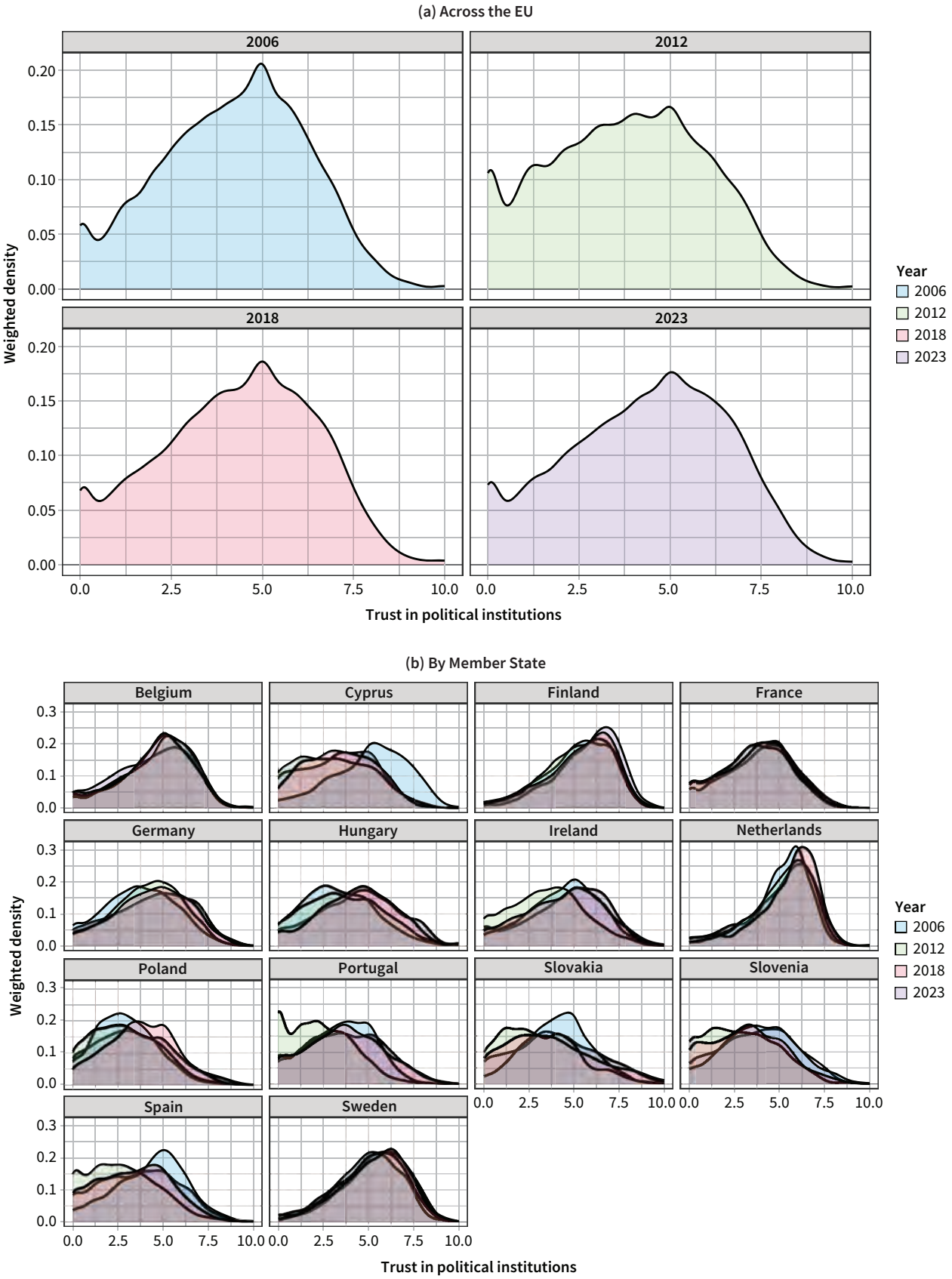
When looking at the national trends, Ireland, Portugal and Spain exhibit the greatest movement towards distrust in 2012. Whereas values in Ireland and Portugal improved in 2018, Spain still recorded low levels of trust. Finally, Galtung's AJUS and Hartigan's dip test assert multimodality.

Table 2: Results for the indicator 'Trust in political institutions'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.31	0.02	0.00	S	– 0.12	2.48	4.25	1.99
2012	0.35	0.03	0.00	S	0.02	2.22	3.75	2.14
2018	0.33	0.02	0.00	S	– 0.16	2.35	4.50	2.13
2023	0.35	0.02	0.00	S	– 0.17	2.29	4.50	2.19

Source: Authors.

Figure 3: Trust in political institutions, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Attitudes to European unification

Opinions regarding European unification seem to be quite diverse. Although the median value stayed constant in the middle of the distribution, the standard deviation fluctuated, showing some degree of disparity (Table 3). Moreover, looking at Figure 4, there seem to be several modes: one at each end of the distribution, one in the middle (where the median sits) and one more peak in favour of further unification. This peaked distribution is reflected in the high value of Van der Eijk's polarisation, as well as the multimodal character pointed out by Galtung's AJUS and the significant, albeit small, Hartigan's dip test values.

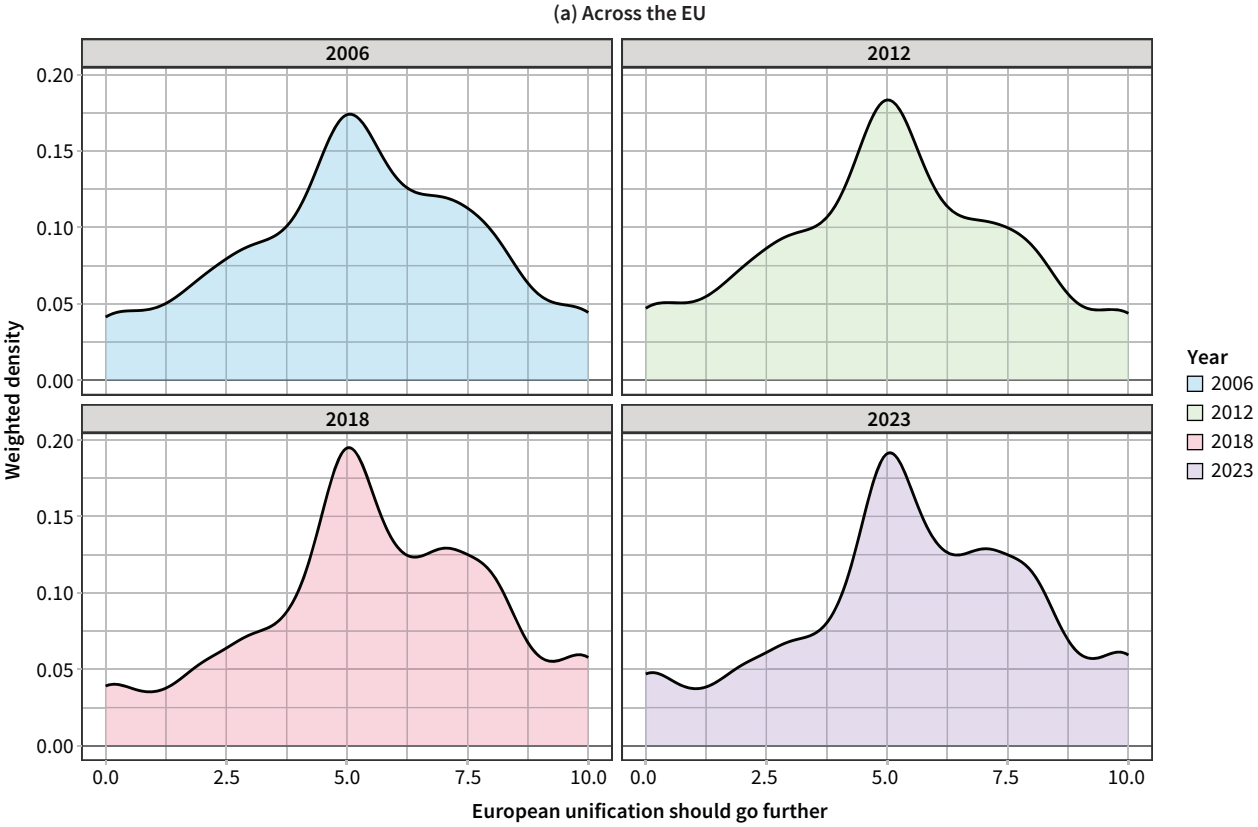
When looking at country differences, opinions in several Member States moved towards further European unification. Notably, Finland, Germany and Portugal became more positive about further European unification over time. Conversely, some Member States, such as Poland and Slovakia, started in 2006 with a very positive opinion regarding European unification, probably reflecting their recent accession to the EU in 2004. However, opinions on further unification changed in 2018 and 2023, with respondents showing a higher tendency to say unification had gone too far.

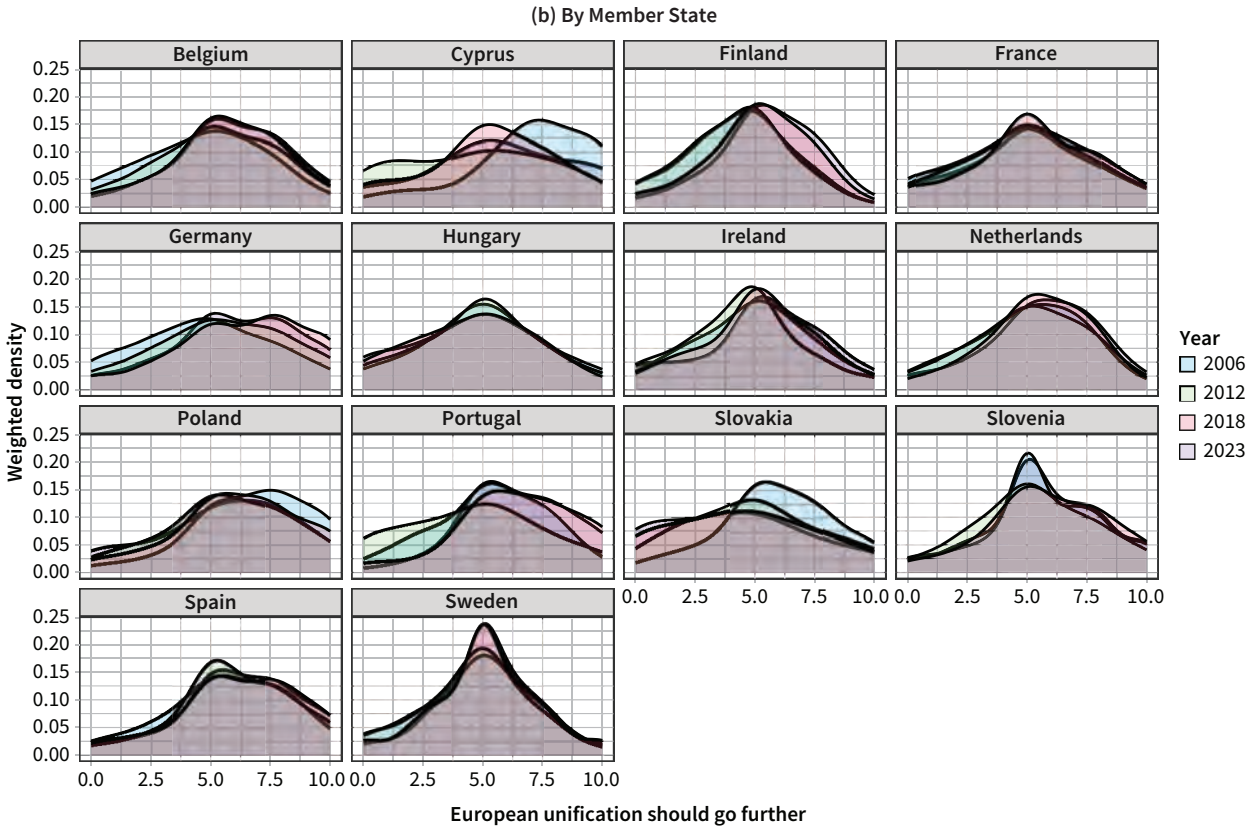
Table 3: Results for the indicator 'European unification should go further or has gone too far'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.36	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.15	2.44	5.00	2.59
2012	0.36	0.05	0.00	S	– 0.06	2.43	5.00	2.61
2018	0.34	0.07	0.00	S	– 0.24	2.59	5.00	2.55
2023	0.35	0.07	0.00	S	– 0.30	2.56	5.00	2.61

Source: Authors.

Figure 4: European unification should go further, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Satisfaction with national-level democracy

Satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in the different countries seems to have increased over time, although large differences can be observed among the Member States examined (Figure 5). The median increased in 2012 and 2018 but dropped again in 2023 (Table 4). Disparities steadily increased over time as well, and the shape of the distribution is similar to the one for trust in political institutions. In Figure 5, three modes can be distinguished: one among those who are completely dissatisfied with democracy, one around the median value and one among those who are rather satisfied. This is reflected in the multimodal character indicated by AJUS and the significant dip test values. Moreover, Van der Eijk's polarisation increased over time, showing less agreement in opinions on this indicator.

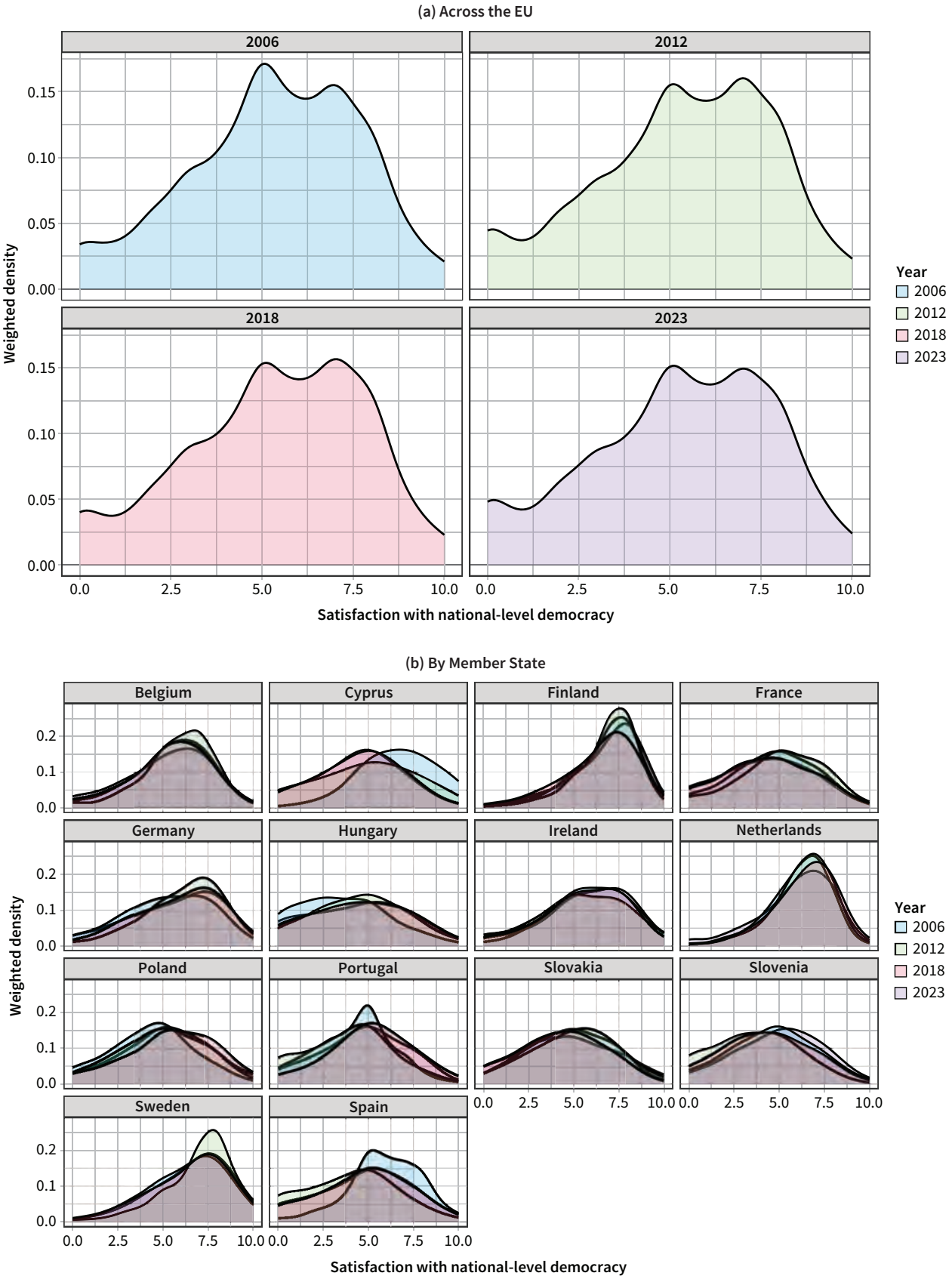
Among Member States, some of the largest decreases in satisfaction with democracy can be observed in Cyprus, Hungary and Spain. France and Sweden also recorded decreases, albeit to a lesser extent. In Poland, Portugal and (to a slight extent) Slovenia, the public's satisfaction with how democracy works in their countries increased over time.

Table 4: Results for the indicator 'Satisfaction with the way in which democracy works in your country'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.33	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.34	2.55	5.00	2.36
2012	0.34	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.41	2.49	6.00	2.47
2018	0.34	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.39	2.48	6.00	2.45
2023	0.35	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.38	2.42	5.00	2.52

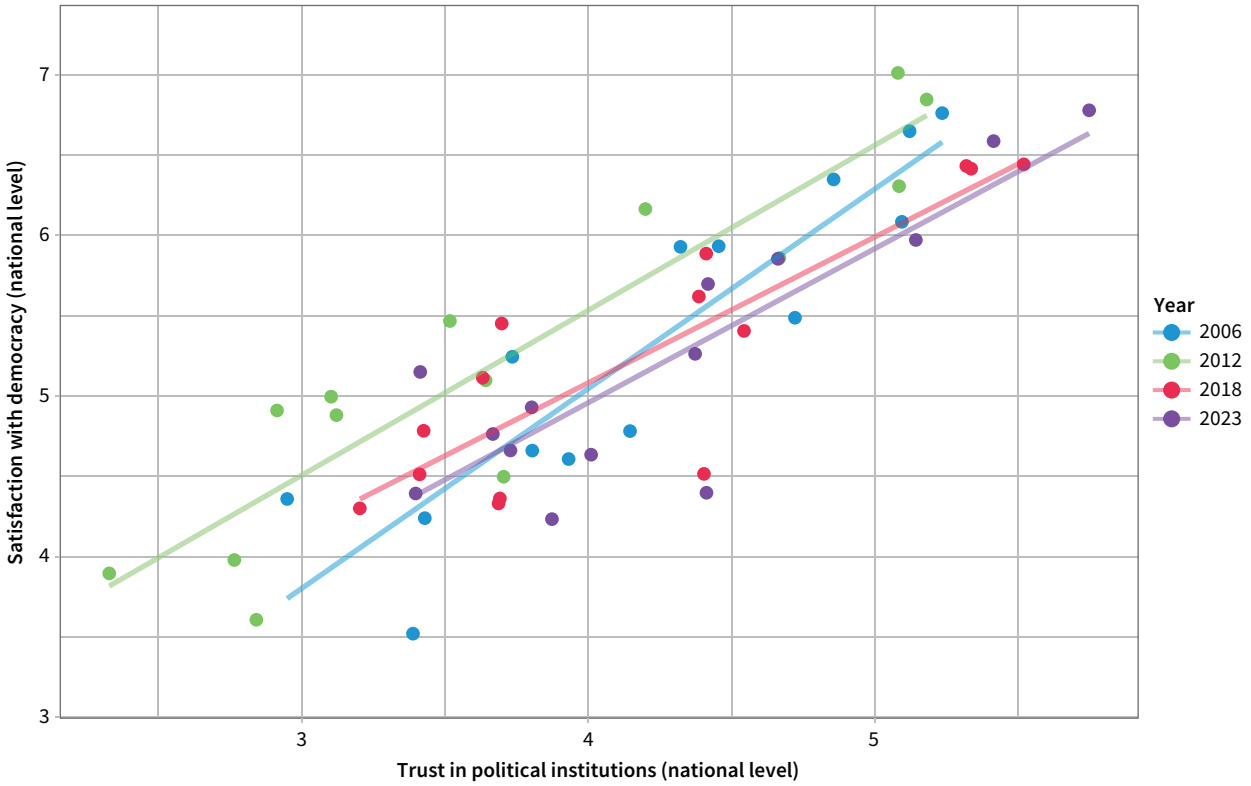
Source: Authors.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with national-level democracy, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Figure 6: Correlation between trust in political institutions and satisfaction with national-level democracy, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Not surprisingly, trust in national political institutions and satisfaction with national-level democracy are highly correlated over all the years considered (Figure 6).

Importance of living in a democratically governed country

The importance of living in a democratically governed country is, across Europe, the indicator with the highest rate of agreement. Despite only two years of data being available, Van der Eijk's polarisation score reduced from 2012 to 2020, showing almost full agreement (Figure 7). Similarly, the standard deviation decreased, showing a more consistent opinion on the issue (Table 5). Despite this, Galtung's AJUS and Hartigan's dip test suggest that the distribution is multimodal, as peaks can be observed towards the middle of the distribution. Obviously, a high kurtosis and negative skewness represent the concentration of values at the positive extremes of the distribution.

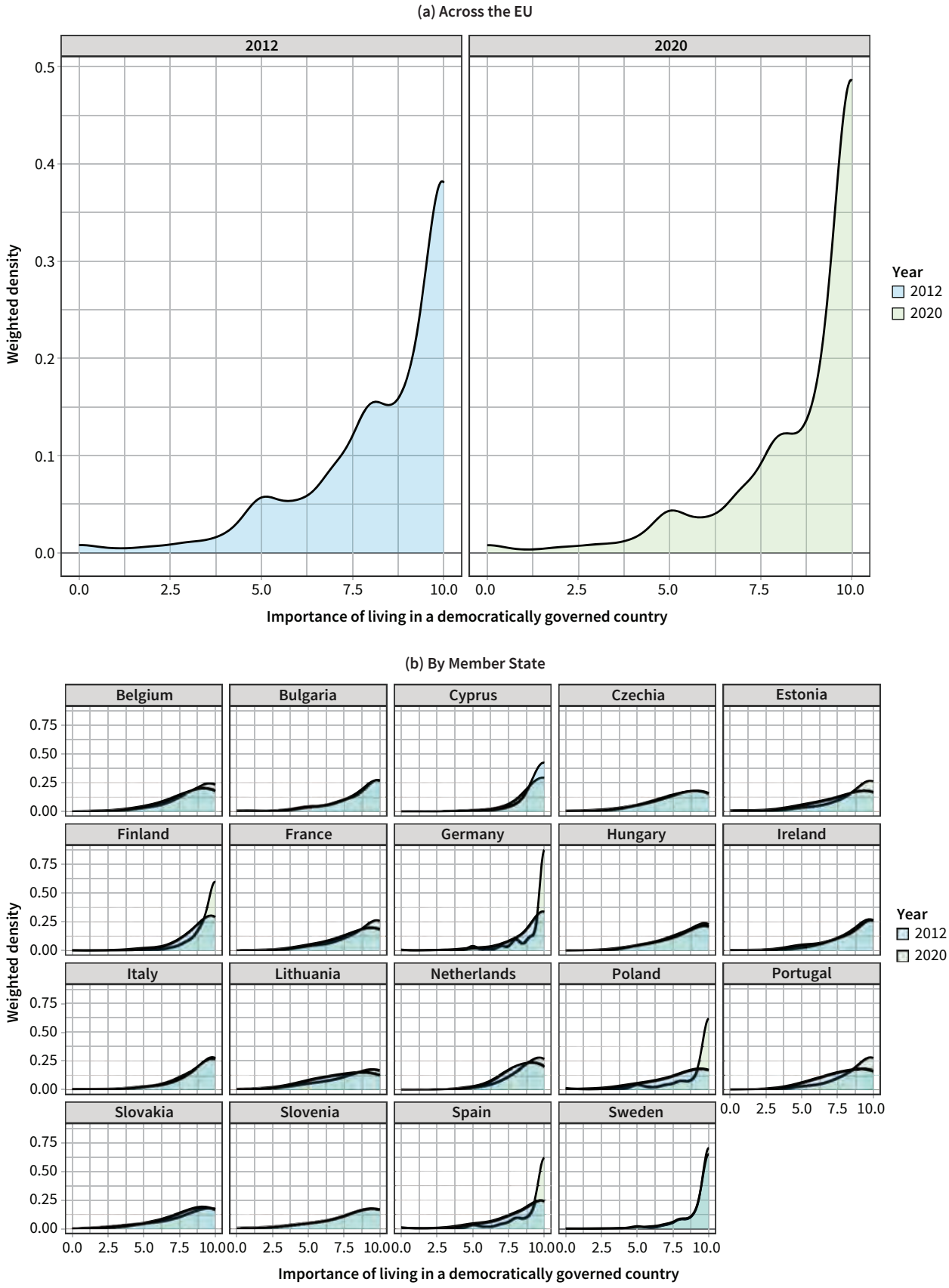
When looking at country differences, very few changes can be observed. In some Member States, the level of importance increased from 2012 to 2020, for instance in Finland, Germany, Poland and Spain. Otherwise, trends seem to be constant over time and a generally positive opinion can be observed with regard to this indicator.

Table 5: Results for the indicator 'Importance of living in a democratically governed country'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2012	0.15	0.08	0.00	S	– 1.66	5.97	9.00	1.96
2020	0.11	0.06	0.00	S	– 2.24	8.61	10.00	1.82

Source: Authors.

Figure 7: Importance of living in a democratically governed country, 2012 and 2020



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Gay men and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish

Opinions regarding acceptance of gay men and lesbians have become steadily more positive over time, as shown in Figure 8. Although the median value stayed constant over time, disparities decreased, showing more agreement (Table 6). This is corroborated by the reduction in Van der Eijk's polarisation measure. Moreover, the increasingly negative skewness implies that the general opinion has moved towards the right-hand side of the distribution, showing more acceptance of gay men and lesbians. Finally, the modality of the opinion differs between Hartigan's dip test and Galtung's AJUS. Whereas AJUS marks the first two years as unimodal and the last two as multimodal, the dip test shows all multimodal distributions in the four years considered.

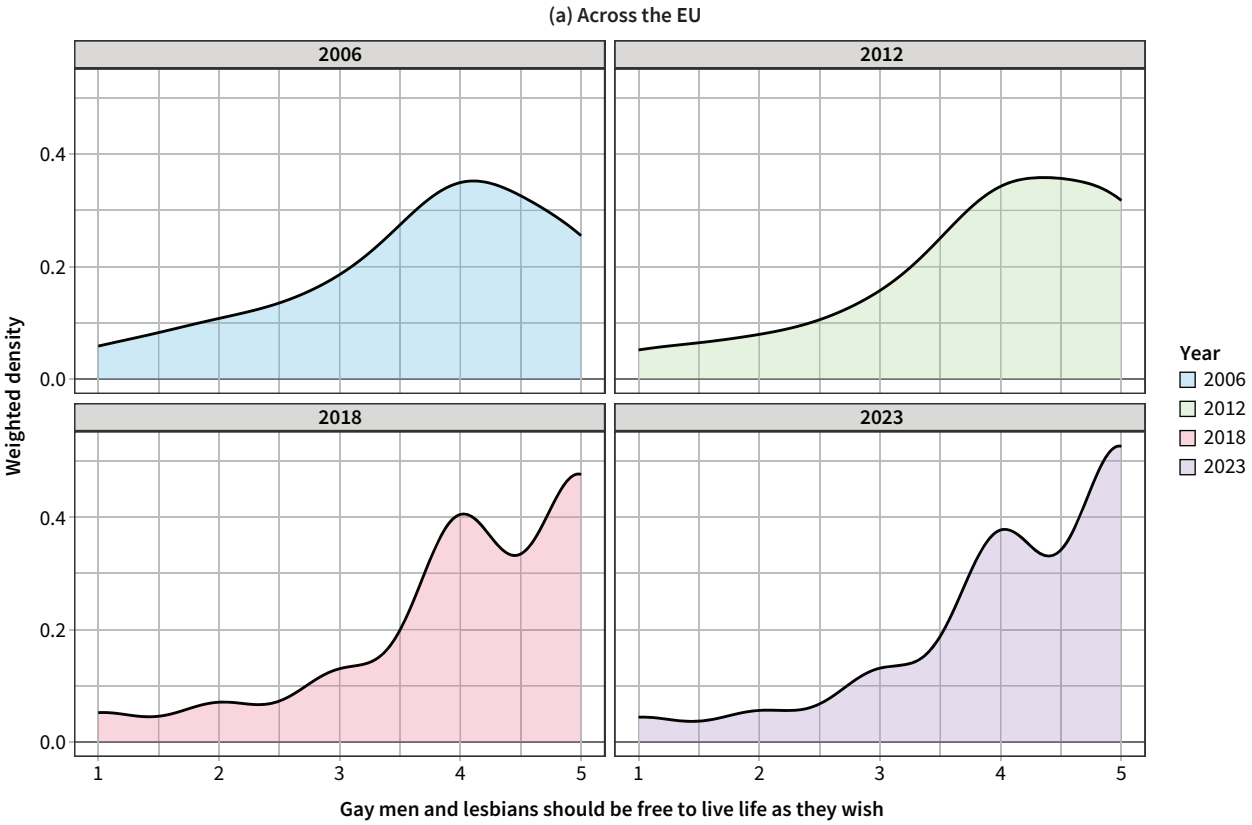
Member States displayed similar trends, with no clear polarisation over time in the sample. Most Member States moved towards greater acceptance of gay men and lesbians, with the highest gains in Finland, Poland and Slovenia. Although the differences seem rather small, Hungary is the only country in which acceptance seemed to drop slightly over time.

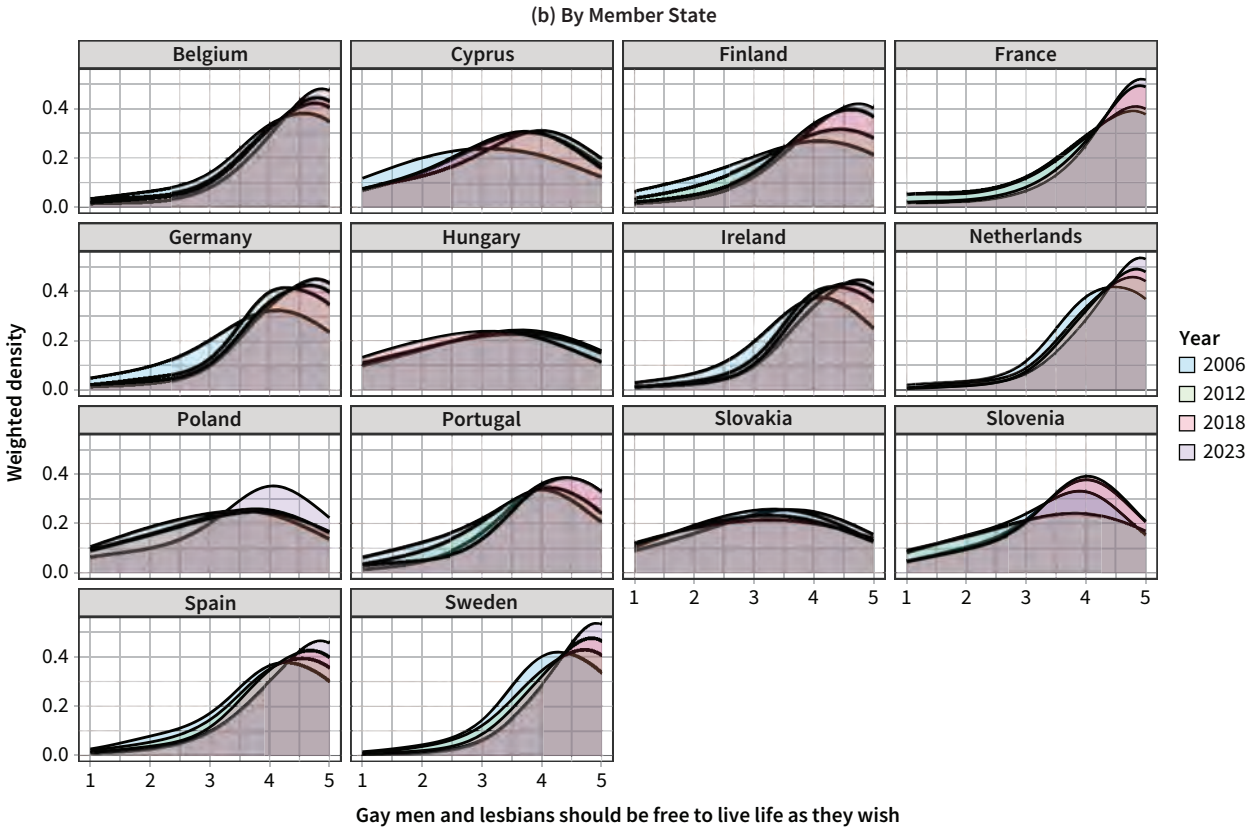
Table 6: Results for the indicator 'Gay men and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.29	0.14	0.00	A	– 0.81	2.85	4.00	1.16
2012	0.27	0.18	0.00	A	– 1.04	3.33	4.00	1.15
2018	0.24	0.18	0.00	S	– 1.24	3.90	4.00	1.10
2023	0.22	0.17	0.00	S	– 1.34	4.27	4.00	1.06

Source: Authors.

Figure 8: Gay men and lesbians should be free to live life as they wish, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children

Different from the previous indicator, the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children is a far more divisive issue. Although the median value stayed constant over time (Table 7), trends can be observed at both ends of the distribution (Figure 9). Starting with Van der Eijk's polarisation measure, 2016 has the value closest to 0.5, showing an almost perfect 'no agreement' state: all five answer categories had a similar level of density. The coefficient drops over the years, depicting a less polarised picture. The standard deviation stayed constant over time, with minimal changes in 2020 and then a return to close to previous levels in 2023. Hartigan's dip test and Galtung's AJUS agree in most years, showing multimodality for all years except 2020. For that year, whereas the dip test asserts multimodality, AJUS suggests that the distribution is unimodal, with a peak at one end.

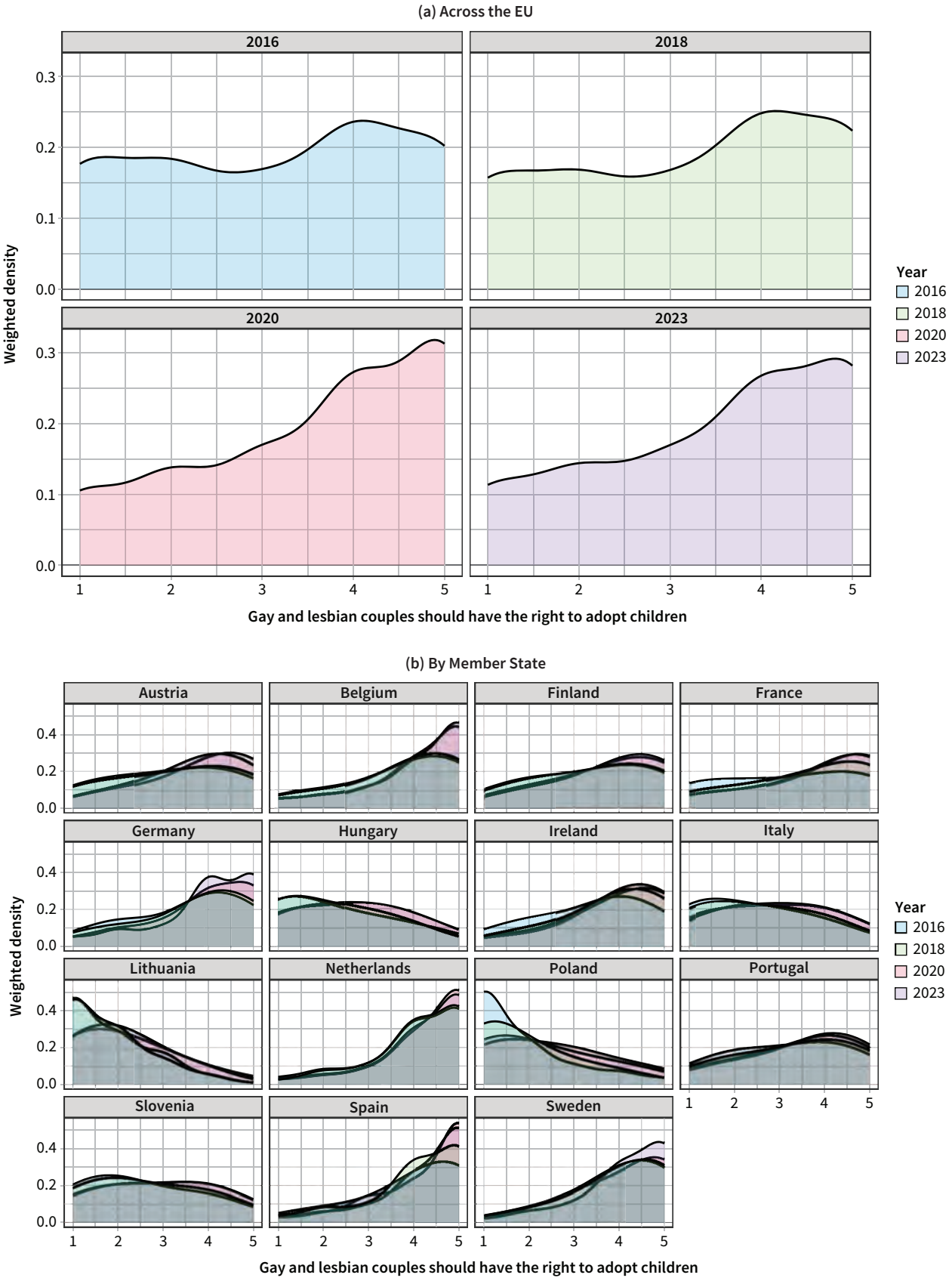
When results are broken down by Member State, interesting trends can be seen. On the one hand, countries such as Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and Spain have been supportive of the right of gay men and lesbians to adopt children, showing a more normal distribution skewed towards the more supportive answers. On the other hand, countries such as Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and, to some extent, Italy show a strong opposition to the right of gay men and lesbians to adopt children in both 2016 and 2018, then slowly becoming more accepting in the subsequent years. This shows that the mass polarisation trend seen in 2016 is not observable in all countries, but rather is country-specific.

Table 7: Results for the indicator 'Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2016	0.43	0.13	0.00	S	– 0.33	1.75	4.00	1.42
2018	0.42	0.13	0.00	S	– 0.36	1.78	4.00	1.43
2020	0.35	0.13	0.00	J	– 0.63	2.15	4.00	1.35
2023	0.38	0.13	0.00	U	– 0.54	1.95	4.00	1.41

Source: Authors.

Figure 9: Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children, 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Impact of immigrants on national cultural life

Another indicator that shows some opinion polarisation is whether the cultural life of one's country is undermined or enriched by immigrants. The first thing to note is how Van der Eijk's polarisation increases over time (Table 8). This can be graphically observed in Figure 10, where the purple and pink curves, representing 2018 and 2023, are more dominant at both ends of the distribution than those representing 2006 and 2012. Similarly, the dispersion of the distribution increased, signalled by a larger standard deviation in 2023 than in 2006. Finally, Hartigan's dip test and Galtung's AJUS agree on the multimodality of the distribution. The figure clearly displays two peaks around the median value, and then a subtle trend towards the negative end of the answer scale.

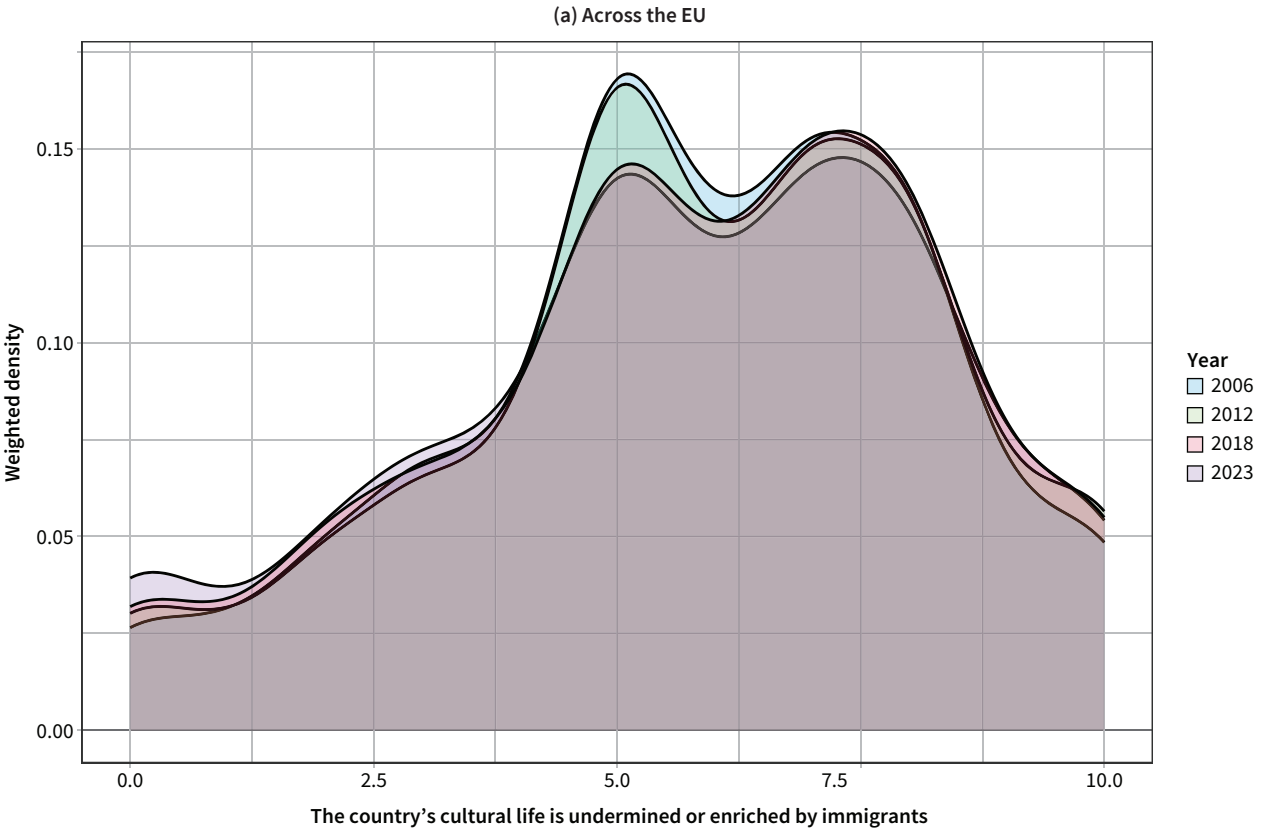
When looking at national trends, the largest differences can be observed over time. Member States such as Hungary, Poland and Slovakia started with more positive opinions regarding the impact of immigrants on national cultural life, and then abruptly shifted towards more negative opinions. The other Member States considered either remained rather stable in their opinions, as in the case of France, the Netherlands and Sweden, or turned slightly positive, as in the case of Cyprus, Ireland and Portugal.

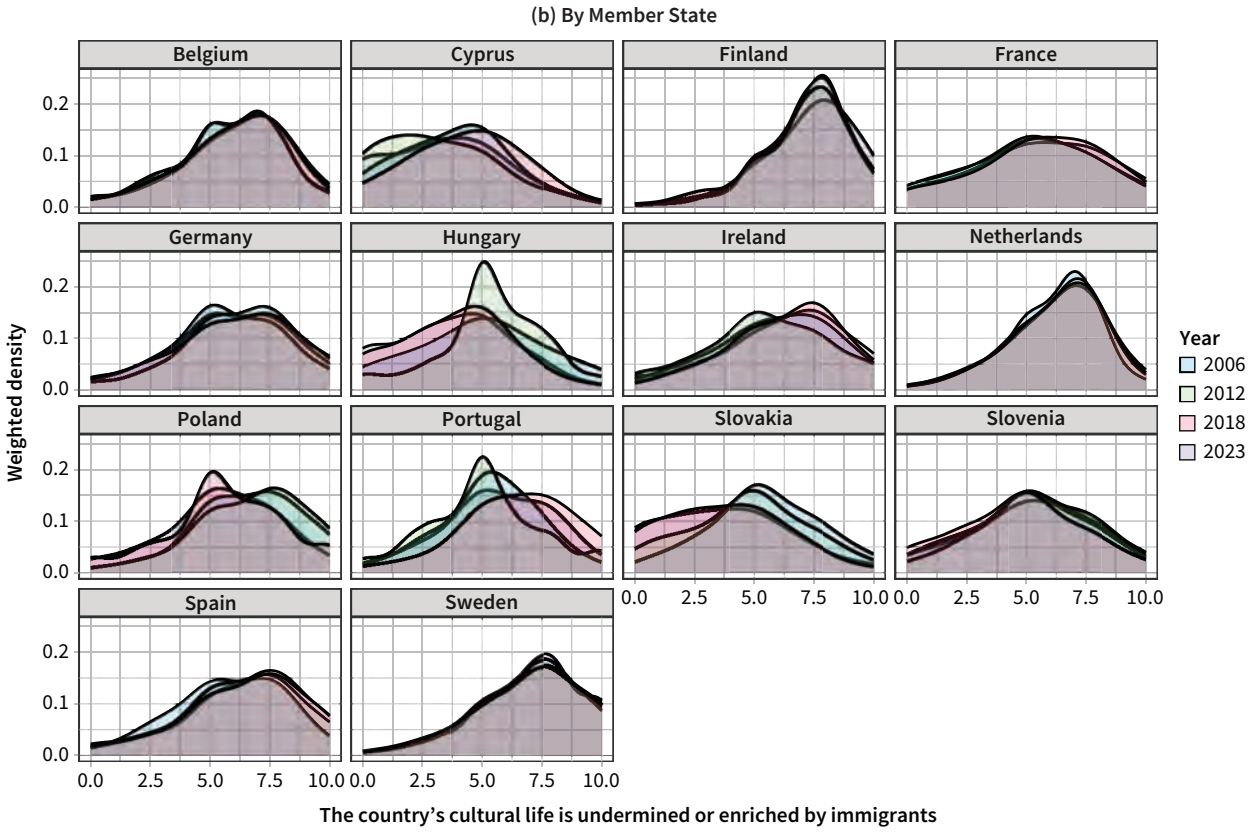
Table 8: Results for the indicator 'The country's cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.33	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.40	2.67	6.00	2.45
2012	0.34	0.09	0.00	S	– 0.40	2.65	6.00	2.50
2018	0.35	0.09	0.00	S	– 0.42	2.55	6.00	2.57
2023	0.37	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.40	2.48	6.00	2.64

Source: Authors.

Figure 10: The country's cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live

Regarding opinions whether immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live, the density plot reveals a constant median over time, with no considerable changes from 2006 onwards (Figure 11). The polarisation measure and the standard deviation increased slightly over time, showing a more spread-out distribution (Table 9). Regarding modality, Hartigan's dip test values are significant, albeit very small, and AJUS confirms multimodality. Overall, the trend does not show significant instances of polarisation.

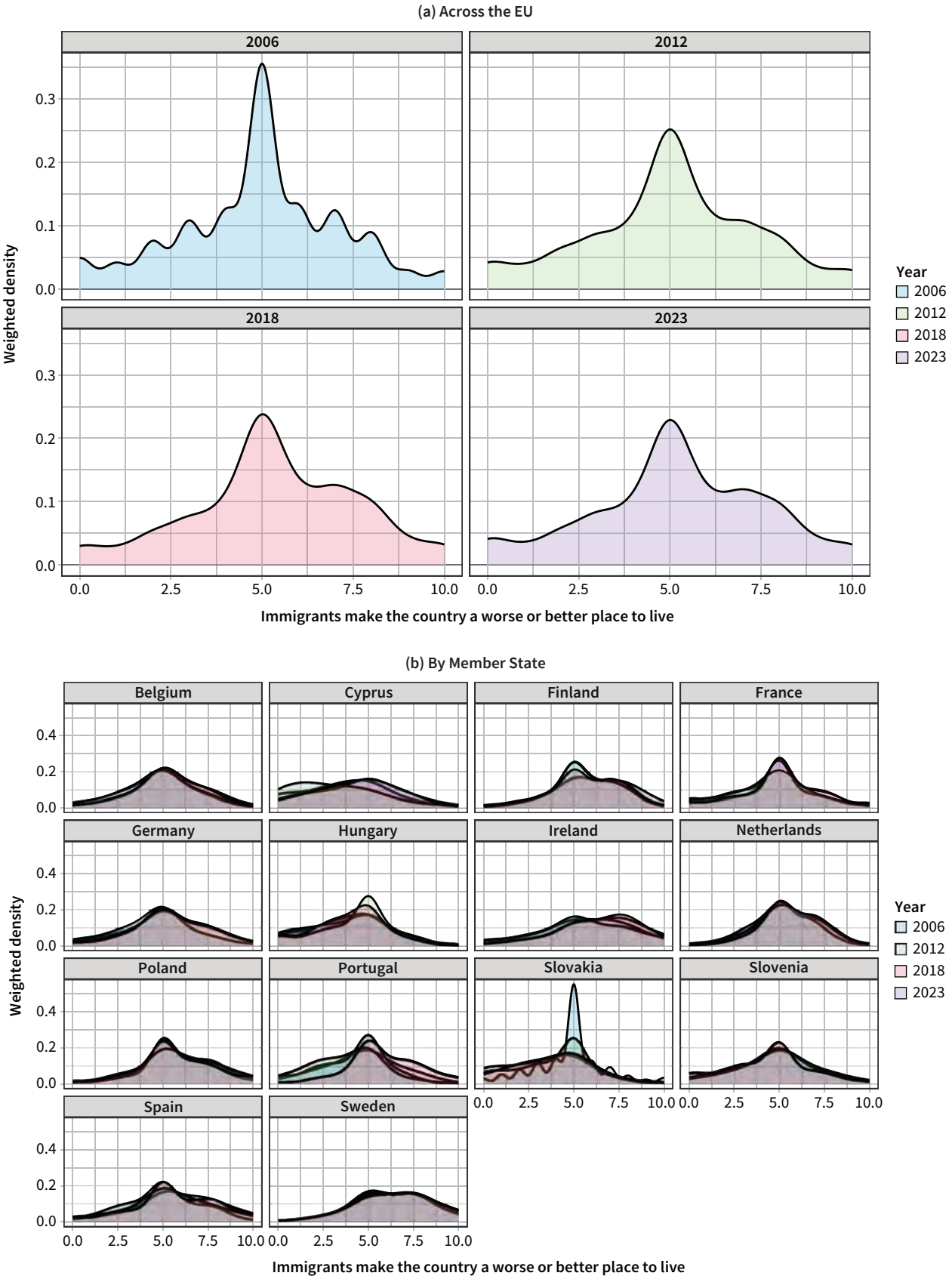
Small differences can be noticed at the Member State level, with Hungary and Slovakia showing a more negative attitude after the financial crisis. A few Member States, such as Cyprus, Ireland, Germany and Portugal, show a slightly more positive attitude.

Table 9: Results for the indicator 'Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.29	0.05	0.00	S	– 0.14	2.92	5.00	2.24
2012	0.31	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.13	2.81	5.00	2.34
2018	0.30	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.21	2.84	5.00	2.30
2023	0.32	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.21	2.72	5.00	2.40

Source: Authors.

Figure 11: Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Immigrants should have the right to access social benefits

The question of whether immigrants should have the right to access social benefits is an aspect of welfare chauvinism, which hinges on the opinion that natives should have priority in accessing social services and benefits over immigrants. Welfare chauvinism, although not directly captured by the ESS, can be extrapolated from opinions on whether and when immigrants should obtain the right to access social benefits and services. The scale used ranges from 1 ('They should never get the same right to access') to 5 ('They should have the right to access immediately'). The polarisation measure and the standard deviation increase slightly over time, showing a more spread-out distribution (Figure 12). Regarding modality, Hartigan's dip test values are significant, albeit very small, and AJUS confirms unimodality (Table 10), probably owing to the large concentration of responses in the middle category ('They should have the right after they have worked and paid taxes for at least a year'). Overall, the trend does not show significant instances of polarisation.

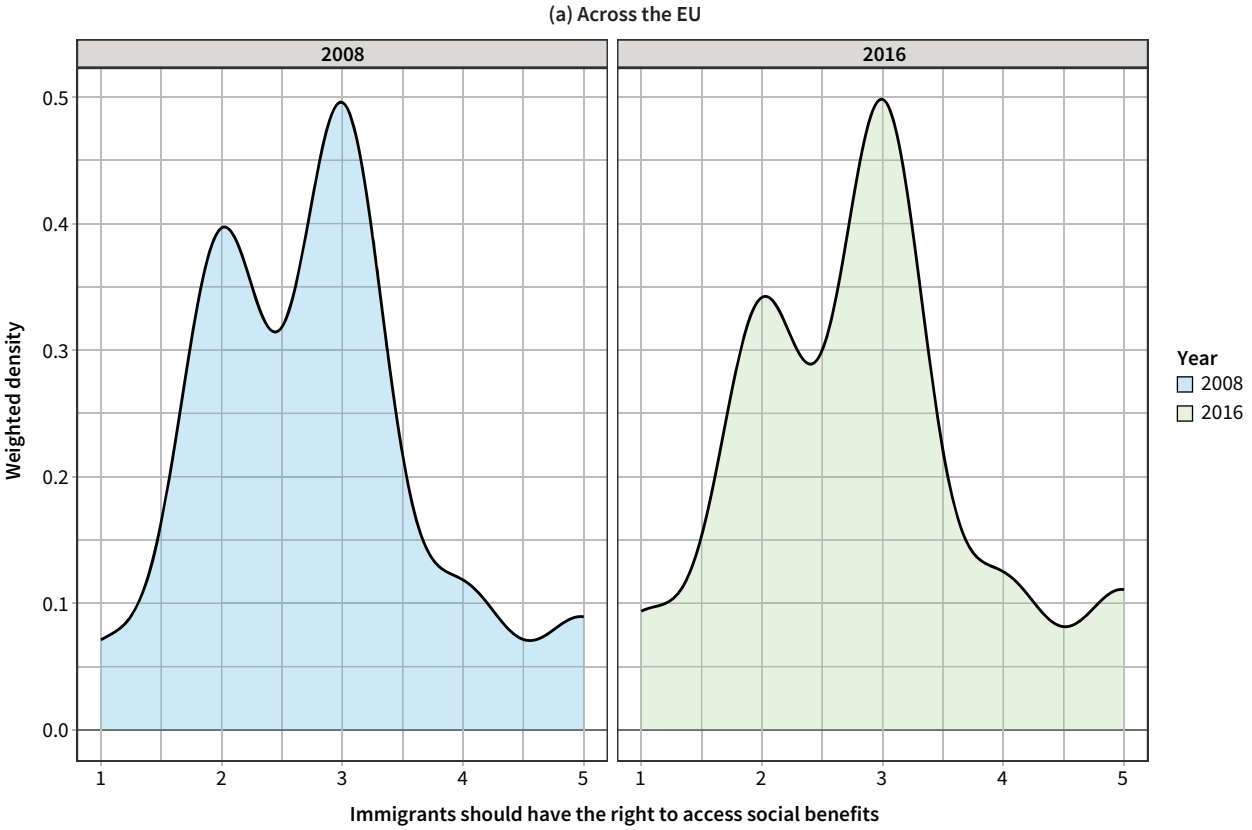
Small differences can be noted at the Member State level, with Czechia, Hungary and Poland showing slightly less support for the statement after the financial crisis. A few Member States, such as Ireland, Portugal and Spain, show a slight trend towards a more positive opinion on accessing services.

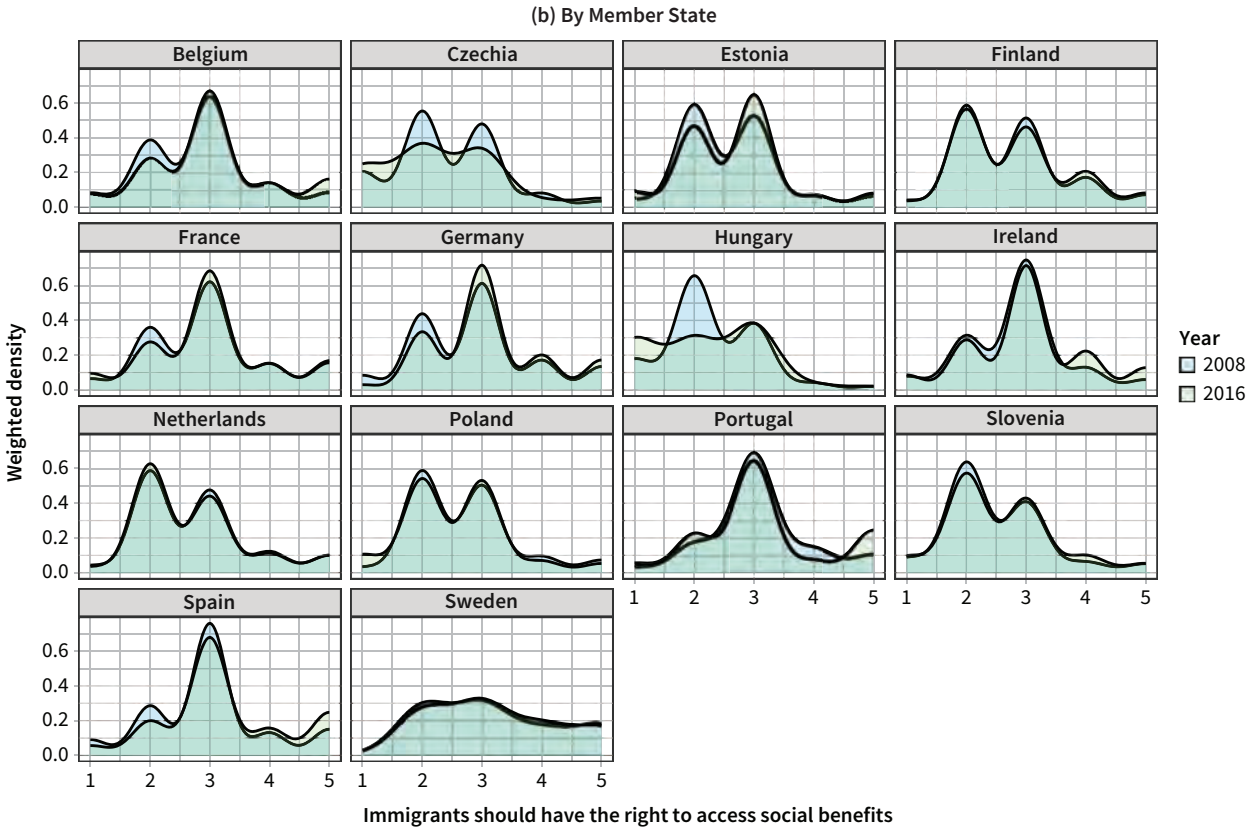
Table 10: Results for the indicator 'Immigrants should have the right to access social benefits'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2008	0.25	0.17	0.00	A	0.55	3.17	3.00	0.97
2016	0.27	0.15	0.00	A	0.41	2.92	3.00	1.03

Source: Authors.

Figure 12: Immigrants should have the right to access social benefits, 2008 and 2016





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania and Slovakia.
Source: Authors.

The government should reduce differences in income levels

Opinions on reducing income inequalities stayed constant over time, with most respondents favouring the reduction of differences in income levels. Disparities of opinion, shown by the polarisation measure, and the standard deviation stayed rather constant over time (Table 11). Regarding modality, although Hartigan's dip test shows multiple peaks, Galtung's AJUS asserts unimodality. This could be due to the high concentration of responses, with almost half the density clustered in the median value, making the graphical classification differ from the statistical test. Overall, the indicator does not seem to show polarising trends at any point in time.

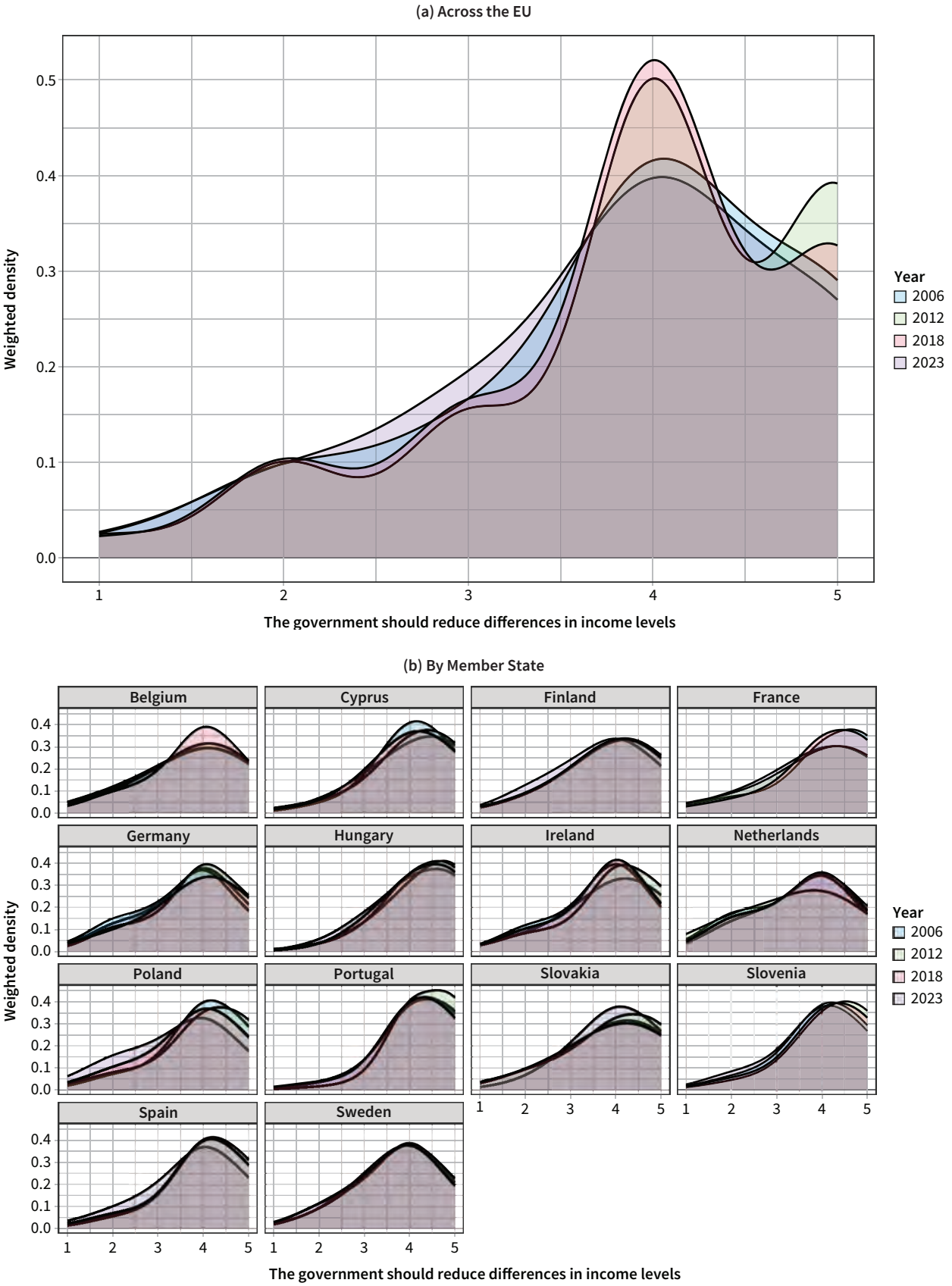
When looking at country differences, a few interesting trends emerge (Figure 13). Several Member States grew less favourable towards income redistribution, such as Finland, Poland and Spain. Other Member States remained rather stable over time.

Table 11: Results for the indicator 'The government should reduce differences in income levels'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.24	0.15	0.00	A	– 0.88	3.24	4.00	1.00
2012	0.23	0.17	0.00	A	– 1.00	3.55	4.00	0.99
2018	0.23	0.15	0.00	A	– 0.90	3.40	4.00	0.97
2023	0.25	0.14	0.00	A	– 0.77	3.07	4.00	1.00

Source: Authors.

Figure 13: The government should reduce differences in income levels, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Men should have a greater right to a job than women when jobs are scarce

Although data more recent than 2016 were not available for this indicator, it is strongly relevant when discussing gender equality issues. Over time, both the polarisation measure and the standard deviation decreased, moving away from a more dispersed distribution and centring towards median values (Table 12). Moreover, skewness and kurtosis display a clear shift towards the left-hand side of the distribution, meaning the general public disagreed more with this statement over time. Finally, the modality tests agree on the multimodal nature of the distribution, shown by the numerous peaks in 2016 around the lowest values of the answer categories (Figure 14).

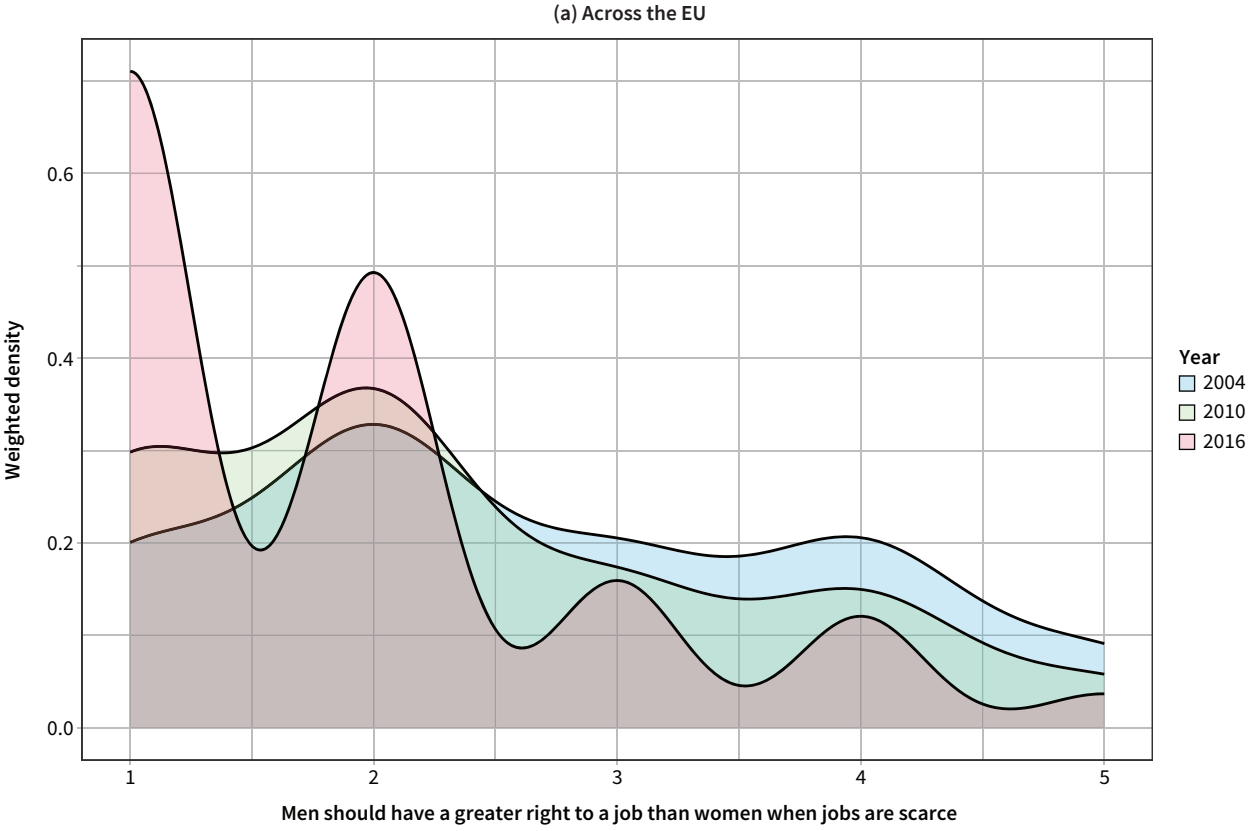
Member States show a similar trend, with an increasing consensus in disagreeing with the statement in 2016.

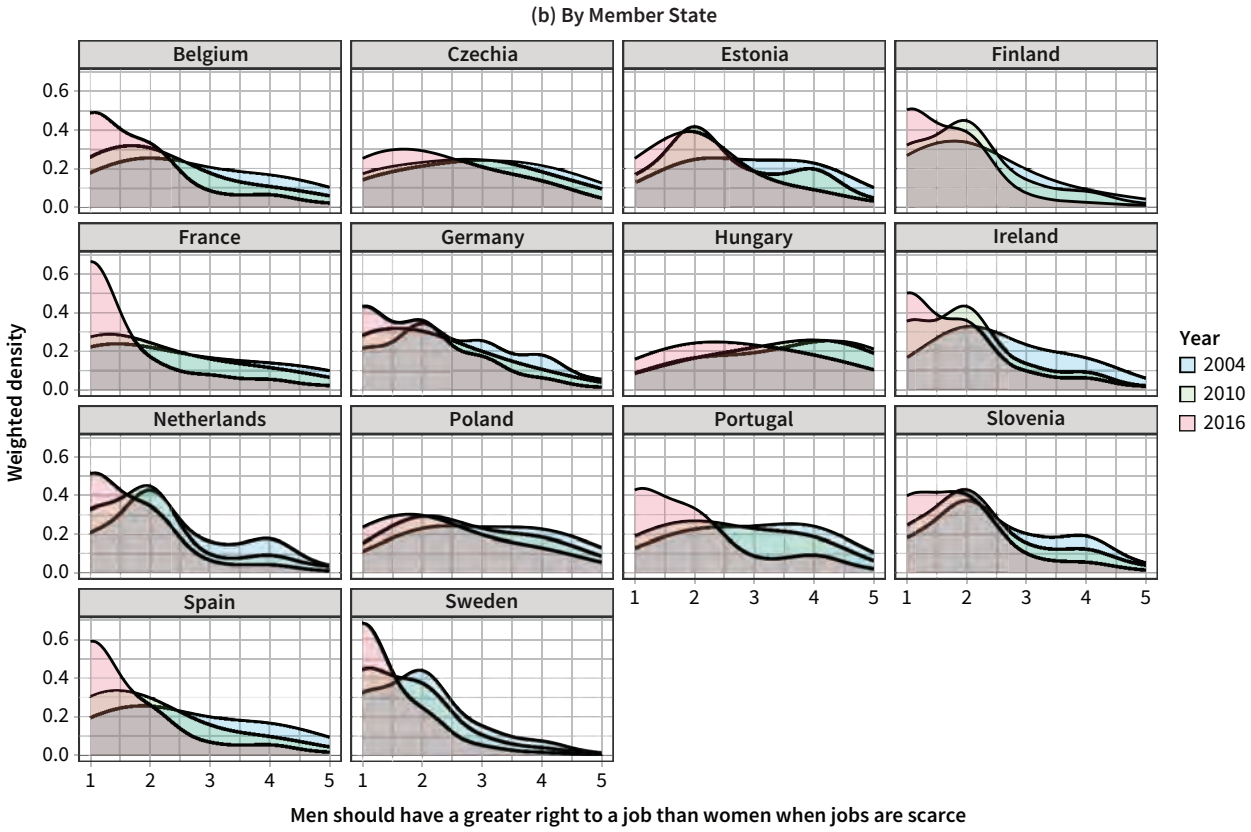
Table 12: Results for the indicator 'Men should have a greater right to a job than women when jobs are scarce'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2004	0.39	0.10	0.00	S	0.32	2.01	2.00	1.24
2010	0.31	0.15	0.00	S	0.67	2.45	2.00	1.19
2016	0.22	0.16	0.00	S	1.19	3.68	2.00	1.05

Source: Authors.

Figure 14: Men should have a greater right to a job than women when jobs are scarce, 2004, 2010 and 2016





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania and Slovakia.
Source: Authors.

Effect of immigration on the national economy

Opinions that immigration is good for the economy increased over time, as signalled by the median value increasing in 2023 (Figure 15). Notwithstanding, both Van der Eijk's polarisation and the standard deviation slightly increased in 2023, showing a divergence of opinions (Table 13). Hartigan's dip test and Galtung's AJUS agree on the multimodality of the distribution, especially notable in the peaks around the median value and at the left-hand extreme. Interestingly, results did not seem to be affected by the financial crisis in the years covered, showing how opinions on this issue may be affected by other factors.

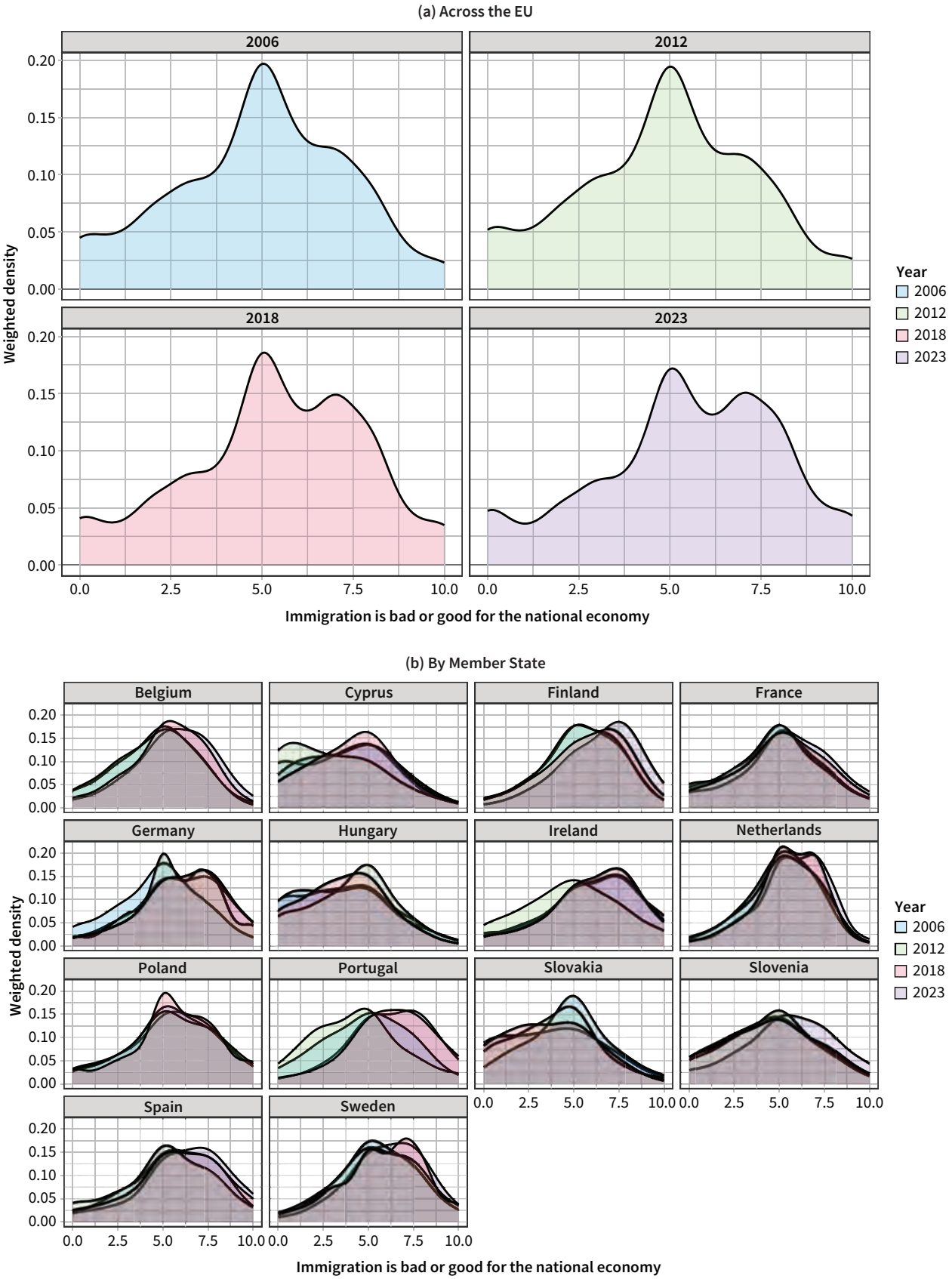
When considering country differences, most of the Member States considered followed a similar pattern of increasing positive opinion of the impact of immigration on the economy. Notable results can be seen for Cyprus, Germany, Ireland and Portugal, where median values significantly increased over time. Just two Member States, Hungary and Slovakia, showed a more negative opinion in 2023 than in the previous years, although respondents from both countries were more critical towards the role of immigrants in the national economy throughout the years covered.

Table 13: Results for the indicator 'Immigration is bad or good for the national economy'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.33	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.20	2.53	5.00	2.43
2012	0.34	0.06	0.00	S	– 0.14	2.51	5.00	2.48
2018	0.33	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.33	2.59	5.00	2.47
2023	0.35	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.39	2.57	6.00	2.56

Source: Authors.

Figure 15: Immigration is bad or good for the national economy, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Satisfaction with the national economy

Satisfaction with the national economy clearly shows the impact of the global financial crisis and its aftermath (on 2012 results) and of the consecutive crises of COVID-19, the war against Ukraine and the soaring cost of living – also described as the polycrisis (on 2023 results). Satisfaction with the economy dipped in 2012 but then increases over time, with higher satisfaction recorded in 2018, signalled by the increase in the median (Table 14). The more positive outlook of 2018 gave way to a further setback in 2023, when the median decreased to previous levels. In 2012, polarisation was at its peak, signalled by the highest value of Van der Eijk's measure for the indicator, as well as the highest standard deviation value. Both Hartigan's dip test and Galtung's AJUS show multimodality, reflected in the several cusps and fragmented distribution over the four years.

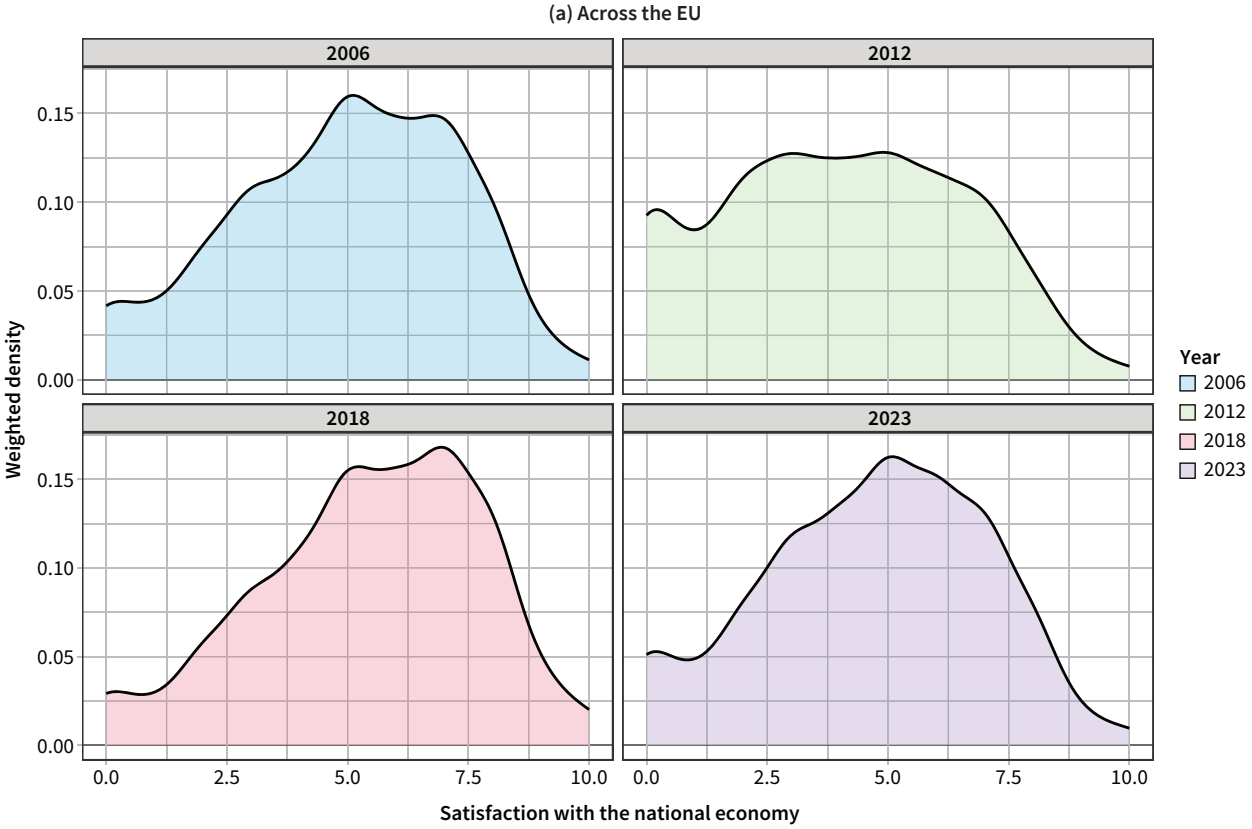
Member States individually do not show significant instances of polarisation, instead showing normally distributed frequencies, highly skewed towards dissatisfaction during the years immediately following the financial crisis (Figure 16). Among the Member States most dissatisfied with the economy in 2012, Cyprus, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain show the highest rates of dissatisfaction, while France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden show satisfaction levels in line with the other years.

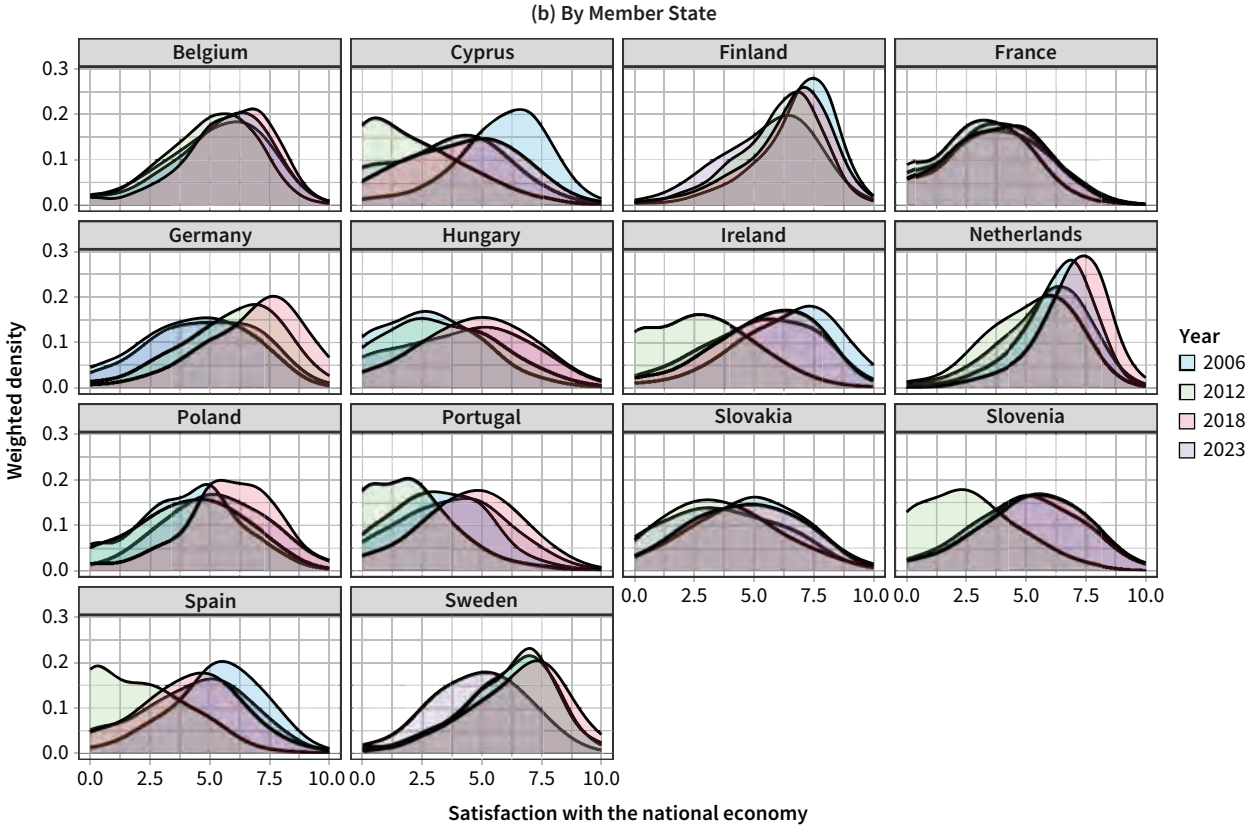
Table 14: Results for the indicator 'Satisfaction with the national economy'

Round	Polarisation	Hartigan's dip test	*p*-value dip	AJUS	Skewness	Kurtosis	Median	Standard deviation
2006	0.33	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.28	2.40	5.00	2.35
2012	0.37	0.07	0.00	S	0.06	2.08	4.00	2.52
2018	0.31	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.41	2.63	6.00	2.31
2023	0.32	0.08	0.00	S	– 0.23	2.44	5.00	2.32

Source: Authors.

Figure 16: Satisfaction with the national economy, 2006, 2012, 2018 and 2023





Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Evidence of polarisation in some attitudes

The quantitative results give a somewhat reassuring indication of the state of play of mass polarisation across the Member States considered. Some of these results are dependent on the methodological choices that were made. When investigating mass polarisation, the indicators are not broken down by sensitive groups, so they reveal macro-trends for the selected variables rather than fractures in society. A different methodology would find different conclusions, in particular if different socioeconomic or political groups were compared.

Among the 13 indicators, most of them do not show staggering evidence of mass polarisation or increased polarisation over time. In fact, attitudes towards gender and sexual equality have become more positive consistently across Member States, resulting in a less conflictual and more accepting environment. For example, the idea of men having a greater right to a job than women received significant disagreement in the years examined, despite the time series ending in 2016. Similarly, the acceptance of gay men and lesbians and their freedom to live how they wish has increased noticeably in the past 20 years. Moreover, opinions on the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children started with a clear divide and moved towards more acceptance, even in Member States where adoption is a sensitive issue. Regarding economic issues, such as income inequality and satisfaction with the national economy, the data available offer a positive picture. Support for reducing income inequality is strong among Member States and seemed particularly so in moments of crisis. Aside from a drop in satisfaction during the financial crisis, citizens have seemed rather satisfied with the state of their national economy in recent years, although fluctuations are bound to be linked to the global economy, as the most recent survey round considered in this report was conducted shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic and during Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine.

Despite positive trends across the EU, some indicators still show instances of mass polarisation and require further analysis. These are the indicators relating to trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants. Trust in political institutions declined sharply in the wake of the financial crisis, the effects of which can still be seen in parts of the population. Among Member States, there is a solid base of people who do not trust the national parliament, politicians or parties, or the European Parliament. The divide discussed in the descriptive analysis shows that a substantial portion of citizens are clearly disengaged

from the middle ground, represented by the median value. Moreover, this divide seems to be consistent and correlates with divides regarding other political opinions, such as satisfaction with democracy. As discussed in a previous publication by Eurofound (2022a), trust and discontent are tightly linked, and further analysis is needed to unpack the effects of such low trust in political institutions. In addition, the analysis shows how the financial crisis and resulting austerity measures took a toll on trust. When looking at year-on-year changes in trust, the years following the financial crisis recorded the largest drop in trust in political institutions, followed by the years of the migrant crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic ([5]).

Similarly, acceptance of immigrants is highly contentious. There is a substantial portion of society that expresses scepticism towards the contribution of immigrants to the cultural life, society and economy of their country. These aspects are intertwined and highly correlated. Immigration is a delicate and contested topic that attracts a great deal of attention in the Member States, as well as at the EU level. Although the average citizen's view has remained constant over time, the growing dissatisfaction with immigrants in part of the population signals a worrying trend that needs further investigation.

([5]) Standard Eurobarometer 102, conducted in Autumn 2024 (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3215).

3 Drivers of polarisation

This chapter presents further statistical analysis conducted to identify the citizens who are experiencing growing discontent and dissatisfaction, the topics that show the most tendency towards polarisation and whether multiple topics show similar trends. First, the chapter explains the creation of indicators reflecting the different topics at play, such as political opinions, gender and sexual equality, and acceptance of immigrants. Second, it identifies whether the indicators show instances of polarisation. Third, the chapter provides an empirical and theoretical base for identifying polarised citizens, as well as investigating the drivers of said polarisation.

Clustering opinion topics

In order to cluster opinion topics into consistent indicators, a factor analysis was run on all possible opinion topics covered in the ESS. As the descriptive results suggest a more polarised landscape in 2023 than in the past for some opinions, the factor analysis was run on data from the latest year available. This increased the number of Member States available, as none needed to be excluded on the basis of not being represented in multiple rounds of the ESS.

First, all public opinion questions asked in 2023 were gathered. These included both the core questions asked in all rounds, such as those about trust in institutions, acceptance of immigrants and acceptance of same-sex couples' rights, and the ad hoc module, which for round 11 (i.e. 2023) was an extensive module on gender equality, political leadership and climate change concerns. The factor analysis included all the questions in order to investigate the possible correlations between different topics and avoid possible blind spots. The variables selected for the factor analysis and factor loadings can be found in Table 15 and Table 16, respectively.

Table 15: Opinion topics considered in the factor analysis

Topic	Variable name	Scale
Trust in the European Parliament	trstep	0–10
Trust in the legal system	trstlgl	0–10
Trust in the police	trstplc	0–10
Trust in politicians	trstplt	0–10
Trust in the national parliament	trstprl	0–10
Trust in political parties	trstprt	0–10
Trust in the United Nations	trstun	0–10
Gay men and lesbians should be free to live as they wish	freehms	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children	hmsacld	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
Would feel ashamed if a close family member were gay or lesbian	hmsfmlsh	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
The government should reduce differences in income levels	gincdif	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
The country should allow few/many immigrants of the same race / ethnic group as the majority	imsmetn	1 (allow none)–4 (allow as many as want to immigrate)
The country should allow few/many immigrants of a different race / ethnic group to the majority	imdfetn	1 (allow none)–4 (allow as many as want to immigrate)
The country should allow few/many immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe	impcntr	1 (allow none)–4 (allow as many as want to immigrate)
Immigration is bad or good for the country's economy	imbgeco	0–10
The country's cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants	imueclt	0–10
Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live	imwbcnt	0–10
European unification should go further or has gone too far	euftf	0–10
Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn	lrnobed	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
The country needs the most loyalty towards its leaders	loylead	1 (strongly agree)–5 (strongly disagree)
It is bad or good for family life in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in paid work	eqwrkbg	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)

Topic	Variable name	Scale
It is bad or good for politics in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in positions of political leadership	eqpolbg	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)
It is bad or good for businesses in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in higher management positions	eqmgmbg	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)
It is bad or good for the economy in [country] if women and men receive equal pay for doing the same work	eqpaybg	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)
The number of seats in parliament should be divided equally between women and men	eqparep	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)
Both parents should be required to take equal periods of paid leave to care for their child	eqparlv	0 (very bad)–6 (very good)
Employees who make insulting comments directed at women in the workplace should be fired	freinsw	1 (strongly against)–5 (strongly in favour)
Extent to which you feel personal responsibility to reduce climate change	ccrdprs	0–10
Climate change is caused by natural processes, human activity or both	ccnthum	1 (all by nature)–5 (all by human activity)
Level of worry about climate change	wrclmch	1 (not at all worried)–5 (extremely worried)

Source: ESS round 11 (2023).

The factor analysis resulted in four indicators, clustering topics into trust in political institutions, acceptance of immigrants, acceptance of gender equality and acceptance of gay men and lesbians. The factor loadings are presented in Table 16 and explain 0.50 of the variance. Cronbach's alpha, which is a measure of reliability, is also provided.

Table 16: Factor loadings

Topic	Trust in political institutions	Acceptance of immigrants	Acceptance of gender equality	Acceptance of gay men and lesbians
Trust in the European Parliament	0.68			
Trust in politicians	0.96			
Trust in the national parliament	0.82			
Trust in political parties	0.94			
The country should allow few/many immigrants of the same race / ethnic group as the majority		0.82		
The country should allow few/many immigrants of a different race / ethnic group to the majority		0.96		
The country should allow few/many immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe		0.93		
Immigration is bad or good for the country's economy		0.66		
The country's cultural life is undermined or enriched by immigrants		0.63		
Immigrants make the country a worse or better place to live		0.66		
It is bad or good for family life in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in paid work			0.58	
It is bad or good for politics in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in positions of political leadership			0.87	
It is bad or good for businesses in [country] if equal numbers of women and men are in higher management positions			0.91	
It is bad or good for the economy in [country] if women and men receive equal pay for doing the same work			0.66	

Variable	Trust in political institutions	Acceptance of immigrants	Acceptance of gender equality	Acceptance of gay men and lesbians
Gay men and lesbians should be free to live as they wish				0.87
Gay and lesbian couples should have the right to adopt children				0.69
Would feel ashamed if a close family member were gay or lesbian				0.79
Cronbach's alpha	0.89	0.84	0.84	0.80

Source: Authors.

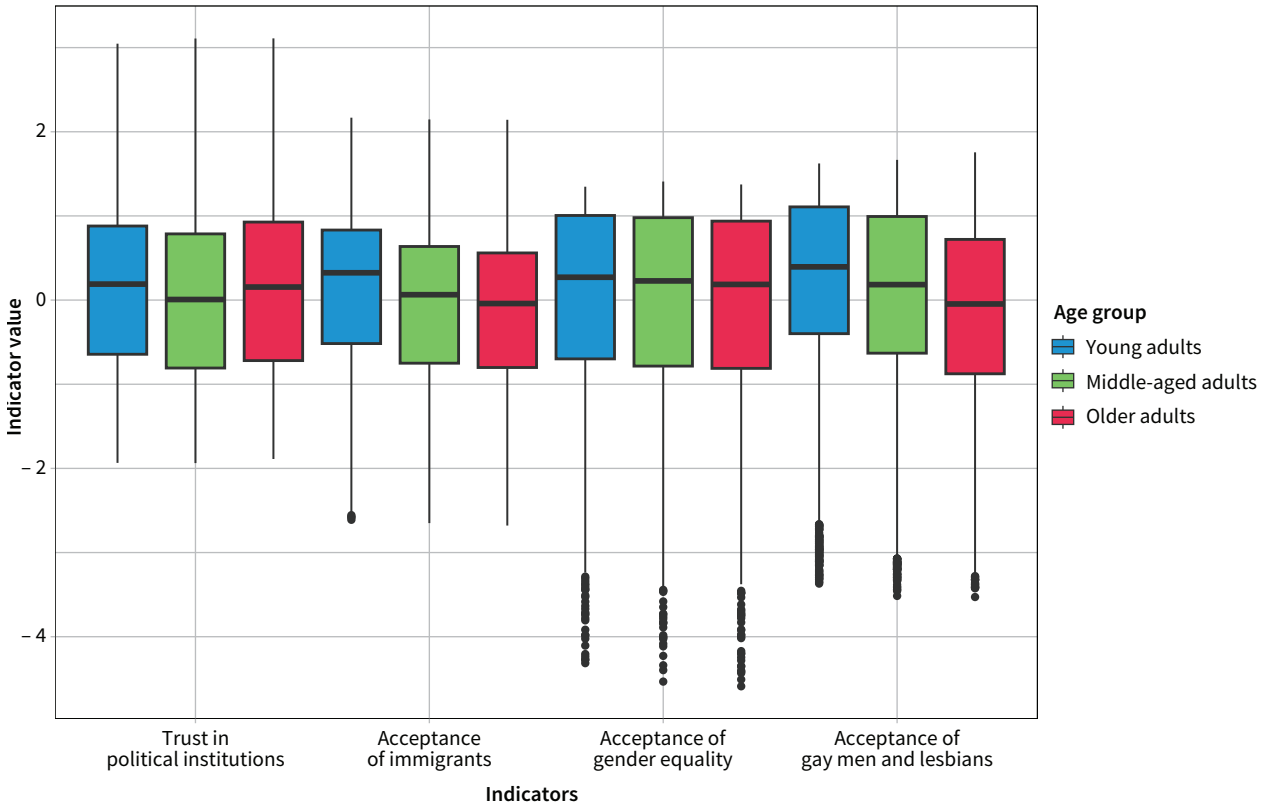
Attitudes in the population

The four indicators are used to assess general attitudes across society. Attitudes change over time, especially when life-altering events happen. For instance, previous studies have found that parenthood changes views of and attitudes towards gender roles (Baxter et al., 2014) and other public opinion issues (Banducci et al., 2016). In addition to age, a change in employment or economic security has an impact on attitudes towards public issues (Colantone et al., 2022). It is thus important to see which citizens are more generally supportive or sceptical of the opinions identified in the factor analysis. Socioeconomic variables like age, gender, education, degree of urbanisation, financial circumstances and employment are described. Next, variables relating to interest in politics are shown, and then correlations between attitudes and values are presented. The indicators stem from the factor analysis and all measures are mean-centred, meaning that the average and the median value for the four indicators are set to zero. Hence, negative values represent values below the average, whereas positive values represent values above the average.

Socioeconomic breakdown

In line with previous findings, young adults (under the age of 39 years) seem to be more favourable towards and accepting of social changes than middle-aged (from 40 to 59 years) or older (60 years and over) adults (Figure 17). Young adults, in particular, seem to be more accepting of same-sex rights and seem to see the contributions of immigrants more favourably than the other age groups, especially older adults.

Figure 17: Age categories and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



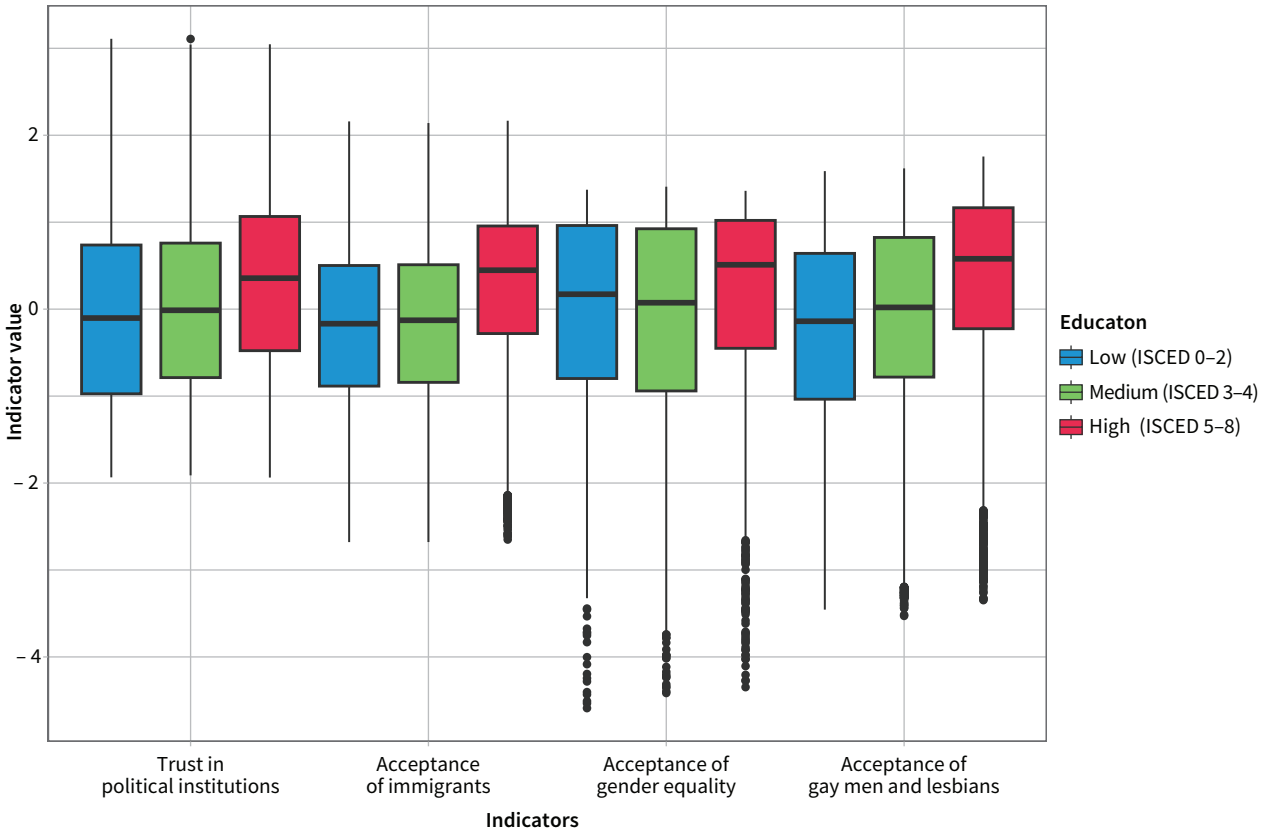
Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Regarding trust in political institutions, the age group that shows the highest distrust is middle-aged adults. This is somewhat expected, as they were the ones largely hit by the financial crisis that began in 2007, and its aftermath, and paid a higher price than younger or older generations.

Regarding gender, female respondents are on average more favourable towards gender equality (0.36) and acceptance of gay men and lesbians (0.22) than their male counterparts (0.07 and 0.06 for gender and same-sex rights, respectively), whereas no large differences can be observed regarding acceptance of immigrants or trust in political institutions. Similar results can be observed when age and gender are combined. Surprisingly, the gap in opinion across all four indicators is largest among young respondents below the age of 30 years (0.05 for trust in political institutions, 0.11 for acceptance of immigrants, 0.42 for acceptance of gender equality and 0.24 for acceptance of gay men and lesbians), signalling an increased divide in opinions between young men and women. In 2023, the degree of urbanisation did not seem to affect acceptance and trust attitudes significantly. Those living in cities were slightly more favourable towards trust and acceptance than those residing in towns or in the countryside, although the differences are rather small. The largest difference can be observed for the acceptance of immigrants, where countryside residents are less favourable (0.02) than those living in towns (0.18) or cities (0.19). This finding is in line with previous research and highlights the rural–urban divide in immigration issues (Eurofound, 2023).

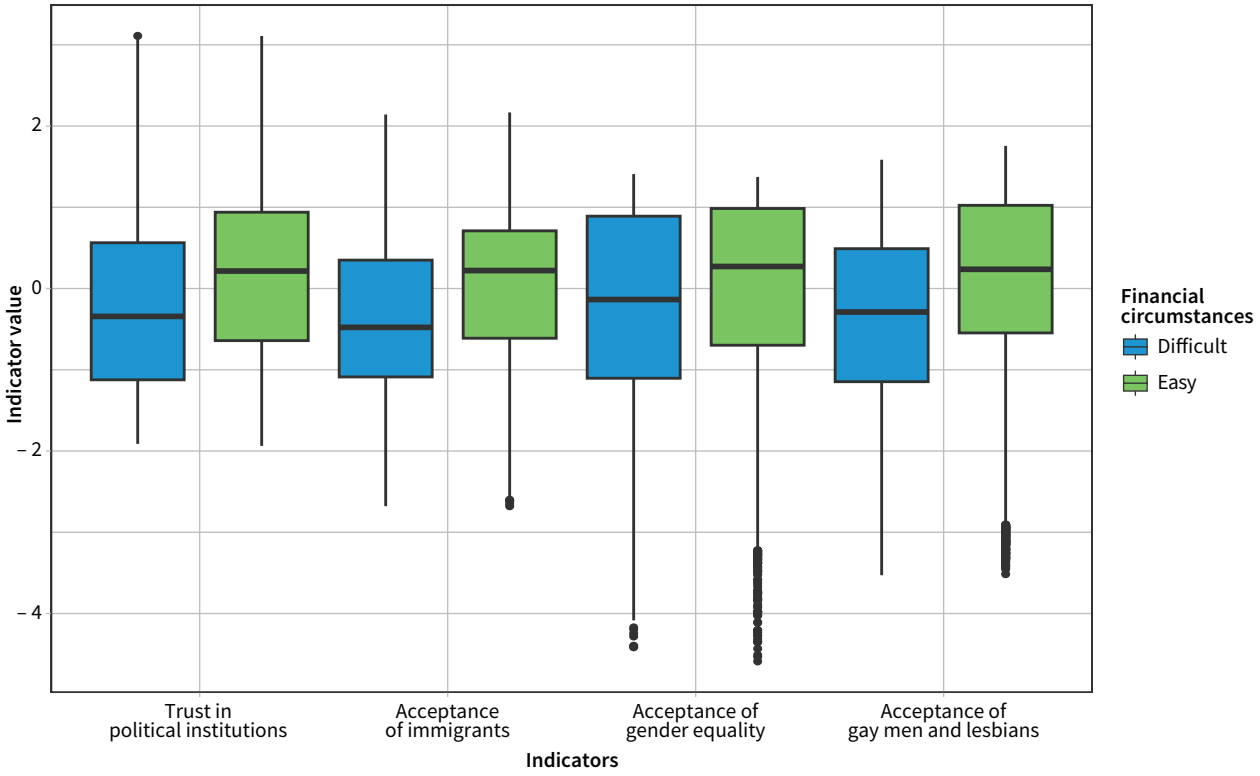
Educational attainment (Figure 18) and financial circumstances (Figure 19) show the largest differences for all attitudes. Those with a high education level show more trust and acceptance than those with medium and low levels. In line with the literature, highly educated citizens show more progressive attitudes. Among those with low educational attainment, some values are below zero, affecting the mean and median values for the indicators.

Figure 18: Educational attainment and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Notes: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania. ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.
Source: Authors.

Figure 19: Financial circumstances and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

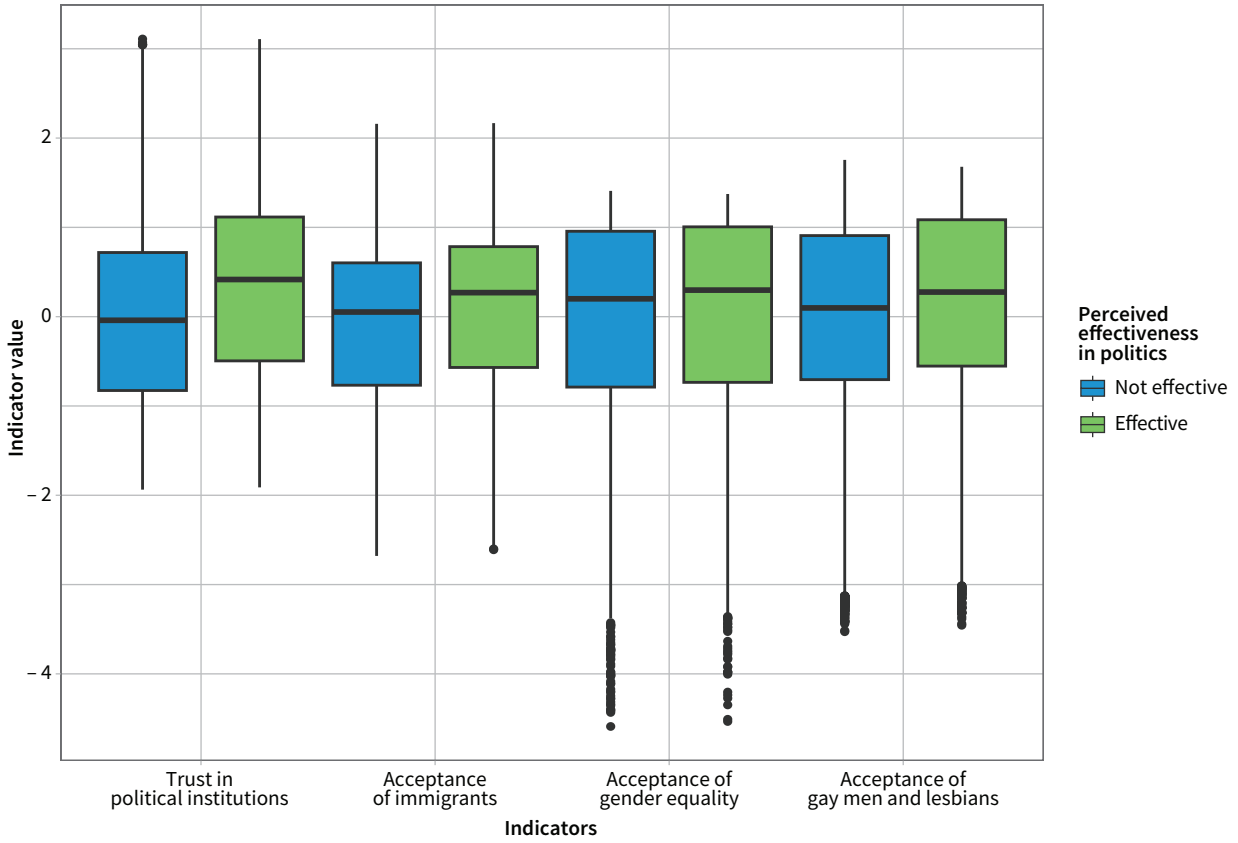
Similarly, people's financial circumstances (experiencing ease or difficulty with their household income) are associated with different levels of trust and acceptance. Large differences can be observed, especially regarding trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants. In line with previous findings, financial circumstances and acceptance of immigrants are tightly linked, as native citizens may feel threatened by the new workforce, as well as by the resulting temporary decline in wages (Colantone et al., 2022). Similar differences can be observed depending on employment status. Employed people seem more accepting of immigrants (0.14) and more trusting of political institutions (0.13) than unemployed people (0.0 and 0.3, respectively). Interestingly, unemployed respondents seem to be less favourable towards same-sex rights (– 0.09) than employed respondents (0.18).

Political engagement

Political interest and political sophistication have a role in strengthening opinions and attitudes. Citizens who are involved in politics and align themselves with a party may have stronger opinions regarding public issues, especially trust in political institutions (European Commission: JRC et al., 2021). Moreover, voter turnout is an essential component of liberal democracies, and the extent to which trust and social movements can affect voter turnout is an important topic of investigation, although causal effects are still not agreed upon in the literature (Hooghe, 2017). To test the relationship between political engagement and attitudes to societal issues, two variables were used to observe differences in attitudes towards trust and acceptance: perceived political effectiveness (divided into effective and not effective) and closeness to a national party (divided into not close and somewhat close).

Regarding political effectiveness, the respondents who did not think they had an effect on their country's politics had average values very close to zero. Conversely, those who were confident in their political effectiveness had values above the average, especially for trust in political institutions (Figure 20). In line with the literature, this finding shows that those confident in their own political effectiveness trust the system more to have an impact, and in general hold stronger views. A similar finding can be observed for closeness to a party (Figure 21). Those not close to a party reported average opinions on all acceptance indicators and a below-average opinion on trust in political institutions, as expected. On the other hand, those close to a party showed a higher level of trust in political institutions, of which one component is indeed trust in political parties, as well as a more favourable opinion with regard to the other three indicators. Despite not knowing which parties these respondents feel close to,

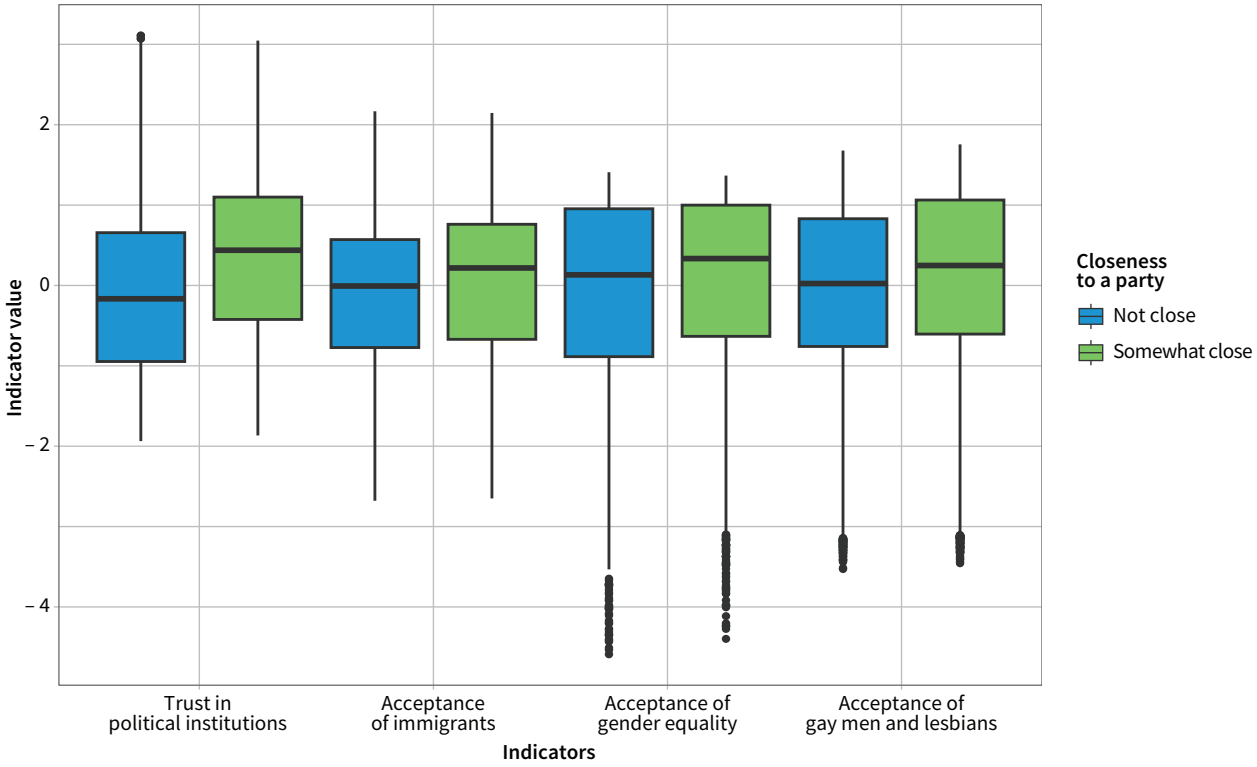
Figure 20: Political effectiveness and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

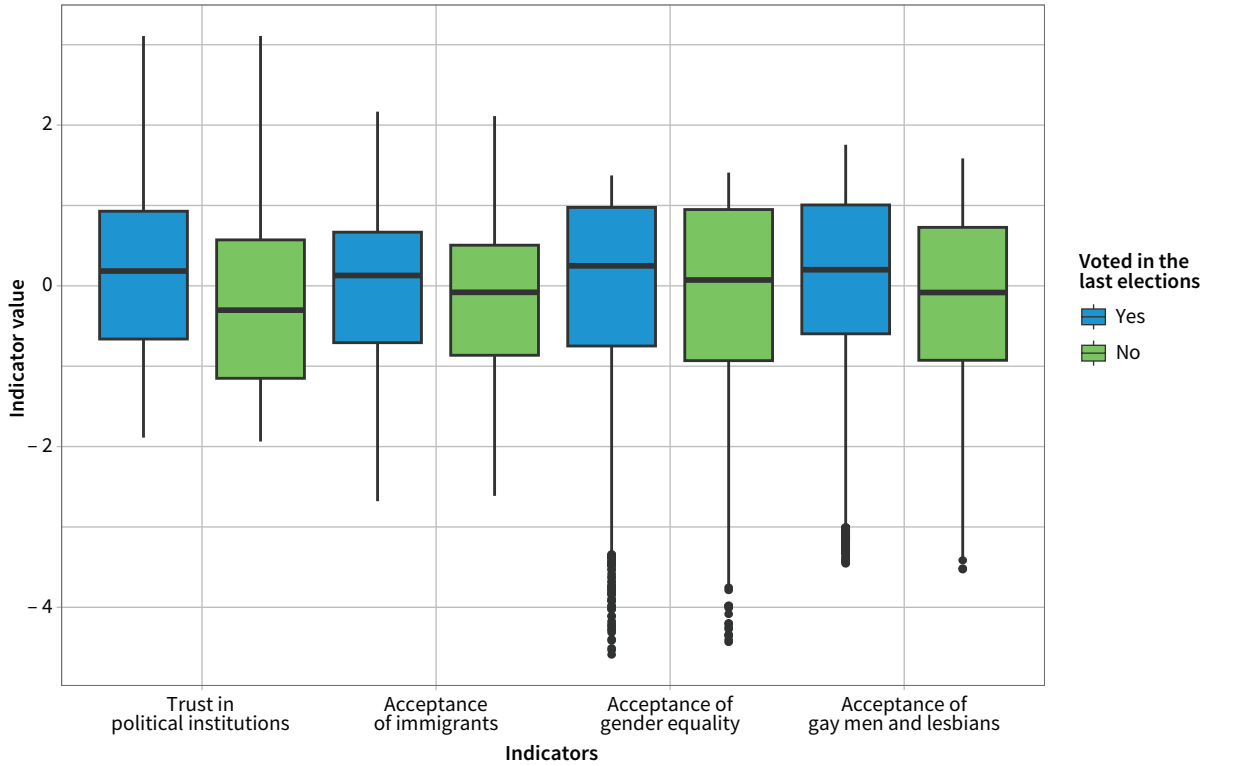
one could argue that a stronger identification with party values is linked with stronger opinions (as found in McCarty et al., 2008). Finally, the relationship between attitudes and voter turnout is presented (Figure 22). The largest differences between those who voted and did not vote in the most recent elections could be seen in their trust in political institutions, with a positive value for those who voted and a negative one for those who did not. As the literature suggests, trust is a strong predictor of voter turnout, and those who distrust institutions did not see much value in casting their vote, or they voted for anti-establishment parties (Olivera, 2015; Hooghe, 2017). Regarding the other indicators, those who did not vote expressed less support for accepting immigrants (the second-largest gap), as well as lower acceptance of gender equality.

Figure 21: Closeness to a party and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Figure 22: Voting habits and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

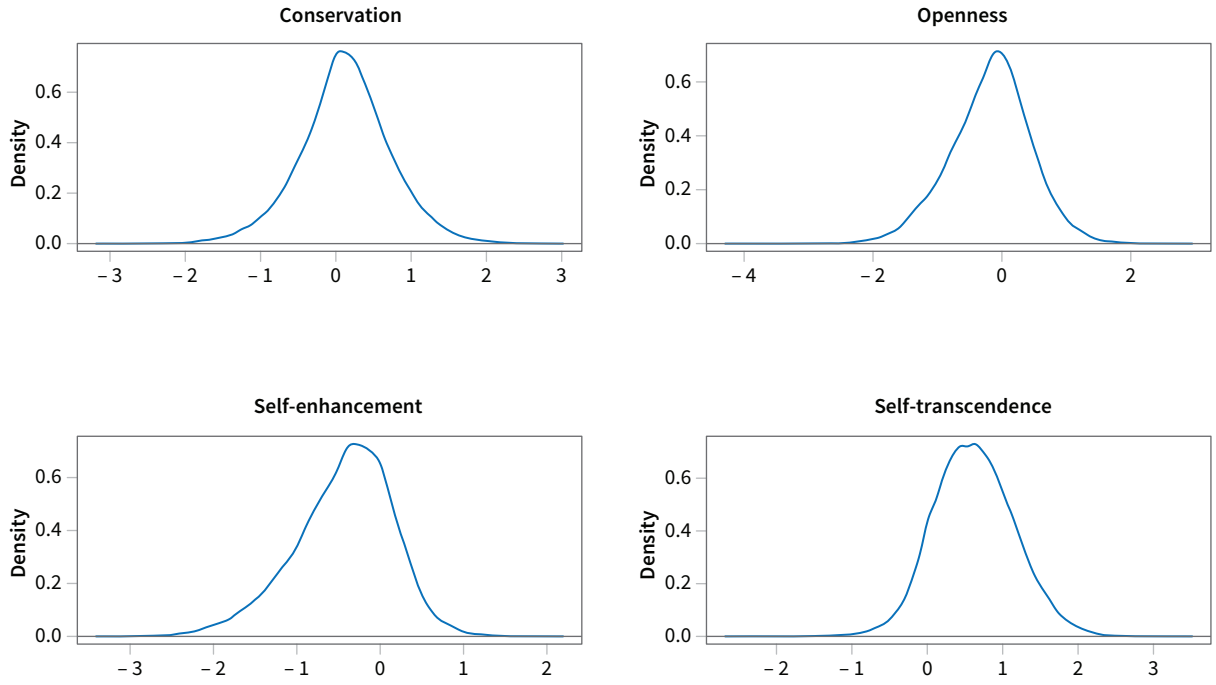
Values and attitudes

Values have a strong influence on people's attitudes and life choices. Among the studies measuring attitudes towards immigration, Davidov et al. (2020) measured the impact of the values of tradition and universalism on opinions about immigration. The findings held for different countries, showing how human values directly affect the formation of attitudes. Similarly, Schwartz et al. (2010) tested human values against several political attitudes, such as law and order, equality, morality, civil liberties and blind patriotism. The correlation analysis showed that most values relate to political and social attitudes in the expected direction; values such as tradition and conformity correlated positively with traditional morality, patriotism and military intervention, while values such as universalism and benevolence had a moderate and negative correlation with the same attitudes. To replicate the findings of Schwartz et al., this section presents the correlation between the four indicators representing the attitudes and Schwartz's basic human values ([6]).

To represent the four human values described in the literature cited, answers are centred to correct for individual preferences and individuals' relative importance of values (Schwartz et al., 2015). This involves subtracting the mean score across all values from a value's raw score (Schwartz et al., 2015). Then, the variables composing conservation, openness, self-enhancement and self-transcendence are averaged together. The final result is four indicators representing the four human values. For 2023 data, human values are normally distributed and they do not display large outliers or polarising trends, as per Figure 23. Here again, the average value is centred to zero, so positive marks reflect a higher propensity in that value (e.g. high conservation), whereas negative marks reflect a lower propensity in that value (e.g. low conservation).

Regarding the correlation between attitudes and human values, interesting trends can be observed for 2023. Conservation – that is, the value relating to conformity and tradition – shows a weak negative correlation with trust in political institutions, as well as weak to moderate negative correlations with the acceptance of immigrants, gender equality, and gay men and lesbians. This means that those individuals scoring higher in conservation are associated with lower scores in trust

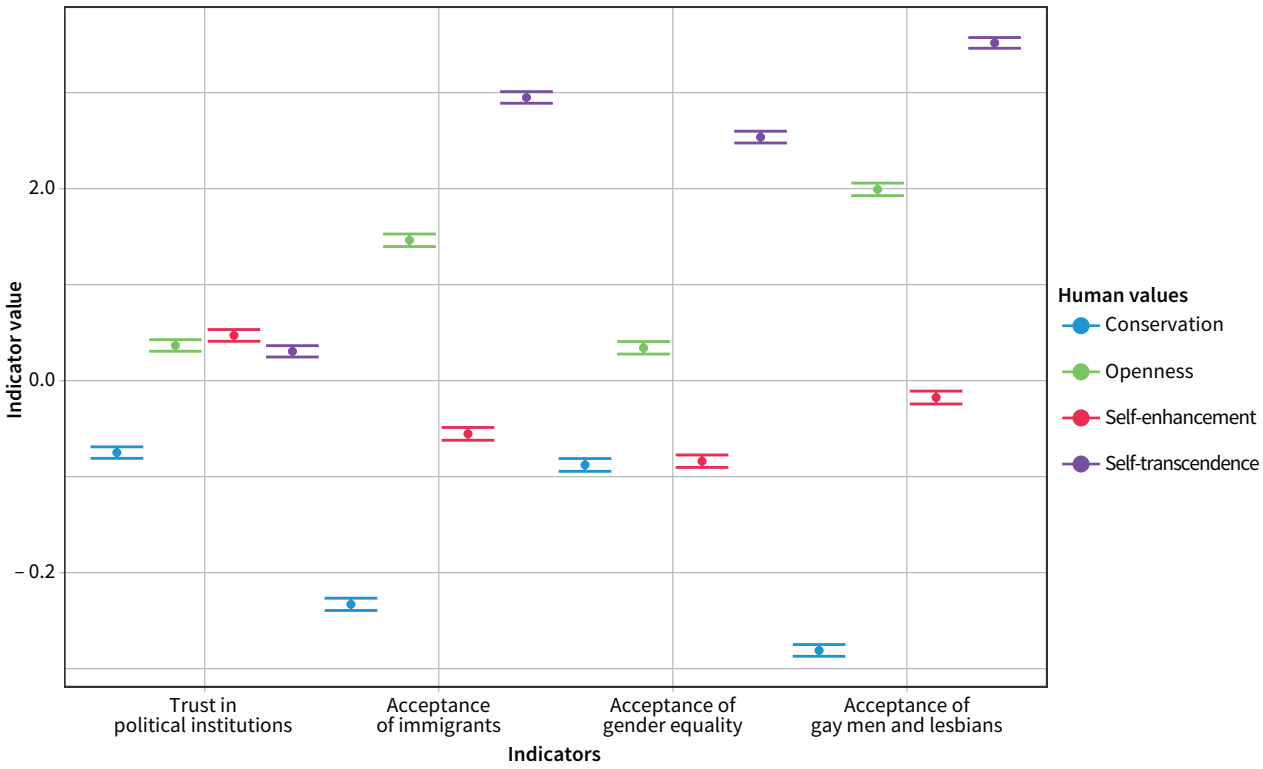
Figure 23: Distribution of human values, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

([6]) Although there are no strict rules for assigning strength of association, general guidelines are provided by Cohen (1988): $0.1 < |r| < 0.3$ suggests a small/weak correlation; $0.3 < |r| < 0.5$ suggests a medium/moderate correlation; $|r| > 0.5$ suggests a large/strong correlation.

Figure 24: Correlation between human values and attitudes towards indicators, EU, 2023



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

and acceptance, and vice versa. Openness – that is, the value relating to new experiences, stimulation and self-direction – shows positive, albeit weak, correlations with trust and acceptance. Owing to the nature of the indicator, the high correlation between openness to experience and acceptance of same-sex rights is to be expected. Self-enhancement, the value that represents power and achievement, has very weak correlations with the attitudes under consideration. Finally, self-transcendence, the value relating to universalism and benevolence, displays weak to moderate positive correlations with trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants, gender equality, and gay men and lesbians (Figure 24).

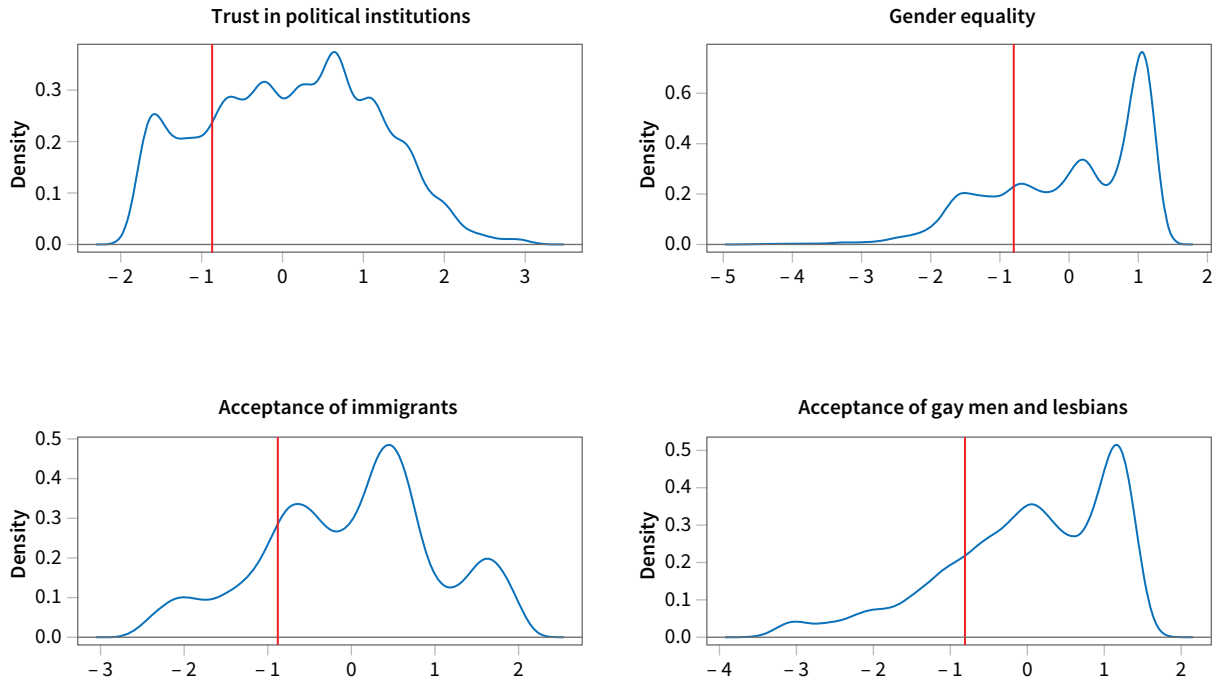
The findings corroborate previous research (Schwartz et al., 2010) that asserts that the societal values of conservation and self-transcendence have strong correlations with public opinion issues, whereas values such as openness and self-enhancement, which are more focused on individual growth, have weaker correlations.

A methodology for classifying polarised citizens

Now that descriptive results for the four indicators have been presented, this section investigates polarisation and proposes a statistical model to investigate the drivers of polarisation. In order to confirm the descriptive results of the previous chapter, the four indicators were tested again for multimodality and dispersion. Hartigan's dip test showed that all four indicators present a multimodal distribution, but Galtung's AJUS confirmed multimodality only for trust in political institutions, while asserting a rather normal distribution for the other three indicators. Regarding dispersion, all four indicators were mean centred, that is, the mean lay at zero and the median value lay approximately at zero. The four indicators had a similar dispersion, with trust in political institutions displaying the largest dispersion.

The previous chapter suggests that, while acceptance of gender equality and of gay men and lesbians has depolarised over time, trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants have followed the opposite trend. It is thus important to identify those individuals who expressed negative opinions on these two issues. Although the literature provides many tools to measure polarisation at the population level or among groups, identifying polarised citizens is still a debated issue.

Figure 25: Distribution of the four indicators and the coefficient of consensus, EU, 2023



Notes: As the indicators are mean centred, the mean and median values lie at 0. The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Among the most commonly used techniques is the coefficient of consensus, which is a measure of dispersion relating to the distribution of public opinion (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; DiMaggio et al., 1996; Bramson et al., 2017). Hence, two features need to be present to label citizens as polarised: first, the distribution must show multimodality and, second, enough cases must be stashed at the extremes of the distribution (Fiorina et al., 2005). To visually test this, the four indicators are plotted alongside a mark of where the coefficient of consensus (a standard deviation away from the median value) would point out those who express an extremely negative opinion on the four indicators. Figure 25 clearly shows the peak at the left of the distribution for trust in institutions, and to a lesser extent for acceptance of immigrants. Gender equality issues, as well as acceptance of gay men and lesbians, feature a more normal distribution, as expected based on the descriptive results.

In summary, the methodology only enables us to observe a clear polarised trend that is worth discussing further for trust in political institutions. Despite the interesting results for other indicators, such as acceptance of immigrants and gender equality, the more stringent operationalisation does not support further investigation of polarised citizens in relation to such indicators.

Description of the model

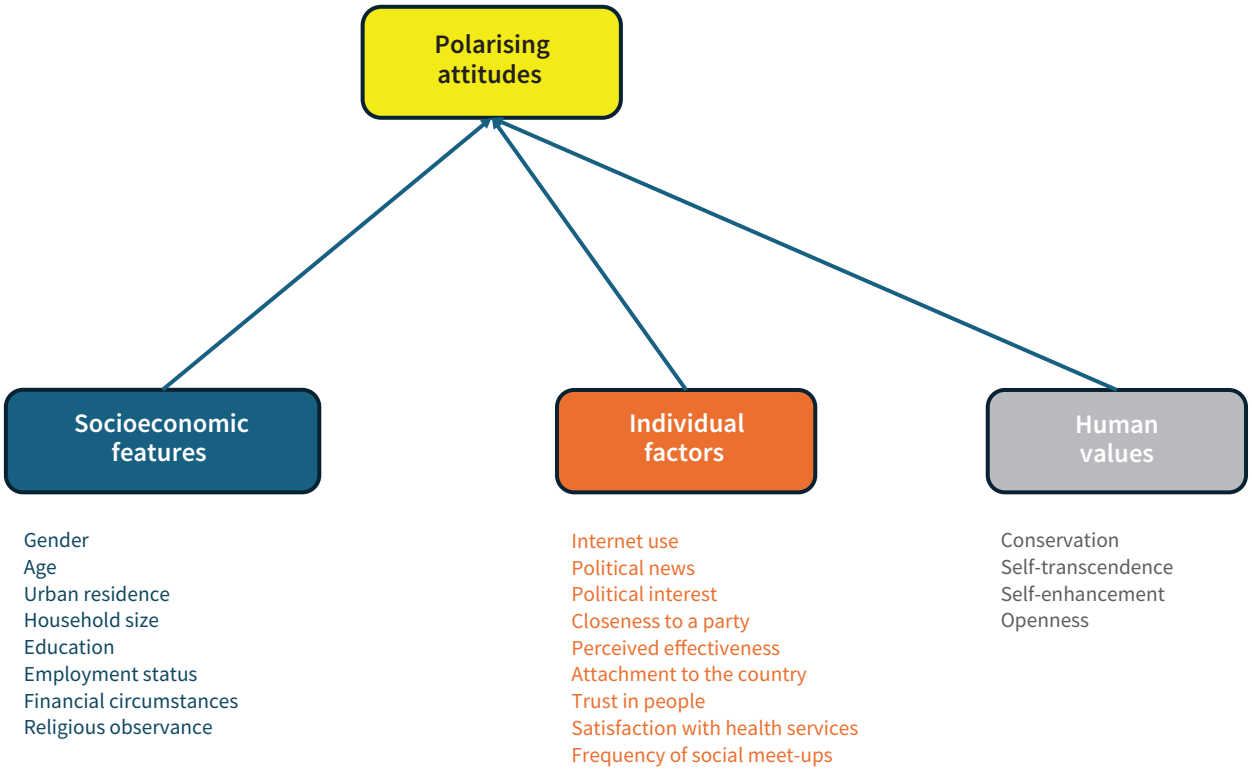
The model is summarised in Figure 26. Regression analysis was performed to define the main correlations between the citizens polarised on trust in political institutions and socioeconomic factors. The models predict the characteristics of those polarised on the issue, meaning their score is smaller than one standard deviation from the median. The analysis uses data from the most recent edition of the ESS (2023). Table 17 summarises the dependent and independent variables used for the model. The model first includes only socioeconomic explanatory factors, then expands to include individual variables (political interest, internet use, sociability) and, finally, human values.

Table 17: Variables used in the model

Dependent variable	Details
Political attitude	Level of trust in political institutions
Independent variables	**Details**
Demographic factors	Gender (*); age; urban residence (city results compared with those for towns and countryside); household size
Socioeconomic factors	Education level; employment status (employed, retired, unemployed/inactive); financial circumstances; religious observance
Satisfaction	Satisfaction with the state of the health services in the country; frequency of social meet-ups; level of trust in people
Political engagement	Internet use; consumption of political news; level of political interest; closeness to a party; perceived political effectiveness; level of attachment to the country
Human values	Conservation; self-transcendence; self-enhancement; openness

(*) In the analysis of the e-survey data, respondents are categorised according to gender on the basis of the following question: 'How would you describe yourself? Response options: male, female, in another way'. The number of respondents who described themselves 'in another way' was not sufficient to allow for separate analysis. These respondents are included in all analyses, except for tables and figures by gender, where they are not shown. Countries may differ in the source of this data (administrative data, self-declared, etc.) The terms 'male' and 'female' are used adjectivally to describe characteristics and experiences relating to men and women, respectively.
Source: Authors.

Figure 26: The logistic regression model



Source: Authors.

Drivers of polarisation against political institutions in 2023

The regression model comprises three specifications. The first considers sociodemographic variables, the second extends these with objective factors such as satisfaction and political engagement levels, and the third considers human values in order to add a psychosocial dimension. The three model specifications show similar results, with the first and simplest one having the worst model fit and the most cases, whereas the other two fit the model slightly better and add more explanatory factors (evidenced by the lower Akaike information criterion). The three model specifications are discussed in the following sections, and more detailed results are presented for the final one, including both objective factors and human values. As mentioned previously, the results are based on data from the most recent round of the ESS, hence providing a snapshot of values in 2023. Moreover, as trust in political institutions is strongly related to which party or coalition is in power in the country at the time, some results may seem surprising or counterintuitive at first. For the sake of completeness, Annex 2 reports the regressions for the other three indicators for which polarisation trends were not supported by the methodology presented (see Table 22).

Model 1 (results in Table 18) presents the results for sociodemographic variables. Starting with age, middle-aged adults and older adults are more likely to express high distrust of political institutions than younger respondents. The gender of respondents does not have an effect on their likelihood of polarising, whereas education is a significant factor. Those with medium (ISCED 3–4) and high (ISCED 5–8) education levels tend to polarise less than those with a low (ISCED 0–2) education level. Employment status is another determinant of polarisation. Employed respondents are more likely to polarise than those who are retired or not employed. Household size seems to have a small impact, with larger households polarising less than small ones. Financial circumstances, as seen in the descriptive analysis, have a considerable effect, with differences between those making ends meet easily and those who are in difficulty. Feeling at ease with one's financial circumstances decreased the likelihood of having high distrust of political institutions. Finally, control checks were conducted: religious observance has a small and negative impact on polarisation, whereas degree of urban residence shows that rural residents are more likely than city residents to distrust political institutions, while no significant difference is seen between city and town residents.

Model 2 (results in Table 18) adds the individual factors, which are satisfaction and political engagement variables. Most of the sociodemographic variables hold their significance and their effect after objective factors have been added. Gender and age become significant, with women being less likely than men to become polarised on political institutions, and older adults being more likely to do so. In contrast, household size, degree of urban residence and medium education level lose their significance in the face of more attitudinal variables. As discussed in a previous Eurofound publication (2022a), interpersonal trust is a determinant of trust in political institutions, similar to satisfaction with the healthcare system, used here as a proxy for satisfaction with public services in the country, as the ESS does not offer a comprehensive overview of the latter. The political engagement questions show interesting results as well. Generally speaking, politically engaged citizens are less likely to polarise on political institutions. Higher levels of political interest and consumption of political news are both linked to a lower likelihood of becoming polarised on political institutions. To a lesser extent, higher attachment to one's country contributes to a lower likelihood of distrusting the country's political institutions, whereas no effects were found for internet use and perceived political effectiveness. The variable associated with social exclusion, which is frequency of social meet-ups, did not bear any significant results.

Finally, model 3 (results in Table 18) adds human values to the equation. With regard to sociodemographic, satisfaction and political engagement variables, this model does not differ from model 2. High education levels and good financial circumstances are still the strongest predictors of trust in political institutions (Figure 27), together with satisfaction with the healthcare system, trust in people, news consumption, interest in politics and attachment to one's country (Figure 28).

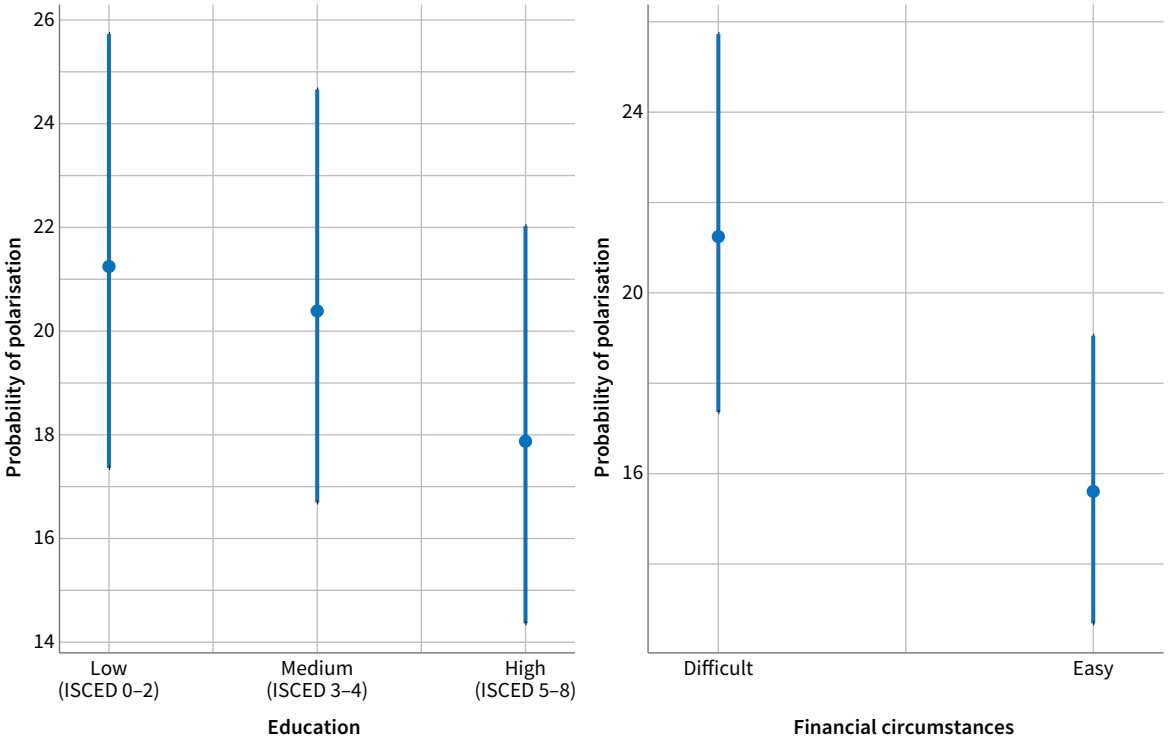
Table 18: Predictors of polarisation on trust in political institutions, EU, 2023

Dependent variable: polarisation on trust in political institutions			
	Socioeconomic factors	Objective factors	Value factors
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Middle-aged adults (ref: young adults)	0.27***	0.32***	0.32***
Older adults (ref: young adults)	0.14***	0.42***	0.41***
Gender – women (ref: men)	– 0.03	– 0.33***	– 0.35***
Education – medium (ISCED 3–4) (ref: low)	– 0.16***	– 0.04	– 0.05
Education – high (ISCED 5–8) (ref: low)	– 0.60***	– 0.20***	– 0.21***

Employment status – employed (ref: not employed)	0.35***	0.36***	0.35***
Household size	– 0.03**	– 0.01	– 0.003
Financial circumstances – easy (ref: difficult)	– 0.56***	– 0.37***	– 0.38***
Religious observance	– 0.06***	– 0.04***	– 0.04***
Urban residence – town (ref: city)	0.03	– 0.05	– 0.04
Urban residence – rural (ref: city)	0.14***	0.03	0.04
Trust in people		– 0.21***	– 0.21***
Satisfaction with healthcare system		– 0.28***	– 0.27***
Internet use		0.03	0.03
Consumption of political news		– 0.12***	– 0.12***
Political interest		– 0.45***	– 0.46***
Perceived political effectiveness		– 0.05	– 0.06
Attachment to country		– 0.04***	– 0.04***
Frequency of social meet-ups		0.01	0.003
Conservation			0.15**
Self-enhancement			– 0.03
Self-transcendence			0.17***
Openness			0.30***
Belgium (ref: Austria)	0.37***	0.40***	0.36***
Croatia	– 0.81***	– 1.78***	– 1.80***
Cyprus	0.62***	– 0.22	– 0.23
Finland	0.29***	0.56***	0.46***
France	0.26***	– 0.52***	– 0.66***
Germany	0.37***	– 0.18*	– 0.27***
Greece	– 0.34***	– 1.65***	– 1.64***
Hungary	0.12	– 1.07***	– 1.02***
Ireland	0.52***	– 0.13	– 0.12
Italy	0.49***	– 0.32***	– 0.25**
Lithuania	0.26**	– 0.75***	– 0.73***
Netherlands	0.25***	0.42***	0.38***
Poland	0.12	– 0.85***	– 0.82***
Portugal	– 0.11	– 1.24***	– 1.26***
Slovakia	– 0.02	– 1.36***	– 1.31***
Slovenia	0.30***	– 0.79***	– 0.81***
Spain	0.29***	– 0.20*	– 0.29***
Sweden	0.19*	0.17	0.07
Constant	– 1.10***	3.07***	3.04***
Observations	27 655	21 693	21 581
Log likelihood	– 12 921.26	– 8 841.10	– 8 775.45
Akaike information criterion	25 902.52	17 758.21	17 634.90

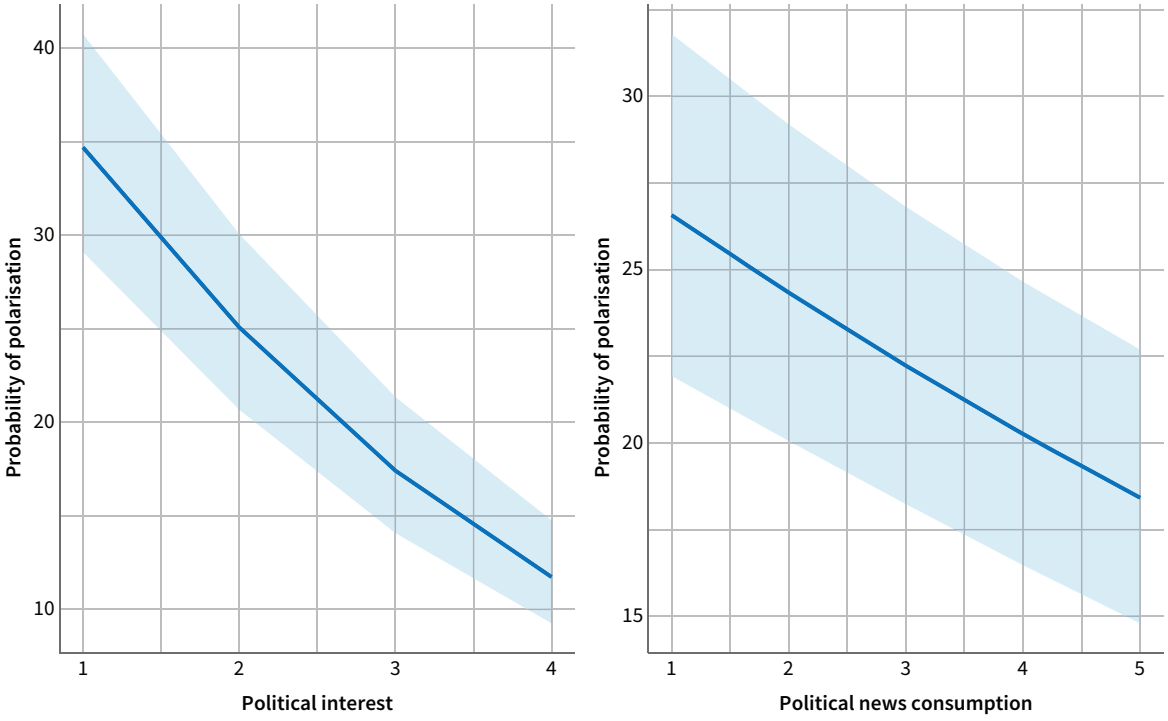
Notes: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania. ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.
Source: Authors.

Figure 27: Predicted probability of polarisation, by education and financial circumstances, EU, 2023 (%)



Notes: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania. ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.
Source: Authors.

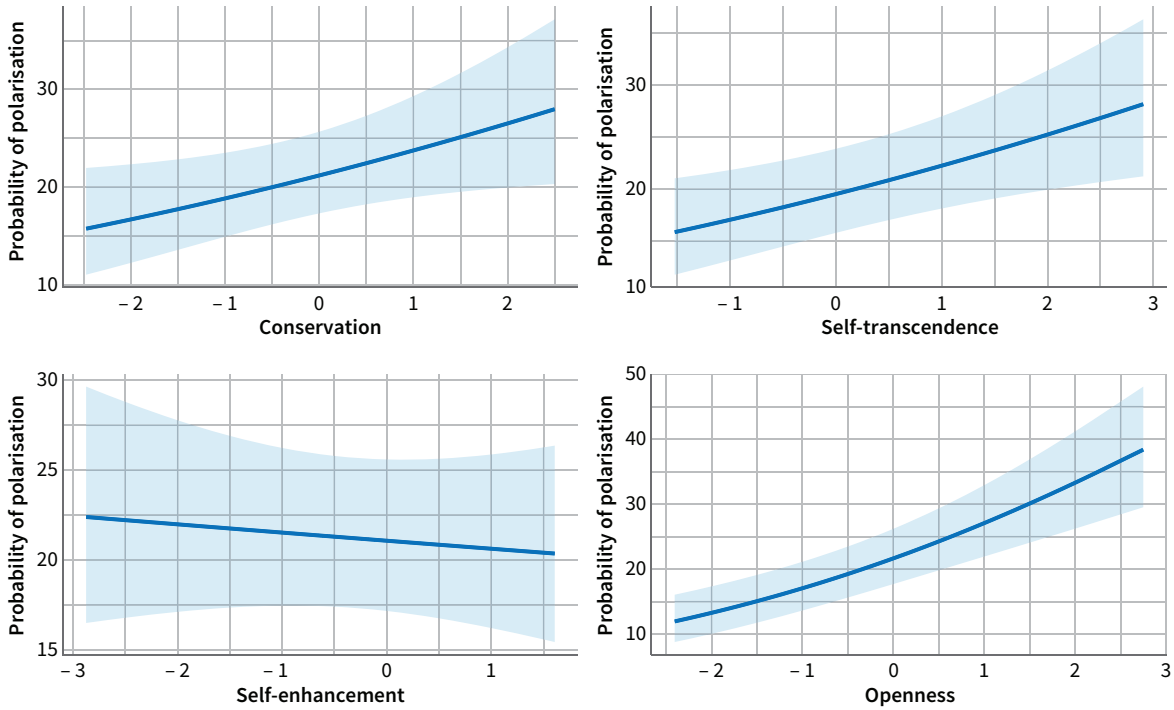
Figure 28: Predicted probability of polarisation, by level of political interest and political news consumption, EU, 2023 (%)



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

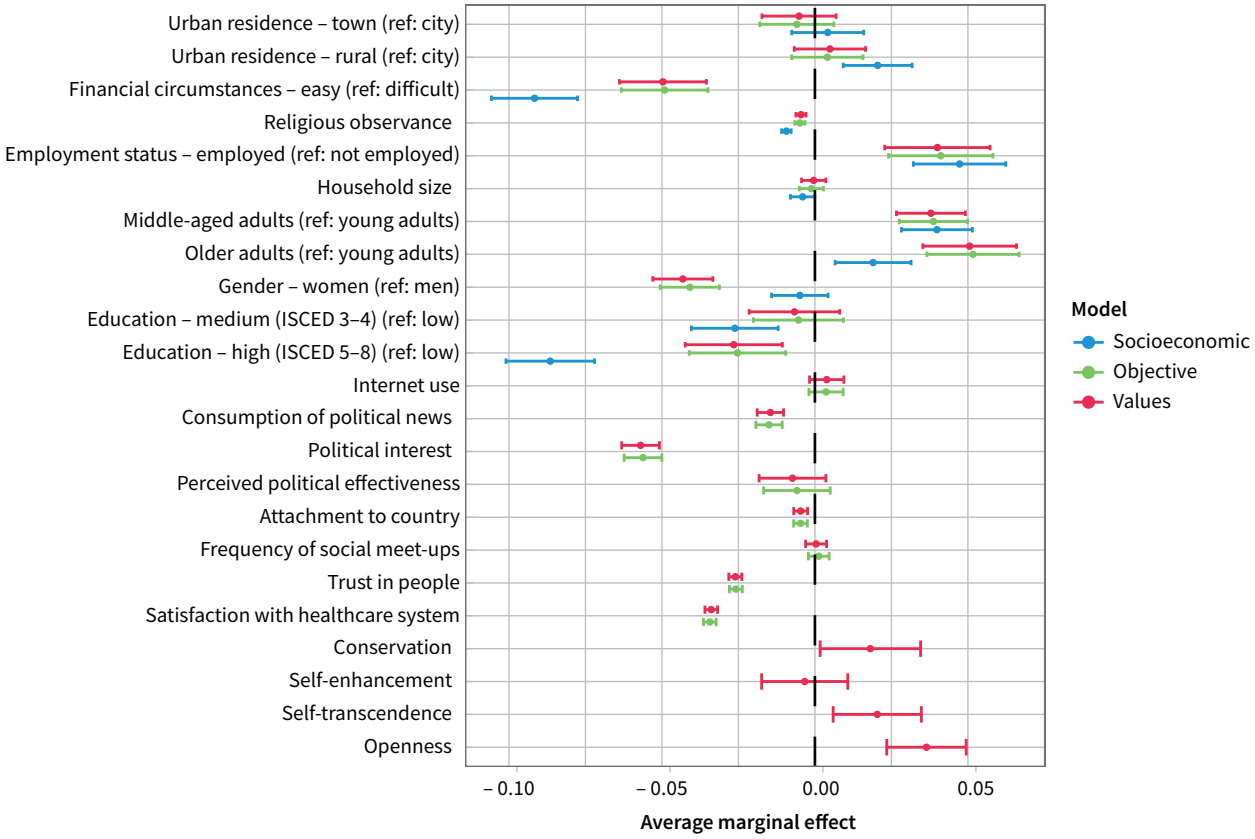
With regard to human values, the results are somewhat in line with previous studies on political attitudes. Openness to change is the variable that most predicts polarisation on trust in political institutions. In line with the literature, openness to change is a value that is based on independence and freedom of thought and action. Hence, it is the value that most opposes traditional forms of democracy, and it is related to lower levels of trust, or, as in this case, a higher likelihood of polarisation on political institutions (Figure 29). The other two values that are significant are the two social values, conservation and self-transcendence. As explained by Schwartz et al. (2010), these two values represent somewhat more conservative and traditional views of society, versus a more equal and benevolent belief system. Hence, these values are inherently associated with political beliefs and, possibly, political factions. Despite the correlations showing a positive association between self-transcendence and trust in political institutions, as well as a negative correlation between conservation and trust, the results of the regression go in the opposite direction. Respondents high in self-transcendence and conservation show a significantly higher likelihood of becoming polarised on political institutions (Figure 30). Owing to the country fixed effects, this could be caused by the governing party or coalition holding beliefs that conflict with those held by respondents with stronger values of conservation or self-transcendence. Longitudinal data will help clarify the impact of values on polarisation on political institutions.

Figure 29: Predicted probability of polarisation, by human value, EU, 2023 (%)



Note: The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.
Source: Authors.

Figure 30: Average marginal effect of the three models



Note: ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.
Source: Authors.

Political polarisation remains high

Are Europeans polarising on public issues? If so, who is polarising the most? To answer these questions, the chapter has presented four main indicators relating to public opinion on trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants, gender equality and same-sex equality. The optimistic results show that mass polarisation is not on the rise in Europe. Acceptance of immigrants, gender equality and same-sex equality has been showing largely positive trends, with higher support for inclusiveness and few signs of rejection overall. Despite this, the main negative result, where polarisation was detected, was with regard to trust in political institutions. The indicator, composed of trust in the national government, parties and parliament, and the European Parliament, showed instances of polarisation, with a high concentration of respondents claiming not to trust political institutions at all.

To unpack this political polarisation, the chapter investigated possible drivers of it. By using a robust approach, it tested different models, starting with a basic sociodemographic model, then adding both satisfaction and political engagement questions, and finally expanding the model to include human values. The results of the regression analysis show that economic stability, higher education and strong political engagement are the main factors reducing the probability of citizens being polarised. In contrast, holding strong societal values related to universalism or conservation may clash with the current government's ideology, hence increasing the chances of political polarisation.

The descriptive results also showed how voter turnout and trust are inherently linked. Previous research has shown that when polarisation rises, voter turnout decreases. Similar results were set out in this chapter, with lower trust being associated with not voting.

One of the limitations of the results as presented in this chapter is that they do not take into account the development of drivers over time, especially as data on economic variables and media consumption variables are quite scarce in the ESS. For this reason, the next chapter complements the results presented so far by extending the analysis to a highly salient topic, Russia's war against Ukraine, and using the panel structure of Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey. It investigates how citizens' support for Ukraine has changed over time, and whether economic instability, as well as the fragmented and uncertain media landscape, have had an impact on people's opinions regarding the war.

4 Withdrawing support for Ukraine: a panel study

As noted previously, ESS data do not enable researchers to track changes in respondents' opinions over time. Although offering many insights over several years, the cross-sectional nature of the survey lacks the longitudinal aspect that is vital for gauging changes in opinions and attitudes across the EU. Although Cronos, a cross-national probability-based online panel following a harmonised approach ([7]), has been launched, the panel has been fielded in only a handful of Member States thus far, and the latest data available are from 2021. Therefore, this report makes use of Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey, which has a panel structure. In particular, this chapter examines one of the salient public opinion topics investigated by the survey: satisfaction with national government support for Ukraine.

Context: the war against Ukraine

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine started in the first months of 2022 and is ongoing. As of November 2024, there were 6.8 million displaced people from Ukraine globally, with the largest shares welcomed by Moldova and Poland ([8]). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that approximately 14.6 million people from Ukraine have needed humanitarian assistance. The EU and its Member States adopted several measures to aid Ukraine and its displaced people. Measures included restrictions and sanctions against Russia, as well as financial aid to Ukraine to help it defend itself from the unprovoked attack. Moreover, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) to fast-track displaced people from Ukraine to join the public employment and social protection schemes in their country of displacement (Eurofound and FRA, 2023). As might be expected of people fleeing war, housing was among the most prominent concerns for displaced people from Ukraine, alongside childcare and employment (Eurofound and FRA, 2023). In 2022, the Flash Eurobarometer showed unwavering support for Ukraine and its displaced people (88 % across the EU), with strong support coming from Nordic countries. After a year, Eurobarometer data showed a decrease, despite support remaining high (76 % across the EU). In 2024, support for Ukrainian refugees dropped again to 71 %, with a particularly low share in Poland (60 %), signalling a worrying war fatigue in a country that has been close to the war zone the whole time (European Parliament: Directorate-General for Communication, 2024). It is therefore important to understand the factors behind the loss of support and explore possible remedies.

To this end, Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey collected data on Europeans' opinions regarding personal and government aid to Ukraine. In 2022, a module on the war against Ukraine was added, and it has been repeated every year since. To accommodate the panel structure, the analysis focuses both on a cross-sectional sample of e-survey respondents from 2022, 2023 and 2024 and on the panellists who responded to both panel rounds (in 2022 and 2024). The cross-sectional sample considered 64 210 respondents, while a total of 11 288 panellists were considered.

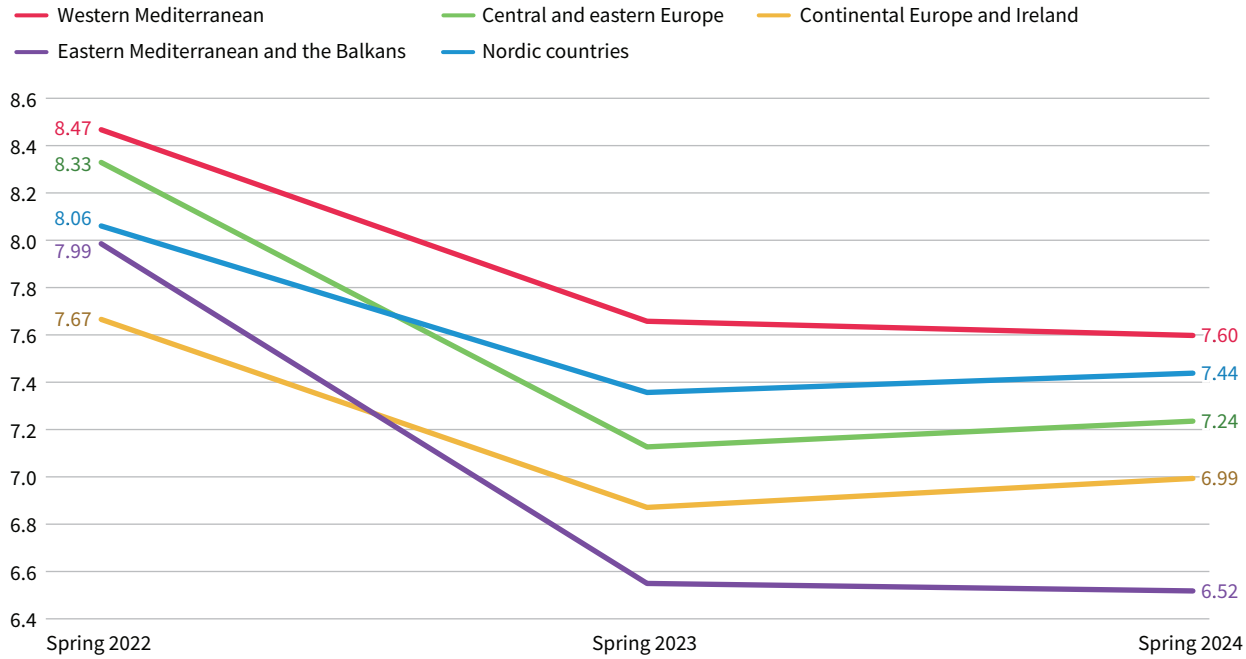
Concerns about the war and satisfaction with government responses

In 2022, 2023 and 2024, respondents were asked how concerned they were about the war against Ukraine, on a scale from 1 to 10. After an initially high level of concern in 2022, respondents reported less concern in 2023 and 2024, with the two later years yielding similar results (Figure 31).

([7]) For more information, please consult https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodological-research/modes-data-collection/cronos.

([8]) For more information, please consult https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/.

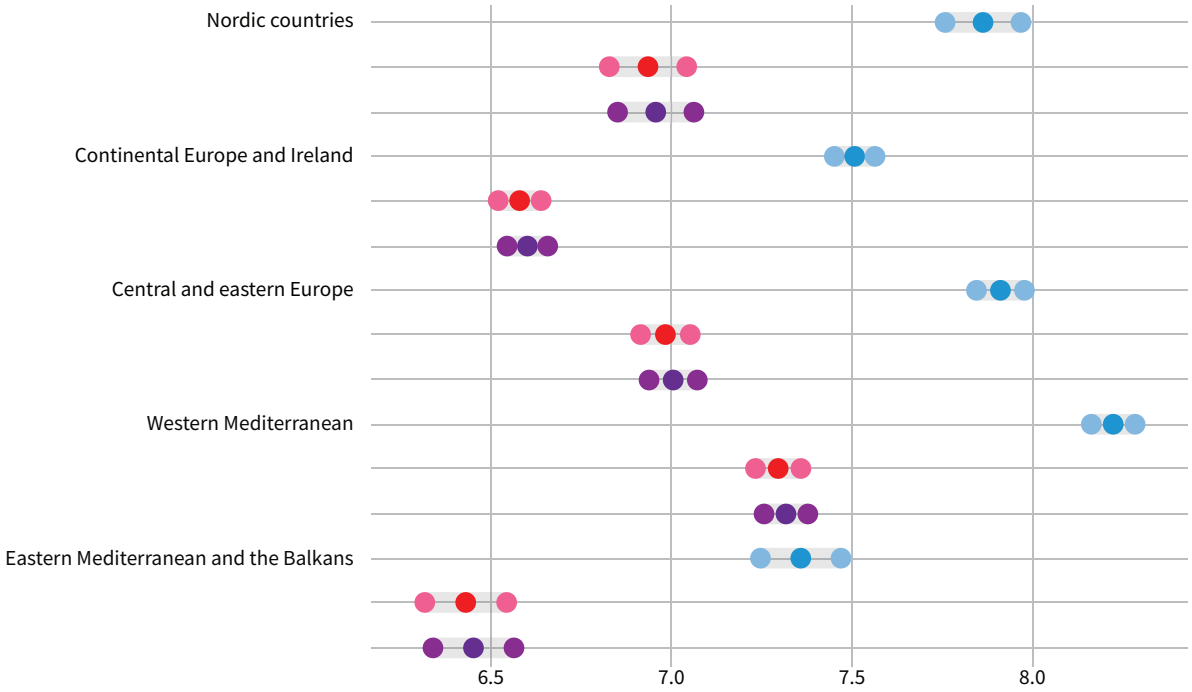
Figure 31: Levels of concern about the war against Ukraine, cross-sectional sample, 2022, 2023 and 2024



Notes: Scale ranges from 0 (not at all concerned) to 10 (very concerned). Country clusters are made up as follows: Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Sweden; continental Europe and Ireland – Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands; western Mediterranean – Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain; central and eastern Europe: Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia; eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans – Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania.
Source: Authors.

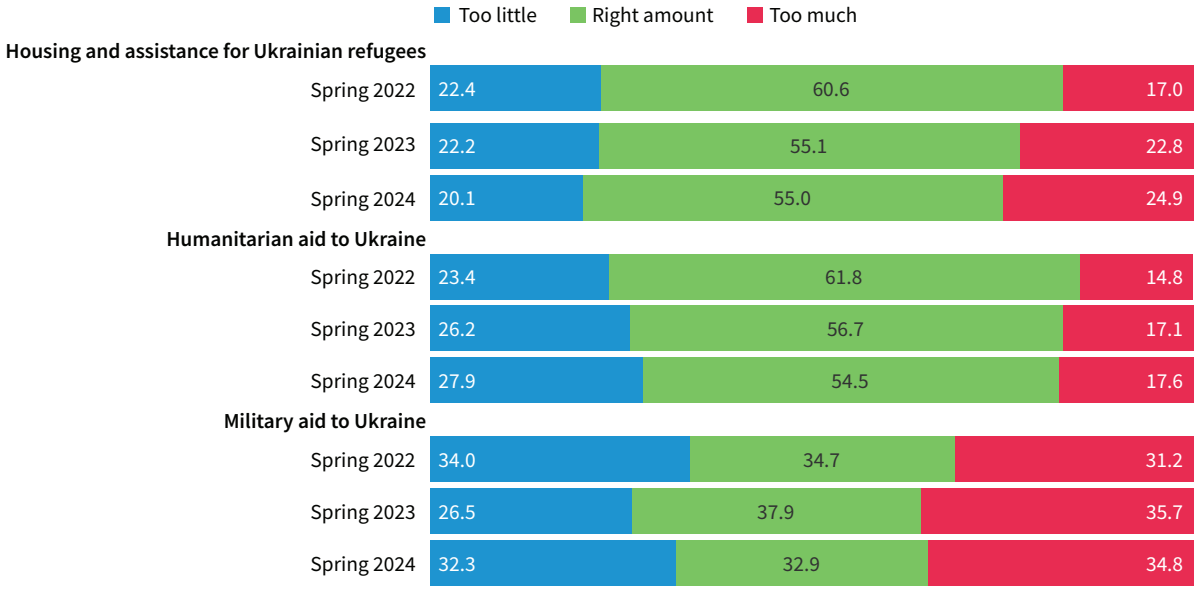
Concern dropped significantly over time for all regions of the EU, even when controlling for basic demographics (Figure 32).

Figure 32: Estimated marginal mean for 'concerned about the war in Ukraine', cross-sectional sample, 2022, 2023 and 2024



Notes: The three circles in each bar represent the estimated marginal means for 2022 (blue), 2023 (red) and 2024 (purple). Results are averaged across employment status, urban residence, gender, educational attainment and Member State.
Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey.

Figure 33: Satisfaction with own government's response to the war against Ukraine, cross-sectional sample (%)



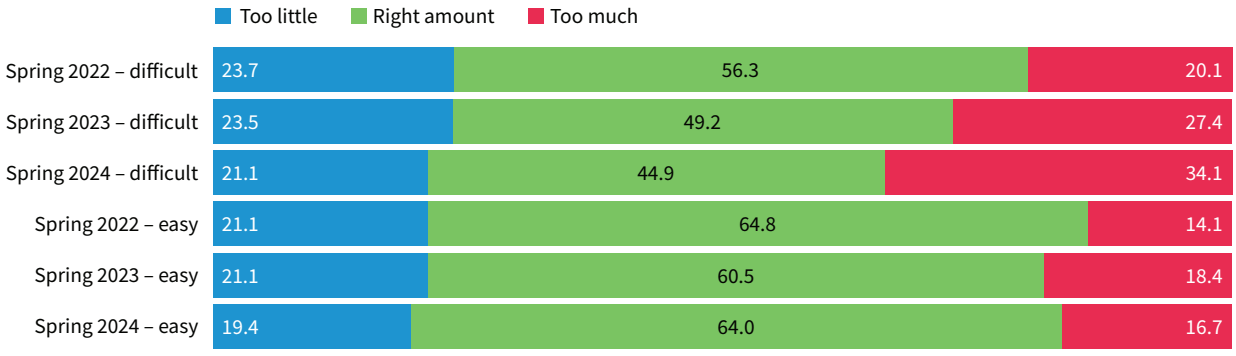
Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey.

The decline in concern was accompanied by increased dissatisfaction with government aid to Ukrainians (Figure 33). The starkest difference can be observed with regard to housing for Ukrainians. Respondents increasingly mentioned that their government did too much in providing housing and assistance to Ukrainian refugees, with an increase of 7.9 percentage points over the two years. Regarding humanitarian and military aid, respondents split into those who said the government did too little and those who said the government did too much, with a small decline in the middle ground over time in the case of the former and some fluctuation in the case of the latter.

To unpack the changes over time, the responses were broken down by respondents' financial circumstances – that is, ease or difficulty making ends meet. Once this was included, the picture changed significantly, with the largest change observed for those experiencing economic difficulty (Figure 34). Among those respondents, the share claiming that the government did too much to house and assist Ukrainian refugees increased by 14 %. Similarly, the share of respondents who reported economic difficulty also reported increased dissatisfaction with humanitarian (+ 8 percentage points) and military (+ 7.5 percentage points) aid. Interestingly, the increase in dissatisfaction mostly occurred among those who had previously claimed the government was giving 'the right amount' of help and support, and to a lesser extent among those who had previously claimed the government was doing 'too little'.

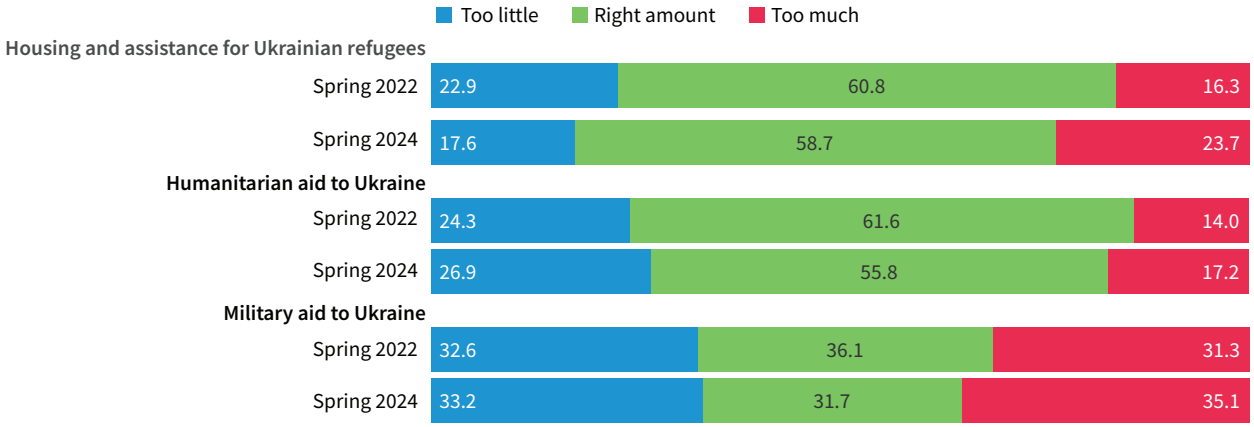
Panellists voiced the same concerns as the respondents from the cross-sectional sample (Figure 35). Housing was the most divisive issue, with a substantial increase in dissatisfaction from 2022 to 2024 (+ 7.4 percentage points). Overall, the biggest divide could be observed with regard to military aid, with the three answer categories equally split, showing no agreement on this issue. As noted for the cross-sectional sample, there

Figure 34: Satisfaction with own government's provision of housing and assistance to Ukrainian refugees, by financial circumstances, cross-sectional sample, 2022, 2023 and 2024 (%)



Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey.

Figure 35: Satisfaction with own government's response to the war against Ukraine, panellists, 2022 and 2024 (%)



Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey.

seems to be a decrease in the middle ground, in this case, the 'right amount' responses.

Drivers of withdrawal of support

Besides the obvious humanitarian crisis, the war has led to a series of negative consequences for the EU. Soaring inflation and cost of living, tensions between displaced Ukrainians and local communities regarding housing, and labour market barriers for Ukrainians are reported to be among the main causes of distress (Eurofound and FRA, 2023; Eurofound, 2024). Moreover, after initially showing support, some Western governments may be experiencing war fatigue due to the prolonged effect of the war on European economies (Liadze et al., 2023). As a result, economic insecurity and economic anxiety are among the main drivers of protectionist agendas (Autor et al., 2020) and conflictual attitudes towards immigrants or refugees (Strain and Veuger, 2019), even during a humanitarian crisis.

Another aspect fuelling dissatisfaction and uncertainty regarding the war is the media landscape. Discerning true from fake news is not easy, as the news environment is in a state of constant change during a conflict (Tucker et al., 2018). Pre-existing tendencies towards conspiracy, as well as contextual factors, such as distance from the battlefield, increase the chances of believing misinformation (Ognyanova et al., 2020; Silverman et al., 2021; Zilinsky et al., 2024). This is coupled with the role of social media in amplifying misinformation by creating echo chambers and enabling fringe views to thrive and spread (Allen, 2022). It is therefore important to gauge the impact of economic anxiety on, as well as the role of social media in, the withdrawal of support for aiding Ukrainians.

Dynamic model with cross-sectional data

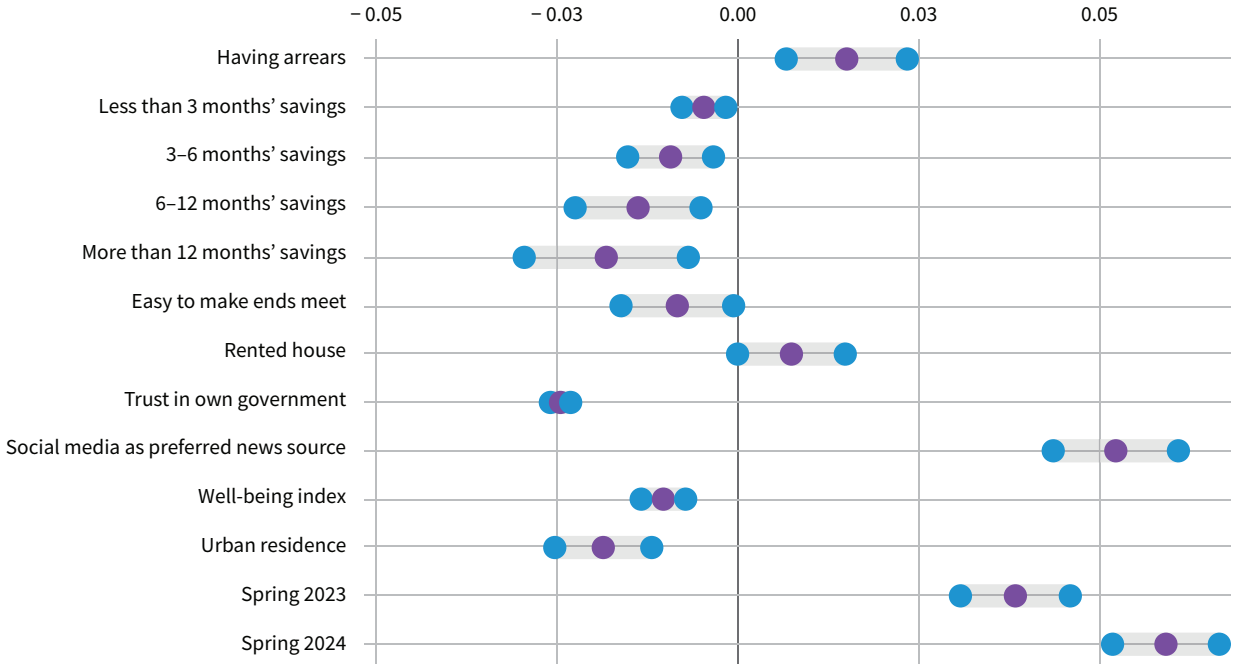
To model both changes over time for the general population and changes for panellists, two models were carried out. The first, a dynamic model, uses the cross-sectional samples for 2022, 2023 and 2024. This model investigates by means of a logistic regression the reasons why people claimed that the government did too much to house Ukrainians and to provide humanitarian and military aid. It predicts this opinion by using variables related to financial stability, such as arrears, household savings and difficulty making ends meet; contextual factors, such as trust in the government, well-being and house tenure; social media as the preferred news source; and demographic factors. The model is broken down in full in Table 19.

Table 19: Dynamic model for e-survey cross-sectional sample

Dependent variable	Details
Political attitudes	Government has done too much to house Ukrainians; government has given too much humanitarian aid; government has given too much military aid
Independent variables	**Details**
Financial stability	Arrears, household savings, difficulty making ends meet
Media consumption	Social media as preferred news source
Satisfaction	Trust in the country's government, score on well-being index
Socioeconomic factors	Education, employment status, house tenure
Demographic factors	Gender, age, urban residence, European region

Source: Authors.

Figure 36: Average marginal effect for 'the government has done too much to house Ukrainians', cross-sectional sample, 2022, 2023 and 2024



Note: Results for age, gender, employment status and region are not displayed.
Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey.

When looking at the drivers of the opinion that the government has done too much to house and assist Ukrainians, the cross-sectional results tend to point towards financial instability, hence confirming the descriptive results. Moreover, the trend seems to increase over time, with a higher probability of reporting 'too much' aid in 2024, indicating that respondents have experienced war fatigue (Figure 36).

The cross-sectional analysis shows how having arrears leads to a higher likelihood of claiming that the government has done too much to house Ukrainians, whereas having savings and making ends meet easily lead to the opposite. When looking at media consumption, those preferring social media as their main news source are more likely than those consuming traditional news media to claim that the government has done too much. Trusting the country's government and having a higher level of personal well-being lead to a lower likelihood of claiming the government has done too much.

Similar results can be observed with regard to support for humanitarian and military aid, with the main drivers of dissatisfaction being economic instability and social media as the preferred news source.

The panel structure of the data allows the investigation to delve into the changes in respondents' opinions over time, with a focus on those who moved from the opinion that the government has done too little or the right amount to help Ukrainians to the opinion that it has done too much. In order to do that, the report presents the results of the static model with panel data, where changes have been tracked.

Static model with panel data: change in economic stability drives dissatisfaction

The panel structure makes it possible to track those who withdrew their support for the government's aid over time, alongside the deterioration of or improvement in their physical and financial well-being. To that end, the same respondents were asked the same questions two years apart, and the differences between 2022 and 2024 replies could be calculated. As the literature suggests, the erosion of financial and personal well-being is one of the key factors driving friction with immigrants and refugees (Autor et al., 2020). To investigate this aspect, respondents were recoded as those who withdrew support for housing and assisting Ukrainians and those who withdrew support for the government providing humanitarian or military aid (from responding that the government has done 'too little' or 'the right amount' to 'too much'). Moreover, several change variables were computed, such as a change in the ability to make ends meet, a change in personal well-being and trust, and a change in concern about the war itself. Table 20 offers a full description of the model.

Table 20: Static model for e-survey panellists, 2022 and 2024

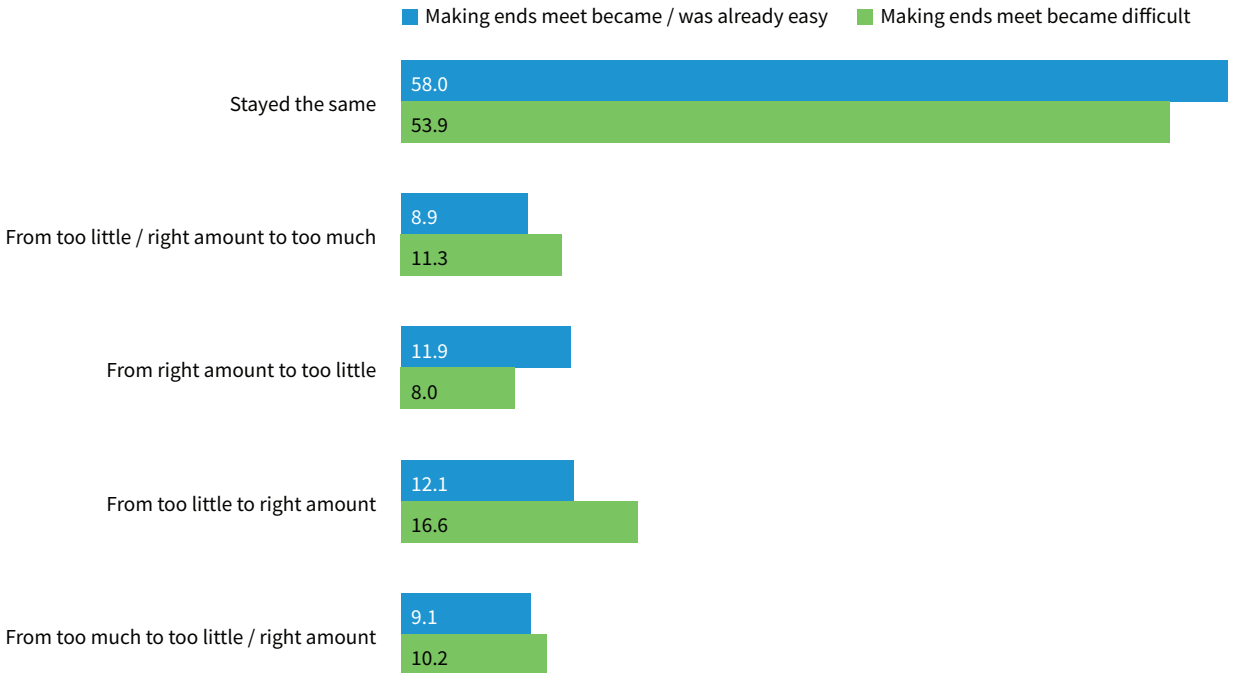
Dependent variable	Details
Political attitude	Withdrawal of support for the government housing Ukrainians; withdrawal of support for the government providing humanitarian aid; withdrawal of support for the government providing military aid
Independent variables	**Details**
Changed conditions	Erosion in ability to make ends meet, erosion in trust in government, erosion in personal well-being, less concerned about the war
Financial well-being	In arrears, experiencing social or material deprivation (*) in 2024
Media consumption	Social media as preferred news source in 2024
Socioeconomic factors	Education, employment status, house tenure in 2024
Demographic factors	Gender, age, urban residence, European region in 2024

(*) Social or material deprivation reflects respondents' ability to replace worn-out clothes with new ones, have two pairs of fitting shoes, spend a small amount of money each week on themselves, enjoy regular leisure activities, get together with friends or family for a drink or meal at least once a month and pay for an internet connection.
Source: Authors.

When looking at descriptive measures, withdrawal of support is mostly observed among those with reduced financial well-being. For instance, among those who perceived a decrease in their ability to make ends meet, in 2024 almost 11.3 % shifted from the opinion that the government was doing too little or the right amount to house Ukrainians to the opinion that it was doing too much (Figure 37). Similar results are seen with regard to the government's provision of humanitarian and military aid.

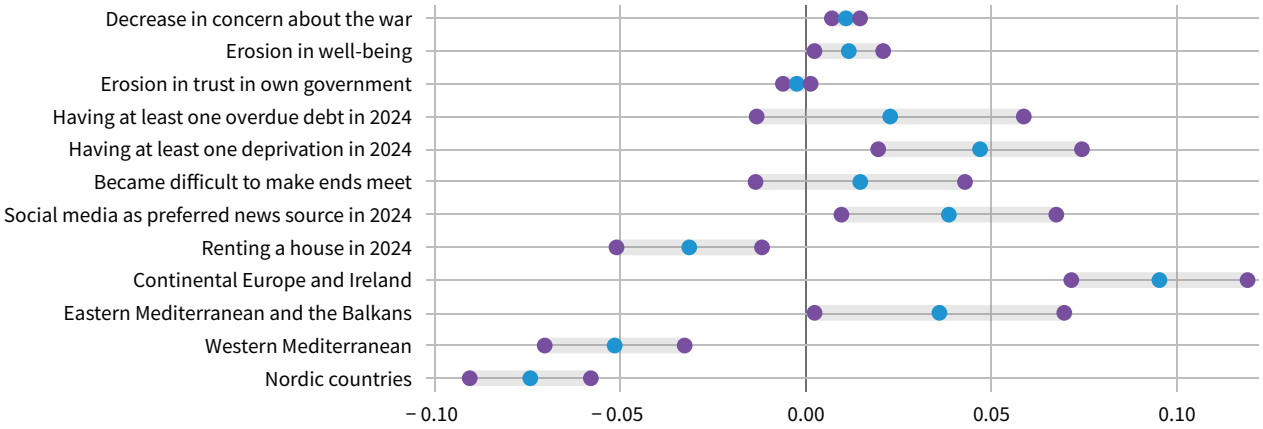
The statistical model shows similar results. Despite the results applying only to the panellists, knowing what drove some Europeans to withdraw their support for Ukraine remains highly valuable (Figure 38). As expected, those who were less concerned about the war, those whose physical well-being had deteriorated and those who reported experiencing deprivation, alongside those consuming news primarily on social media in 2024, were more likely to withdraw their support for the government's housing of Ukrainians. Despite the descriptive results suggesting the opposite, being in arrears and having difficulty making ends meet did not have a significant impact. However, regional differences can be noted. Discontent grew more

Figure 37: Change in support for the government's measures to house Ukrainians, by change in ability to make ends meet, panellists, 2022 and 2024 (%)



Note: Change calculated based on answers in 2022 and 2024 for 'making ends meet'.
Source: Authors.

Figure 38: Average marginal effect for 'the government has done too much to house Ukrainians', panellists, 2022 and 2024



Notes: Withdrawal is coded: 1, from too little / right amount in 2022 to too much in 2024; 0, all other cases. Distribution: 1, 1 200; 0, 7 762. Results for age, gender, employment status and urban residence are not displayed. The changes for concern about the war, well-being and trust were computed by subtracting the 2022 value from the 2024 value.
Source: Living and Working in the EU e-survey, 2022–2024 panel data.

significantly in continental Europe, Ireland, the eastern Mediterranean region and the Balkans, while Nordic and western Mediterranean Member States maintained their support for their governments' housing of Ukrainians.

Decreasing public support

Despite a large proportion of Europeans still supporting Ukraine and governments' efforts to aid it in the war, a considerable part of the population is experiencing war fatigue. This is especially true among those respondents who have been most economically affected by the war, and those who are financially unstable for any reason, in arrears or struggling to make ends meet. Moreover, the impact of social media as a preferred news source is visible and worrying. For both cross-sectional and panel results, it was found that social media fuelled withdrawal of support. Following on from previous studies that found social media to reduce trust in institutions and satisfaction with government measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurofound, 2022a; Eurofound and FRA, 2023), this chapter has extended those analyses by using panel data to track changes in attitudes to the war against Ukraine.

This chapter and the previous two have presented a complex picture of European citizens, in a situation of growing discontent with their political institutions, increasing polarisation in some key political attitudes and a growing dissatisfaction with how governments are handling support for Ukraine. The multiple effects of the disenchantment of citizens with the more traditional forms of democracy may endanger the proper functioning of democracy, especially if people withdraw from the political debate. As seen in previous research, the effect of trust on voting is evident (Eurofound, 2024). In line with policy efforts to bridge the gap between groups in society and strengthen European democracies, the next chapter showcases new ways of involving citizens in decision-making, including through case studies of initiatives that have applied a deliberative dimension to policymaking.

5 Bridging the gap: political efficacy and deliberative democracy

Electoral democracy is facing several challenges, which are becoming increasingly evident. Voter turnout in the EU is hovering around 50 %, if not less (Statista, 2024) ([9]). This trend is spreading across Western countries in general, where low voter turnout is partly due to growing distrust of political parties and institutions, especially among disadvantaged citizens (OECD, 2024). Where voting is the main avenue via which citizens can have a voice, low turnout leads to an unrepresentative democracy that is unfit to guarantee primary political and social rights. Therefore, new and innovative forms of democracy can help bridge the gap. Among these forms (for more detailed examples, please see Box 3), the deliberative approach was found to be beneficial in many cases (OECD, 2020).

Combining traditional and innovative approaches can create an ecosystem of democratic practices that features different tools for better public decisions. At its core, deliberation is the act of exchanging and scrutinising ideas in a respectful manner to gain consensus and harness collective intelligence (Collins and Nerlich, 2015; Giraudet et al., 2022; Willis et al., 2022). The main features of today's deliberative practices include mini-publics, random participation and facilitated deliberation (OECD, 2020). Mini-publics are samples of the population divided into representative strata that reflect characteristics such as gender, age group, education and, where possible, other significant socioeconomic variables. Minorities, such as immigrants or non-resident students, are often included. Random participation, also called a civic lottery, is a common practice to ensure that participants do not lobby. The deliberative process analyses the issue in question through expert opinions and from different cultural, social or political perspectives. Moderators usually facilitate the discussion, enabling participants to understand, contribute to, share and determine a common position. A final decision may emerge by consensus and voting. The assembly statements are recommendations for public administrations. Depending on political will, laws and available resources, governments may adopt and implement them. Deliberative processes can also be used as instruments to set political agendas or gauge public opinion on a particular matter.

By enabling citizens to be more directly involved in policymaking, deliberative processes have the potential to strengthen public trust in governments and ameliorate social discontent (WHO, 2022; Council of Europe, 2023). When individuals are able to see their identities, values, interests and lived experiences reflected in the composition of a decision-making body, they will have greater confidence in the decision-making abilities of said body (Pow et al., 2020). Indeed, deliberation among a diverse array of citizens during policymaking procedures reassures the public that (1) all affected interests are equally represented and (2) all relevant interests are thoroughly considered (Pow et al., 2020). Positive attitudes towards policies and political decisions will confer greater legitimacy on the standing government, which in turn creates a stabilising effect on other democratic systems (Council of Europe, 2023). Moreover, deliberative processes may encourage citizens to be more civically engaged in the future, increasing participation in other institutional contexts thereafter (WHO, 2022; Council of Europe, 2023).

Box 3: Social dialogue and democratic participation

The use of direct democracy and deliberative tools is not new, and it can be seen in other areas of citizen interaction, for instance social dialogue. Social dialogue aims to foster democracy in the workplace. Tripartite social dialogue sees government, employers' representatives and workers interacting 'as equal and independent partners to seek solutions to issues of common concern' (ILO, 2024). Social dialogue is founded on fair representation and pluralism principles to include all workers' interests. In this, social dialogue and deliberative democracy are quite similar. Their goals are to increase participation and representation at work and within society, respectively, with the positive outcome of stimulating and fostering democratic values. A recent survey in Germany showed that workers who have more participation opportunities, more recognition and better working conditions hold more democratic attitudes (Hans Böckler Foundation, 2024). Moreover, social dialogue benefits democracy as a whole by increasing inclusion and representation through voter mobilisation. In the United States, states with high unionisation density have passed far fewer voter restriction bills in the past 14 years than states with low unionisation density (EPI, 2021).

([9]) The mean for 1979–2024 is 51.83 % (Statista, 2024).

Quality checks: the dos and don'ts of deliberative processes

Ensuring the high quality of deliberative processes is paramount for effective and positive experiences and outcomes. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021a) delineates three main aspects integral to success: the integrity of the process design, the high quality of the deliberative experience and the pursuit of pathways to impact (Figure 39).

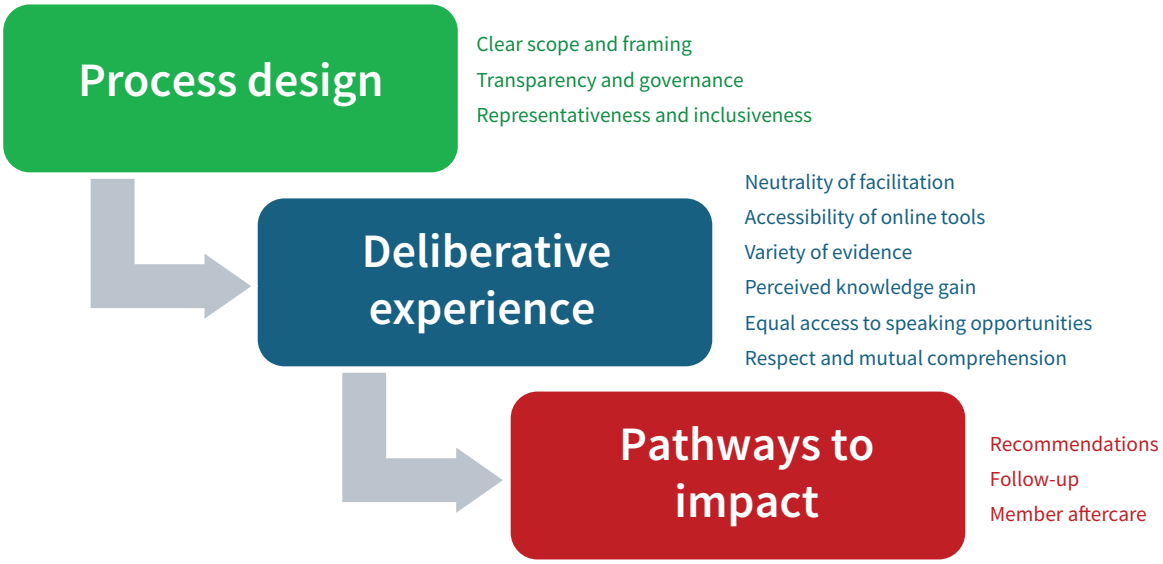
Process design

Deliberative processes are usually organised in response to a policy need. Designing such a process entails a clear policy area and an area of action, be it municipal, regional, national or transnational. The structure of the process should be made clear to all participants, as well as to organisers, sponsors and supporters, to increase transparency. Finally, there must be a major focus on the sample composition. For the deliberative group to properly function as a microcosm of larger society, individuals from a broad range of races, ages, classes, religions, education levels and political-party affiliations must be incorporated. While the need for diversity in deliberative processes requires a certain level of selectiveness, participants should initially be drawn from a random sample so that individuals who are typically less politically involved have an equal opportunity to participate (Giraudet et al., 2022). Gathering a diverse group of citizens is often a costly and tedious process, but it remains critical nonetheless. A strategically inclusive selection procedure will increase the opportunities for sexual and ethnic minorities to participate – with their voices heard unfiltered and their opinions considered fully – in political decision-making (Gherghina et al., 2021). It is important that inclusive practices do not cease once participant selection is finalised; instead, they should continue for the entire duration of a deliberative process.

Deliberative experience

Holding learning sessions before formal deliberation provides a base for high-quality deliberation. During such sessions, participants learn about the particulars of the policy issue at hand from field experts and gain exposure to a range of relevant stakeholder perspectives (OECD, 2020; Council of Europe, 2023). Learning sessions support the inclusivity of a deliberative process by deterring asymmetrical information, which often results in bias or situations where some participants have an advantage over others (Lupia and Norton, 2017). Moreover, learning sessions reduce the likelihood of a power imbalance within a deliberative group. For the purposes of credibility, it is imperative for the information to be entirely neutral, which may require the use of an independent advisory committee when selecting evidence for presentation (Willis et al., 2022; Council of Europe, 2023). Legal advisers are also useful at this stage, as they can translate ideas from policy documents into plain language (Giraudet et al., 2022). In the age of AI and big data, governance and policymaking can benefit from harnessing new technologies. But biases pose a major threat and AI ethics should guide the public application of this technology. In this regard, four EU-funded projects are exploring the use of AI to facilitate

Figure 39: Success path for deliberative democracy processes



Source: Authors, based on OECD (2021a).

governance and deliberative processes by using a citizen-centred and culture-centred approach ([10]).

Professional facilitation is another necessary element for high-quality deliberation. Facilitators manage the flow of deliberation, resolve obstacles and ensure that participation is equal among citizens (Council of Europe, 2023). Most important is a facilitator's ability to circumvent internal conflict and steer citizens towards consensus (Giraudet et al., 2022). Facilitators should work in conjunction with both field experts and citizen participants during each session, preventing any domination of the discussion. It is hard to predict the exact route a deliberation will follow, but an experienced and skilled facilitator increases the probability of a deliberative process reaching a meaningful end.

Pathways to impact

The efficacy of a deliberative process is highly contingent on the degree of visible impact it has on policymaking. If deliberative processes do not produce a tangible political impact, then they risk subverting citizens' expectations and further damaging public trust in the government (Bialozyt and Le Quiniou, 2020; Council of Europe, 2023). It is thus ideal for deliberative processes to be formally and indefinitely embedded into policymaking cycles (Council of Europe, 2023). To this end, bringing policymakers into the deliberative process as it unfolds may also support the creation of a policy or an official referendum (WHO, 2022).

Institutionalising deliberative processes has significant benefits. Often, deliberative processes are ad hoc or one-off events in which many citizens are unable to participate. A deliberative process that is institutionalised and therefore continual will naturally engage a larger portion of society, further enriching democracy by incorporating a wider range of opinions into political decision-making. Institutionalisation may also reduce the costs associated with deliberative processes by enabling documents, practices and facilitation methods to be improved and reused (OECD, 2021b); reusing materials in deliberative processes will also increase overall uniformity, which will make impact assessments less challenging. In addition, recurring deliberative processes will enable a better estimation of long-term effects to be made. The potential benefits of institutionalising a deliberative process make it worth pursuing in all contexts.

Box 4: Successful deliberation: permanent, bottom-up and top-down cases

Ostbelgien model

The permanent deliberative body in eastern Belgium offers insight into how a deliberative process may be institutionalised. In 2019, the Ostbelgien parliament unanimously approved a decree that established a model for permanent citizen deliberation in light of previous successful deliberative processes (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2019). The Ostbelgien model was designed, initiated and implemented by political elites rather than ordinary citizens. The primary component of the Ostbelgien model is a Citizens' Council, a permanent deliberative body that has the power to initiate up to three ad hoc citizens' assemblies per year (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2019; OECD, 2021b). The Citizens' Council benefits from a mixed composition of field experts and ordinary citizens; of the 24 participants, 6 are randomly selected citizens who have previously been involved in a citizens' panel, 6 are politicians from separate parties and the remaining 12 are randomly selected citizens from the Ostbelgien population (OECD, 2021b). Meanwhile, the 25–50 participants in each citizens' assembly are exclusively citizens who are randomly selected using stratification (OECD, 2021b). Research has shown that citizens who have taken part in either a citizens' assembly or the Citizens' Council show higher support for institutions after participation and are more likely to be civically engaged after participation (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2019; OECD, 2021b).

Irish assemblies

The two constitutional referendums (on same-sex marriage and abortion) in Ireland in the past decade were both preceded by deliberative processes. The 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage was advocated for by the movement We the Citizens after it piloted several informal assemblies in 2011 and collected data on citizen issues for publication (Courant, 2021). In 2012, the Convention on the Constitution was established, comprising 66 randomly selected citizens and 33 politicians representing various political parties proportional to their presence in parliament and including representatives of the Northern Ireland political parties (Courant, 2021). It utilised a unique sampling procedure whereby a polling company knocked on every 16th door within a given area to recruit

([10]) The 'Trustworthy AI by design' webinar presented research from the AI, Big Data and Democracy Task Force, a collective initiative comprising four EU-funded projects: AI4Gov, KT4D, Ithaca and ORBIS. These projects support the European Commission's vision of fostering inclusive, innovative and reflective societies.

participants in accordance with identity quotas. In 2016, the Irish Citizens' Assembly (ICA) was launched with the goal of obtaining citizens' recommendations on five divisive issues, one of which was the right to an abortion. Unlike the Convention on the Constitution, the ICA was composed exclusively of randomly selected citizens. The ICA's conclusion put a repeal of the eighth amendment, which stated that abortions were not permissible except in cases of medical emergency, to a referendum. A 66.4 % majority of Irish people voted in favour of the right to an abortion during this 2018 referendum, which was a similar rate of approval to that within the ICA. The fact that that the public voted along similar lines to the deliberative groups on both of these key issues attests to the strong output legitimacy of these initiatives.

French assembly on climate change

The French Citizens' Convention for Climate is one of the largest climate assemblies to have been held to date in terms of both monetary resources and duration – nine months in 2019–2020. In the aftermath of the 'yellow vests' movement, President Macron responded to public discontent by launching the citizens' convention and tasking 150 randomly assigned citizens to determine measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In all, 255 000 phone numbers were randomly selected, 11 400 people were contacted and surveyed for socioeconomic characteristics and willingness to participate and, finally, 150 participants were strategically chosen to fill quotas relating to a number of demographics (Giraudet et al., 2022). Between sessions, participants were encouraged to return home and consult their communities – families, neighbours, colleagues – to engage with a larger portion of the population. Despite the significant support from the government, citizens' proposals were later rewritten by policymakers, resulting in a low opinion on the part of participants of the government's ability to follow up after the deliberative process had taken place.

Italian Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood

Context

Social parenthood is a complex issue and concerns the recognition of same-sex families, surrogacy and the protection of children's rights. Social parenthood is defined as all forms of parenthood resulting from the use of certain medical technologies. These include, for instance, assisted fertilisation using heterologous techniques (introducing genetic material from one organism into another) and surrogacy / pregnancy for others.

The European Commission (2022b) has proposed a regulation ([11]) to introduce rules on the mutual recognition of judicial decisions and public acts of ascertainment in order to provide adequate protection for rainbow families. On the topic of surrogate motherhood, the European Court of Human Rights (2019) issued an advisory opinion supporting the recognition of the filial relationship with intended parents in the case of surrogacy. The European Parliament (2023) supported the proposed law requiring the automatic recognition throughout the EU of parenthood established by a Member State, regardless of how a child was conceived or born or of the type of family. The aim is to ensure that all children enjoy the same rights under national laws regarding education, healthcare, custody and other aspects. Finally, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child supports the Verona principles on surrogacy (ISS, 2021), drafted by a group of experts in international law and human rights through an International Social Service initiative.

In Italy, the main legal obstacle to social parenthood is the lack of recognition of parenthood for both members of a couple. Currently, only one member of the couple is recognised as a legal parent, while the other isn't. In addition, Italian Law 40 of 19 February 2004 ([12]) excludes gay and lesbian couples and single people from using medically assisted reproduction, limiting their access to parenthood. Furthermore, provision for the adoption of a spouse's child was removed from the final text of the civil unions law, making it difficult for same-sex couples to obtain legal parenthood through adoption. Law 40 also prohibits surrogacy. Another issue is that legal recognition on the birth certificates of children born from homogeneous nucleation is permitted only for lesbian mothers and not for gay male couples. And, finally, Italian courts have annulled recognitions of filial relationships on the birth certificates of children born from homogeneous nucleation in the absence of an authorising regulation. For LGBTQ+ couples, these legal obstacles mean that access to parenthood is possible only for those who can afford to organise 'procreative journeys' abroad.

([11]) The EU has no competence in the areas of family law or the legal status of persons; the legal basis for the proposal is therefore found in the different competence, established by Article 81(3) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to adopt family law measures with cross-border implications.

([12]) For more information, see https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2004/02/24/004G0062/sg.

Within this complex landscape, the Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood took place in Milan on 19 and 20 October 2023. The project allowed Italian and European citizens to issue recommendations to the various levels of government responsible for social parenthood. As the issue is characterised by highly polarised opinions, it was important to provide scientific and legal information to the participants.

Key stakeholders and their roles

The assembly was financed by the EU in the framework of the transnational European Assembly project, coordinated by European Alternatives, an organisation active at the European level in the field of democratic innovation that has carried out similar deliberative experiences in other countries. The civic assembly was co-organised by Eumans – a pan-European citizens' initiative movement, which has made innovation in democracy the core of its activities – and the Luca Coscioni Association for Scientific Research Freedom, dealing with themes such as euthanasia and assisted fertilisation. The University of Milan and the social promotion association Prossima Democrazia participated in the project as scientific advisers in their respective fields.

The municipality of Milan participated as an active observer with a specific interest in the assembly's recommendations. The municipality of Milan has undertaken several practical initiatives to support social parenthood over time, and the city alderwoman for participation was present throughout the process.

Funding

The assembly was financed through an EU project called 'Citizens, equality, rights and values', which provided funding of EUR 21 598.50. The Luca Coscioni Association contributed a further EUR 24 975.30. Most of the funds were allocated to reimbursing transport and accommodation costs for foreign participants, to ensure the involvement of citizens from at least seven Member States other than Italy, as required by the EU project providing the financing. There was no direct compensation for participants.

Overall objectives

According to the Luca Coscioni Association, one of the main reasons for holding the assembly was the perceived urgency of resolving questions relating to reproductive issues and family rights, which, according to the Eumans representative interviewed, are 'often characterised by ideologies and not based on the facts and testimonies of the people involved'.

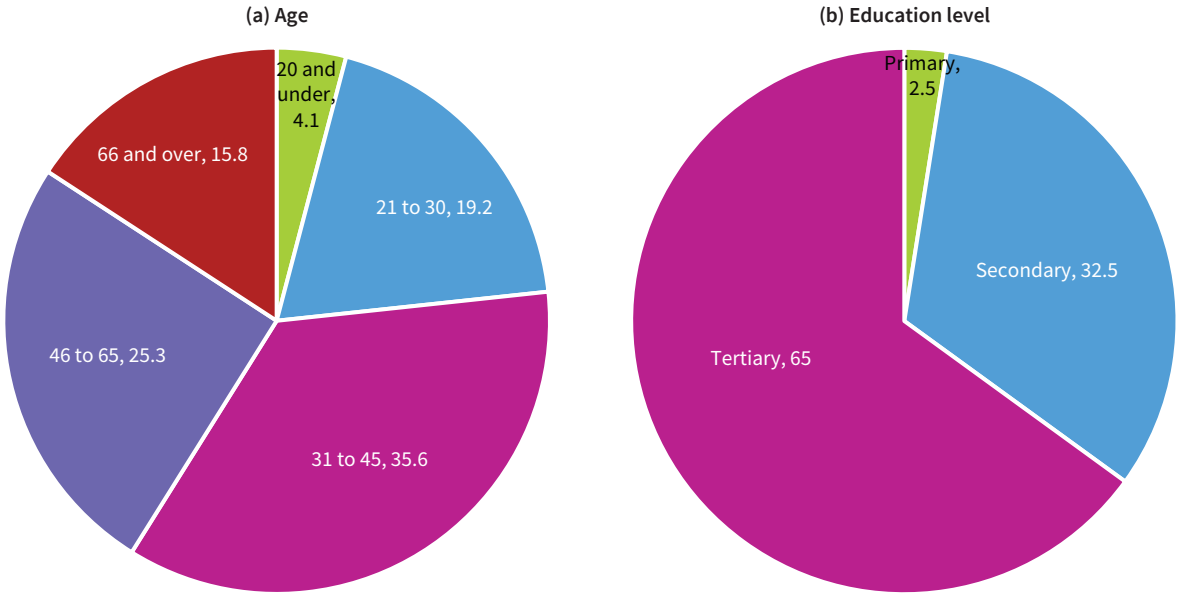
The assembly sought to give space to all the voices involved, from women carrying babies for others (including same-sex couples) to experts from various disciplinary fields and having various ethical perspectives, in order to provide a complete and cross-cutting overview of the issue. Moreover, it involved representatives of religious associations in the Christian and Muslim communities, as well as social movements. This guaranteed diversity among the participants and greater involvement of civil society. Finally, the assembly tested new methods of civic participation, including the use of digital tools for voting, to involve remote participants and ensure greater inclusiveness.

Recruitment of participants

The civic assembly aimed to represent Italian and European demographics to create a mini-public that could serve as a microcosm of society (Luca Coscioni Association, undated). The selection was carried out by sortition among volunteers who had filled in an application form, which had been disseminated through various channels, including email, social media, and collaboration with universities, student associations and recruiters.

Registration for the assembly closed on Saturday, 30 September 2023, for Italians and the other six Member States involved in the project: Belgium, France, Germany, Poland, Romania and Spain. A sampling of the registered participants was carried out to create an assembly as representative of the general population as possible. The relevant demographics included gender, age group, area of residence, level of education, professional status, and membership of ethnic minorities, religious minorities and social movements, such as the Islamic community and feminist groups (Figure 40). Moreover, the organisers asked participants about their prior knowledge of the issue and whether they were in favour of social parenthood. 68 % of respondents declared themselves in favour or highly in favour of social parenthood, whereas 11 % declared themselves opposed or highly opposed.

Figure 40: Distribution of civic assembly participants, by age and education level (%)



Source: Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood entry survey.

There were 234 registrants, comprising 212 Italians and 22 foreigners (8 from Belgium, 1 from France, 2 from Germany, 5 from Poland, 2 from Romania and 4 from Spain).

The Sortition Foundation selected 50 citizens (44 Italians and 6 foreigners (1 per country)) to participate in both the training day on Thursday, 19 October and the deliberative day on Friday, 20 October. Then, Prossima Democrazia selected 102 Italian citizens to participate in the first training day only. They were sampled through the open-source software Panelot. Owing to many withdrawals, additional draws were conducted from the remaining pool of Italian citizens and foreigners.

Decision-making process

The assembly consisted of two phases, the first informative and the second deliberative.

Documents were sent to participants before the working days to ensure correct and balanced information. Participants also received videos in which the experts and interested groups explained the topics discussed and, if applicable, their experience in the field. Among them were lawyers; professors of public, private, international, constitutional, biological and criminal law; specialists in gynaecology-obstetrics and reproductive medicine; sociologists; psychologists; and presidents of various organisations. The organisations ranged from the more conservative Scienza e Vita to the more progressive Coordinamento Nazionale Comunità di Accoglienza (CNCA), which supports adoptive and foster family associations, and also involved more purely scientific actors, such as the Italian Society of Fertility and Sterility and Reproductive Medicine (SIFES-MR). The information sessions took place on the first day and were structured based on the topics of deliberation. Each session was coordinated by a journalist as a facilitator. Sessions were uploaded to YouTube ([13]).

The second day was spent deliberating on recommendations. An external facilitator aided the discussion. Based on the previous exchanges, each working group discussed and drafted recommendations addressing one of the topics at hand: assisted fertilisation, surrogacy / pregnancy for others, adoptions and registration of filial status. Legal experts screened the recommendations to make sure the text was appropriate. The recommendations were read, amended and voted on in the plenary session. Participants cast their votes on individual proposals using coloured cards: green for yes, red for no and yellow for an intermediate opinion. The possibility of abstaining was provided. To ensure those who could not be physically present were able to participate, a digital voting system through the platform Eligo was used for a second sample of participants, who voted according to the same grading criteria. The proceedings were livestreamed, recorded and made available to a

([13]) All sessions and presentations are available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Lt7uodg-J8.

wider audience to ensure transparency. The proceedings were also open to public observers until the maximum capacity of the hall was reached. The recommendations emerging from the civic assembly were submitted by the promoters to the competent institutions involved in the issue of social parenthood, and they received initial positive feedback from municipal administrations.

Output

Adoption

The assembly recommended that social services staff, including social workers and psychologists, receive comprehensive training on how to best serve the child's interests. Furthermore, it recommended that the process for obtaining a certification of suitability for adoption be streamlined to ensure quicker and more efficient procedures. In line with Article 40 of Law 149 of 2001, the establishment and activation of a national data bank for juvenile courts was recommended to support data-driven child protection policies nationwide. The assembly advised that adoption eligibility should include all family types, including single individuals, de facto and same-sex couples, and LGBTQ+ people, through appropriate amendments to Law 184 of 1983 and Law 76 of 2016.

Surrogacy / pregnancy for others

The assembly recommended that regulations for altruistic surrogacy meet specific ethical requirements, mostly related to psychological and minimum income status. Finally, the assembly encouraged municipalities and regions to facilitate public discussions on pregnancy for others to support the development of appropriate regulations on the issue.

Assisted reproduction

The assembly recommended that Article 5 of Law 40 of 2004 be amended to provide access to medically assisted reproductive technologies to single people and to same-sex couples living together or united in civil partnership.

Certification of the legal status of a child

The assembly recommended the adoption of a European filiation certificate. Local authorities, including municipalities and regions, were encouraged to support initiatives to understand evolving family models. In addition, the development and sharing of national guidelines was advised to harmonise the registration of children's birth certificates.

European certificate of parenthood

The European working group recommended the establishment of a European unified certificate of parenthood, accessible through dedicated EU registration offices in all Member States. Additionally, the group recommended the creation of a single EU birth register. It suggested that children born outside the EU to EU-citizen parents be permitted to apply for the EU certificate at support offices located in national embassies. Finally, better access to legal support at the EU level was recommended to help parents assert their parental rights and counter any national discrimination.

We Need to Talk: the Belgian citizens' assembly on political party funding

Context

For years, the reform of political party funding in Belgium has been deadlocked, with all parties agreeing that the current system needs to change but unable to reach consensus on a new model. To break the self-regulating system, where political parties choose how much money they receive and how it can be spent, the assembly organisers sought to discuss party funding with citizens. Alicja Gescinska, a spokesperson for the project, said 'the importance of election results has greatly increased. They determine not only how many seats you win, but also how much money you can earn' (quoted in Bürgerrat, 2023). Belgian political parties are mainly funded by the government, with 74 % of the total income of political parties coming from public subsidies (Vanden Eynde et al., 2021). The remaining 26 % comes from proxy contributions (11 %), donations (1 %), membership contributions (4 %) and other income (10 %) (van Biezen and Kopecký, 2017). Belgian political parties receive around EUR 75 million from the government per year. Per capita data reveal that Belgian political parties receive twice as much as their Danish or Swedish counterparts, and four times as much as their Dutch counterparts (van Biezen, 2020). Current Belgian regulations date from 1989 and guarantee equitable funding of political parties to avoid conflicts of interest and corruption. The law has been amended several times since then, most recently as part of the sixth reform of the state in 2014, but its foundations remain the same.

The contribution of the citizens' assembly seemed appropriate and timely, therefore.

> *We wanted to have a broad, large public debate on party funding, to make sure that people were able to have an opinion on that. … Our more high-level objective was to be able to reduce a little bit the mistrust between citizens and politics on matters of money. The strength and legitimacy of these recommendations today lie in the quality of the in-depth work that was carried out, in the seriousness of the procedure that was put in place, in the help provided by the experts and by the representatives of the political parties themselves, and above all, in the involvement and commitment [that citizens have] shown.*
>
> (De Pauw and Gilbert, 2023)

Key stakeholders and their roles

The process was started by Belgian and European organisations specialised in democratic innovation. G1000, Itinera, the Friday Group, the Egmont Institute, LEVL and Aula Magna conducted the citizens' debate in spring 2023. De Wakkere Burger, Citizenship and Participation (CPCP), Glassroots, DDB Brussels, FINN, MAS Research, Tree Company and the University of Ghent then joined to develop this project.

The organisational design encompassed a steering committee to manage the project's strategic objectives, budget and timetable. Itinera, the Friday Group and G1000 agreed to form the committee, which was accountable to the consortium of initiators.

To guarantee the quality and integrity of the participation process in terms of impartiality, independence, neutrality and inclusion, an external supervision committee was appointed by the steering committee. Members with expertise in three areas were sought: (1) politics, governance and policy; (2) citizen participation and deliberative democracy; and (3) inclusion. In total, the committee met five times. Its members were responsible for appointing the committee of experts, composed of four academics who provided information to the public.

Funding

The assembly was financed primarily through private donations from individuals and family foundations. Fundraising activities were organised and attracted around 40 supporters who contributed financially but not operationally, ensuring independence from funding entities. The overall budget for the assembly was approximately EUR 250 000, which was necessary to cover various costs such as travel, hotels, venue hire, catering, childcare, translation and technical support. To ensure full and diverse participation, participants received EUR 325 in compensation on top of free catering, accommodation, childcare and companion/guardian costs, if needed.

Overall objectives

The promoters had four key objectives. First, they sought to organise a large-scale public debate covered by national media. The promoters wanted to engage the general public by asking relevant questions and eliciting suggestions. Second, they intended to produce a comprehensive report with consistent and ambitious recommendations to improve the existing system for funding political parties. Third, the promoters aimed to advance the political dialogue to pave the way for meaningful reforms by involving citizens in the decision-making process. Fourth, they aspired to make a modest yet impactful contribution towards bridging the gap between citizens and politicians and restoring trust in the political system.

Recruitment of participants

The citizens were recruited by drawing lots. As national registers were not available, the organisers worked with a private research agency. The demographic strata of the mini-public included gender (approximately 50 % split), age range (29.1 % aged 16 to 34 years; 47.4 % aged 35 to 64 years; 23.5 % aged 65 years and over), social class (25 % upper, 25 % middle and 50 % lower class) and region of residence (31.6 % from the Walloon Region, 57.8 % from the Flemish Region and 10.6 % from Brussels). The lowest social class was deliberately over-represented, as research carried out with previous panels has shown that the rate of positive responses is significantly lower in this group. Participants were excluded if they held a political mandate (at any level) and were employed by a Belgian political party or by the organisers. After consultation with the external supervision committee and based on Statbel data, it was decided to set the target for non-Belgian participants at 20 %. Owing to difficulties in recruitment, the organisers decided to select two people whose mother was of non-Belgian nationality. In all, 16 200 people selected at random were invited to join the citizens' panel and were sent a questionnaire to be completed online, by post or by telephone. A reminder was also sent by email to increase the response rate. In the end, the organisers received 394 responses, 372 of which were valid. This corresponds to a positive response rate of 2.3 %, which can be considered a success for a citizens' initiative.

A second stratified draw was conducted, based on age, gender, level of education, place of residence and disability needs. A total of 60 participants were selected (Figure 41). In the case of participant withdrawal, new participants were drawn from the 372 responses. Some slight differences emerged when comparing the overall sample with the final mini-public panel. Citizens aged 35–64 years were over-represented on the panel and those with lower education levels were under-represented.

All 60 participants attended consistently and participated actively during the process. Only four people dropped out during the final weekend.

Figure 41: Final sample distribution for the We Need to Talk citizens' assembly panel, by gender, age, language and education level (%)

Source: Authors.

Decision-making process

The process consisted of three phases. The first involved an online open discussion in which news articles were used as topical starting points. The second phase was the citizens' panel. The third phase communicated results to political bodies and the public.

Citizens had the opportunity to take part in the open discussion between 2 February and 24 March 2023, and the online tool Rhetoric was used to publicise it. Participants could react to 10 statements linked to the nationwide debate on party financing. After indicating whether they 'agreed', 'disagreed' or 'had no opinion', they could argue their position. Responses were collected, analysed and made available to the panellists.

The citizens' panel took place over three full weekends: 25–26 March, 22–23 April and 13–14 May. The first weekend introduced the topic. Independent experts drew attention to different facets of Belgian party financing, its history and how it compares with neighbouring systems. The panel prepared three main questions to pose to the representatives of the political parties. On the second weekend, representatives of the political parties presented their party positions. Citizens received written contributions from 10 of the 12 political parties sitting in the Chamber of Representatives (N-VA and Vlaams Belang did not participate) and the views

were published on We Need to Talk's website. The oral presentation by the party representatives was followed by 'speed dating' between the representatives and six groups of 10 citizens, to better understand the parties' positions and visions. Each group of citizens had one facilitator and was multilingual; automatic interpreting between French and Dutch/Flemish was provided. Arabic-speaking participants were aided with interpreting from and to one of the official Belgian languages. Deliberations on party income and expenditure were launched in six working groups, adopting a 'world café' structure, where recommendations rotated among groups. During the third and final weekend, all recommendations were finalised and put to the general vote. All members of the panel deliberated and voted on all recommendations, expressing three possible votes: 'yes', 'no' and 'abstain'.

In the final phase, the recommendations were presented on 16 May to the general public and on 24 May to the House Constitution Committee, which was preparing the reform.

Output

Federal endowment and donations

Citizens felt that all parties should receive enough money to fund their basic operations. They also felt that parties should be able to be rewarded for their popularity, but that the financial differences between large and small parties ought to be reduced. Hence, the citizens' panel proposed increasing the lump sum that each party receives when it wins at least one seat and making the variable part of party funding degressive.

They agreed that donations from individuals should remain capped, the ban on corporate donations from legal entities should be maintained and the amount of membership fees should never exceed the maximum amount of donations.

Lower threshold for new parties

The citizens' panel upheld the belief that democracy should allow new ideas to sprout. They opined that new democratic movements that collect more than 50 000 signatures should be entitled to a start-up grant, and that if the party receives 50 000 votes but wins no seats, it should also receive a basic amount to build and defend its vision until the next election.

Party expenses and transparency

The citizens' panel decided that political parties' funds should be clearly allocated, with minimum and maximum percentages set for different kinds of expenditure. In this framework, a minimum percentage should be devoted to fulfilling the party's core tasks and to research and personnel. Maximum percentages should be set for expenditure on local services, administration and communication. The income and expenditure of all parties should be presented on an online platform, with uniform guidelines for all parties, to enable comparisons. Independent audits and sanctions should also be introduced.

Limiting savings and investment

The panel opined that parties should be allowed to have savings, but only if the funds saved are used within a reasonable period of time and do not exceed a stipulated amount. Investments should only be made in risk-free products (e.g. government bonds) and must be Belgian and ethical. Property investments should only be made if the properties in question are used for the party's operations (e.g. as offices, research centres or meeting rooms).

Stricter rules on online communication

The citizens' panel recognised that social media is a major communication tool, particularly for small or new parties, for which it is often the only way to communicate with supporters. The citizens' panel suggested that annual party spending on social media be capped equally for all parties and mandataries. The rules on communication during the four months leading up to elections should be extended to social media. Finally, the citizens' panel unanimously recommended the creation of an ethics committee to monitor the content published on social media.

Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation

Context

Franco-German relations have a rich history characterised by both conflict and collaboration, evolving significantly after the Second World War. After centuries of rivalry and warfare, the signing of the Élysée Treaty in 1963 marked a pivotal moment, establishing a framework for close political, economic and cultural ties between France and Germany and laying the groundwork for a united Europe.

The Franco-German relationship has often been described as the engine of European integration, as both countries play crucial roles in shaping EU policies and initiatives. However, the partnership has faced challenges over the years. Economic disparities, differing political priorities and varying approaches to issues such as defence and immigration have sometimes strained the relationship. The election of Emmanuel Macron as President of France in 2017 during Angela Merkel's leadership in Germany created new opportunities to revive cooperation. Their shared vision for Europe emphasised stronger integration and collaboration on key issues such as security, climate change and economic policy. In January 2019, both leaders signed the Treaty of Aachen, which deepened bilateral ties by addressing contemporary challenges while building on the foundations laid by earlier

agreements. The Treaty of Aachen emphasised several priority areas for cooperation, including cross-border collaboration, cultural exchanges and joint initiatives in defence and security. It also established mechanisms for regular consultation between the two governments to ensure alignment on European policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges that tested the resilience of the treaty. The crisis drew attention to vulnerabilities in cross-border arrangements. Cooperation projects were called into question, businesses were endangered and the daily lives of cross-border workers were deeply affected by border closures. As one citizen reported, 'For many of us the border has materialised for the first time in our lives. This decision is understandable given the context, but this closure can only be temporary and in no way a long-term solution' (Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation, 2021). There were incidents and tensions between border residents at the beginning of the pandemic, but also new forms of solidarity. This situation called for more robust frameworks to enhance cross-border collaboration on healthcare, transport and economic recovery efforts. In response to these challenges, the Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation was convened to gather citizens' insights and recommendations for strengthening ties between bordering communities.

Key stakeholders and their roles

The promoters of the Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation included several organisations and individuals committed to enhancing collaboration between France and Germany. Four main stakeholders were involved. The Franco-German Citizen Fund supports initiatives that promote civil society engagement between France and Germany. It played a significant role in backing the council's activities and ensuring that citizen-led initiatives were funded. Local governments from both sides of the border, particularly from Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and Grand Est (France), were involved in promoting and supporting the council. They provided context for discussions and helped address local issues affecting cross-border cooperation. Notable government officials such as Gisela Erler, State Councillor for Civil Society and Citizen Participation of Baden-Württemberg, and Claudine Ganter, State Councillor for International and Cross-border Relations of Grand Est, actively engaged with the council, welcoming its recommendations and promising to consider them in policymaking. Finally, Missions Publiques was instrumental in organising the council and facilitating discussions among randomly selected citizens from both countries.

Funding

The Franco-German Citizen Fund provided EUR 60 000 in public funding for the council, covering facilitation, participant selection, documentation, translation and miscellaneous costs, and Mission Publiques added EUR 40 000, to reach an overall total of EUR 100 000. Participants were compensated with EUR 70 per session to motivate attendance and participation. As sessions were online, there were no organisational costs.

Overall objectives

The council had three aims, which were to gather citizens' perspectives, formulate actionable proposals and engage with policymakers by presenting these proposals to regional and national authorities for consideration. The council served as a renewed, bottom-up testament to the enduring Franco-German partnership, emphasising the importance of grassroots engagement in fostering strong bilateral relations that can adapt to an ever-changing European landscape and possibly apply to other border areas across Europe.

Recruitment of participants

The council comprised 40 randomly selected citizens who engaged in a series of online working sessions between December 2020 and April 2021. Participants came from the French Grand Est region (Vosges, Bas-Rhin, Moselle and Meurthe-et-Moselle) and the German state of Baden-Württemberg (Neckar-Alb, Rhein-Neckar, Mittlerer Oberrhein, Heilbronn-Franken, Karlsruhe, Tübingen and Freiburg).

In Germany, the recruitment process began by randomly selecting 50 communities from the state of Baden-Württemberg. Within these communities, citizens were randomly selected and invited to participate in either a regional citizens' assembly or a cross-border assembly focused on cooperation with France. In contrast, the French side did not use random selection. Instead, invitations were sent to individuals affiliated with organisations active in cross-border cooperation. This approach was more targeted, aiming to engage those already involved in relevant activities.

The organisers sought equal numbers of participants from both France and Germany, as well as a roughly equal gender distribution. However, they did not set specific goals regarding education levels or backgrounds. The recruitment process faced challenges, but the final group was able to remain engaged throughout the sessions. In the first session, there were 24 participants , 12 French and 12 German, among whom 13 were male and 11 female. According to the official report on the second session, the group was composed of 28 participants, 14 French and 14 German. Among them, 18 were male and 10 female. The report on the third session mentioned 23 participants, 9 female and 14 male. There was a decrease of about one third in participants from the original pool of 40. The fourth and

final session was, according to one of the organisers, attended by 24 participants, 12 French and 12 German.

Decision-making process

The council convened in four sessions. In the first two, held in December 2020 and February 2021, the topic was introduced and the recommendations drafted. In the third session, held on 19–20 March 2021, the recommendations were consolidated. In the final session, on 16–17 April 2021, proposals were presented.

As mentioned, two initial working sessions were held with 24 and 28 participants each, split equally between the two countries. The initial sessions delved into the impact of the global pandemic and the experiences of the participants, as well as an assessment of existing projects on cross-border collaboration. During the second session, the group identified the issues to explore in greater depth and on which further information was needed. As project manager Manon Potet described, 'We invited speakers for the second and third sessions on these priority themes. After the assessment phase, the participants began to agree on recommendations' (Missions Publiques, 2021). The council's second and third working sessions included expert presentations on specific topics related to cross-border cooperation, followed by group discussions where participants could express their views and propose solutions. This format encouraged active engagement and allowed participants to develop a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by their communities. In addition, interactive online tools such as Slido or Miro were employed to facilitate written expression by participants who may have been less comfortable speaking in plenary sessions. The third session focused on the drafting of the proposals, during which the participants engaged in a process of deepening and consolidating their recommendations. In the fourth and final session, the participants finalised their report and a list of their proposals. The participants then presented their recommendations to the elected representatives involved in the process, namely Claudine Ganter and Gisela Erler.

Output

Education and bilingualism

The proposals included the promotion of bilingual teaching teams in schools. This recommendation aims to enhance language learning from an early age and encourage a sense of belonging in the cross-border region. Similarly, the citizens' council encouraged teachers to gain experience abroad and enrich their professional development while fostering bilingual education. The proposal targeted students from kindergarten through vocational school, aiming for linguistic immersion and practical language use.

Cultural exchange

To address social isolation due to the pandemic, large public celebrations along the border were proposed to foster cultural exchange. These events would feature artistic workshops, concerts and sports activities, involving local communities and cultural institutions. The proposal includes the organisation of joint performances and festivals between cultural institutions in both countries to raise awareness of each other's cultural scenes. This initiative aims to strengthen ties among artists and promote cultural understanding.

Mobility and transport

The list of proposals calls for assessing public transport needs to improve cross-border mobility. This includes better coordination of schedules and routes to facilitate travel for commuters and students. Moreover, a proposal for a multimodal cross-border travel card, designed by citizens, aims to simplify travel across the border by integrating various transport modes (train, bus, tram) into a single ticketing system.

Environmental initiatives

Participants recommended organising eco-friendly Franco-German events focused on sustainability, such as participatory workshops and awareness campaigns on energy consumption and waste management. A proposal was advanced to establish a fund for developing alternative energy solutions in the Upper Rhine region and harmonising procedures for energy-efficient renovations for residents on both sides of the border.

Employment opportunities

The recommendations advocate for promoting bilingual vocational training in sectors with labour shortages. This would involve partnerships between educational institutions in both countries to support language learning among trainees. A platform for posting cross-border job openings was proposed to centralise opportunities in sectors like healthcare and education, aiming to enhance labour market integration and professional mobility.

Climate-friendly local policies in Rzeszów, Poland

Context

Rzeszów, the capital of the Podkarpackie province, is the largest city in south-eastern Poland. With a population of nearly 220 000, Rzeszów is often referred to as the 'city of young people', with 353 students for every 1 000 inhabitants ([14]). It is a vibrant centre for economic, academic, cultural and recreational activities. Rzeszów boasts a remarkably diverse economy, particularly in advanced sectors such as aerospace, IT and chemicals. The city is home to Aviation Valley, the largest aviation industrial cluster in Poland, which includes more than 180 companies.

The city has spearheaded environmental actions; it is known for its innovation and has received Poland's Smart City award. It is keen to adopt new technologies and solutions benefiting the environment ([15]).
In response to recent heatwaves, with temperatures reaching up to 35° C, Rzeszów has created more green spaces. The city planted around 1 000 trees in 2023 alone, working with residents to determine optimal locations for shade and greenery (Chodownik, 2023).
The city is one of five Polish municipalities participating in the EU mission 'Climate-neutral and smart cities', which aims to support and promote European cities in their climate transformation. Rzeszów is implementing an air quality plan to reduce pollution and improve air quality, while the whole region aims to eliminate approximately 325 000 outdated solid-fuel boilers by 2026 and increase renewable energy production by at least 48 % by 2033 (European Commission, undated).
The municipality is collaborating with other major Polish cities, including Kraków, Łódź, Warsaw and Wrocław through NetZeroCities, an EU-funded project. Their joint pilot activity, 'Net-zero emission and environmentally sustainable territories', facilitates knowledge exchange for shared climate solutions (Colclough, 2024). Finally, Rzeszów has made significant progress in renovating public buildings to improve energy efficiency, partly with the assistance of grants from the European Economic Area. Past initiatives have focused on improving the energy efficiency of eight public utility buildings, including schools and kindergartens, improving insulation, installing solar collectors and photovoltaic cells, and modernising interior installations.

The citizens' assembly in Rzeszów was initiated shortly after a national election that resulted in a significant change in power. This political shift prompted the exploration of new governance methods, including citizens' assemblies. Parties like Poland 2050, which promote citizen participation, played a significant role, as did political trends. 'Mayors in Poland, especially from the biggest cities, are following each other's moves. Rzeszów was, I think, the thirteenth local citizen[s'] assembly in Poland', said a representative of one of the organising foundations.

The city's environmental policies focus on adaptation and mitigation efforts while including citizens in decision-making processes. As a result, the municipality committed to conducting a 'green citizens' panel' to enable residents to have a binding say on important community issues.

Key stakeholders and their roles

The key stakeholders involved in promoting, implementing and gaining political buy-in for the Rzeszów citizens' climate panel were mostly public bodies. The municipality had a central role. The mayor of Rzeszów officially invited citizens to participate in the panel through signed invitation letters, attended parts of the panel meetings to show support and committed to implementing recommendations that received at least 80 % support from panellists. City Hall officials gave presentations to the panel on city plans and activities related to energy efficiency and sustainable transport and provided data and information to support the panel's work. The Pole Dialogu and Shipyard (Stocznia) foundations were responsible for the overall implementation of the panel, including selecting panellists, recruiting experts, preparing the programme and organising meetings.

A monitoring team composed of representatives from City Hall, the City Council and civil society organisations was appointed by the mayor to oversee the proper conduct of the panel.

Funding

The panel was organised as a civic engagement initiative funded from the budget of the City of Rzeszów in the amount of approximately PLN 250 000 (around EUR 55 000). The Open Society Foundation contributed a further EUR 10 000 or so. Each citizen was paid approximately EUR 130 in total for their participation, equivalent to a basic wage for the hours they attended.

Overall objectives

The panel aimed to combine citizen engagement, education, deliberation and decision-making to chart a path for Rzeszów to become climate neutral by 2030, as part of the EU mission 'Climate-neutral and smart

([14]) For more information on the city of Rzeszów, see https://www.poland.travel/en/rzeszow-the-capital-of-the-podkarpacie-region/.

([15]) For more information on climate initiatives in Poland, see https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/urban-environment/european-green-capital-award/krakow-climate-assembly-shaping-sustainable-future-together_en.

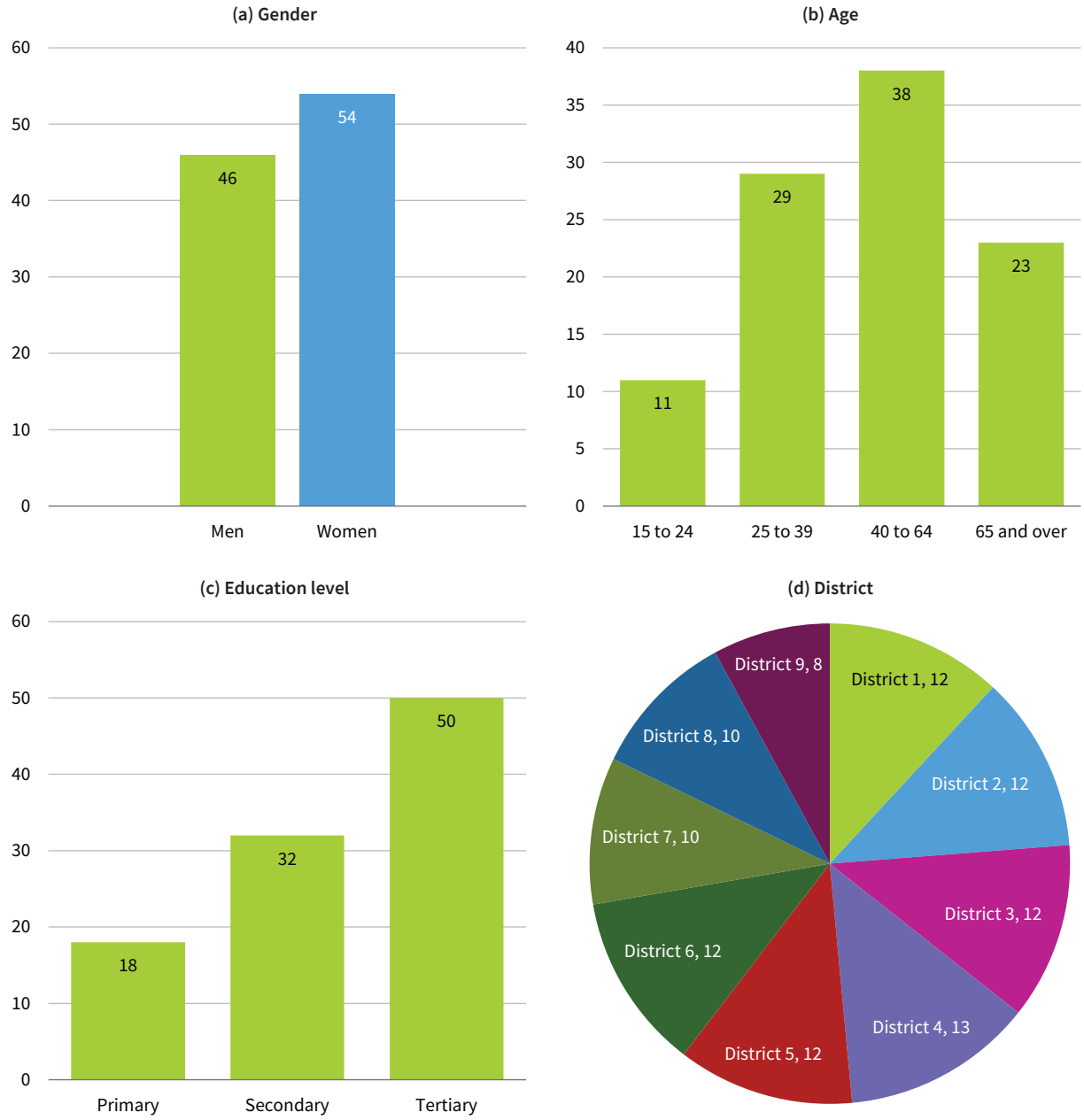
cities', through improvements in energy efficiency and sustainable transport, the emissions of which can be controlled by the city. The binding nature of highly supported recommendations guaranteed that citizens' input would directly shape the city's policies. This was coupled with the political desire for more participatory democracy and a comprehensive climate action plan based on citizens' collective wisdom.

Recruitment of participants

Recruitment involved a two-stage random selection process with demographic quotas for age, gender, educational attainment and place of residence. First, 10 000 invitations were sent to randomly selected households across all parts of Rzeszów. From the 231 opt-in respondents, a final group of 60 panellists was selected through a second random draw (Figure 42). This selection aimed to create a group that reflected the sociodemographic structure of Rzeszów in terms of gender, age, education level and city district.

The final panel consisted of 50 people in the main group and 10 people in a reserve group (who participated in all stages except the final voting). Other residents could submit ideas through an online form. The panel over-represented middle-aged participants and those with higher education levels.

Figure 42: Sample composition of the Rzeszów citizens' panel, by gender, age, education level and city district (%)



Source: Authors.

Decision-making process

The Rzeszów citizens' climate panel was structured into four work phases. The panel was conducted primarily through in-person meetings and workshops over five weekends in October and November 2023, each lasting about six hours.

The learning phase took two weekends, 21–22 October and 4–5 November. Education and learning were emphasised as the core components of the exercise. Efforts were made to include diverse perspectives, with presentations from city officials, academic experts, non-governmental organisations and business representatives. The first phase began with introductory presentations from City Hall officials, followed by a series of in-depth expert presentations – seven on the first weekend and eight on the second. In addition, three presentations were delivered by stakeholders and non-governmental organisations such as the Ekoskop Association and Rzeszów Youth Climate Strike. The topics ranged from climate-change basics to energy efficiency and sustainable transport. The expert speakers included an adviser to the coordinating team, academics from technical universities, representatives from energy-efficiency foundations, officials from other cities such as Bydgoszcz and Kraków, and specialists in fields like electromobility.

During the deliberation phase, participants were divided into small groups. They evaluated future scenarios for the city and brainstormed potential recommendations. All residents of Rzeszów could also submit ideas through an online form, even if not selected for the panel.

The panellists then drafted 182 recommendations and the experts proposed 43, for a total of 225 draft recommendations. The coordinating team and the panellists refined them, while the monitoring team reviewed them for legal and policy compliance. In the end, 114 recommendations were prepared for voting. On 18 November, 49 people voted online and 7 voted on paper. Finally, 51 recommendations received over 80 % support and became binding.

Output

Strategic planning and cooperation

The panel suggested developing a strategic concept document on achieving climate neutrality for city-owned buildings and municipal companies. This included aspects such as prioritising energy transformation in budget planning (including large long-term investments), planning a clean and cheap energy supply for Rzeszów based on local production and suppliers, cooperating regularly with technical universities on innovative solutions, exchanging best practices on energy management with other cities and supporting the development of green energy companies.

Data collection and analysis

The recommendations emphasised the need to identify efficiency requirements for all municipal buildings while analysing and renegotiating long-term energy supply contracts, if necessary. In a similar vein, they suggested conducting regular energy audits of municipal buildings and collecting annual data on energy costs and consumption for city buildings, as well as developing tools to monitor and analyse energy use in city buildings.

Municipal investments and actions

The panel suggested that an energy storage system for Rzeszów be designed, in cooperation with academia and business. On the improvement of buildings, the recommendations suggested installing photovoltaic panels on municipal infrastructure (buildings, bus stops, etc.) and implementing a thermal modernisation programme for municipal buildings. Financially, they encouraged proactively seeking funding sources for energy efficiency investments, as well as developing staff competencies to systematically obtain external funds for energy transformation.

Support for residents

The panel suggested providing financial and informational support for residents to improve energy efficiency, as well as conducting educational campaigns on energy saving and climate protection.

Case study insights

These case studies are part of a broader trend of democratic innovation, supporting evidence of the 'deliberative wave' and the increasing use of sortition-based mini-publics. These insights demonstrate the growing application and adaptation of citizens' assemblies across diverse contexts in Europe, while also emphasising ongoing challenges and areas for further research and development. Democratic innovation seems scalable and impactful, under certain conditions. Political and administrative support, funding and the connection of these deliberative processes to the whole political and legal system are crucial to success.

Successes

Scalability of the process

The case studies demonstrate significant variation in how citizens' assemblies are designed and implemented across different contexts, as seen in Table 21. Citizens' assemblies appear to be adaptable to different institutional levels, although more impactful at the local level (e.g. in Milan and Rzeszów) and potentially in a standalone context.

Table 21: Summary of case studies

Case	Recruitment method	Assembly size	Duration and format
Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood (**Italy**)	Multistage process with demographic quotas	50 participants	Two days, in person
We Need to Talk (**Belgium**)	Multistage process with demographic quotas	60 participants	Three weekends, in person
Franco-German Citizens' Council on Cross-border Cooperation	Targeted invitations	24–28 participants	Four sessions, online
Citizens' climate panel (**Rzeszów**)	Multistage process with demographic quotas	60 participants	Five weekends, in person

Source: Authors.

This aligns with research showing that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to citizens' assemblies, and their design should be tailored to local contexts and objectives (RSA, 2020; Oross and Kiss, 2023; OIDP, 2024; RIFS, 2024). From city assemblies to transnational councils, these cases demonstrate the power of deliberative democracy to address diverse issues. These assemblies tackled complex issues such as climate change, social parenthood and political party funding, supporting previous research that found that citizens' assemblies can address intricate policy challenges effectively. Potential scalability is a key feature.

Institutionalisation and political buy-in

Scalability alone is not sufficient. Governments still play a crucial role in promoting deliberative processes, as the quality and outcomes of the latter are linked to the will of the former to invest resources and commit politically. For instance, the active participation of the municipality of Milan sent a strong signal of interest and support to the assembly in that city. The municipality is now working on blueprint guidelines for registering children's birth certificates, which will be proposed to all Italian municipalities. In Rzeszów, the mayor nominated officers to implement the panel's recommendations, indicating a structured approach to following through on the panel's outcomes. The municipality also assured that some recommendations had already been completed in the form of measures relating to climate education and eco-standards for housing. Meanwhile, the recommendations of the Franco-German council were well received by policymakers, indicating a willingness to incorporate citizens' input into governance processes. Policymakers promised to consider initiatives such as organising large Franco-German cultural festivals and improving cross-border healthcare collaboration.

The role of civil society organisations is also emerging. In Italy, the Luca Coscioni Association met various stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Health and the Minister for Family, to discuss guidelines on assisted reproduction and discrimination in access to reproductive technologies. The recommendations of the assembly have been finalised and are under discussion to be turned into measures. Civil-society-led assemblies are increasing but need support, in terms of both numbers and quality. Resources need to be committed, and institutions should sponsor the process and consider the ensuing recommendations.

Institutionalisation provides a stable framework for citizens' participation and contributes to addressing citizens' real needs (Deliberative Democracy Digest, 2023). In Poland, recommendations are binding, as city authorities commit to implementing the ones that receive a high level of support from the assembly members, with a varying threshold depending on the recommendation – usually 80 %. If there are any obstacles, the city management must provide clear reasons for the lack of implementation (Carson and Gerwin, 2018). The implementation is monitored and its progress and actions detailed in an annual report. Hence, the process ensures transparency and accountability, while stimulating the effective use of deliberative processes. The administrative capacity of Polish municipalities and their regulatory powers are favourable to frequent citizens' assemblies ([16]). The Polish context demonstrates that an ecosystem approach to democratic innovations and their embeddedness in governmental practices and legal systems mean decision-making can be more inclusive and – above all – citizens' voices can be heard.

Resources foster quality

Money is key; assemblies' success is very much tied to sufficient funding. At present, alternative forms of democracy are underfinanced, and funding must be adequate to maintain good standards. The case studies demonstrated different approaches to funding, such as

([16]) European countries have the highest levels in the world of self-regulatory power in local government (European Commission, 2021). The European Charter of Local Self-Government, which has been ratified by all 46 member states of the Council of Europe, sets standards for local autonomy. While all these countries have committed to certain principles of local self-government, the actual implementation and degree of autonomy can vary significantly.

government support (in France/Germany and Poland) to EU grants (in Italy) and civil society resources (in Belgium and France/Germany). The lack of funding poses a threat to process quality and participation, as citizens are not able to be incentivised through daily compensation and reimbursement. Without this resource, less privileged socioeconomic groups may not be able to attend, hindering representativeness. In addition, the lack of funding affects the learning phase, as presentations from experts were the starting point of all the processes in the case studies examined. Providing balanced information ensures more knowledgeable and factually based decision-making.

Digital democracy is still peripheral

Digital democracy played an ancillary role in all the case studies analysed. In Italy, remote participation happened only in the voting phase. It ensured greater inclusiveness and enabled hybrid civic participation, but not the same experience of deliberation as an in-person format. The Franco-German council was conducted entirely online, which meant the process was cheaper but also more difficult for participants to interact and engage; 'The programme alternated between plenary sessions and subgroups, with a preference for brief presentations and extended question-and-answer periods, as well as exchanges with the speakers' (Missions Publiques, 2021). Digital tools were also used for sampling, submitting ideas online, voting and videoconferencing/streaming the deliberation. The digital tools ranged from open-source software to specialised and licensed programs. Nonetheless, the core deliberative processes in most of these assemblies relied primarily on traditional in-person interactions.

Political efficacy

The case studies show that citizens appreciated their involvement in the assemblies, even when recommendations were not enforced, as in the case of the Belgian We Need to Talk assembly. In the words of one participant: 'A part of me is very happy that we had the opportunity to go to the parliament and explain and receive feedback.'

Another participant noted: 'I always say that this was an experiment for democracy, because every time we had to speak with one another, we had to sometimes accept having opposing views.'

Some of the participants started to become more politically engaged in their everyday lives because of the projects: 'I now feel more concerned about the social and political questions. I even put my name on the list for the local elections', said one.

People feel they have a voice and they appreciate talking to the institutions involved. Italian participants stated that they would monitor the outcomes and expected real impacts of their recommendations. This showed great interest in the process and strong expectations of their contributions. Polish participants stated their willingness to participate in more assemblies in the future. Deliberative processes not only enhance democratic legitimacy but also empower individuals to take ownership of their communities. For French and German participants, engagement was crucial to building trust and solidarity across borders, reinforcing the idea that residents share a common space that transcends national boundaries.

Across the case studies, there is evidence of increases in participants' knowledge, engagement and sense of empowerment ([17]). This aligns with the literature on the educational and civic benefits of deliberative processes (Grimes, 2008). Reports from Rzeszów showed that 85 % of participants felt more informed about climate action than they had before, and 82 % said they would use the knowledge they had gained in the future. As for trust in institutions, this is significantly linked to political follow-up. Belgian participants expressed their disappointment in the political deadlock that stalled the implementation of their recommendations, whereas Polish participants expressed satisfaction with the institutional involvement. These mixed results corroborate the literature suggesting that assemblies can restore trust (Blockmans and Russack, 2020) but also may engender the idea that citizens can be better decision-makers than politicians (Oross et al., 2022).

Limitations

Representativeness and inclusion

Despite efforts to include all groups in society, some may decide to opt out, hence diminishing the representativeness of the assembly. In Italy, both the Islamic community and more conservative associations turned down the offer to provide their expertise and opinions. In Belgium, the two anti-establishment parties, N-VA and Vlaams Belang, did not participate in the presentation and information sessions with panellists. In addition, sometimes the sampling procedure may induce self-selection bias. In France, participants were selected by the organisers, while in Italy, participants volunteered. Moreover, in Italy, transport and accommodation costs were covered, but no wage was provided for participants. This may have limited the participation of people with financial difficulties or work and family commitments. More substantial funding may enable deliberative procedures

([17]) The effect on participants' sense of empowerment is also evident in more traditional processes; see, for example, the case of participatory budgeting in Lisbon (https://participedia.net/case/4967).

to guarantee compensation for participants and to pay experts. Finally, local associations and non-governmental organisations could be more involved and take on a monitoring role, providing they have the resources and capacity.

Complexity, communication and consensus

Most participants across the case studies found the topics discussed complex, which sometimes hindered effective communication. In the Franco-German assembly, although the learning phase was deemed relevant and successful, the different political systems and administrative complexities of the bordering regions were a challenge that required deeper reflection and understanding. Sometimes the participants felt there was not enough time to familiarise themselves with the topic and perceived a lack of clarity and transparency.

Operationally, the bilingual settings in Belgium and in France/Germany proved to be challenging. The organisers strived to ensure that all parties understood each other and felt adequately represented while keeping the discourse fluid and consistent. Teams of interpreters were employed, comprising one for each subgroup and for the plenary sessions, to ensure simultaneous interpreting during the sessions.

Reaching consensus was challenging, as assemblies dealt with delicate and complex topics and ideas, and opinions often clashed. A Belgian participant mentioned, 'It was really difficult to justify something when you do not agree with that,' while another one reflected, 'Just because you have the same objective doesn't mean it's easy to work together.'

Political immobility harms deliberation

Political buy-in is vital for deliberative processes to be successful and have an impact. If their recommendations are not followed up by political institutions, participants may feel disheartened and frustrated by the lack of action taken. This was the case of the Belgian We Need to Talk recommendations. Although majority votes were gained for 25 out of 34 recommendations, and the governing coalition agreed on 13 of them, the parties could not reach an implementation agreement on most of them, and only a few minor measures were seen through. Politicians acknowledged the temporary failure.

Conclusions

This report presents the findings of an analysis of social cohesion and issue polarisation among Member States over the past 20 years. The study uses cross-sectional data from the ESS and panel data from Eurofound's Living and Working in the EU e-survey to observe changes in attitude polarisation – and polarisation's relationship with values and the political engagement of European citizens – and analyse the reasons for reduced support for Ukraine over the course of the war. Moreover, the study draws attention to some exemplary uses of deliberative democracy processes to bridge the gap between citizens and established political institutions.

There are limitations to the study. First, the methodology used to measure polarisation reflects European society overall, and instances of mass polarisation may be much rarer than group polarisation or affective polarisation, which involve the fragmentation of society into factions. This report is the first to track mass polarisation over time in Member States, so future research may benefit from looking deeper into social conflicts and fragmentation in relation to those issues that, with the current methodology, do not show polarising trends. Second, the ESS lacks a variable relating to social media use and preferred media outlets for news consumption, which the literature suggests is a strong determinant of polarising views. These aspects limited the report to certain issues on which data were available, and these issues, although relevant, may be less polarised than others. Moreover, the report carried out an analysis of political polarisation in 2023 only, as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted ESS data collection in 2020, meaning some variables were not available in some countries, or the change of mode made results less comparable over time. Thus, the authors decided to use only the latest available year to map the drivers of polarisation. Third, the Living and Working in the EU panel data are limited to a voluntary selection of respondents who are engaged with the survey and are willing to answer the questions without any compensation. This results in self-selection bias and reduces the generalisation of the results: the findings cannot be extrapolated to the general population and are valid only for those specific respondents.

Nonetheless, the findings validate previous research on political polarisation and political engagement. Polarisation is a complex and multifaceted concept, difficult to conceptualise and analyse. The report offers a robust and sound methodology to investigate attitude polarisation among European citizens, capturing several aspects related to sensitive topics such as immigration, gender equality, trust in political institutions and the interplay of personal values, socioeconomic factors and personal interests in determining polarisation. Moreover, the report is the first to analyse the impact of social media and economic instability on reduced support for Ukraine. The following points present the main findings of both the quantitative and qualitative elements.

Issue polarisation fluctuates over time

Unlike human values, public opinion is in constant flux. Trends in issue polarisation in Member States show that polarisation has risen with regard to some specific indicators, such as trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants (in particular their contributions to cultural and social life and to the economy). This polarising trend can be observed especially in times of crisis, such as the financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. Other attitudes related to human and social rights have seen significant improvements over time. Attitudes towards gender and sexual equality have become more positive consistently across Member States, resulting in a less conflictual and more accepting environment. Regarding gender equality, Europeans express the opinion that men and women should have the same job opportunities even in times of crisis, and the general population is more favourable than ever towards letting gay men and lesbians live life as they wish. A surprising result was found on especially divisive topics such as adoption for gay and lesbian couples, with acceptance having grown and polarisation considerably reduced over time.

Human values affect polarisation

Human values are the cornerstone of beliefs. Attitudes and opinions develop based on the convictions and world views that people hold. Values are very stable over time and only small changes can be observed. Nonetheless, their impact on political polarisation and opinions is pervasive. As expected, openness is the value most likely to give rise to polarisation on political institutions. Conservation and self-transcendence, the two social traits, have opposite effects when it comes to trust in political institutions but very similar results when it comes to polarisation on the matter. The report shows that self-transcendence, the value associated with universalism and benevolence, correlates positively with trust in political institutions and acceptance of immigrants and gender equality, whereas conservation, the value associated with traditional norms and conformity, correlates negatively.

Despite this, when looking at polarisation and taking into account country differences, both values have a tendency to predict a higher level of distrust. As the two values have a strong political component, they may be associated with a stronger dislike for political institutions than people holding weaker beliefs would show.

Political engagement reduces polarisation on political institutions

When citizens are involved in politics, their likelihood of highly distrusting the political institutions in their countries seems to decrease. Active interest in and attachment to one's country have been shown to have a considerable impact in depolarising citizens, at least with regard to trust in institutions. This result is in line with previous research findings that civic engagement is a fundamental aspect of the relationship between institutions and citizens. Another relevant finding, albeit only descriptive, is the relationship between polarisation and voting. Distrust is often linked to a general disappointment in political outcomes, as well as political disenfranchisement. Not voting is associated with much lower trust in political institutions, as expected. It is important to highlight and reflect on the impact of polarisation on political participation, as lower voter turnout has an impact on the representativeness of democracy.

War fatigue, social media and financial instability

As the EU and Member State governments have continued to provide humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine, some people have started to become dissatisfied. The e-survey panellists who had changed their minds regarding their government's housing of Ukrainian refugees were mostly influenced by war fatigue, social media and financial insecurity. Worry about the war has decreased considerably in the past two years, and that has had an impact on how respondents perceive the need to help Ukrainians. When respondents perceived the war as less concerning, their inclination to withdraw support grew. Respondents whose main news source was social media were also more likely to withdraw their support for government action to house Ukrainians and provide humanitarian and military aid. Those who had lost savings or experienced diminished financial and physical well-being were far more likely to withdraw their support for government action to aid Ukrainians.

Although the e-survey panellists are not a representative sample, the study did manage to capture the change over time regarding this sensitive topic and to track people's opinions in a timely manner.

The democracy ecosystem

The 'ecosystem' approach seems appealing to institutions wanting to increase the inclusiveness of their policymaking by integrating a range of democratic tools (e.g. citizens' assemblies, referendums, citizens' law initiatives, petitions, voting in representative institutions) selected to best suit the policy context and respect the quality of the process and the representation of social diversity. Local governments can be very fertile ground for experimentation, provided that political will, sufficient resources and adequate skills are available (Lerner, 2024; Sotgiu, 2024). These models can be supplemented by online or offline public consultations during and after the decision-making process ([18]).

A central element of the decision-making ecosystem is the incorporation and discussion of different points of view, which is core to deliberative processes. To yield the best results, this approach should involve full interaction with the entire public sphere, including in the areas of education, digital literacy and the labour market, and with social partners through social dialogue. Such efforts should promote collective participation rights protected by legal systems, help improve public policy design and, ultimately, restore a democracy capable of bringing citizens and institutions together.

Policy pointers

The report discusses the practical outcomes of reducing issue polarisation and strengthening political participation.

- Political polarisation is linked to both voter turnout and electoral outcomes. It is therefore important for healthy democracies to encourage a plurality of views and inclusiveness, while limiting the spread of polarised and extreme viewpoints, especially those taking the form of harmful or hateful speech. Moreover, less polarised societies would lead to greater stability, as the policymaking agenda would be dictated less by sudden changes in the economic and geopolitical landscape. As the report shows, polarisation seems to rise during moments of crisis, accompanied by a tendency to push for more protectionist agendas and to trust political institutions less.

([18]) Exemplary cases include the Conference on the Future of Europe and European citizens' panels at the EU level (https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/european-citizens-panels_en) and Decidim Barcelona at the municipal level (https://www.decidim.barcelona/).

- A political system that welcomes citizens' contributions is one that empowers its citizens. As discussed in this report, encouraging citizens to actively participate in politics and strive for their opinions to be heard results in increased political interest among the general population. When coupled with a reduction in polarisation, this could create a vibrant political sphere where politicians are held accountable by their fellow citizens.
- Among the factors that help defuse political polarisation, good economic conditions and political engagement are important. Satisfaction with one's income and with the economy are strong predictors of increased trust. Similarly, education seems to be a key factor in citizens' levels of trust.
- Social media plays an unsettling role in determining support for governments' actions, especially with regard to contested topics such as aid to Ukraine. As seen in previous research, social media is fertile ground for misinformation, and more comprehensive controls within the remit of the Digital Services Act could be put in place to ensure a safer and less harmful environment, especially in the face of the challenges that AI-generated content could pose to democracy.
- Deliberative democracy was found to be a valuable tool in bridging the gap between citizens and institutions. Citizens who participated showed great appreciation for their involvement and felt compelled to follow up on the related measures, as well as feeling more inclined to engage in such processes in the future. In order to function properly, deliberative democracy needs funding, institutional support and political buy-in. Without these three key elements, processes cannot ensure inclusiveness and effectiveness, and their chances of success are reduced.
- The institutionalisation of deliberative democracy can foster an ecosystem that has tailored democratic tools for all policy needs. Moreover, the involvement of social partners and civil society organisations is fundamental to keep the local and national political fabric together and create an environment in which citizens and institutions listen to each other.

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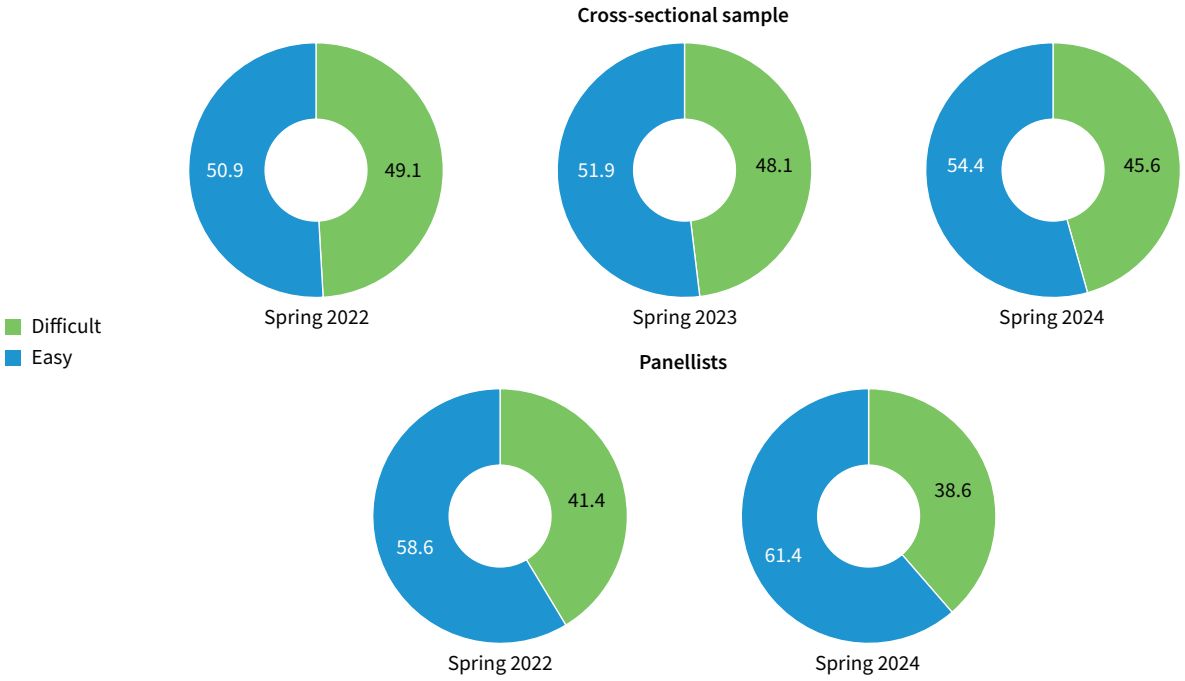
Annexes

Annex 1: e-Survey panel composition

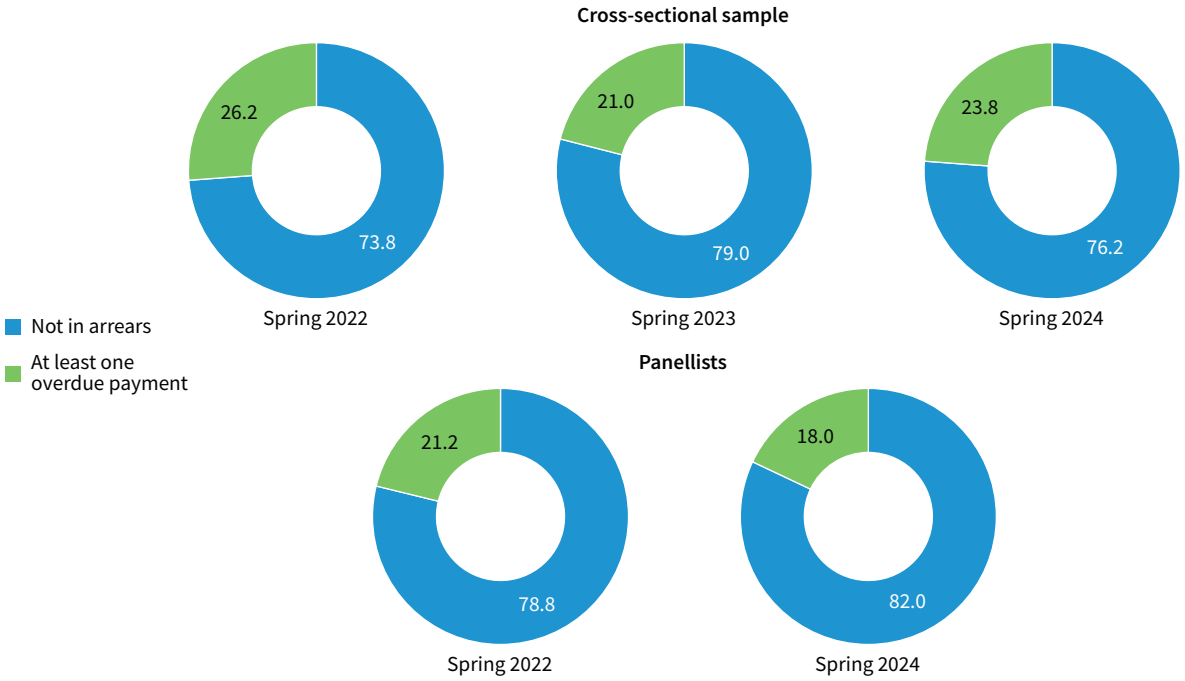
Despite the Living and Working in the EU e-survey panel being a voluntary opt-in exercise, the demographics of its panellists did not differ majorly from those of the cross-sectional sample respondents. Panellists were slightly older and there were more women, but urban residence and education levels matched the overall sample. Panellists were slightly better off in terms of financial security. They tended to have easier financial circumstances, be less frequently in arrears and have more household savings (Figures 43, 44 and 45).

Figure 43: Financial circumstances of e-survey respondents, cross-sectional sample versus panellists (%)



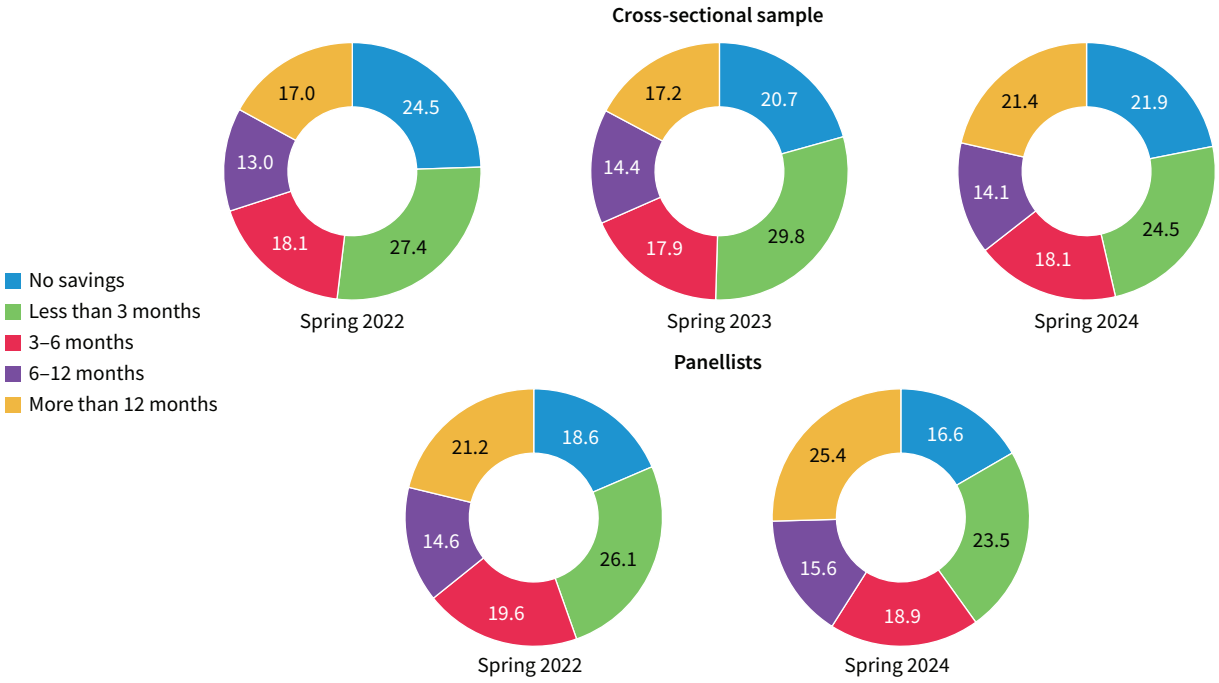
Source: Authors.

Figure 44: e-Survey respondents in arrears, cross-sectional sample versus panellists (%)



Note: 'At least one overdue payment' means the respondents replied 'Yes' with regard to arrears in one of the following: rent or mortgage payments for accommodation; utility bills, such as electricity, water and gas; payments related to consumer loans, including credit card overdrafts (to buy electrical appliances, a car, furniture, etc.); telephone, mobile or internet connection bills; payments relating to informal loans from friends or relatives not living in their household; payments for healthcare or health insurance; or student loans.
Source: Authors.

Figure 45: Household savings of e-survey respondents, cross-sectional sample versus panellists (%)



Source: Authors.

Annex 2: Further logistic regressions on indicators for which polarisation trends were not supported by the methodology used

Table 22: Regression models for polarisation on acceptance of gender equality, immigrants, and gay men and lesbians, 2023

	Acceptance of gender equality			Acceptance of immigrants		Acceptance of gay men and lesbians			
	Value factors	Socioeconomic factors	Objective factors	Value factors	Socioeconomic factors	Objective factors			Value factors
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Urban residence – town (ref: city)	0.11**	0.09*	0.09*	0.17***	0.06	0.07	0.05	0.01	0.03
Urban residence – rural (ref: city)	0.19***	0.20***	0.20***	0.35***	0.28***	0.28***	0.11***	0.005	0.02
Financial circumstances – easy (ref: difficult)	– 0.21***	– 0.08	– 0.10*	– 0.27***	– 0.03	– 0.07	– 0.35***	– 0.18***	– 0.22***
Religious observance	0.04***	0.06***	0.05***	0.002	0.01*	0	0.14***	0.16***	0.15***
Employment status – employed (ref: not employed)	– 0.10*	– 0.05	– 0.002	0.03	0.09	0.14	– 0.19***	– 0.13	– 0.08
Household size	– 0.04**	– 0.01	– 0.01	– 0.05**	– 0.04**	– 0.04**	0.02	0.04**	0.04**
Middle-aged adults (ref: young adults)	0.09**	0.11**	0.13***	0.31***	0.21***	0.22***	0.22***	0.04	0.05
Older adults (ref: young adults)	0.02	0.05	0.09	0.31***	0.16**	0.17**	0.65***	0.28***	0.32***
Gender – women (ref: men)	– 0.69***	– 0.83***	– 0.73***	– 0.20***	– 0.35***	– 0.23***	– 0.64***	– 0.73***	– 0.59***
Education – medium (ISCED 3–4) (ref: low)	– 0.20***	– 0.08	– 0.07	– 0.34***	– 0.22***	– 0.21***	– 0.45***	– 0.27***	– 0.26***
Education – high (ISCED 5–8) (ref: low)	– 0.55***	– 0.34***	– 0.32***	– 1.00***	– 0.73***	– 0.69***	– 0.92***	– 0.59***	– 0.55***
Belgium (ref: Austria)	– 0.05	– 0.30***	– 0.21**	0.59***	0.45***	0.53***	0.63***	0.59***	0.79***
Croatia	0.08	– 0.26**	– 0.23**	0.48***	– 0.25*	– 0.2	0.36***	0.09	0.16
Cyprus	– 0.17	– 0.39**	– 0.41***	0.23	– 0.36*	– 0.36*	– 0.50***	– 0.87***	– 0.90***
Finland	0.04	0.12	0.30***	0.74***	0.78***	0.97***	0.61***	0.79***	1.14***
France	0.11	– 0.05	0.11	0.65***	0.08	0.17	0.41***	0.24*	0.56***
Germany	0.10	– 0.10	0.07	0.69***	0.38***	0.57***	0.53***	0.42***	0.76***
Greece	– 0.56***	– 0.82***	– 0.93***	0.33***	– 0.43***	– 0.56***	– 0.09	– 0.38***	– 0.51***
Hungary	– 1.05***	– 1.30***	– 1.51***	0.55***	– 0.08	– 0.31**	0.28***	0.24*	– 0.01
Ireland	0.02	– 0.31***	– 0.32***	0.54***	0.07	0.09	0.20*	0.11	0.12
Italy	– 0.20**	– 0.48***	– 0.63***	0.27***	– 0.39***	– 0.50***	– 0.13	– 0.38***	– 0.64***

	Acceptance of gender equality			Acceptance of immigrants		Acceptance of gay men and lesbians			
	Value factors	Socioeconomic factors	Objective factors	Value factors	Socioeconomic factors	Objective factors			Value factors
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Lithuania	– 0.77***	– 1.24***	– 1.54***	0.59***	– 0.08	– 0.36**	0.38***	0.09	– 0.28*
Netherlands	0.07	– 0.003	0.12	0.79***	0.91***	1.05***	0.78***	0.99***	1.26***
Poland	0.09	– 0.15	– 0.22*	0.61***	– 0.16	– 0.16	0.02	– 0.21	– 0.34**
Portugal	– 0.11	– 0.31**	– 0.34***	0.91***	0.33**	0.30**	0.02	– 0.37**	– 0.37**
Slovakia	– 1.35***	– 1.80***	– 2.07***	0.41***	– 0.31**	– 0.58***	– 0.005	– 0.07	– 0.42***
Slovenia	0.11	– 0.32***	– 0.44***	0.56***	– 0.15	– 0.25*	0.40***	0.16	0.04
Spain	0.06	– 0.07	0.09	0.47***	0.10	0.25**	0.64***	0.73***	1.01***
Sweden	0.12	0.10	0.32***	0.09	0.10	0.33**	1.00***	1.14***	1.60***
Internet use		– 0.003	– 0.001		– 0.06***	– 0.05**		– 0.16***	– 0.16***
Consumption of political news		– 0.04**	– 0.05***		– 0.02	– 0.04**		0.04**	0.03
Political interest		– 0.17***	– 0.14***		– 0.20***	– 0.17***		– 0.09***	– 0.06**
Perceived political effectiveness		– 0.001	0.02		0.02	0.06		– 0.13***	– 0.10**
Attachment to country		– 0.09***	– 0.10***		0.03***	0.02**		– 0.03***	– 0.04***
Frequency of social meet-ups		– 0.06***	– 0.05***		– 0.05***	– 0.04**		– 0.08***	– 0.05***
Trust in people		– 0.04***	– 0.02***		– 0.17***	– 0.15***		– 0.11***	– 0.09***
Satisfaction with healthcare system		– 0.04***	– 0.05***		– 0.11***	– 0.12***		– 0.01	– 0.02**
Conservation			0.04			0.53***			0.06
Self-enhancement			– 0.14**			0.16**			– 0.21***
Self-transcendence			– 0.75***			– 0.61***			– 1.19***
Openness			– 0.08			0.17***			– 0.33***
Constant	– 0.61***	1.15***	1.37***	– 1.58***	0.70***	0.95***	– 1.66***	– 0.09	0.22
Observations	23 848	19 137	19 048	23 848	19 137	19 048	23 848	19 137	19 048
Log likelihood	– 11 483.41	– 8 926.38	– 8 740.56	– 10 811.43	– 8 032.38	– 7 821.28	– 10 725.31	– 7 853.13	– 7 535.09
Akaike information criterion	23 026.82	17 928.76	17 565.12	21 682.85	16 140.77	15 726.57	21 510.62	15 782.26	15 154.19

Notes: * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01. The following Member States were excluded from the analysis: Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Luxembourg, Latvia, Malta and Romania. ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education.
Source: Authors.

Annex 3: Italian Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood: proposals and voting

	Green	Yellow	Red	Abstention
Adoption				
It is recommended that social services staff (social workers, psychologists) be adequately trained to provide all possible tools to effectively pursue the best interests of the child, considering, where possible, the importance of both preserving the link with the family of origin and the need to give minors a new family.	30	8	0	12
Online votes	50	0	1	1
Total	**80**	**8**	**1**	**13**
It is recommended that the procedure for obtaining the certification of suitability for adoption be improved by implementing a more streamlined time frame and method for obtaining it.	34	6	0	10
Online votes	37	9	5	3
Total	**71**	**15**	**5**	**13**
It is recommended (in implementation of Article 40 of Law 149/2001) that the National Data Bank, currently used by all juvenile courts, be used to guide child protection policies throughout the country.	40	0	0	10
Online votes	51	1	1	1
Total	**91**	**1**	**1**	**11**
It is recommended, to overcome any discrimination, that adoption be opened up to all forms of families, single persons, de facto and same-sex couples and LGBTQ+ persons, with any appropriate amendments to Law 184/1983 and Law 76/2016.	30	3	6	11
Online votes	43	8	3	0
Total	**73**	**11**	**9**	**11**
Pregnancy for others / surrogacy				
To regulate pregnancy for others / surrogacy as a form of solidarity, it is recommended that certain requirements be met (i.e. access must be open to single people and same-sex and different-sex couples; the pregnant woman must have had at least one child previously, successfully pass a psycho-physical check for suitability and meet a minimum income requirement).	35	4	3	8
Online votes	45	2	6	1
Total	**80**	**6**	**9**	**9**
It is recommended that an absolute ban on surrogacy be maintained, as already provided for in Article 12(6) of Law 40/2004.	1	4	39	6
Online votes	Not carried out, owing to plenary recommendation rejection			
Total	**1**	**4**	**39**	**6**
The randomly drawn Civic Assembly on Social Parenthood commits the municipalities and regions to promote opportunities for in-depth discussion on the topic of pregnancy for others in view of the need to introduce appropriate regulations on the topic.	49	0	1	0
Online votes	45	4	2	3
Total	**94**	**4**	**3**	**3**
Assisted reproduction				
It is recommended that all assisted fertilisation techniques be banned.	2	2	38	8
Online votes	Not carried out, owing to plenary recommendation rejection			
Total	**2**	**2**	**38**	**8**

	Green	Yellow	Red	Abstention
Assisted reproduction (cont.)				
It is recommended that Article 5 of Law 40/2004 be amended to provide for access to medically assisted reproductive technologies for single people and same-sex couples living together or united in civil partnership.	32	5	4	9
Online votes	46	2	5	1
Total	**78**	**7**	**9**	**10**
Certification of the legal status of a child				
It is recommended that a European filiation certificate be adopted.	38	2	0	10
Online votes	52	0	1	2
Total	**90**	**2**	**1**	**12**
It is recommended that local authorities such as municipalities and regions promote initiatives (e.g. a listening observatory) for knowledge, study and in-depth analysis of the evolution of family models.	37	7	0	6
Online votes	46	6	2	1
Total	**83**	**13**	**2**	**7**
It is recommended that guidelines be drawn up and proposed to all Italian municipalities on the registration of children's birth certificates.	38	5	1	6
Online votes	49	1	1	4
Total	**87**	**6**	**2**	**10**
European certificate of parenthood (European working group)				
It is recommended that the European unified certificate of filiation be provided by the EU through dedicated registration offices in all Member States. The European unified certificate of filiation should initially be provided upon request by three means: in person, by email or online. Online application should be allowed through an easy-to-use form. It is recommended that, in the future, obtaining the single European certificate of filiation should be automatic for children born in the EU and included in EU citizenship to strengthen the right of movement within the EU.	**50**	**2**	**0**	**4**
It is recommended that a single EU birth register be set up to collect birth data from national registry offices.	**49**	**3**	**0**	**4**
It is recommended that information be provided, by institutions and online, on the possibility of obtaining the European unified certificate of filiation and the necessary process. An information campaign on this is also recommended.	**48**	**1**	**0**	**6**
Regarding EU parents with children born outside the EU, it is recommended that, once they have been recognised as legal parents in their Member State, they should be able to apply for the single European certificate of filiation at the appropriate EU support offices in national embassies.	**50**	**1**	**1**	**3**
Better access for parents to legal support at the EU level is recommended to enable them to assert their parental rights in the event of national-level discrimination.	**49**	**1**	**2**	**3**

Source: Authors.

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TJ-01-25-015-EN-N

This report investigates the dimensions of polarisation in Europe, offering a 20-year perspective based on data from the European Social Survey. It examines trends and national variations in polarisation on various issues, looking at how European values and attitudes have changed over time. In addition, the report explores the drivers of polarisation and changing opinions on support for Ukraine, using insights from the Living and Working in the EU e-survey panel data. Economic instability emerges as the primary driver of political polarisation, whereas social media has a decisive role in reducing support for Ukraine, a pivotal finding of the analysis. Furthermore, the report identifies significant disparities in polarisation, with well-educated and more politically engaged citizens exhibiting higher levels of trust in political institutions.

The report also draws attention to new tools to improve democratic participation and engage citizens in policymaking. The results of deliberative processes are illustrated by four case studies, highlighting successes and requirements for an inclusive and resilient democratic ecosystem.

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