

Searching for the Democratic Disconnect: Unequal and Ambivalent Political Support Along Social Divides in Europe

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Abstract

Has public commitment to democracy declined in Europe? Which social groups display the lowest levels of support? Despite extensive debate on an alleged democratic crisis, systematic evidence on variation across countries and socio-demographic divides remains limited. This study addresses this gap by analysing multiple data sources and indicators, building on findings that citizens hold ambivalent regime attitudes, simultaneously supporting democratic ideals while remaining open to authoritarian alternatives. First, we draw on the European Values Study and the World Values Survey to assess trends in democratic versus authoritarian regime preferences in eight European democracies over the past three decades ($N \approx 55,000$). We trace trajectories and cross-national differences, disaggregating by gender, age, and education. While abstract support for democracy remains stable, significant socio-demographic gaps emerge, with educational divides reflecting deeper differences in regime preferences and notable contextual variation. Second, using an original comparative survey from 2025 ($N \approx 15,000$) and a liberal-democracy scale, we show that higher education is positively associated with commitment to liberal-democratic principles, whereas younger and female respondents tend to score lower. The combination of both datasets helps document how this ambivalence is socially structured, most consistently along educational lines. This article contributes to the literature by blending a wider array of data and indicators and shedding light on the role of socio-demographic gaps in political support. While it highlights the importance of education, the effects of other factors appear more context-dependent, varying across countries, time, and operationalisation.

Keywords

democratic disconnect; European democracies; social divides; support for democracy

1. Introduction

European democracies have recently faced a “polycrisis” (Zeitlin et al., 2019), marked by overlapping shocks, from the 2008 financial and eurozone crises, to the refugee crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In parallel, democratic procedures have been directly challenged by illiberal leaders and populist parties in government, as in the cases of Orbán in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). For this reason, a substantial body of literature has turned its attention to public opinion, examining whether citizens continue to endorse democracy as preferable to alternative regimes (Mattes, 2018). Classic theories posit that diffuse support enhances democratic endurance (Easton, 1975; Lipset, 1959b) and recent empirical analyses appear to support this expectation (Claassen, 2020). Lack of support provides incentives for democratic norm violation, enabling undemocratic leaders to win elections (Foa & Mounk, 2016), whereas high support constrains their ability to trigger democratic backsliding (Booth & Seligson, 2009).

The idea that democratic support is declining has been much debated. While several studies have raised concerns about declining democratic enthusiasm among Western populations (Diamond, 2016; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Lührmann, 2021; Wike & Fetterolf, 2018), critics argue that abstract support for democracy has remained relatively constant over recent decades (Alexander & Welzel, 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris, 2017; Plattner, 2017). Scholars reconcile this contradiction by arguing that citizens hold ambivalent attitudes: Individuals who self-identify as pro-democratic often do not associate democracy with liberal principles (Kirsch & Welzel, 2019) or do not perceive democracy and autocratic regimes as incompatible. An expanding share of citizens simultaneously endorses authoritarian alternatives (Jones & Cowan, 2025), enabling illiberal leaders to win elections without commanding an anti-democratic majority (Wunsch & Gessler, 2023).

When prompted about authoritarian alternatives, citizens frequently express views that conflict with democratic ideals, such as approval of strongmen bypassing constitutional norms (Dalton & Shin, 2014; Inglehart, 2003; Qi & Shin, 2011). According to this view, although citizens pay lip service to democratic values, support for democracy may be less robust than commonly assumed. Measurement issues may partly account for the high levels of democracy approval alongside conflicting regime preferences. Because traditional survey items ask respondents to endorse “democracy” in general terms—without specifying what they should have in mind—they risk eliciting abstract and superficial support, driven by social desirability (Canache, 2012; Claassen et al., 2025; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). At the same time, these findings may reflect deeper psychological ambivalence. As theorised by Jones and Cowan (2025), this ambivalence stems from an evaluative conflict in which individuals maintain a hybrid identity, simultaneously supporting democratic systems and authoritarian alternatives. Such hybridity is frequently associated with lower educational attainment, which can increase support for democratic backsliding. To address this, our study employs multiple indicators to better disentangle these relationships.

Understanding variation in democratic support along social divides is essential for identifying which population segments may be most vulnerable to anti-democratic appeals. Research on European countries reveals that the political preferences of men and women are diverging: In particular, male voters are clearly overrepresented in the electorate of populist radical right parties (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017), which often pursue an illiberal agenda. Ambivalent regime preferences may also be more pronounced in certain national contexts and age

groups, with younger generations developing contradictory inclinations (Wuttke et al., 2022). A further debate concerns the claim that citizens of lower social status are losing faith in democracy (Ceka & Magalhães, 2020; Kołczyńska, 2020).

This study addresses these questions by analysing complementary data and alternative indicators across eight European countries. We use the integrated European Values Study (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS) dataset to trace three decades of change in democratic versus authoritarian regime preferences along key socio-demographic divides: gender, age, and education. We then draw on the REDIRECT citizen survey collected in 2025 to explore commitment to liberal democracy through a newly developed scale (Claassen et al., 2025). Our findings reveal that while abstract support for democracy remains stable and high, significant socio-demographic gaps emerge, with educational divides emerging as the most pronounced source of regime preferences relative to other social divides, and notable contextual variation across countries. Using a liberal-democracy scale, we show that education positively predicts adherence to liberal-democratic principles, whereas younger and female respondents tend to score lower.

Drawing on multiple data sources and indicators, this article contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding and support for democracy by shedding light on the role of socio-demographic gaps. While it highlights the importance of education, the effects of other factors appear more context-dependent and sensitive to varying operationalisations. More broadly, the article informs the discussion on the “democratic disconnect,” understood as a multifaceted phenomenon signalling a weakening linkage between citizens and governing elites, by assessing the ambivalent support that different groups of citizens express for both the democratic ideal and the liberal-democratic model.

2. The Democratic Disconnect in the Eyes of European Citizens

In Europe, several studies have investigated trends in satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions, finding that both have declined in times of crisis (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Martini & Quaranta, 2020). These two indicators capture evaluative orientations of political support—that is, citizens’ dissatisfaction with the outputs of the political system—which are far more sensitive to the ups and downs of government performance and the volatility of the economic cycle than support for democracy per se (Singh & Mayne, 2023). The empirical evidence regarding regime support in European countries is less robust.

One crucial point of disagreement is whether democratic support is declining. This question is particularly relevant at a time when Europe has faced several pressing challenges, leading observers and scholars to speak of a polycrisis widely seen as a trigger of deconsolidation (Ágh, 2016). Drawing on the sixth wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), whose fieldwork was conducted in 2010–2012, Kriesi (2020) argues that Europeans attach great importance to living in a country governed democratically, albeit with varying intensity across geographical regions. A key limitation of traditional survey questions is that they do not specify what is meant by the term “democracy,” allowing citizens to project very different concepts onto the term. Kriesi nonetheless shows that Europeans express overwhelming support for two liberal principles—a free media and equality before the law. Similar results emerged from a more recent analysis of the 2020–2022 ESS data (Hernández, 2025), showing that Europeans still largely endorse a liberal model of democracy based on free and fair elections.

Analysing the WVS, Jones and Cowan (2025) show that investigating support for democracy without simultaneously measuring support for autocratic regimes may produce overly optimistic assessments, since a sizable proportion of citizens is willing to support both regime types, adopting an ambivalent stance. Drawing on the 2020–2022 ESS data, Martini (2025) reaches a similar conclusion, finding that although support for democracy is much higher than support for autocratic alternatives, there is considerable variation. In particular, post-communist Eastern European countries and other countries such as Italy display comparatively higher support for strong leaders unconstrained by law. These findings collectively point to the need for a more nuanced analysis of democratic support trends across Europe—one that examines not only nominal backing of democracy but also the degree of openness to autocratic alternatives.

A second important question concerns the differentiated levels of democratic support across different social groups defined by gender, age, and education. The following sections address each of these dimensions, in turn reviewing the relevant scholarly debates and their implications for European countries.

2.1. Gender Differences in Democratic Attitudes

While Langsæther and Knutsen (2025) find that women consistently hold more progressive policy attitudes, these differences do not necessarily translate into differential levels of regime support. However, recent research documents a significant gender gap among younger generations, with young women becoming markedly more liberal over the last decade while young men have remained relatively stable or shifted in conservative directions (Kamarck & Muchnick, 2024; Lampert & Papadongonas, 2024). Although much of this research focuses on the intersection of age and gender—examining how gender gaps vary across cohorts—it suggests that gender differences in political orientations may have important implications for democratic support more broadly. If young men and women increasingly differ in their political orientations and value priorities, they may also develop divergent evaluations of democratic institutions and processes.

In Europe, populist radical right parties are frequently characterised in the political science literature as “men’s parties” (*Männerparteien*) due to the persistent overrepresentation of male voters (Berlingozzi & Piccolino, 2019). Data covering 30 countries suggest that populist radical right parties display the most pronounced gender imbalance of any party family, averaging nearly two male voters per female voter (Weeks et al., 2023). This gap remains “substantial” even after controlling for individual socioeconomic characteristics (Immerzeel et al., 2015).

This suggests that men may also be overrepresented among supporters of illiberal democracy in Europe. This would represent a relatively new phenomenon: The literature on other geographical contexts and historical periods found inconclusive evidence, with some studies finding that women were more lukewarm in their support for democracy in Eastern Europe (Oakes, 2002) and sub-Saharan Africa (Konte & Klasen, 2016).

A potential gender gap in support for democracy can be attributed to several factors. A primary explanation involves divergent socialisation processes, where expectations for “correct behaviour” vary by gender (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017). In addition, disparities in media exposure between men and women may lead to differentiated levels of support for democracy and other forms of government (Gidengil & Everitt, 2003). These differences are ultimately expected to shape political behaviour.

2.2. Age and Generational Divides in Democratic Support

The question of a generational divide in attitudes towards democracy has received considerable attention, especially following the influential study by Foa and Mounk (2016). Age is a key factor in shaping individuals' levels of support for democratic systems. For example, a study conducted in Southern Europe found that millennials—a generation raised in either consolidating or fully established democracies—show decreased support for democratic governance, a trend particularly visible since the eurozone crisis (Tsatsanis et al., 2021). These findings align with Bordeleau's (2025) finding that younger citizens show less support for democracy and greater tolerance for undemocratic practices.

Recent empirical evidence, however, suggests a more nuanced reality. Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al. (2024) find that in Europe, younger adults generally display levels of support for liberal democracy comparable to those of older generations. Kriesi (2020) tested whether younger cohorts were less supportive of democratic regimes and found evidence of this phenomenon in Southern European and Nordic countries, though the generational gap is nowhere near as pronounced as in the United States (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). A generational divide may reflect differences in formative experiences across cohorts: Younger generations have come of age in a context marked by economic insecurity and repeated political crises, and the global rise of populism may have further shaped how they evaluate traditional democratic institutions relative to alternative forms of leadership (Bordeleau, 2025).

Overall, concerns about a “democratic crisis” among youth may be overstated, though specific challenges related to systemic efficacy in addressing contemporary issues persist. The non-linear age effects identified by Chironi et al. (2024) suggest that particular attention should be paid to early-adulthood cohorts (25–34), who may display distinctive patterns of opposition to democracy as they encounter political and economic institutions during formative career-building years. Taken together, these findings suggest that age differences in democratic support may reflect a combination of lifecycle dynamics and period effects tied to specific economic or political shocks, rather than a straightforward generational divide (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). Whether these patterns are best understood as cohort-specific or as responses to shared contemporaneous conditions remains an open empirical question, and one whose answer is likely to vary across national contexts.

2.3. Educational Divides in Democratic Support

The notion that lower classes are particularly prone to authoritarian predispositions is not new (Lipset, 1959a), but recent debate has focused not only on economic status but also on the role of education. Education is commonly treated as a proxy for human capital and social status: As the better educated are more likely to attain higher earnings and social recognition, they may show greater support for democracy by virtue of their position as “social winners” (Dalton, 2005). Democratic support is increasingly shaped by education as an institutional gatekeeper rather than merely as a measure of individual competence. In what researchers call “schooling societies”—countries in which schooling has become a primary and authoritative institution for social organisation and status allocation (D. Baker, 2014)—educational credentials serve as the main mechanism for social stratification and political access. The highly educated are more likely to gain privileged access to elite positions and political influence (Bovens & Wille, 2017), while those with lower educational attainment often feel systematically excluded from decision-making. This produces a “diploma democracy,” in which political life is dominated by credentialed elites, generating a sense of cultural and

political distance among the less educated (Kesberg & Easterbrook, 2025; Noordzij et al., 2019) and fostering education-based intergroup conflicts that can polarise attitudes toward democratic institutions (Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015; Stubager, 2009).

We expect education to generate a divide in democratic support primarily through its role as a positional good that allocates status and political access: In strongly schooled societies such as those in our sample, the highly educated defend a political system that confers dominant status upon them, while the less educated oppose institutions from which they feel excluded—a mechanism that operates independently of the cognitive or civic skills that schooling may also impart (Kavadias et al., 2026; Kończyńska, 2020).

3. Data and Method

Our analysis focuses on eight European democracies: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the United Kingdom. This selection reflects key dimensions of variation in European democratic experience, spanning a wide geographical range and including countries that differ in the age of their democratic systems, from long-established to newer post-communist democracies. While this selection does not exhaust European diversity, it provides sufficient variation to examine how social divides structure democratic support and how these patterns vary across national contexts.

We assess the state of disconnect across different socio-demographic groups by drawing on indicators from three comparative surveys covering our eight selected countries. First, we rely on the integrated dataset provided by the EVS and the WVS to evaluate trends in regime preferences. The combination of these two data sources yields 55,224 interviews (before listwise deletion of missing values) conducted between 1996 and 2022, covering a total of 37 country-years (36 in the United Kingdom for the support for democracy item), though we have an unbalanced dataset as in some countries we observe fewer time-points (Belgium has a minimum of two) than in other countries (Germany has a maximum of seven; for coverage of countries and years see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File). We use one question asking respondents on a 4-point Likert scale how good or bad they consider different ways of governing their countries, including “having a democratic political system” and “having a strong leader who does not bother with parliament and elections.”

We present descriptive results based on country-level aggregate data for each indicator to display the trend of support for democracy versus autocratic strong leadership, first overall, then disaggregating the socio-demographic groups of interest. For the subgroup analysis, we split samples according to whether respondents identified as “female” or “male.” Following Voeten (2017), we further divide samples according to whether respondents were “under” or “over” 35 years of age, treating age as a cross-sectional marker of generational position while acknowledging that the underlying dynamics may be more complex than this operationalisation can fully capture. If the current younger generation faces a specific democratic deficit, we would expect support for democracy to decline over time alongside growing support for non-democratic alternatives. A formal age-period-cohort decomposition, however, falls outside the scope of this study. Education is measured by the highest level of education attainment at the time of the survey, distinguishing respondents with “higher” education (short-cycle tertiary or upper) from those with “lower/medium” education (post-secondary/non-tertiary or lower). The EVS-WVS integrated dataset provides its own recoded variable based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to harmonise the measure across countries. For ease of interpretation, results are presented graphically with actual numerical

figures discussed in the text. To check for significant differences, we compute weighted differences in proportions (e.g., % female supporters – % male supporters) and assess significance using Wald tests within country-years. Post-stratification weights follow the instructions provided with the datasets.

However, traditional indicators of political support have been criticised because of their methodological limitations. To address this problem and provide more robust results, in the second part of our analysis, we use the REDIRECT citizen survey conducted between January 2 and January 20 (January 23 in Hungary), 2025, across the same eight European countries. The sample comprises individuals aged 18 and above who were residents in one of the countries included in the study (Verzichelli et al., 2025). Participants were recruited from an opt-in panel provided by YouGov. Although this constitutes a non-probability sample, a robust sampling frame and effective procedures were employed. The sample was structured using quotas for gender and age (interlocked), geographical area (based on the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, NUTS1), and educational attainment, closely resembling census data in each country, despite small deviations in some national contexts (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File). A data cleaning process was implemented to improve data quality: In line with R. Baker et al. (2010) and polling industry standards, interview length was used to detect unusually short responses. The final pooled sample comprises 16,943 complete interviews, reduced to 15,217 after removing speeders—that is, interviews completed in less than 40% of the median response time—but before listwise deletion of missing values (Belgium: completed 2,092; speeders 209; France: 2,054; 200; Germany: 2,011; 194; Hungary: 1,993; 289; Italy: 2,022; 281; Norway: 2,007; 328; Poland: 1,036; 93; United Kingdom: 2,002; 132).

The REDIRECT citizen survey is particularly useful for our purposes because it includes an alternative measure of support for liberal democracy developed by Claassen et al. (2025). This is a concise, cross-country-tested battery of seven items that anchors democratic support in concrete principles, rather than asking about “democracy” in the abstract. On a 11-point disagreement-agreement scale, the items probe respondents’ willingness to constrain pluralism, party competition, and electoral suffrage, limit judicial independence, curtail media freedom, and circumvent legal and constitutional checks when deemed expedient in pursuit of political goals. Building on Claassen et al. (2025), rather than assuming full cross-national equivalence, we treat this measure as a substantively richer alternative that may nonetheless remain sensitive to contextual differences across countries. To assess the dimensionality and internal coherence of the scale, we estimated a confirmatory factor model on the pooled sample and replicated the same specification separately within each country (Rosseel et al., 2025). Results indicate a stable one-dimensional structure with satisfactory fit across national samples, supporting the use of the latent factor as an individual-level outcome measure. One item displayed inconsistent behaviour in one country-specific model and was therefore excluded from the main specification. The resulting six-item scale is used in all subsequent analyses (see Tables A3–A23 and Figure A2 in the Supplementary File for full results).

To estimate the net effects of our three socio-demographic divides, we regress the liberal-democracy support scale on gender, age, and education using the same operationalisation as before. The models also incorporate a set of individual-level covariates that may correlate with democratic versus authoritarian preferences or account for variation attributable to our key predictors. These include employment status (whether respondents were “unemployed” or in “other employment categories”), generalized social trust—highlighted by modernisation and social capital theories as integral to processes of democratisation

and pro-democratic attitudes (Zmerli & Newton, 2008)—as well as political interest (high/low) and left–right ideological self-placement, given prior evidence that ideological orientation shapes receptiveness to authoritarian alternatives (Malka & Costello, 2023). Lastly, to capture institutional factors, the models include an indicator of whether respondents voted for a governing party (for the full classification, see Table A24 in the Supplementary File), allowing us to account for potential incumbency effects on evaluations of political regimes and institutions (Anderson et al., 2005). We estimate both pooled and country-by-country models to capture context-specific relationships. Analyses are run on unweighted data.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Trends and Socio-Economic Gaps in Support for Democracy and Strong Leader

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

We start by analysing citizens' views on different regime types and whether we find any changes across the available years. Figure 1 reports the share of citizens who considered it fairly or very good to have a democracy or a strong leader. The first thing we can observe is that support for democracy as a regime type is very high and generally stable. The mean percentage score across countries and years is 91.9%, with the maximum value

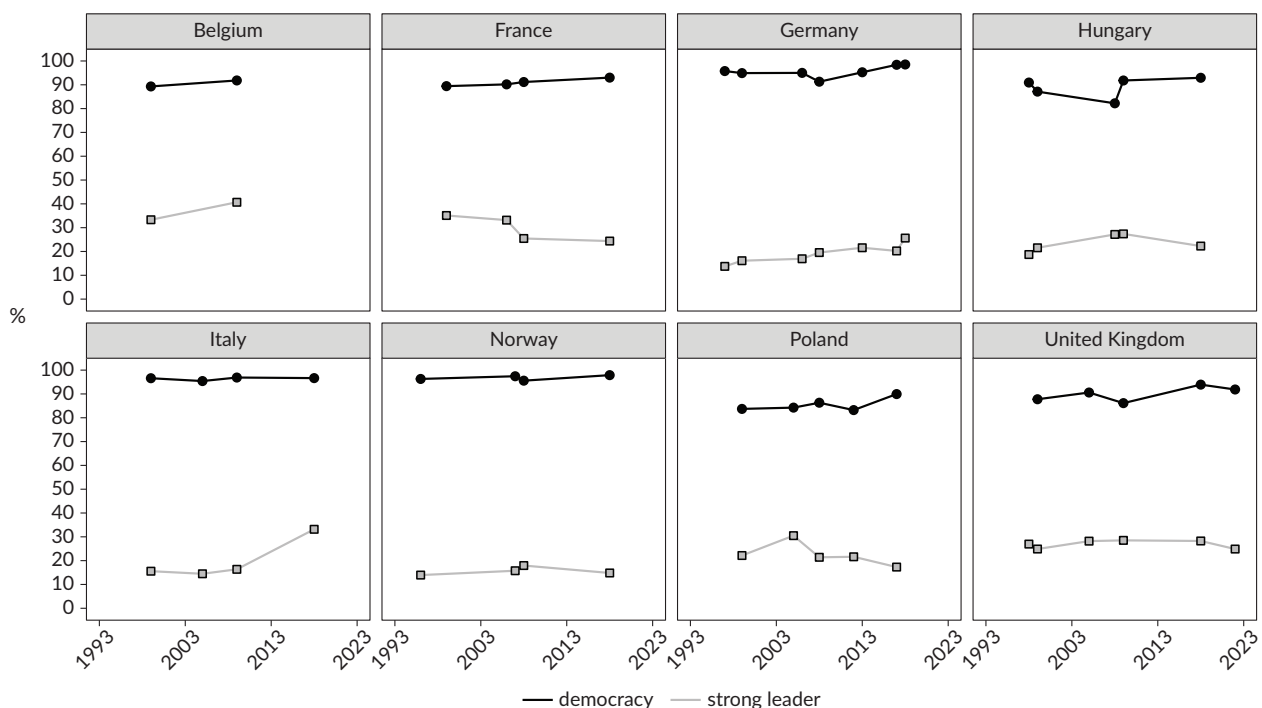


Figure 1. Preferences for democracy and strong leader across eight European democracies (EVS-WVS 1996–2022). Notes: Lines show the percentage of respondents rating the respective regime type as “very good” or “fairly good”; weighted estimates.

recorded in Germany in 2018 (98.5%) and the minimum reached by Hungary in 2008 (82.2%). Overall, the levels of democracy support tend to be lower on average in Eastern Europe than in the rest of the countries.

However, more than one in five respondents on average considers strong leadership without parliamentary constraints as a good form of political system. We record high percentages on average, above all, in Belgium (37.0%), and in France (29.5%), and we register the most substantial increase over time in Italy (+17.5 percentage points), a country that, in the most recent year observed in our series, reached the highest percentage (33.2%) as compared to the rest of countries (see Table A25 in the Supplementary File). Although our findings may not perfectly align to previous research as this may depend on data source and indicators (Dalton & Shin, 2014; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Martini, 2025; Norris, 1999; Qi & Shin, 2011; Thomassen & van Ham, 2017), they do when it comes to the main message: Preference for democracy seems to be overwhelmingly high, yet, this co-exists with support for autocratic types of regimes, such that a relevant share of “democrats in name only” also show leanings towards illiberal forms of political systems, based for instance on strong leadership. As said, this may be due to various reasons, ranging from social desirability to the fact that people might actually attach different meanings to the term “democracy” (Canache, 2012; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016).

We now turn to the analysis of the differences in support for democracy based on gender, age, and education (results in tabular form are in the Supplementary File, Table A26). Figure 2 displays the gaps in support: the gender gap, the age gap, and the education gap, summarising the differences in the percentages of supporters across our three different pairs. Starting from the gender gap (% female supporters – % male supporters), the black solid line, the difference in support for democracy between men and women appears minimal as point estimates approach zero in basically all the countries and periods. It was almost non-existent in Norway and Italy and reached its peak in three countries at around 6 percentage points (Hungary 1999, Poland 2012, and Italy 2023).

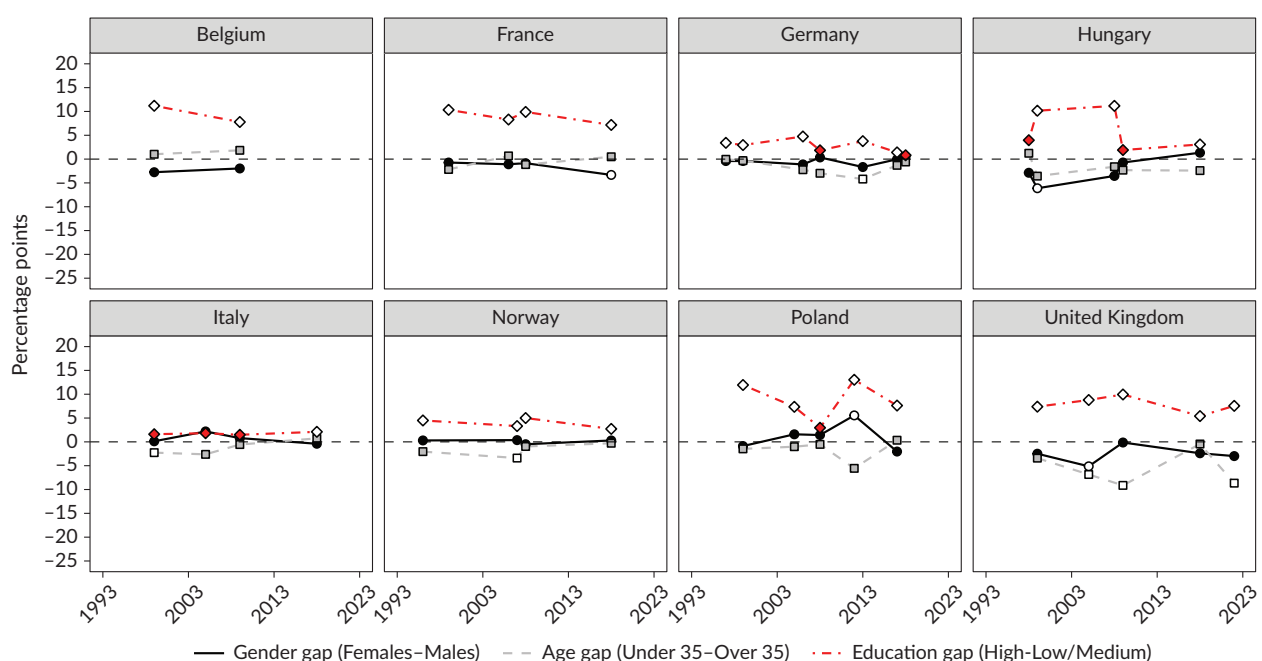


Figure 2. Gap in support for democracy along social divides. Note: The empty symbols indicate when the gaps are different from zero at the 95% significance level.

United Kingdom 2005). However, the pattern isn't consistent: Women were less supportive in Belgium, France, Germany, and Hungary, but more supportive in Poland, and, rarely, the gender gap is statistically significant.

The picture does not confirm the importance of the age gap, represented by the dashed grey line (% under-35 supporters – % over-35 supporters). Younger people generally appear less supportive of democracy than older people; however, these differences are often not statistically significant, with the notable exception of the United Kingdom, where the gap is significant in three out of five years (with an observed peak of around –9 percentage points).

When focusing on the education gap (the dashed-dotted red line: % high edu supporters – % low/medium edu supporters), the results are more distinct. More educated individuals consistently show greater support than less educated individuals. Importantly, these differences reach conventional statistical significance in seven of the eight countries; only in Italy do education-related gaps tend to be negligible, as is the case for the other variables in this country. The education gap was particularly pronounced in Belgium, France, Poland, and the United Kingdom, with peaks recorded in Belgium and Poland (+11 percentage points in 1999 in both countries).

Figure 3 replicates the analysis for the indicator of support for strong leaders (Supplementary File, Table A27). The gender gap line mirrors that presented before. In most countries, women exhibit lower support for strong leaders than men. However, these differences are rarely significant, with the notable exception of specific time points in Poland. In contrast, the age gap reveals greater importance regarding support for autocratic leaders; younger individuals are less supportive than older ones, particularly in Belgium and France, where differences were consistently significant. Conversely, in the United Kingdom, younger respondents showed greater favourability toward autocratic leadership, with a gap that seems to have widened remarkably over the years, peaking at approximately +11 percentage points in 2022.

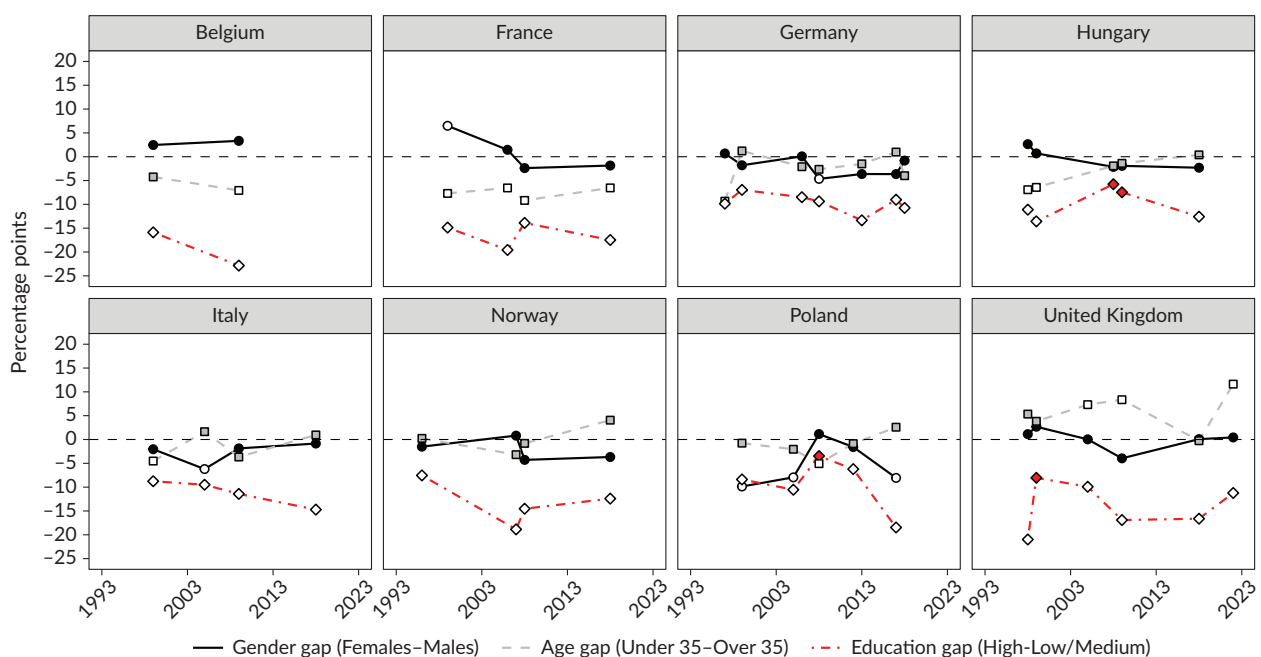


Figure 3. Gap in support for autocratic strong leadership along social divides. Note: The empty symbols indicate when the gaps are different from zero at the 95% significance level.

Turning to the education gap, the pattern aligns with those shown in the previous graph: More educated respondents tend to support strong leaders less than their less-educated counterparts, producing the largest and most significant differences. This gap ranged from -6 percentage points in Poland (2012) to -23 percentage points in Belgium (2009) and appears to have widened in several national contexts.

4.2. Who Upholds Liberal-Democratic Principles?

In this last section, we employ an alternative measure that, unlike traditional items, anchors democratic commitment in liberal principles rather than abstract regime labels. This allows us to assess the extent to which our three socio-economic groups comply with basic principles of plural political competition. To achieve this goal, Figure 4 displays the relevant estimates of a series of multiple linear regression models run on pooled data as well as on a country-by-country basis, again to uncover any heterogeneity according to the national context. The figure plots coefficient estimates for our key predictors on the liberal-democracy support scale. Points indicate the estimates, and horizontal bars show 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients to the right of zero denote positive associations; those to the left indicate negative ones (full results are included in the Supplementary File, Table A28).

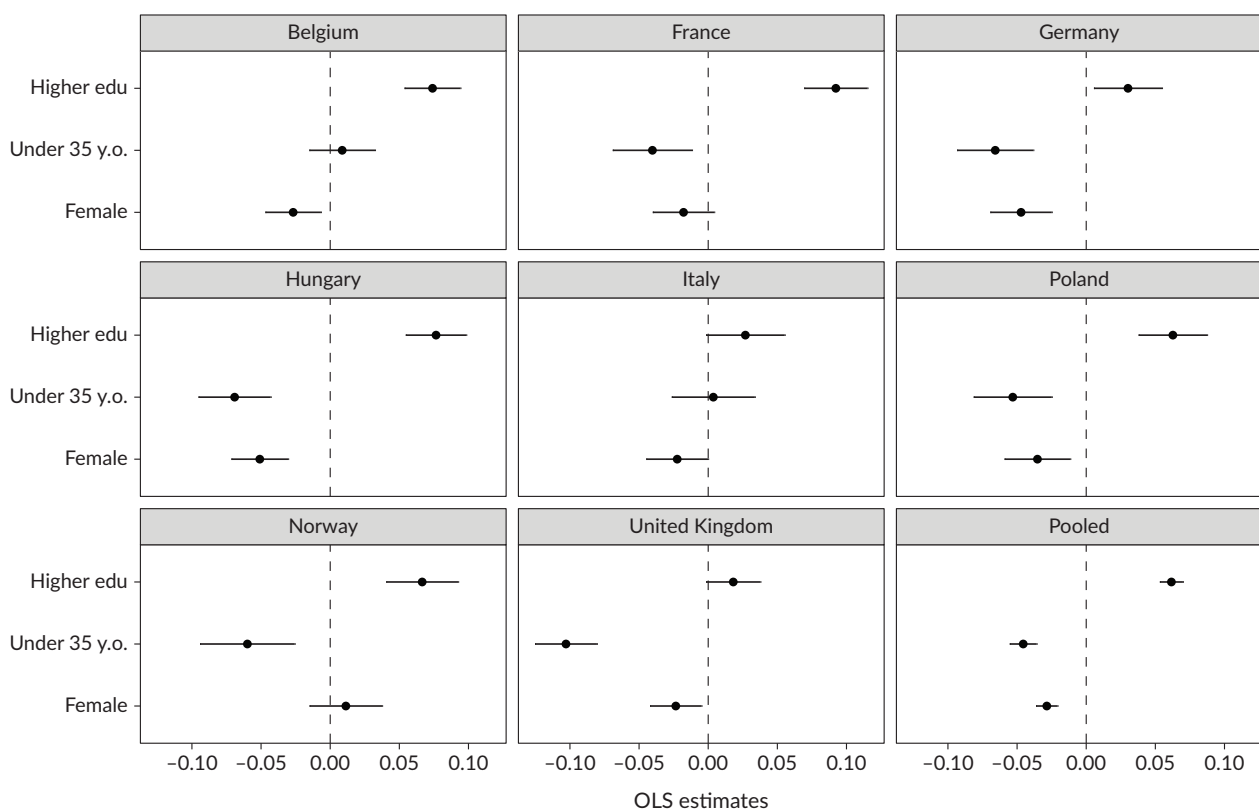


Figure 4. Associations between social divides and support for liberal democracy. Notes: Lines across dots represent 95% confidence intervals; graphs report only estimates relevant to the main argumentation; the models also include control variables, such as unemployment, political interest, ideology, social trust, and whether the respondent voted for an incumbent party; models estimated country-by-country and pooled with country fixed-effects.

If we start from the model run on the full pooled sample in the bottom-right corner of the figure, we clearly see that our three variables show an association with our dependent variable. Overall, women show significantly lower scores on our scale (-0.29 , $SE = 0.004$, $p < 0.01$). This applies also to younger respondents, who are less likely to uphold liberal principles (-0.046 , $SE = 0.005$, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, more educated people tend to comply more with basic liberal pillars (0.062 , $SE = 0.004$, $p < 0.01$), such as the protection of fundamental rights, pluralism, electoral competition, judicial independence, and media freedom. The estimated effect of education appears to be larger in magnitude than those associated with other social divides.

Results are fairly consistent across the different examined democracies when looking at country-by-country models. Apart from a few exceptions, which we report next, estimates are in fact stable both in terms of size, related uncertainties, and expected signs. Age fails to have a discernible impact in Belgium and Italy. Gender, instead, is not relevant in France and Norway, while education seems not to show an association in Italy and the United Kingdom. Notably, the exceptions for education remain limited to two countries, while its pooled effect is the largest in magnitude among the three divides—suggesting that education, though not entirely uniform across contexts, is considerably more robust and portable than gender or age. It should be noted that we obtain the same results when the scale is constructed using the original seven items (Supplementary File, Table A29).

As a robustness test, we also run the same models using the traditional indicators of support for democracy and autocratic leaders, as they were included in the same survey (see Tables A30–A31 in the Supplementary File). The overall results are consistent with those found in the longitudinal analysis, showing that the traditional items and the new scale on liberal-democratic values measure slightly different attitudes. In particular, gender does not exhibit any significant effect on support for either democracy or autocracy. Our education and age variables show expected associations, although country-by-country estimates appear more stable for our indicator of support for autocratic leaders than for our indicator of support for democracy. Lastly, education shows a stronger association as compared to age in the case of support for a strong leader without democratic constraints. Finally, we also replicate all the models by weighting data, and results are consistent (Supplementary File, Table A32).

Altogether, these results confirm and in part complement those discussed in the previous section: They do not only corroborate the relevance of education, but also uncover a role for gender and age that previous data and indicators did not capture. Differences across results hinge on the indicator of support employed, the national context, and the period considered. This might apply to gender. Young women shifting toward more progressive positions on broader political values (Kamarck & Muchnick, 2024; Lampert & Papadongonas, 2024) may nonetheless interpret items anchored in formal institutional constraints differently, not because they are less committed to democratic principles, but because they perceive some institutions as insufficiently neutral or representative of their interests. Overall erosion risks in Europe appear to stem not from a formal rejection of democracy, but from a structured ambivalence in which abstract democratic commitment coexists with selective openness to illiberal alternatives—a pattern that is socially structured, most consistently by education, though varying across national contexts and measurement approaches.

5. Conclusion

Has public commitment to democracy declined in Europe? Which social groups display the lowest levels of support? This study has addressed these questions by analysing two complementary datasets and employing multiple indicators of democratic support across eight European democracies over three decades. Confirming previous results (Kriesi, 2020; Martini & Quaranta, 2015; Voeten, 2017; Wuttke et al., 2022), we find no clear declining trend in support for democracy across the examined countries. Rather than systematic erosion, we observe fluctuations alongside considerable stability in democratic support. The various crises that have affected European democracies do not appear to have generated uniform trends across countries. While these successive shocks have tested democratic institutions, their impact on regime support appears contingent on national contexts rather than producing a general pattern of erosion.

Yet, this commitment coexists with relevant openness to autocratic alternatives. In all countries examined, a non-negligible share of citizens expresses favourable views toward strong leadership unconstrained by democratic checks (Jones & Cowan, 2025; Martini, 2025). This ambivalence has remained stable over time, though at concerning levels in specific countries like Italy, Belgium, and France. Such ambivalence may represent a significant vulnerability for democratic stability, since would-be autocrats do not require a majority holding illiberal views to gain and maintain power; they merely need enough citizens willing to tolerate authoritarian practices alongside democratic ones, potentially in exchange for some policy benefit. For Italy, this phenomenon might be rooted in prolonged systemic underperformance over the last decades, which has, in turn, fuelled support for strong leaders (Caiani & Padoan, 2020).

We document persistent divisions between social groups across the period examined, suggesting structural features of how different segments of society relate to democratic governance. While most scholarly attention has recently been devoted to the age gap, education emerges here as the strongest and most consistent predictor of support across both datasets and all measurement approaches, a finding consistent with theoretical accounts of “schooled societies,” in which educational credentials serve as primary gatekeepers to political influence (Bovens & Wille, 2017), potentially creating a sense of political exclusion among those with lower educational attainment.

Overall, our findings seem more consistent with a positional than a sophistication-based account of the education gap, in line with recent cross-national evidence on schooled societies (Kavadias et al., 2026). While our design does not allow for a direct test of mechanisms, the contextual variability of the education gap across national contexts makes a purely cognitive explanation less plausible. If this applies, the democratic disconnect rooted in education may be fundamentally structural, unlikely to be resolved without broader reforms (D. Baker, 2014; Bovens & Wille, 2017). Future research should also examine interaction effects between socio-demographic predictors—such as age, gender, and education—to better capture how their combined influence shapes democratic support across national contexts.

Our findings highlight how measurement choices shape conclusions about gender differences in democratic support. Traditional indicators reveal minimal and largely non-significant gender gaps. By contrast, the liberal-democracy scale, which measures adherence to concrete liberal principles, indicates that female respondents score significantly lower, suggesting that women may be somewhat less committed to specific liberal-democratic constraints despite expressing equivalent abstract support for democracy. This finding

speaks to emerging research on gender gaps in political attitudes and underscores the importance of employing multiple measurement approaches.

Overall, this article contributes to the literature by blending multiple data sources and indicators to illuminate socio-demographic gaps in political support. While it underscores the centrality of education in structuring democratic commitments, it also reveals that other divides are contingent on national context, historical period, and measurement strategies. The absence of clear declining trends offers some reassurance, but the persistent coexistence of democratic support with openness to autocratic alternatives suggests ongoing vulnerabilities. If sizable segments of the population, particularly those with lower educational attainment, consistently display greater receptivity to authoritarian alternatives, they may constitute a stable reservoir of potential support for illiberal leaders. This vulnerability may not be merely attitudinal: Qualitative research on youth in socio-economically disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods documents deep-seated feelings of alienation and misrepresentation rooted in social stratification and unequal political access, suggesting that the disconnect is also experiential and structural (Severs & Meyvaert, 2026).

Some limitations need to be acknowledged. The EVS-WVS data, while covering three decades, provide irregular temporal coverage across countries, while our REDIRECT survey data belong to a one-shot cross-sectional survey, precluding the analysis of temporal change. The eight-country sample, though diverse, does not exhaust European variation. Future research should incorporate country-level predictors within a formal multilevel framework to systematically explain cross-national variation in democratic support and account for context-specific patterns such as those observed in Italy and the United Kingdom. At the same time, our design is better suited to identify associations than to investigate the hidden causal mechanisms. Subsequent studies could pay more attention to whether these socio-demographic divisions have behavioural implications and represent vulnerabilities for the resilience of democracy in Europe. It would also be valuable to incorporate measures of subjective economic status or perceived social mobility to better assess how economic insecurity shapes support for democracy. Finally, our binary age operationalisation and design prevents a formal age-period-cohort decomposition. Future research should adopt cohort-based specifications to better disentangle the lifecycle and generational dynamics that our analysis can only partially capture.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

REDIRECT survey data are not publicly available at this time due to an embargo period. However, all replication materials, including coding scripts and model specifications, are publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/8F9DE> and can be applied to the survey dataset once it is released online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EDM75> (upon completion of the project and, in any case, no earlier than 31 January 2027).

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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