

Rethinking Democratic Disconnect: Ontological Insecurity, Institutional Trust, and Democratic Support Across Generations

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Abstract

Adding to the literature on generational differences in democratic support, this article argues that younger citizens in consolidated European democracies are not inherently less democratic but may be affected differently by the rapid succession of “once-in-a-generation” crises during the past decade, including the Covid-19 pandemic, war on the European continent, economic volatility, welfare state transformation, and shifting geopolitical relations. We hypothesise that this condition of polycrisis reshapes the experiential foundations of democratic legitimacy. We examine how support for democracy is structured along generationally differentiated pathways, particularly in contexts of growing uncertainty about the future, understood here as ontological insecurity. Drawing on original survey data (the REDIRECT dataset) collected in 2025 across eight European countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the UK), we estimate country fixed-effects regression models with robust standard errors. The analysis examines how material insecurity and identity-related insecurity shape institutional trust, perceived societal threat, and democratic support. The findings challenge narratives of a generalised democratic disengagement or disconnect among younger generations. Institutional trust emerges as the principal mechanism linking insecurity to democratic support, whereas perceived societal threat plays only a limited role. Age moderates these relationships: experiences of social denigration are more strongly associated with democratic support among younger respondents, whereas institutional trust becomes progressively more important among older cohorts. Moreover, identity-related insecurity, operationalised as perceived social denigration, is associated with lower institutional trust but higher democratic support, suggesting that experiences of exclusion may undermine confidence in existing institutions without necessarily weakening attachment to democratic principles.

Keywords

democratic legitimacy; democratic support; generational differences; identity-related insecurity; institutional trust; ontological insecurity

1. Introduction

The 21st century has proven unexpectedly challenging for democracy. Long-settled assumptions, especially the stability of democratic legitimacy in consolidated democracies, have resurfaced as open empirical and theoretical questions. A key catalyst was Foa and Mounk's (2016) "democratic disconnect," which suggested that democratic deconsolidation processes may be occurring even in longstanding democracies. More recent works shift focus from abstract notions of democratic support to citizens' democratic attitudes, more specifically their willingness to uphold democratic norms and procedures. Foa and Mounk (2022), for instance, argue that, due to attitudinal shifts, a growing number of contemporary democracies risk transitioning from "clean" to "dirty" democracies, where formal competition persists, but political actors become increasingly willing to bend or undermine democratic rules and institutions. In this view, citizens' growing scepticism towards the legitimacy of contemporary democracies need not entail an outright rejection of the principle of democracy. Instead, it may point to changes in citizens' appraisal of the functioning of, and the need to protect, key democratic institutions and practices, such as political pluralism, democratic transparency, and judicial independence.

Although this ambiguity—continued support for the ideal of democracy alongside growing openness to illiberal alternatives—may leave room for democratic renewal, it also indicates a weakening of democracy's affective foundations, potentially making such renewal increasingly difficult (Bermeo, 2016; Foa & Romero-Vidal, 2025). Importantly, these developments appear unevenly distributed across countries and, especially, across age cohorts. Research suggests that democratic scepticism is particularly pronounced among younger cohorts, both compared to older groups and to earlier generations at comparable life stages (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Since the publication of Foa and Mounk's (2016) contribution, scholars have increasingly questioned not only whether democratic support is eroding in consolidated democracies, but also why such developments appear patterned by generations. More broadly, evidence on generational dynamics has renewed scholarly interest in the relationship between age, representation, and democratic legitimacy (Buchmeier & Vogt, 2024).

Much of this debate has centred on whether younger generations are indeed less supportive of democracy than older cohorts (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Foa & Mounk, 2016). At the same time, scholars continue to debate the extent and nature of democratic decline. While some scholars interpret recent developments as evidence of democratic deconsolidation, others argue that support for democracy has remained remarkably stable over time. Using evidence from 18 consolidated democracies, Wuttke et al. (2022) find little support for the claim that citizens have become systematically less supportive of democracy. Their findings suggest that concerns about democratic erosion should not automatically be equated with declining democratic legitimacy. Rather than asking whether support for democracy is collapsing, attention should therefore shift towards understanding the conditions under which democratic attitudes are strengthened, weakened, or transformed. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the mechanisms through which contemporary social conditions shape democratic attitudes. However, understanding these mechanisms is essential for explaining why democratic support may vary across generations.

In particular, it remains unclear how the succession of economic, political, and social crises that have characterised the past decade has affected citizens' orientations towards democracy. Indeed, citizens across Europe have experienced a rapid succession of "once-in-a-generation" disruptions, including the Covid-19

pandemic, war on the European continent, persistent economic volatility, housing insecurity, and transformations of welfare-state institutions. A growing body of research suggests that the political consequences of such crises are often mediated through citizens' subjective experiences of uncertainty and insecurity. Crises do not merely affect material conditions; they can also alter perceptions of stability, predictability, and control, thereby shaping how individuals relate to political institutions and democratic governance (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Kinnvall, 2017). Recent scholarship conceptualises these dynamics through the notion of ontological insecurity. Under conditions of prolonged uncertainty, citizens may become increasingly concerned about the stability, predictability, and continuity of their social and political environment. Because concerns about democratic deconsolidation have disproportionately focused on younger generations (cf. Foa & Mounk, 2016), the key question is not simply whether younger citizens are less democratic. Instead, we argue that the more relevant question is whether experiences of insecurity affect the foundations of democratic legitimacy, and whether these mechanisms operate differently across generations.

Before turning to these competing interpretations, it is important to clarify what we mean by democratic support. Throughout this article, it refers to citizens' overall orientation toward democracy as a legitimate form of governance. This orientation includes both normative attachment to democratic principles and broader evaluations of the legitimacy of democratic institutions and procedures. Following Easton (1975), we conceptualise democratic support as a form of diffuse regime support, referring to attachment to democracy as a legitimate political system, rather than evaluations of the performance of specific governments or institutions. Importantly, citizens do not necessarily attach the same meaning to democracy. Comparative research among adolescents demonstrates substantial variation in how democracy is understood and evaluated across countries, suggesting that expressions of democratic support may reflect different normative expectations and understandings of democratic governance (Quaranta, 2020). Generational differences in democratic attitudes should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of democratic disengagement but may also reflect differences in how democracy itself is conceptualised and evaluated. This conceptualisation differs from institutional trust and satisfaction with democratic performance, which are more contingent upon political events and government outputs (Claassen, 2020; Norris, 2011).

Recent scholarship on ontological insecurity provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics (Kinnvall, 2017; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022). Ontological insecurity refers to a perceived erosion of stability, continuity, and predictability in one's relationship with the social and political world. Under conditions of prolonged uncertainty, individuals may become more sensitive to threats, rely more heavily on simplified cognitive frames, and seek certainty through protective identities or stable sources of authority. Such processes may alter how citizens evaluate political institutions and democratic governance.

Prolonged insecurity may weaken confidence in political institutions that are expected to provide stability and protection, while simultaneously increasing sensitivity to perceived societal threats. Because democratic institutions derive part of their legitimacy from perceptions of responsiveness, effectiveness, and the capacity to address socio-economic challenges, perceived failures in these areas can erode institutional trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Van der Meer, 2010), and, in turn, also diffuse regime support (Easton, 1975). Institutional trust and perceived societal threat therefore constitute plausible attitudinal pathways through which ontological insecurity may affect democratic support.

While ontological insecurity is a broad theoretical construct, we target two dimensions that are particularly relevant in contemporary European democracies. The first is material insecurity, referring to concerns about economic and personal stability. The second is identity-related insecurity, referring to perceptions of recognition, belonging, and social status. Material insecurity captures concerns about economic survival and future prospects, whereas identity-related insecurity relates to concerns about social recognition and belonging. We focus on these dimensions because contemporary accounts of democratic disaffection consistently identify economic vulnerability and perceived status loss as two of the most prominent sources of insecurity in advanced democracies (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Haugsgjerd & Kumlin, 2020). Together, these dimensions capture both the material and symbolic foundations of ontological security. We argue that these forms of insecurity may shape democratic support through their relationship with institutional trust and perceived societal threat.

Rather than assuming that younger cohorts possess weaker democratic norms or a lower intrinsic attachment to democracy, we examine whether the conditions under which different generations have come of age shape the mechanisms through which democratic support is formed. Because political attitudes are often formed during impressionable years, experiences of insecurity during the transition to adulthood could have lasting consequences for democratic orientations (Dinas, 2013). Using original survey data collected in 2025 across eight European countries, we analyse whether the relationships between insecurity, institutional trust, perceived societal threat, and democratic support differ across age cohorts. By focusing on these mechanisms rather than on age differences alone, we seek to explain not whether younger citizens are less democratic, but how contemporary conditions of uncertainty influence the foundations of democratic legitimacy across generations.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

2.1. *Generational Change, Democratic Support, and the Transformation of Citizenship*

Concerns about declining democratic engagement among younger generations are longstanding. Since the late 20th century, scholars have documented lower turnout rates, weaker party attachment, and reduced conventional participation among youth (Adsett, 2003; Dalton, 2008; Norris, 2002). Some interpret these patterns as evidence of political disengagement or democratic fragility, while others view them as broader shifts in citizenship norms and repertoires of participation.

A key contribution to this literature is evidence that citizenship norms themselves have changed. Dalton (2008), for instance, shows that younger cohorts are less attached to “duty-based” norms of citizenship (e.g., voting, party membership) and more supportive of “engaged” or expressive norms emphasising autonomy, issue activism, and self-expression. Similarly, Norris (2002, 2004) describes a shift from a “politics of loyalties” to a “politics of choice,” captured in the metaphor of the democratic phoenix: conventional participation declines as alternative forms of engagement expand.

Research on youth participation supports this transformation thesis. Younger citizens increasingly engage through online networks, single-issue campaigns, and flexible forms of activism rather than through institutionalised channels (Delli Carpini, 2000; Hull et al., 2009; Loader, 2007; Matthes, 2022; Ohme, 2019; Vaughan et al., 2024). These developments suggest that younger cohorts are not necessarily disengaging from politics but may be adapting to an expanded and increasingly digital participatory environment.

Whether these changing forms of participation are accompanied by changes in democratic support remains less clear. Comparative research indicates that political engagement is diversifying rather than disappearing, yet the implications of these developments for democratic legitimacy remain contested (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). While declining conventional participation is empirically robust across many democracies (Adsett, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), the emergence of new participatory repertoires does not automatically translate into either stronger or weaker support for democracy.

This debate parallels broader discussions about democratic deconsolidation (Foa & Mounk, 2016). If younger citizens remain politically engaged but favour alternative repertoires of participation, declining confidence in institutions need not necessarily imply weaker support for democracy itself (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023; Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2024; Foa et al., 2020). Younger cohorts often maintain support for democracy as an ideal while expressing greater scepticism towards institutional performance. The conditions under which this combination emerges, however, remain insufficiently understood (Fernández Guzmán Grassi et al., 2024). Changes in participation therefore cannot be taken as direct evidence of either democratic decline or democratic renewal. Rather, they raise broader questions about how contemporary generations relate to democratic institutions and democratic legitimacy (Adsett, 2003).

Classical modernisation theory links democratic support to rising existential security and the spread of self-expression values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2014). From this view, declining trust, institutional scepticism, or protest activity may indeed reflect empowered citizens raising their expectations rather than withdrawing support. However, this view assumes steadily improving security across generations, an assumption that is increasingly at odds with contemporary conditions. Labour-market precarity, housing insecurity, climate-related uncertainty, and repeated societal crises suggest that younger cohorts now often face prolonged uncertainty (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Hickman et al., 2021). Rather than cumulative security, the formative years of many young people now appear increasingly characterised by ontological insecurity arising from prolonged uncertainty about future prospects, social status, and institutional reliability. To adequately understand the potential impact of these changing conditions, a framework is needed that links insecurity to democratic attitudes and specifies the mechanisms through which insecurity shapes democratic support. Instead of explaining generational differences solely through changing participatory repertoires, it is crucial to examine how experiences of (in)security shape democratic support.

2.2. Ontological Insecurity, Trust, Threat, and Conditional Democratic Legitimacy

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) identify existential security as a key precondition for the development and persistence of emancipative values. When individuals face economic precarity or vulnerability, social instability, or uncertain futures, support for such values weakens and openness to authoritarian preferences increases, undermining the normative basis of democratic commitment (Echeverría et al., 2019, 2022).

However, contemporary insecurity extends beyond material conditions to include uncertainty about institutional reliability, social continuity, and the predictability of collective life. This broader condition is captured by the concept of ontological insecurity. Drawing on Giddens (1991), ontological insecurity refers to the erosion of a stable sense of order and trust in the social world. Modern institutions typically sustain this stability by structuring expectations and providing narratives of protection. When institutional reliability is perceived as fragile, confidence in familiar frameworks weakens, generating diffuse anxiety and eroding trust (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020).

In contemporary democracies, insecurity takes at least two analytically distinct forms. First, material insecurity stems from actual or anticipated declines in health, income, or socio-economic stability. Such vulnerability undermines the socio-psychological foundations of diffuse institutional support (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Welzel, 2021). Second, identity-based insecurity arises from perceived social denigration and lack of recognition. Individuals who feel devalued due to salient identity characteristics, such as their religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, may experience uncertainty about their social standing and belonging within the broader social order. These threats to recognition can destabilise self-narratives and erode trust in institutions (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020; Honneth, 2004; Valente et al., 2018). While material insecurity concerns exposure to socio-economic decline, identity-based insecurity relates to one's status and belonging within the social order.

Although analytically distinct, these dimensions are interconnected. Both material and identity-based insecurity undermine the predictability and continuity that underpin ontological security. As socio-economic prospects decline and social recognition erodes, democratic institutions may appear less capable of guaranteeing protection, fairness, and inclusion. Under these conditions, diffuse support for democratic institutions may become increasingly conditional upon perceptions of institutional responsiveness and effectiveness. In this perspective, insecurity is expected to shape democratic support indirectly through the ways citizens evaluate institutions and interpret their social environment.

While ontological insecurity provides the overarching theoretical framework for this study, it remains a multidimensional concept that is difficult to capture directly through survey measures (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). We therefore focus on two empirical manifestations that are particularly relevant in contemporary democracies: material insecurity and identity-related insecurity, the latter operationalised as perceived social denigration. These dimensions should therefore be understood as empirical manifestations of ontological insecurity rather than direct measures of the concept itself.

Importantly, democratic support is conceptually distinct from institutional trust and may coexist with institutional scepticism. Individuals can endorse democracy as a normative ideal while remaining sceptical of its institutional performance. Evidence of a democratic “rally effect” illustrates this: external authoritarian threats can strengthen attachment to democracy even as institutional trust remains fragile (Foa & Romero-Vidal, 2025). This distinction between support for democracy and evaluations of democratic institutions is particularly important when examining the consequences of insecurity.

Ontological insecurity thus redirects attention from whether young citizens value democracy in the abstract to how they experience democratic institutions under sustained uncertainty. Empirically, this dynamic operates primarily through two attitudinal channels: institutional trust and perceived societal threat. Declining trust weakens diffuse support for representative institutions, while heightened threat sensitivity can activate preferences for order and authority. These processes are socially patterned, yet not reducible to material deprivation or vulnerability alone. Socio-economic position and civic resources structure political trust and engagement (Hoskin & Janmaat, 2019; Kavadias et al., 2021). Generational positionality further matters, as political orientations formed during impressionable years tend to crystallise into durable political dispositions. Today's younger cohorts have come of age amid overlapping “once-in-a-generation” crises—financial instability, migration conflicts, pandemic disruption, and geopolitical uncertainty—which may shape the experiential foundations of democratic legitimacy. While disentangling age, period, and cohort effects

remains difficult (Gougou & Mayer, 2012; Walczak et al., 2012), the key issue is institutional experience. Generational differences are therefore not interpreted as fixed cohort traits, but as differences in how insecurity, trust, and threat perceptions structure democratic evaluations under sustained conditions of uncertainty. Younger cohorts may therefore express weaker institutional support not because they reject democracy as an ideal, but because they encounter representative institutions as less predictable or less responsive. Democratic engagement and democratic scepticism can thus coexist.

In sum, we argue that democratic support is shaped by material and identity-based insecurity, institutional trust, perceived societal threat, and generational position within historically specific contexts of crisis. Perceived societal threat may be particularly consequential because threats increase demands for order, protection, and decisive authority, potentially reducing support for pluralistic and procedurally constrained forms of democratic governance (Hetherington & Suhay, 2011). We consider different pathways in which individual experiences (i.e., economic vulnerability and perceived social denigration) independently or jointly structure threat perceptions, institutional trust, and, in turn, democratic support. Institutional trust and perceived societal threat function as two key attitudinal pathways: while declining trust weakens diffuse support for representative institutions, heightened threat sensitivity can activate preferences for order and authority.

2.3. Hypotheses

Building on the foregoing theoretical framework, we advance a set of hypotheses concerning the associations between ontological insecurity, institutional trust, perceived societal threat, and democratic support, as well as their variation across age groups:

H1. If democratic legitimacy becomes more conditional under sustained uncertainty, both material and identity-based insecurity should weaken institutional trust.

H1a. Higher levels of material insecurity are associated with lower institutional trust.

H1b. Higher levels of identity-based insecurity are associated with lower institutional trust.

H2. Moreover, both dimensions of insecurity are expected to heighten threat sensitivity, albeit potentially through different mechanisms.

H2a. Higher levels of material insecurity are associated with higher perceived societal threat.

H2b. Higher levels of identity-based insecurity are associated with higher perceived societal threat.

H3. If insecurity undermines the perceived foundations of democratic legitimacy, it should also be associated with more critical evaluations of democracy.

H3a. Higher levels of material insecurity are negatively associated with democratic support.

H3b. Higher levels of identity-based insecurity are negatively associated with democratic support.

If institutional trust reflects confidence in the responsiveness and reliability of democratic institutions, higher levels of institutional trust should be associated with stronger democratic support.

H4. Higher levels of institutional trust are positively associated with democratic support.

H4a. Institutional trust mediates the relationship between material insecurity and democratic support.

H4b. Institutional trust mediates the relationship between identity-based insecurity and democratic support.

Conversely, heightened threat sensitivity may foster more conditional or authority-oriented orientations toward governance.

H5. Higher levels of perceived societal threat are negatively associated with democratic support.

H5a. Perceived societal threat mediates the relationship between material insecurity and democratic support.

H5b. Perceived societal threat mediates the relationship between identity-based insecurity and democratic support.

H6. The theoretical framework does not assume that younger cohorts are inherently less democratic. Rather, it posits that democratic evaluations may be more strongly conditioned by insecurity-related mechanisms among younger age groups.

H6a. The negative association between material insecurity and democratic support is stronger among younger cohorts.

H6b. The negative association between identity-based insecurity and democratic support is stronger among younger cohorts.

H7. The association between institutional trust and democratic support varies across age cohorts.

H8. The association between perceived societal threat and democratic support varies across age cohorts.

These hypotheses reflect the expectation that democratic legitimacy may be more performance-sensitive among age cohorts socialised under sustained conditions of crisis and uncertainty. The hypotheses translate this expectation into a set of testable propositions on insecurity, institutional trust, perceived threat, democratic support, and age.

3. Methodological Approach

This section describes the data, measurement strategy, and modelling approach used to test the hypotheses. We first outline the research design and cross-national data structure. We then present the operationalisation of the key and control variables. Second, we detail the country fixed-effects modelling

strategy employed to examine the associations between insecurity, trust, perceived threat, democratic support, and age.

3.1. Data and Research Design

The analyses are based on data from the REDIRECT project collected in 2025 across eight European countries. The survey was designed to examine democratic attitudes under contemporary crisis conditions.

The cross-national design allows us to analyse individual-level mechanisms while accounting for contextual variation across institutional environments. Given documented cross-country differences in democratic performance, institutional trust, and political culture, it is essential to isolate within-country associations rather than conflating them with between-country differences. To do so, the empirical analysis uses country fixed-effects regression models. This approach includes a full set of country dummy variables, thereby controlling for all time-invariant country-level characteristics—such as institutional design, political culture, historical legacies, and macroeconomic context. As a result, estimated coefficients reflect associations within countries rather than differences across them. Given the limited number of country units ($N = 8$), fixed effects provide a more conservative and robust approach than multilevel modelling, where higher-level variance components may be unstable (Allison, 2009; Huntington-Klein, 2025). All models therefore include country fixed effects and are estimated using robust standard errors.

3.2. Key Variables

The dependent variable is democratic support, measured using an index capturing respondents' evaluations of democracy and its functioning. The index reflects institutional assessments rather than abstract normative commitment alone. Higher values indicate stronger support for democracy. The independent variables are (a) perceptions of identity-related and material insecurity, (b) perceptions of societal threat, (c) levels of institutional trust, and (d) age.

Perceived insecurity is operationalised along two dimensions: material and identity-related insecurity. Material insecurity captures forward-looking concerns about personal vulnerability and is constructed as the mean of two items measuring agreement (0–10 scale) with the statements that one's health may worsen in the next 12 months and that one's financial situation may worsen in the next 12 months. Higher values indicate stronger perceived material insecurity. Identity-related insecurity is operationalised as perceived social denigration and is measured through three items capturing the extent to which respondents feel looked down upon because of their religion, ethnic or racial background, or sexual orientation. Responses are recorded on 11-point scales ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*). The scale is constructed as the mean of the three items and recoded such that higher values indicate higher levels of identity-related insecurity. Together, these two dimensions capture different experiential aspects of insecurity: anticipated material decline and perceived social denigration, both of which may undermine confidence in institutional protection and responsiveness. While material insecurity reflects anticipated vulnerability to future socio-economic decline, identity-related insecurity captures perceived threats to social recognition and belonging.

Perceived societal threat is measured using a five-item index capturing respondents' assessments of major societal risks. Specifically, respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they perceived Russia's

territorial ambitions, international terrorism, the weakening of democratic institutions, climate change, and pandemics as threats to society. Higher values indicate stronger perceptions of societal threat.

Institutional trust is operationalised through an index measuring confidence in representative political institutions, including parliament, government, and political parties. Higher values indicate greater trust.

The reliability of all multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Exploratory factor analyses and parallel analyses supported a one-factor solution for both the institutional trust and societal threat scales. For institutional trust, all factor loadings exceeded .63, and the first factor explained 67% of the variance. For societal threat, all retained items loaded positively on a single factor (loadings ranging from .41 to .69), explaining 31% of the variance. Moreover, parallel analysis supported the retention of a single-factor solution. Table 1 reports acceptable levels of internal consistency for all scales, although the societal threat scale exhibits somewhat lower reliability than the other measures. Given the conceptual breadth of the threat construct, encompassing geopolitical, environmental, public-health and democratic risks, somewhat lower internal consistency was expected and does not necessarily indicate poor construct validity.

Age is operationalised using categorical age groups. The analysis does not attempt to disentangle age, period, and cohort effects. Rather, age is treated as a moderator to assess whether the associations between insecurity-related mechanisms and democratic support differ across age categories within a shared contextual moment.

All models include controls for educational attainment, employment status, gender, and age-group indicators. Perceived government responsiveness is included in supplementary robustness analyses because of its conceptual proximity to institutional trust and democratic support. These control variables account for socio-demographic and attitudinal resources that may structure political trust, perceived threat, and democratic evaluations.

Table 1. Overview of descriptives.

Variable	Mean %	SD	min	max	miss	N	α	n-items
Democratic support (index)	6.735	2.199	0	10	466	14,751		1
Institutional trust (index)	3.875	2.477	0	10	268	14,949	.92	6
Societal threat (index)	7.154	1.578	0	10	103	15,114	.68	5
Insecurity material	5.287	2.889	0	10	906	14,311	.69	2
Insecurity identity related (perceived social denigration)	8.683	2.246	0	10	635	14,582	.80	3
Government responsiveness (index)	6.270	2.813	0	10	1003	14,214		1
Education: High (0: Low/Mid; 1: High)	32.54%		0	1	0	15,217		1
Employment status: Working (0: Not working; 1: Working)	56.96%		0	1	0	15,217		1
Gender: Female (0: Male; 1: Female)	52.76%		0	1	0	15,217		1

3.3. Modelling Strategy

The empirical strategy proceeds in five steps. First, we estimate baseline country fixed-effects models predicting democratic support as a function of material insecurity, identity-related insecurity, age-group indicators, and control variables (educational attainment, employment status, and gender). These models assess the overall association between insecurity and democratic support. Second, we estimate auxiliary models predicting institutional trust and perceived societal threat. These models examine whether material and identity-related insecurity are associated with lower institutional trust and higher threat perceptions, respectively. Third, we estimate extended models of democratic support including both attitudinal channels. Comparing coefficients across models allows us to assess whether the association between insecurity and democratic support is attenuated after accounting for institutional trust and perceived societal threat. Fourth, we formally examine mediation using regression-based mediation analyses. Separate mediation models are estimated for institutional trust and perceived societal threat. Indirect effects are calculated using nonparametric bootstrap procedures with 5,000 replications. Indirect effects were estimated using the product-of-coefficients approach, combining the effect of insecurity on the mediator (a-path) and the effect of the mediator on democratic support (b-path). This approach allows us to assess the extent to which the association between insecurity and democratic support operates through changes in institutional trust and perceived societal threat. Finally, interaction models are estimated to examine whether the associations between insecurity, trust, threat, and democratic support vary across age groups. The full estimation model additionally included interactions between age and the attitudinal mediators (trust and threat). Figure 1 summarises the pathways and causal mechanisms.

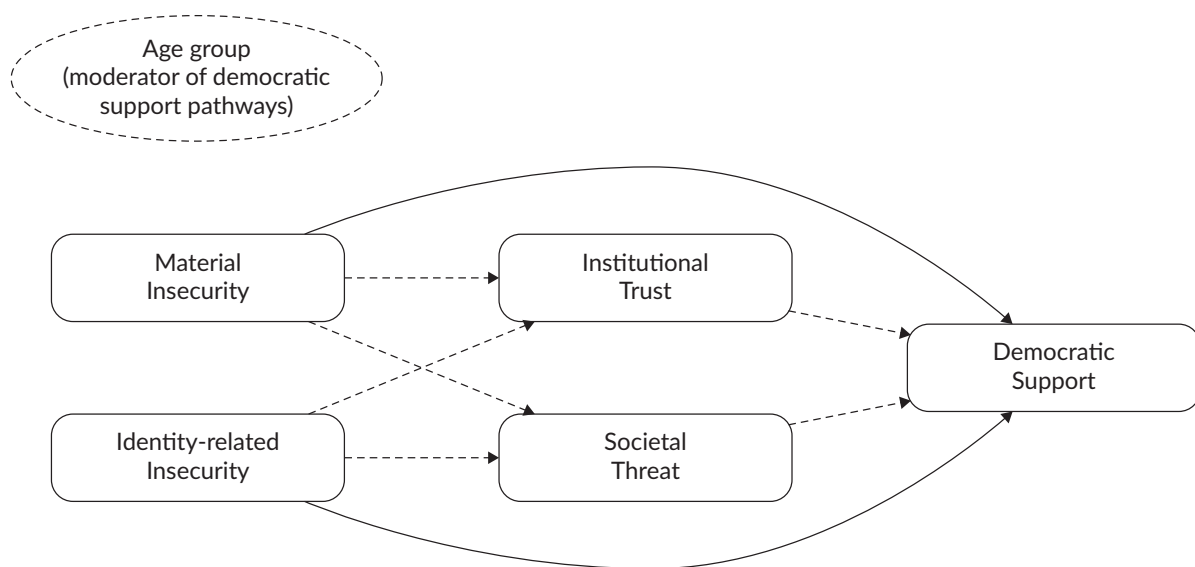


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking insecurity, institutional trust, societal threat, and democratic support.

Material insecurity and identity-related insecurity are expected to reduce institutional trust (H1a, H1b) and increase perceived societal threat (H2a, H2b). Both dimensions of insecurity are expected to be associated with democratic support (H3a, H3b), directly and indirectly through institutional trust (H4) and perceived societal threat (H5). Age group is modelled as a moderator of the associations between insecurity and democratic support (H6), institutional trust and democratic support (H7), and perceived societal threat and democratic support (H8).

Material and identity-related insecurity are expected to influence democratic support both directly and indirectly through institutional trust and perceived societal threat. Age is theorised to moderate the strength of these associations. Given the cross-sectional nature of the data, mediation analyses should be interpreted as evidence consistent with the proposed causal ordering rather than definitive proof of causal mediation.

Formally, the baseline fixed-effects specification for respondent i in country c is:

$$\text{DemSup}_{ic} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{InsecMat}_{ic} + \beta_2 \text{InsecID}_{ic} + \sum_{g=2}^5 \gamma_g \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} + \mathbf{X}'_{ic} \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

where DemSup_{ic} is democratic support, InsecMat_{ic} is material insecurity, InsecID_{ic} is identity-related insecurity, $\text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic}$ are age-group dummies (with the youngest group as the reference category), $\mathbf{X}_{ic}$ is a vector of individual-level controls (gender, education, employment status, perceived government responsiveness, and other covariates used in the analyses), μ_c are country fixed effects, and ε_{ic} is an idiosyncratic error term.

To probe the mechanism implied by the theoretical framework, we estimate an extended model adding trust and threat:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{DemSup}_{ic} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{InsecMat}_{ic} + \beta_2 \text{InsecID}_{ic} + \lambda_1 \text{Trust}_{ic} + \lambda_2 \text{Threat}_{ic} + \sum_{g=2}^5 \gamma_g \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} \\ & + \mathbf{X}'_{ic} \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{ic} \end{aligned}$$

Finally, to assess whether insecurity is more strongly linked to democratic support among younger cohorts (consistent with the “conditional legitimacy” argument under formative-period insecurity), we estimate interaction models:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{DemSup}_{ic} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{InsecMat}_{ic} + \beta_2 \text{InsecID}_{ic} \\ & + \sum_{g=2}^5 \left(\phi_{1g} \text{InsecMat}_{ic} \times \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} + \phi_{2g} \text{InsecID}_{ic} \times \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} \right) + \dots + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{ic} \end{aligned}$$

In parallel, we estimate auxiliary fixed-effects models for the two attitudinal channels:

$$\text{Trust}_{ic} = \alpha + \pi_1 \text{InsecMat}_{ic} + \pi_2 \text{InsecID}_{ic} + \sum_g \gamma_g \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} + \mathbf{X}'_{ic} \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

$$\text{Threat}_{ic} = \alpha + \rho_1 \text{InsecMat}_{ic} + \rho_2 \text{InsecID}_{ic} + \sum_g \gamma_g \text{AgeGroup}_{g,ic} + \mathbf{X}'_{ic} \boldsymbol{\theta} + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

These models allow us to examine whether both insecurity dimensions are systematically related to lower trust and higher threat perceptions, and whether trust and threat operate as mediating mechanisms linking insecurity to democratic support. All models use country fixed effects and robust standard errors. Because respondents are nested within countries, standard errors are conservatively adjusted using heteroskedasticity-robust estimators; in robustness checks, we additionally cluster standard errors by country.

4. Main Findings

4.1. Insecurity, Institutional Trust, and Perceived Threat

We begin by examining whether material and identity-based insecurity are associated with institutional trust and perceived societal threat, as proposed in H1 and H2. Table 2 summarises the associations between material insecurity, identity-related insecurity, and institutional trust.

In line with H1a, material insecurity is negatively associated with institutional trust: respondents reporting greater material insecurity express significantly lower confidence in political institutions. A one-point increase in material insecurity is associated with a decrease of approximately 0.18 points on the institutional trust scale. A comparable increase in identity-related insecurity is associated with a similarly sized decrease in institutional trust.

Table 2. Trust model: Country fixed effects (SE clustered by country).

Term	B	(SE)
Insecurity material	−0.178	(0.008) ***
Insecurity identity-based	−0.184	(0.011) ***
Education: High (0 = Low/Mid)	0.547	(0.043) ***
Employment status: Working (0 = Not working)	0.109	(0.048) *
Gender: Female (0 = Male)	−0.078	(0.040) *
Age 30–40 (Ref: < 30)	−0.382	(0.075) ***
Age 40–50 (Ref: < 30)	−0.416	(0.074) ***
Age 50–65 (Ref: < 30)	−0.340	(0.066) ***
Age 65+ (Ref: < 30)	0.125	(0.072)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Consistent with H1b, identity-based insecurity is also negatively associated with institutional trust. Together, these findings support the expectation that both anticipated material decline and experiences of social denigration undermine one of the core attitudinal foundations of democratic legitimacy.

Turning to threat perceptions in Table 3, the picture is more mixed for H2. Consistent with H2a, material insecurity is positively associated with perceived societal threat. Respondents experiencing greater material insecurity are more likely to perceive society as threatened and unstable. Contrary to H2b, identity-related insecurity is not significantly associated with perceived societal threat once controls and country fixed effects are considered. This suggests that identity-related insecurity is more strongly connected to institutional trust than to generalized perceptions of societal threat.

Taken together, these findings suggest that material insecurity affects core attitudinal channels proposed in the theoretical framework, whereas identity-related insecurity primarily operates through institutional trust. Notably, both dimensions of insecurity exhibit substantial negative associations with institutional trust. Standardized models (not shown) indicate that the association is somewhat stronger for material insecurity ($\beta = -.21$) than for identity-related insecurity ($\beta = -.17$), although both effects remain substantively meaningful. Experiences of social denigration therefore emerge as an important correlate of institutional

Table 3. Threat model: Country fixed effects (SE clustered by country).

Term	B	(SE)
Insecurity material	0.083	(0.006) ***
Insecurity identity-based	0.010	(0.007)
Education: High (0 = Low/Mid)	0.049	(0.031)
Employment status: Working (0 = Not working)	0.005	(0.036)
Gender: Female (0 = Male)	0.347	(0.029) ***
Age 30–40 (Ref: < 30)	–0.090	(0.054)
Age 40–50 (Ref: < 30)	–0.099	(0.055)
Age 50–65 (Ref: < 30)	0.084	(0.049)
Age 65+ (Ref: < 30)	0.367	(0.052) ***

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

distrust alongside concerns about future material vulnerability. This pattern suggests that the two dimensions of insecurity are not functionally equivalent and may shape democratic evaluations through partially distinct mechanisms.

4.2. Insecurity and Democratic Support

We next examine whether insecurity is directly associated with democratic support. Table 4 presents the baseline country fixed-effects model predicting democratic support.

Table 4. Democratic support: Total effects, country fixed effects (SE clustered by country).

Term	B	(SE)
Insecurity material	–0.078	(0.006) ***
Insecurity identity-based	0.227	(0.009) ***
Education: High (0 = Low/Mid)	1.040	(0.036) ***
Employment status: Working (0 = Not working)	–0.343	(0.041) ***
Gender: Female (0 = Male)	–0.230	(0.034) ***
Age 30–40 (Ref: < 30)	–0.339	(0.068) ***
Age 40–50 (Ref: < 30)	–0.293	(0.067) ***
Age 50–65 (Ref: < 30)	–0.018	(0.060)
Age 65+ (Ref: < 30)	0.070	(0.064)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Consistent with H3a, material insecurity is negatively associated with democratic support. Respondents who express greater concerns about their future health and financial situation report significantly lower levels of support for democracy. This relationship remains statistically significant after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics and country fixed effects, suggesting that material insecurity is systematically linked to more critical evaluations of democratic performance across national contexts.

The results for identity-related insecurity are more complex. While the theoretical framework anticipated a negative relationship between insecurity and democratic support, the observed association does not appear

to operate through the same mechanisms as material insecurity. As shown in Section 4.1, identity-related insecurity is strongly associated with lower levels of institutional trust but is unrelated to perceptions of societal threat. This suggests that experiences of social denigration and exclusion may influence democratic evaluations primarily through perceptions of institutional recognition and responsiveness rather than through broader concerns about societal instability.

Taken together, the findings indicate that different forms of insecurity are associated with democratic support through distinct pathways. Material insecurity appears to affect both institutional trust and societal threat perceptions, whereas identity-related insecurity is primarily linked to institutional trust. These results provide initial support for the argument that insecurity can undermine democratic support, while also suggesting that not all forms of insecurity operate through identical psychological mechanisms.

The particularly strong association between perceived social denigration and institutional trust points to the potential importance of recognition-based processes in shaping democratic evaluations. These findings merit further attention in the mediation analyses presented below.

4.3. Institutional Trust and Threat Perceptions as Correlates of Democratic Support

Next, we assess the role of institutional trust and perceived societal threat in shaping democratic support. Table 5 first examines the direct influence of insecurity, both material and identity-based, on democratic support.

Contrary to expectations, identity-related insecurity is positively associated with democratic support while being negatively associated with institutional trust (see Table 2). Moreover, this association does not disappear after introducing the proposed mediators. If anything, the coefficient becomes slightly stronger, suggesting that the relationship cannot be explained by reduced institutional trust or heightened perceptions of societal threat.

Table 5. Democratic support: Mediators, country fixed effects (SE clustered by country).

Term	B	(SE)
Insecurity material	−0.054	(0.007) ***
Insecurity identity-based	0.254	(0.010) ***
Trust (index)	0.134	(0.008) ***
Threat (index)	−0.007	(0.010)
Education: High (0 = Low/Mid)	0.964	(0.036) ***
Employment status: Working (0 = Not working)	−0.363	(0.041) ***
Gender: Female (0 = Male)	−0.223	(0.034) ***
Age 30–40 (Ref: < 30)	−0.295	(0.069) ***
Age 40–50 (Ref: < 30)	−0.229	(0.068) ***
Age 50–65 (Ref: < 30)	0.030	(0.060)
Age 65+ (Ref: < 30)	0.052	(0.064)

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

One possible interpretation is that experiences of exclusion undermine confidence in existing institutions while leaving broader democratic commitments intact. Alternatively, individuals who experience social denigration may place greater value on democratic norms of equality, recognition, and inclusion. While the present data do not allow us to adjudicate between these explanations, the results indicate that identity-related insecurity operates differently from material insecurity and cannot be understood solely as a source of democratic disaffection.

To examine whether these associations operate through institutional trust and perceived societal threat, Table 5 introduces trust and threat as potential mediators into the democratic support model.

Table 6 summarises the estimated indirect effects obtained through the product-of-coefficients approach.

Table 6. Democratic support: Mediation product.

Pathway	a	b	Indirect Effect
Insecurity material → Trust → Democratic support	−0.178	0.134	−0.024
Insecurity identity-based → Trust → Democratic support	−0.184	0.134	−0.025
Insecurity material → Threat → Democratic support	0.083	−0.007	−0.001
Insecurity identity-based → Threat → Democratic support	0.010	−0.007	−0.000

The mediation analysis indicates that institutional trust constitutes the principal pathway linking insecurity to democratic support. Individuals who express greater confidence in political institutions also report higher levels of democratic support. This finding reinforces the argument that institutional trust functions as a key attitudinal foundation of democratic legitimacy. Institutional trust emerges as the central mediating mechanism. By contrast, the indirect effects operating through societal threat are negligible. Taken together, these findings provide support for H4 but not for H5.

The positive association between identity-related insecurity and democratic support constitutes an unexpected finding. It suggests a distinction between support for democratic institutions and support for democratic principles. Given the theoretical expectations developed in this study, this result warrants further consideration. In particular, it raises questions about whether experiences of social denigration may reinforce support for democratic ideals of equality, inclusion, and recognition even while simultaneously eroding confidence in existing institutions.

4.4. Generational Differences and Democratic Support

We next examine whether the relationships between insecurity, trust, threat, and democratic support differ across age cohorts, as proposed in H6–H8. For this, we use an interaction effect with fixed effects (by country). To clarify the interaction effects, we also present the simple slopes in Table 7 (full model in the Supplementary File). These parameters show the specific slopes for the indicators by age group.

The results provide only partial support for the expectation that insecurity-related mechanisms operate more strongly among younger cohorts. The interaction terms involving material insecurity are uniformly weak and statistically insignificant, providing little support for H6a. By contrast, the relationship between identity-related insecurity and democratic support varies systematically across age groups. The positive

association observed among younger respondents becomes progressively weaker among older cohorts, suggesting that experiences of social denigration are particularly consequential for democratic evaluations among younger citizens.

Table 7. Simple slopes by age group for insecurity, trust, and threat (country fixed-effects models).

Age group	Identity insecurity	Material insecurity	Trust	Threat
< 30	.300 ***	−.062 ***	−.029	−.020
30–40	.284 ***	−.064 ***	.053 **	.003
40–50	.244 ***	−.065 ***	.132 ***	.022
50–65	.221 ***	−.037 ***	.193 ***	−.016
65+	.161 ***	−.034 **	.219 ***	−.027

The findings for institutional trust reveal a similarly important age pattern. While institutional trust is positively associated with democratic support among middle-aged and older respondents, this association is absent among the youngest cohort. Indeed, the relationship between trust and democratic support is weakest among the youngest age group and increases steadily across successive age categories. These results provide support for H7 and suggest that democratic support among older citizens is more strongly anchored in evaluations of institutional performance.

In contrast, no comparable age differences emerge for perceived societal threat. Neither the main effect of threat nor its interactions with age groups attain substantive significance. Consequently, H8 is not supported.

Taken together, the interaction results reveal a striking age gradient. Experiences of social denigration are most strongly associated with democratic support among younger respondents, whereas institutional trust becomes progressively more important among older cohorts. Rather than exhibiting lower democratic support systematically, younger respondents appear to evaluate democracy through somewhat different attitudinal mechanisms. These findings suggest that age moderates how citizens relate to democracy, but not necessarily the extent to which they support it. Democratic support among younger citizens appears to be more strongly connected to experiences of social recognition and exclusion, whereas among older citizens it is increasingly anchored in evaluations of institutional trustworthiness.

5. Discussion

Overall, the findings challenge alarmist narratives of democratic deconsolidation among younger generations and are consistent with recent evidence suggesting that democratic support in consolidated democracies has remained more resilient than often assumed (Wuttke et al., 2022). Younger respondents do not exhibit uniquely weak democratic support. Rather, age moderates how individuals relate to democracy. Among younger cohorts, experiences of social denigration are more strongly associated with democratic support, while institutional trust becomes progressively more important among older respondents. This suggests that younger citizens may evaluate democracy less through institutional confidence and more through experiences of recognition, inclusion, and exclusion.

The results also demonstrate that insecurity does not operate through a single, uniform mechanism. Material insecurity is consistently associated with lower institutional trust, higher perceptions of societal threat, and

weaker democratic support. Identity-related insecurity, operationalised as perceived social denigration and exclusion, follows a more complex pattern. It strongly predicts lower institutional trust but is not consistently linked to heightened societal threat perceptions. Strikingly, it is positively associated with democratic support despite being negatively associated with institutional trust. This finding points to an important distinction between evaluations of democratic institutions and attachment to democratic principles. Experiences of social denigration may undermine confidence in existing institutions without diminishing support for democracy as such. One interpretation is that citizens who feel denigrated place greater value on democratic norms of equality, protection, recognition, and inclusion, even as they distrust the institutions expected to uphold these principles. It should be noted, however, that our measure captures experiences of social denigration and exclusion rather than a broader conception of ontological insecurity.

A central finding concerns the role of institutional trust. While both material insecurity and, to a lesser extent, identity-related insecurity are associated with heightened perceptions of societal threat, threat perceptions themselves do not significantly predict democratic support once institutional trust is considered. Institutional trust therefore emerges as the principal pathway linking insecurity to democratic support. Citizens do not appear to withdraw support from democracy simply because they perceive society as threatened. Rather, democratic support is more closely tied to whether they trust political institutions to respond effectively to insecurity, vulnerability, and exclusion.

Our findings have important implications for understanding generational change in democratic attitudes. Declining institutional trust or more critical evaluations among younger citizens should not automatically be interpreted as democratic apathy or rejection of democracy. Younger cohorts appear to relate to democracy through somewhat different mechanisms, with experiences of social recognition and exclusion playing a particularly important role. This calls for a more cautious interpretation of claims about a generational democratic disconnect. The issue may be less that younger cohorts are becoming less democratic than that the experiential foundations of democratic legitimacy differ across generations.

The study also has limitations that point to several avenues for future research. First, the analysis does not disentangle age, period, and cohort effects. Because the study relies on cross-sectional data, it cannot determine whether observed age differences reflect life-cycle dynamics, historical period effects, or enduring cohort characteristics. Longitudinal panel studies would provide a stronger basis for understanding how democratic attitudes evolve and how insecurity shapes these trajectories over time.

Second, the findings indicate that younger citizens should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Future research should examine how intra-generational inequalities related to social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and educational background interact with experiences of insecurity and recognition. The unexpected positive association between identity-related insecurity and democratic support warrants particular attention, as it may reflect forms of democratic attachment rooted in demands for recognition, equality, and protection.

Third, qualitative and ethnographic approaches could complement survey research by examining how citizens experience insecurity, trust, recognition, and democratic belonging in everyday life. Such work could help clarify whether perceived social denigration strengthens democratic support because democracy is seen as a source of protection and recognition, or whether it reflects forms of political consciousness and

practical reasoning that remain insufficiently captured by existing survey instruments. In particular, the combination of lower institutional trust and higher democratic support among respondents experiencing greater social denigration deserves closer scrutiny. The present data do not allow us to determine whether this pattern reflects stronger attachment to democratic norms of equality and inclusion, a distinction between evaluations of institutions and evaluations of democracy itself, or alternative understandings of political representation, recognition, and citizenship. Qualitative research could provide valuable insight into how individuals experiencing social denigration understand democracy, institutional legitimacy, and political belonging.

Finally, theoretical discussions of insecurity and democratic crisis remain largely grounded in Western, particularly European and North American, contexts. Expanding these frameworks to include postcolonial and Global South perspectives would deepen understanding of how insecurity, recognition, and political uncertainty vary across diverse historical and institutional settings.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to contribute to the literature on generational differences in democratic support by reconsidering the relationship between age, insecurity, and democratic attitudes. Drawing on existing research, we argued that younger citizens in consolidated European democracies are not inherently less democratic, but that their relationship to democracy is shaped by contemporary conditions of uncertainty and polycrisis. To verify this claim, we examined how material insecurity and identity-related insecurity shape institutional trust, perceived societal threat, and affect democratic support across age groups.

This article makes three main contributions: First, it shifts the analytical focus from whether younger cohorts are less democratic to how democratic support is formed under conditions of crisis and uncertainty, conceptualising insecurity as a key mechanism linking vulnerability, recognition, and uncertainty to democratic evaluations. Second, it moves beyond descriptive age comparisons by modelling the pathways through which insecurity is associated with institutional trust, threat perceptions, and democratic support, treating generational differences not as attitudinal deficits but as variations in how citizens relate to the institutional and affective foundations of democracy. Third, using cross-national survey data from eight European countries, it examines whether these pathways operate similarly across national contexts, accounting for country-level differences through fixed-effects models.

The findings show that the attitudinal foundations of democratic support differ across age groups. Among younger respondents, democratic support is more strongly associated with experiences of social denigration, whereas among older respondents it is increasingly anchored in institutional trust.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that concerns about democratic resilience should focus less on generational change as such and more on the social and institutional conditions that shape citizens' sense of security, recognition, and trust. Democratic support appears most vulnerable not when citizens perceive threats in general, but when they lose confidence in political institutions' ability to respond to insecurity and exclusion.

Future research could build on these findings using survey-experimental designs that directly test the proposed mechanisms. One promising avenue would be to experimentally vary exposure to cues of material

insecurity, identity-related social denigration, and institutional responsiveness. This would clarify whether perceptions and experiences of exclusion strengthen democratic support because democracy is seen as a source of protection and recognition, or whether this reflects a broader distinction between evaluations of existing institutions and attachment to democratic ideals. Experimental approaches could also assess whether institutional responsiveness moderates the effects of insecurity, thereby providing more direct evidence regarding the pathways linking insecurity, recognition, institutional trust, and democratic support.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by John Erik Fossum (University of Oslo).

Data Availability

At the time of publication, REDIRECT survey data are not publicly available due to an embargo period. All replication materials, including coding scripts and model specifications, are publicly available at https://osf.io/2hqxr/overview?view_only=608f265e23db4a3f8282b37e7ba0203f 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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