

Beyond Paradigm War: Exploring the Discursive Space of Contemporary Political Culture Research

Stylios Ioannis Tzagkarakis ¹  and Martin Neumann ² 

¹ Department of Sociology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

² Fachbereich für Controlling und Strategische Unternehmensführung, Alpen Adria University of Klagenfurt, Germany

Correspondence: Stylios Ioannis Tzagkarakis (stzagkarakis@soc.uoa.gr)

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Abstract

This issue brings together theoretical and empirical contributions that reflect the methodological, thematic, and conceptual diversity of contemporary political culture research. Moving beyond older divisions between quantitative and qualitative approaches, the issue demonstrates how political culture can be studied through multiple lenses, including political psychology, discourse theory, computational social science, feminist theory, regionalism, youth studies, trust research, memory studies, and digital activism. The contributions address key challenges of contemporary politics, such as democratic backsliding, populism, political trust, national identity, gender equality, migration narratives, digital communication, artificial intelligence, political participation, and regional political cultures. Collectively, the articles highlight the continuing relevance of political culture as an analytical framework for understanding how values, narratives, institutions, identities, and social practices shape political life. This thematic issue also reveals emerging convergences in the field, particularly the growing role of digital and computational methods, the influence of cultural and experimental political psychology, and renewed attention to democratic societies and their internal tensions. Overall, the issue seeks to stimulate further reflection on the evolving boundaries, methods, and future directions of political culture research.

Keywords

comparative politics; governance; multidisciplinary; political culture; politics

1. Introduction

This thematic issue brings together a rich array of theoretical reflections and empirical studies on political culture, with both quantitative and qualitative research designs demonstrating the wide variety of

contemporary research on the matter. Current research in the field explores the connections between political ideas, discourses, and actions within their broader cultural and social contexts, as well as the impact of both internal and external factors on the national setting (Panagiotidou & Chadjipadelis, 2025), and aims to address pressing issues and challenges in contemporary politics, including but not limited to various forms of democracy and the tensions within them (Gessler & Wunsch, 2025; Wunsch et al., 2025), the construction and representation of national identities (Austers et al., 2024; Bearce et al., 2023), levels of trust or distrust in local, national, and supranational institutions, the origins and lasting effects of political violence (Piazza, 2023), as well as the role of AI (Battista, 2024; Jungherr, 2023; König, 2023).

These issues encompass recent developments such as the rise of populist movements and the influence of populism on political landscapes (Kriesi, 2025; Wajner et al., 2024), the complex crises facing contemporary democracies, the growth of nationalist groups and identity politics, and the rise of AI usage in political communication (Battista, 2024; Jungherr, 2023). To study these critical matters, interdisciplinary approaches are vital, as they offer the opportunity for a comprehensive examination of diverse yet significant factors influencing political culture.

With these considerations as background, this thematic issue brings together 14 contributions for further development of contemporary theory and research on political culture. The contributions touch a broad spectrum of issues, ranging from voter research, political trust, and support to memorization, and use diverse methodological approaches—including the use of computational social sciences in political culture research, which reflects the increasing role of the digital realm in this research area.

While all articles are unique, there are several points where many contributions seem to converge: (a) some of them (Broka, 2026; Farneti, 2026; Kamatayeva & Peral, 2026; Stals, 2026; Liang, 2026; Menzer & Schweizer, 2026) rely more or less explicitly on findings of experimental and cultural political psychology; (b) a quite substantial part of the contributions (Broka, 2016; Kamatayeva & Peral, 2016; Stals, 2016; Tzagkarakis et al., 2026) focus on young citizens, (c) most contributions—except D'April (2026) that studies state's language policy—are focused on the state's constituents rather than on political actors; (d) with the exception of Liang (2026), studying Chinese citizens, many of them focus on democracies, which follows the focus of the very early studies on political culture by Almond and Verba (1965)—in this issue, and in research on political culture generally, seems that research focusing on non-democratic regimes is in retreat. This is an opportunity for future research to reflect on why this appears to be the case; and, finally, (e) empirical studies dominate theoretical reflections, even though these can be found also in Piccin (2026) and Farneti (2026).

2. Contributions to This Thematic Issue

Focusing on the specifics of each contribution, Kamatayeva and Peral (2026) show why younger citizens participate less in elections than older citizens. Using a quantitative approach to analyzing time series, they question the common explanation of a lack of political interest among youth. They emphasize the role of institutional arrangements in the age gap in voter turnout.

Piccin (2026) provides a synthesis of post-structuralist discourse theory, affect theory, and narrative political theory to analyse how political actors deploy crisis narratives of migration. In this article, the author

develops a classification of three narrative mechanisms in the field of the tension between solidarity and exclusion. The narratives called “security scripting,” “affective national belonging,” and “transnational vulnerability framing” contrast state-centric narratives with counter-narratives. The article contributes to understanding how solidarity is narratively produced, contested, and reimagined.

D'Aprile (2026) compares the cases of France and Japan to investigate the states' politics in promoting their national language as a tool for projecting national identity. Both states apply different policies: While the mobilisation of the French language explicitly advances a universal goal, Japan uses the promotion of the national language as a means to gain the trust of foreign audiences.

Compared to Kamatayeva and Peral (2026), Tzagkarakis et al. (2026) examine a different, however important, aspect of youth culture: They study employability culture for graduates in the humanities and social sciences. By zooming from the international context to Greece and finally the employment chances of graduates at the University of Crete, the study provides an exploration of the theoretical foundations of employability culture for examining the public policies designed to enhance it.

Jing and Zhang (2026) dive into the digital world of social media. It investigates digital resistance by using the TikTok ban as a case study. It questions the widespread pessimism regarding the impact of social media on political culture by tracing the organic evolution of a media activism event in which digital resilience deepened into a form of affective solidarity. Findings show that through micro-level, depoliticized, everyday communicative practices, the openness and inclusivity of the internet can be reactivated by a transnational cosmopolitan discursive community of TikTok refugees and RedNote natives.

Stals' (2026) contribution complements Kamatayeva and Peral's (2026) investigation of youth participation in elections: In a cross-national study, Stals (2026) investigates “How Adolescents Evaluate Political Institutions and Develop Political Trust.” In a quantitative research design, the study enhances scientific knowledge about evaluative mechanisms among adolescents, who are still maturing cognitively and politically. Results of a cross-national test reveal that political trust among emerging citizens is shaped not only by interpersonal socialization but also by adolescents' own critical appraisal of the institutional context. This finding highlights the importance of cognitive and normative resources for the development of political trust.

Farneti (2026) advances a theoretical perspective on political culture by reflecting on “Prefigurative Democracy and Cultural Co-Production.” The article objects to the treatment of political culture as a sociological fact by bridging normative political theory and cultural sociology. It argues that culture performs constitutive work in shaping democratic imagination as a medium through which new values, solidarities, and institutional possibilities emerge.

Broka (2026) concludes the number of contributions to younger citizens. This article examines European political youth culture. A particular motivation for the research is that while policies in Europe have long aimed to enhance political, social, and economic inclusion, young people remain vulnerable across welfare dimensions. Her quantitative study examines the relationship between youth welfare regimes and political culture. While findings indicate that political culture among youth is multidimensional, satisfaction with welfare state institutions is the strongest predictor of political trust.

Lefkofridi et al. (2026) emphasize a feminist perspective on political culture in an Austrian case study. A mixed-methods approach reveals mixed findings: Focus groups show that Austrians support both democracy and gender equality. However, survey analysis dissects the co-existence of distinct gendered political cultures. In particular, a fragmented democratic culture reveals vulnerability to anti-gender equality campaigns that accompany democratic backsliding.

Uyar et al. (2026) contribute to scholarship on political consumerism, youth political engagement, and digital activism. They examine how young people discursively frame their participation in consumer boycotts related to the Gaza conflict within digital environments. Using posts in X as data, analyzed with methods from computational social science for analyzing big data, the article indicates that motivational frames play a crucial role in amplifying political meanings and facilitating collective alignment in digital spaces. Thereby, they demonstrate how consumer boycotts function as a discursive form of political participation for young people.

Menzer and Schweizer (2026) focus on “The Underlying Structure of Political Support” because the contemporary political landscape is characterized by declining trust and satisfaction with democracy. Using various quantitative methods, Menzer and Schweizer find that indicators form a one-dimensional latent trait. Beyond structural insights, their research provides practical guidance for deciding between political support indicators.

Like Uyar et al. (2026), Jumle and Makhortykh (2026) also apply methods of computational social science. This article examines a decade-long collection of tweets to examine the question of whether social media can serve as memory sites. Computational text analysis reveals the characteristics of the Holocaust memory discourse, for which the authors coin the term “protean memorialization”.

Liang (2026) builds on the insight that trust is easier destroyed than built. However, evidence for this finding comes from Western, individualistic contexts. To investigate whether it can be generalized, the author undertakes an online experiment in China, which confirms the results from Western contexts also in the more collectively oriented cultural context in China.

Finally, Henderson’s (2026) contribution questions the traditional assumption of political culture research that political culture only exists on the state level. This research draws on the rich body of literature on regionalism and regional political cultures to develop an approach to identify different territorial forms of regional political culture. The article argues that there are two types of regional political cultures, denoted as hard and soft varieties, including the element of subjective perception, which can offer a meaningful form of boundary-making around regional political cultures. This complements Jing and Zhang’s (2026) investigation of transnational digital publics by a perspective below the state level.

We hope that the reader gains fruitful insights from this collection of research on the various themes of contemporary research on political culture and that it will stimulate advancement of the field.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis is an adjunct lecturer at the Department of Sociology of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He is also a political scientist and has worked as a principal researcher on numerous European and national research projects. He has published over 60 scientific studies.



Martin Neumann is a lecturer at the Alpen Adria University Klagenfurt. After obtaining a PhD in philosophy at the University of Osnabrueck, Germany, he worked for several years as lecturer for social science and a research associate in several nationally and European funded research projects at the interface between sociology and politics.