Fractures in the Fabric of Democracy?

Change and Continuity in Public Opinion in Contemporary Europe

OSKAR HULTIN BÄCKERSTEN
Abstract


Is representative democracy in Europe becoming undermined by developments in public opinion? This dissertation addresses this overarching question, by studying the development over time of (i) ideological polarization; (ii) the degree to which vote choices are structured by political attitudes; and (iii) the degree to which parties are internally congruent in political opinion across levels. Public opinion is understood as the metaphorical ‘fabric’ of representative democracy, where conjectures to the fact of a fracturing dynamic are plausible and recurrent in academic and public debate. Thus, this thesis contributes with studies in three particular areas, regarding the interaction between political attitudes and the political system. The studies show that there have not been dramatic ruptures in these aspects of political opinion. Neither polarization, disintegration, nor incongruence are the most appropriate words to characterize developments in general. Some changes are taking place, in particular as attitudes on immigration are becoming more important in all aspects considered.

Paper I studies political polarization in a qualified sense, focusing on ideological views among the electorates of European democracies. The paper presents a conceptualization and measurement of ideological polarization that is partly novel, and proceeds to investigate patterns across countries and time.

Paper II studies the degree to which vote choices in contemporary European democracies are connected to political views, in particular left-right placements, among electorates in Europe. This degree is gradually declining in most cases, and attitudes on secondary dimensions are generally rising in importance. In particular, the left-right scale is subsuming more issues than before, while issue attitudes are becoming gradually more important for explaining vote choices independently as well.

Paper III studies intra-party ideological congruence, focusing on the case of Sweden. Here, the framework of May’s Law is utilized to formulate hypotheses of the structure of intra-party opinion. The study finds that May’s Law is supported in the Swedish case, with some qualifications, in contrast to recent studies. Additionally, there is not a sharp decline in opinion representation in the Swedish parties. Amidst declining levels of engagement in the parties, they still manage to represent the political opinions of their electorates relatively well over time.

The general conclusion from the studies in the dissertation is that what we are seeing is not a wholesale transformation of representative democracy in these aspects, rather, there are signs of gradual change amid a general pattern of stability.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Representative Democracy, Political Polarization, Political Attitudes, Intra-Party Opinion

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URN urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-517433 (http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uu:diva-517433)
To my grandmothers Ruth and Lydia,
two of my first teachers
List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.


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Introduction

It has become a commonplace to suggest that democracy, in particular with emphasis on the representative form of democracy, is in a state of crisis. As Brito Viera and Runciman (2008) suggest, we may be living in a moment that is ‘post-representative’. Yet, the very term representative democracy is all but a pleonasm since it is arguably the only democratic game in town. Thus, it is no surprise that the notion that contemporary democracy is “exhausted” (Tormey, 2014) is widespread in the academic literature. According to Crouch (2004), democratic politics have been eroded to the extent that we now live in “Post-Democracy”. On Hay’s (2007) account, “we” have started to “hate politics”. In Mair’s (2013, p. 1) bleak words, “the age of party democracy has passed”. Della Porta (2013) asks the question whether democracy can be saved from its contemporary challenges. The list of doomsayers goes on.

It is against this background that this dissertation is set, where the claim that democracy is threatened is coming from numerous angles simultaneously. In 2022, the magazine Foreign Policy claimed in bold headline that “Democracy is Broken” (Agrawal, 2022). Regarding citizens’ views, Foa et al. (2020) find that they, in recent times, are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with democracy almost everywhere, amounting to a “state of malaise” (p. 2). Concomitantly, democracy globally is on the back foot, with trends of “backsliding” and “autocratization” observed by comparative scholarship (e.g. Papada et al., 2023). The rise of populism in Europe (e.g. Mudde, 2013), as well as elsewhere (Norris, 2020), is predicated on this very idea – that democracy is failing ‘ordinary citizens’, and that the populists can provide the direly needed voice of the people. As Donald Trump brazenly claimed in his 2016 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention: “I AM YOUR VOICE [sic]” (Politico 2016). Simultaneously, populist parties threaten to undermine the very institutions of democracy, in an “ambivalent relationship” between populism and democracy (Kaltwasser, 2012).

Thus, the notion that democracy is in a fatal crisis has gained considerable traction recently. It should be noted that this state seems to plague extant instantiations of democracy everywhere, across time and space – it is a perennial crisis. As Merkel (2014) notes, “[d]emocracy seems to be
inextricably linked to crisis” (p. 11). As has been noted for decades, contradictions within the structures of modern democratic societies may serve to undermine its own foundations (e.g. Offe, 1984, see also Rosanvallon, 2006). The diagnosis of the crisis of democracy appears to follow a conjectural pattern, as suggested e.g. by the notion of “waves of democracy” and the boom of the 1990's (Huntington, 1991). The present crisis narrative is pervasive, but there is always room for nuance. As Kriesi (2020) suggests regarding developments in Europe, there is “reason for concern, but no reason to dramatize” (p. 237). Empirical scholarship generally finds patterns along these lines, suggesting a more cautious interpretation (Merkel, 2014, p. 19f). Nevertheless, influential accounts suggest that we are living in times when democracy “dies” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) or “ends” (Runciman, 2018). Regardless of where one looks, democracies of today seem to be in a fragile state, if not fatally threatened.

Threatened from Within

The aim of this dissertation is naturally not to assess all aspects of this suggested crisis or the objections to some aspects of it. However, the three studies contribute to this general topic – whether the functioning of representative democracy is threatened. In particular, the focus is on aspects of public opinion that are essential to the functioning of representative democracy. That representative democracy requires active participation and support by its citizens to function well is a sine qua non, as suggested e.g. by David Easton (1965). In this area, too, suggestions to the fact of a breakdown of democratic practices are ample. Regarding the publics of democratic polities, Mair (2013) suggests that they have “retreated” (p. 76), and Della Porta (2013, ch.1) that they are not as satisfied with the quality of their political systems anymore. With this in mind, the notion that representative democracy has also come to be challenged by its own citizens, pertaining to their views and actions, has become a credible hypothesis. On the particular topics discussed here, it may consist of citizens becoming too polarized (e.g. Klein, 2020), de-aligned from the cleavages that traditionally structure politics (e.g. Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002), or that they are no longer engaged in and thus not represented effectively by the political parties (e.g. van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014).
To sketch what a healthy state of democracy looks like, in brief terms, it first and foremost requires citizens that are informed and willing to participate in politics. The very concept of democracy, in all its variations, means that the *people* rule themselves. In a representative democracy, this means that while someone else rules on the people's behalf, the citizens nonetheless participate in electing officials, as well as in public debate and opinion formation between elections. A necessary condition is that people have political preferences, i.e. that there is a structure of public opinion that is possible for the political parties to represent. Yet, challenges to democracy can come from the very structure of this public opinion. In concise terms, there is a twin set of recurrent risks—namely that people's views are too conformist and apathetic, or too far apart and polarized. The balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces, or between conflict and consensus, is endemic to the concept of mass representative democracy as such (see e.g. Dahl, 1967; Lipset, 1985). The other central actor in this schema is the political parties, the vehicles of political representation (e.g. Lawson, 1980). The parties need to act both 'responsively' (i.e. to their constituents' preferences) and 'responsibly' (i.e. in line with systemic constraints and compatibilities), two aspects which may come into conflict (Bardi, Bartolini, & Trechsel, 2014). In a well-functioning large-scale representative democracy, the people participate and make their preferences known to the parties that represent them, who in turn act to channel public opinion and organize political competition in a responsible manner.

The aims of this thesis is to answer questions in three particular areas, all related to the possible threat to democracy from within. A common thread is the focus on public opinion, i.e. on citizens' political views. In the three areas, the emphasis is on how features of public opinion fit in the political system as a whole, where democratic structures can be supported or imperiled depending on what is found in empirical inquiry. The following sections of the introduction sketch the features of public opinion in focus, with an emphasis on the potential risks for democratic governance, and brief summaries of what the respective studies find.
Polarization

The issue in focus of the first paper in this dissertation is polarization. The claim that ‘we’, in modern democratic societies, are living in polarized times has been repeated almost to the point of cliché (see e.g. the introduction to Klein, 2020). The idea that divides based on political identities have become more salient and systematic is pervasive in the current debate, particularly regarding developments in the US, but also elsewhere. This is a central tenet of the threat to democracy from within. As Carothers and O’Donohue (2019) write, “talk of a global democratic crisis is widespread”, and “political polarization—manifested in increasingly harsh divides between opposing political camps and diminishing shared political ground—is a crucial part of this troubling picture” (p. 1). This depiction suggests that extant democracies, to a large extent, are threatened by the centrifugal forces that are inherently potential in the democratic idea of letting public opinion be translated to political power (see Lijphart, 1969, on “centrifugal democracies”). The study of polarization has a long tradition in political science (e.g. Sartori, 1976), but has become all but a catchword in recent developments of scholarship (in particular regarding the US, see e.g. Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

The idea that political polarization is tearing societies apart focuses particularly on affective polarization, i.e. the distrust or dislike of partisan opponents. This literature has focused on developments in the US (e.g. Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), but has also branched out to study other democratic polities (e.g. Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). It is a clear threat to the possibility of democratic deliberation and compromise if citizens view political adversaries as enemies, rather than opponents, to use Mouffe’s (2005) terminology. However, the concept of political polarization also encompasses another aspect—that of ideological polarization. If citizens are becoming dispersed into camps that are far apart in terms of their political views, this may also present significant problems for democratic governance. McCoy and Somer (2019) develop the concept of ‘pernicious polarization’, which in brief is a polarization that divides societies into ‘Us vs. Them’ camps based on a single difference that overshadows all others” (p. 235). This is thus not only a matter of affect, but also of ideology. With high levels of ideological polarization, political compromise becomes difficult, and the stability of political systems undermined.
On this topic, Paper I contributes with a study of ideological polarization in Europe in recent times. In particular, the focus is to estimate whether polarization is changing (increasing) in Europe during the observed period (2002-2020) and whether citizens are indeed coming further apart. In brief, the results suggest that this is the case only in a qualified sense – in the dominant left-right terms, polarization does not exhibit a clear pattern of change. However, in terms of immigration attitudes, ideological polarization is generally increasing from comparatively low levels. Thus, we see a slightly changed pattern of polarization in the European polities, with considerable variation across countries.

Disintegration

If ideological polarization is not rising to the extent that may be expected from the discourse, a second question is whether the opinion structure of the contemporary democratic systems may be in a process of disintegration. In particular, suggestions that the left-right scale are becoming obsolete is rife in both media commentary (e.g. Sartwell, 2014) and the academic literature (e.g. Giddens, 1994; Lep & Kirbiş, 2022). While left and right may not be indispensable terms in political opinion, they provide the language that has organized political competition in European polities in practice since the introduction of universal suffrage. As de Vries et al. (2013, p. 223) put it, “Left/right terminology serves as the chief method of describing the political preferences of candidates, practitioners, experts or the public at large.” It is “widely accepted as a means for citizens to orient themselves in a complex political world” (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990, p. 205).

Analysis of the opinion structure of political competition is a central aspect of political science scholarship, and suggestions for change in this area have been a recurrent feature for several decades. With the “general” dimension of politics being conceptualized as a spatially horizontal dimension, it should come as no surprise that there have been suggestions of an additional, secondary, vertically represented axis. One influential thesis of political “value change” is Ronald Inglehart’s thesis (e.g. Inglehart, 1971, 1977, 1990) on a new materialist/postmaterialist divide. In brief, as larger swathes of the citizenries attained economic security, the suggestion was that economic considerations would become less important for citizens in
their political orientations. This idea has been connected to the rise of new parties in Europe, with case studies of the Nordics by Knutsen (1990) and Belgium by Kitschelt and Helleman (1990) showing a connection of post-materialist values to propensity to vote for the New Left parties. Kitschelt and Helleman (1990) suggest that the new left-libertarian parties aimed to (and to some extent managed) to “pluralize” the left-right meaning to concern ecological and cultural matters as well as the classical economic ones. Additional studies of the meaning of left-right placements among citizens show that the left-right scale is adaptable to new issues becoming salient, e.g. in the Netherlands (de Vries et al., 2013), where immigration attitudes have become a defining feature since the 1980’s. Adaptation of the left-right scale naturally stretches the meaning of the construct, and the condensation of several issue positions only works well when such positions are highly correlated. However, in particular in Western Europe, such adaptation has arguably worked relatively well to the extent that the political “space” has been possible to reduce to a single dimension (e.g. Kitschelt & McGann, 1995).

Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008) suggest that the “rational political space” of West European politics is characterized by their two-dimensionality (2006, passim). In particular, the analysis of six polities results in the identification of two distinct dimensions: an economic and a cultural one, which are “in some cases partially integrated […] but never coincide” (p. 949). The theoretical argument is that recent political and economic developments have led to a “structural opposition between globalization ‘winners’ and ‘losers’” (p. 921), whose interests lead to transformations of both the economic and cultural dimensions of politics. Regarding the economic considerations, this opposition “can be expected to reinforce the classic opposition between a pro-state and a pro-market position”. For the cultural aspects of political views, “the defence of tradition is expected to increasingly take on an ethnic or nationalist character” (p. 924). In particular, Kriesi et al. expect the cultural dimension of politics among the citizens (on the ‘supply side’) to be about European integration and immigration, in practice. These suggestions have a mirror image in the development of the “GAL-TAN” scale by Hooghe et al. (2002). The original ambition was to better explain party positions on EU integration than utilizing only general left-right positions, hence the construction of a concept regarding the positioning of the political parties connected to “the rise of issues concerned
with lifestyle, ecology, cultural diversity, nationalism, and immigration” (p. 976). This measurement has traveled to other settings than explaining European integration policy. It is becoming a common suggestion on how to conceptualize (and measure) the rather elusive secondary dimension, on the individual level as well (e.g. Louwerse & Rosema, 2014) as for party positions.

Following this discussion, the second paper of the dissertation studies whether the left-right scale matters, in a qualified sense. Namely, whether citizens’ vote choices in the European democracies are structured by their left-right placements, and in particular, whether this connection is declining over time. If left and right are indeed becoming obsolete as guiding poles for citizens, their vote choices should become less connected to their self-understanding in left-right terms over time. Furthermore, the analysis concerns whether the left-right scale is becoming supplanted by attitudes on a secondary, ‘cultural’, dimension. The results suggest a marginal decline of left-right placements as important factors for explaining citizens’ vote choices. Additionally, there is some merit to the notion that a dimension concerning attitudes on immigration and EU integration is becoming more salient. These attitudes explain more of citizens’ left-right orientations over time, as well as their party choices at the ballot box. The conclusions for this topic is, in sum, similar to the ones regarding polarization. There is evidence of a gradual and partial change – the left-right scale is declining in terms of the connection to vote choices, but remains at comparatively high levels. Additionally, new conflict lines regarding cultural topics are becoming partially absorbed by the citizens’ understanding of the left-right scale, and they are becoming more important for explaining vote choices independently of left-right placements. What is found is, in conclusion, not the obsolescence of left-right language, nor the outright disintegration of the dominant structure of politics.

Incongruence

Following the questions of whether citizens are becoming polarized, and political competition disintegrated, a third question on the topic of democratic demise is whether the political parties are becoming disconnected from ‘ordinary’ citizens. The parties, in simple terms, are the organizations that should provide ‘linkage’ between people and power (Lawson, 1980).
In the schema presented by Katz and Mair (1995), their role is to bridge the gap between civil society and the state. However, just as with democracy in general, the political parties in particular have been suggested to be in a state of severe crisis in recent decades (e.g. Ignazi, 1996; Webb, 2005). In the aforementioned schema, the parties have ‘cartelized’ and retreated into the state (Katz & Mair, 1995, 2009). The most conspicuous aspect of the suggested party crisis is the immense decline in participation in the form of party membership. As suggested by van Biezen et al. (2012), party members are all but “gone” in the European polities. Similarly, levels of trust in politicians and political parties are generally very low, and declining over time (e.g. Tormey, 2014, p. 105). With parties in a general state of decline and ever fewer citizens engaging in participation in the parties, there is reason to question whether parties can uphold the linkage that is their raison d’être. Since democracy is, in Schattschneider’s (1942) widely quoted words, “unthinkable save in terms of the parties”, a decline of parties implies a decline of democracy generally.

With declining levels of engagement and increasing levels of distrust, the question of whether parties are ‘losing touch’ (in Widfeldt’s (1999) words) with the citizens becomes pertinent. After “the collapse of membership figures”, parties “are being transformed into organizational vehicles for those to whom politics is a profession rather than a vocation”, as van Biezen and Poguntke (2014, p. 205) suggest. This implies that parties are departing from the “authoritative typologies [which] consider the role of members to be one of their defining elements” (ibid.). Beyond the grass-root supporters (minimally, their voters) and the leaders running for office, parties traditionally consist of their members as virtually all parties in contemporary democracies are organized as membership-based associations (e.g. Scarrow, 2014). Thus, the notion that parties need to be representative of their voters in both their membership and leadership, for the “representative linkage” to be effective, is a guiding assumption in party research (e.g. Widfeldt, 1998, p. 134).

Regarding the representativeness of party memberships, the comparative picture for Europe in the late 20th century shows considerable variation regarding both social (i.e. factors such as gender, age, education) and opinion (i.e. left-right placement) representativeness (ibid., p. 171). At that point in time, there were some patterns across party families, with left-wing and conservative parties being “strikingly unrepresentative” (ibid., p.
172f) in ideological terms. With the decline of party membership in the subsequent decades, findings in comparative studies (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010) as well as in the Swedish case (Kölln, 2017) suggest that the parties show a nuanced pattern of change. A general conclusion is that party members are becoming less representative in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics (in particular, they are older than the respective party’s electorate), but they are not becoming less ideologically representative. This finding is surprising, given the expectation that those who remain in parties as membership is dwindling could be expected to be the more radical contingent (following the logic of ‘expressive incentives’, cf. Olson, 1971). This does not seem to be borne out in reality. Rather, the aging party member population suggests that parties are not recruiting the youth to the extent that would keep their memberships socially representative. Nevertheless, those who remain are not more radical than their voter counterparts – rather, there are even signs of increasing representativeness in ideological terms (Kölln, 2017; Polk & Kölln, 2019; Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010).

Paper III thus sets out to study the opinion structure within the political parties, to answer the question of whether memberships and leaderships are changing in their ideological representativeness over recent decades. The case studied is that of Sweden, which has seen a rather typical decline in party membership in the European context (Kölln, 2015; van Biezen et al., 2012). In the study of opinion representation within political parties, the theory received as “May’s Law” (May, 1973) provides structure to the expectations. Namely, May’s Law suggests that in a political party, the activists (e.g. party members) are more radical than the voters, resulting in the elites taking a compromise position between these two groups. Paper III addresses May’s Law extensively, but the analyses also have clear implications for the representation of voters through parties. The analysis over time shows that party elites and/or members are not growing further apart from the electorates of the respective party. While the parties are arguably risking the linking function they are supposed to provide in other terms, their ideological representativeness is not declining, at least in the Swedish case.
Conclusion

The studies in the dissertation thus all concern aspects of public opinion that are central to the functioning of representative democracy. In all three respective areas, suggestions have been made to the fact that we are seeing immense changes; and that such changes would imperil the effectiveness of representative democracy. To reiterate, firstly, whether ideological polarization is increasing; secondly, whether electoral participation is becoming less structured ideologically; and thirdly, whether the parties manage to represent the opinions of their voters. In all three cases, findings could suggest that representative democracy is weakening. If ideological polarization would be dramatically increasing, this would suggest that political conflict is becoming highly contentious. If the dominant language of political competition, i.e. left-right placements, would become immensely less important, this would imply a disintegration of political conflict. If the parties are decreasingly representative of their voters in terms of political opinion, this would suggest a stronger disconnect between voters and elites, imperiling the representative link. However, this is not what the results are showing. Rather, there are nuanced degrees of gradual change in all of those areas, which is elaborated on in the respective studies.

The rest of this introductory chapter proceeds as follows. Firstly, with a discussion of the central concepts in the dissertation, particularly regarding the construct of representative democracy. Secondly, the methods and data utilized for the analyses are presented and discussed. The emphasis lies on common themes and challenges regarding the analyses in the papers. Thirdly, the empirical background in terms of public opinion in Europe is surveyed and discussed in section 4. Section 5 presents summaries of the papers that make up the larger share of the dissertation. Finally, section 6 concludes with some general reflections on the contributions and limitations of the dissertation as a whole.
Theory and Concepts

Representative Democracy

In modern large-scale democracies, the people are supposed to be the ones in power. As the German constitution states, in a formulation quite typical for contemporary democratic constitutions, “All state authority shall be derived from the people” (Article 20, § 2). However, the people as such is rarely present in making decisions or enforcing state power. These tasks are left to representatives, i.e. to politicians in elected offices, and to courts and law enforcement agencies. The key to making such democracies democratic, thus, is the notion of representation – that the people are re-presented in their absence by someone else, between the occasions where the people actually acts in elections and referenda.

Discussions regarding representation cover a vast literature in political science (and adjacent fields), and there is a longstanding debate whether representation is inimical, conducive, or even essential to democratic government. As Pitkin writes (1967, p. 2), representation has become a “popular” concept, not the least due to it “having become linked with the idea of democracy”. It need not be so, however. Historically, representation was a central component of many pre-democratic governments across Europe as well, e.g. when Republican thought made inroads in English renaissance monarchy. Parliaments of estate were clearly not democratic, but the idea of representation was central - that the more imperious echelons of society had some say in government affairs. Pitkin’s (1967, ch. 1) seminal account opens with a somewhat unexpected theorist of representation (at least in modern democratic terms), namely Thomas Hobbes, who provides “the first extended and systematic discussion of representation in English” (p. 14). For Hobbes, the sovereign (i.e. the monarch) represents the people: “A multitude of men, are made one person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented” (from Leviathan, ch. 16). The metaphor is that of the famous frontispiece of Leviathan, where the sovereign authority of the king is a body composed by the multitude of persons he represents.

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1 According to the official translation. In the vernacular, it is suggested to be power (Gewalt) of a somewhat rougher nature than the more austere “authority”, and this power rather comes or emanates (von Volke aus) from the people - the implicit source of public authority/power.
The concept of representation thus needs to be approached with caution in relation to its democratic qualities, since there is no necessity in representation being democratic. It is an ambiguous relationship, where the risk is that representation and democracy are, as often, “thoughtlessly equated” in Pitkin’s (2004, p. 335) words. An assumption in the spirit of Rousseau is that democracy should be carried out in frequent involvement of the whole citizenry, where all representational alternatives to popular assembly are considered de facto varieties of aristocratic rule.

Recent developments in democratic theory have however seen what Nässström (2011) calls a “representative turn”, where several contributions have been made to the effect of seeing “representation to be essential to the working of democracy” (p. 502). This turn has been long in the making. Plotke (1997) claims that representation is constitutive of democracy, and that representation “is constructive, producing knowledge, the capacity to share insights, and the ability to reach difficult agreements” (p. 31). It is not the least the sustaining feature of representation that makes it essential for democracy, according to Plotke, since “participatory” and “populist” alternatives diminishes the necessity of such forms, with the misleading “idea that we could get rid of the formality and complexity and still have democracy”.

Urbinati (2006) similarly claims that there is a constitutive relationship between representation and democracy, and that the two are not knit together by mere historical contingencies. A crucial point is that “representative democracy is an original form of government that is not identifiable with electoral democracy” (p. 4). Rather, there is much more to the form of representative democracy than the hierarchical relationship between elected rulers and elector citizens. What Urbinati argues is that political representation (in the ideal) is firstly “a complex political process that activates the ‘sovereign people’ well beyond the formal act of electoral authorization” (p. 5). The centrality of public discourse gives representative democracy value, on this account, where citizens need to exercise political judgment not only in times of election (which is also emphasized in deliberative accounts of democracy, see e.g. Chambers, 2003). Secondly, the indirect feature of representative democracy is neither an obstacle to realizing democratic values, but rather plays “a key role in forging the discursive democratic character of politics, and aids rather than obstructs participation”. Thirdly, representative democracy is characterized by endowing
politics with an "idealizing and judgmental nature", which enables (and encourages) citizens to transcend their own immediately close situations, to "educate and enlarge their political judgment on their own and others' opinions" (Urbinati, 2006, p. 5).

Urbinati's conceptualization of representative democracy is useful, since it allows for a discussion on how and why this dissertation concerns democracy as such. The central idea of a representative democracy is, uncontroversially, that the people is the ultimate sovereign. The demos (people) have the kratein (power), but in their stead, elected representatives carry out the everyday ruling between elections. As Urbinati (2014, ch. 1) argues, representative democracy is necessarily diarchical, in that it brings together will (i.e. procedures of creating and implementing law) and opinion (i.e. the public processes of opinion formation and exchange of political ideas, interchangeably called judgment). The argument is, put succinctly, that while representative democracy is best understood procedurally, this does not mean that one has to give in to the Schumpeterian logic of "realist" democracy, where acts of popular will are limited to intermittently selecting new leaders (as e.g. Przeworski (1991) suggests). Neither does one have to accept that representative democracy is a "defective substitute for direct democracy", in Mansbridge's (2003, p. 515) words in endorsement of the virtues of representation. Instead, representative democracy bears its own ideas, commitments and values. In particular, that there is a relationship between the people and their representatives, characterized by what Urbinati (2005, p. 211) simply calls representativity – "the essential component that makes representation democratic, and the key to a revised notion of popular sovereignty". Representative democracy consists in the possibility for people to effect political will in elections, as well as their active participation in the opinion formation that unceasingly transpires in society.

The aspects in focus in the dissertation are all in the area that Urbinati (2014, ch 1) calls the 'opinion' aspect of democracy, i.e. that part of democracy which is not immediately concerned with 'will', but rather how opinions are formed (in contrast to how opinions are translated into decisions). As Urbinati (p. 18) summarizes: "Democracy is a combination of decisions and judgment over decisions [...] The character of democracy is diarchic and its nature procedural". For citizens to be able to use individual and collective political judgment, many institutions need to be in place
and utilized. It is on aspects in this latter sphere, on public opinion, that this dissertation contributes. All of the three studies regard necessary (but by themselves insufficient) prerequisites for the opinion arché of representative democracy to function well.

The Parties as Mediators

The central democratic idea of popular sovereignty is by no means discarded in this conceptualization of representative democracy, regardless of the fact that there are other actors who exercise power than the people in assembled form. As Wolkenstein (2019a, p. 338) formulates it: “Popular sovereignty is the doctrine upon which modern democracy is built”. However, the regime type of democratic systems of modern times needs a qualifier – they are instances of party government, i.e. party democracies (cf. Manin, 1997, ch. 6; Schattschneider, 1942). The legitimacy of the state is based on the sovereignty of the people, over which the state exercises power. The parties are the intermediaries, or the “agents of popular sovereignty”, as Wolkenstein (2019a, p. 354) calls them. The political parties have also received considerable attention in democratic theory in recent times, with appreciative accounts provided e.g. by Muirhead and Rosenblum (2012) and White and Ypi (2016). In the terms often used in the empirically oriented research on political parties, the value of the parties is that they create “linkage”. This concept is credited to Kay Lawson (1980), who summarizes it as the task “to create a substantive connection between rulers and ruled.”

![Figure 1. A simple model of representative democracy.](image)

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The central actors, and the relationships between them, in such a democracy is summarized in Figure 1, above. While this crude simplification omits some central aspects of democratic governance (e.g. the relationship between parliament and government, and the role of other organizations), it emphasizes the relationships and actors that are the foci of the analyses in this dissertation. A common way of conceptualizing the representative relationship between parties and people in a simple model is through the bi-directional activities of *aggregating* the interests of the citizens, and *articulating* such interests to the citizens (as introduced by Almond and Coleman, 1960). Any such representative relationship requires the construction of interests, as argued extensively by Saward (2010) in the terms of “making claims” of representation. The parties have a privileged role, as defined by Aldrich (1995, p. 3), they “organize competition for political offices”. Thus, they are distinct in the sense that they have claims to exercise power on behalf of (at least parts of) the people, for the people, and over the people.

The basic concept in this schema, the people, requires some further attention. As the Weimar theorist Hans Kelsen (1929) puts it, “there is nothing more problematic than this unity which goes by the name, the People”, which is an “ethical-political postulate”, amounting in the end to nothing more than a “fiction” (p. 33). Kelsen’s intervention on the concept of the people is enlightening, as it emphasizes that the people must in fact be considered in the plural — in a democracy, there is in reality no unitary people, with a unitary will, as imagined e.g. by Rousseau (1762). This engenders a wicked problem, potentially inherent to democracy as such. A house divided against itself cannot stand. For Kelsen, however, this is not necessarily true. The move from the fiction of the people to the real complicated masses of modern democracies brings one to the political parties as the essential actors. To be able to go from “a ruling, and not a ruled, People [...] we encounter one of real democracy’s most important elements: the political party, which brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping public affairs” (p. 35). One of the virtues of democracy is thus to be able to *represent* the plurality of the people, be it in interests, attitudes, or will (see also e.g. Dahl, 1982, on pluralism), through the political parties. The Kelsenian model results in an ideal of “popular sovereignty through parties” (as discussed by
Wolkenstein (2019a)). This is not necessarily met by contemporary existing instances of democratic government. However, it provides both a yardstick against which to compare actual democracies, as well as arguments for the democratic virtues of party government. On the fundament of the plural people as the sovereign source of power, the structures of party and government can be legitimately built.

Representing Public Opinion

A question that naturally follows this understanding of the people, and the parties as their political representatives, is what: is that is to be represented. In her magisterial work, Hanna Pitkin (1967) concludes that representation “means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (p. 209). This definition of representation is intended to capture a range of understandings of representation, even those that are conflicting in some senses. In particular, the notion of interest is contested in the literature on representation. A crucial assumption for modern representative democracy is that people know their own interests at least fairly well. This is a necessary condition for democratic government, as argued e.g. by Robert Dahl (1989, p. 100) in his “Presumption of Personal Autonomy”, meaning that “everyone should be assumed to be the best judge of his or her own good or interests.” Further, it relates to what Pitkin (1967, ch. 6) describes as the “substantive concept” of representation.

The basic idea is summarized well by Downs’ (1957) theory of democracy. Citizens have political preferences (i.e. in Downs’ model regarding government intervention in the economy), and the parties offer alternatives on policy they will enact in government. The representation done by parties is interpreted in this parsimonious model to be about the correspondence between preferences and policy. Thus, the interests that are to be represented are conceptualized as the political preferences of citizens, which concerns some aspect(s) of political opinion. In Downs’ model, it is assumed that “the political parties in any society can be ordered from left to right in a manner agreed upon by all voters” (p. 142). This strong assumption can be relaxed, at least slightly, without much loss. First of all, the ordering of political parties does not necessarily have to be unidimensional, for opinion representation to be possible. In Miller and Stokes (1963) pioneering study, the congruence of political opinion (understood
squarely in terms of representation) between US congressional representatives and their constituents, is analyzed in three distinct dimensions (see ibid., p. 48). Distances between different actors in a unidimensional setting can straightforwardly be extended to distances in multidimensional space. Secondly, all voters need not necessarily agree to the ordering of positions and parties. However, there needs to be some shared understanding of the political space for representation of opinions qua political preferences to be possible in a given system, through differentiated party positions.

Thus, in the representative activity of the political parties, the concept of public opinion is central. It should come as no surprise that the coiner of the term *public opinion*, as received into English from French, is the incomparable conceptual innovator Michel de Montaigne (in Book 1, Essay XXII). In the essay *Of custom, and that we should not easily change a law received*, Montaigne notes that the force of public opinion is as important as any rational argument in upholding an established custom or law. A couple of centuries later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau picked up the notion of *opinion publique*, on a more positive note. At least in the right circumstances, the public opinion could be expressing the general will, as the foundation of legitimate law-giving. The concept was naturally known and discussed long before the 16th century: For Plato, it was a scourge, both for a just political order, and for the personal fate of his teacher cum mouthpiece Socrates – it was public opinion that condemned him to death. For Aristotle, it is public opinion that makes him sympathetic to democracy as a political form: “Hence the many are better judges than a single man of music and poetry; for some understand one part, and some another, and among them they understand the whole. [...] individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge – as a body they are as good or better” (Politics, Bk III, XI).

In modern times, public opinion is an indispensable part of democratic-political life. According to Ferdinand Tönnies (1922), public opinion – in the sense of widely held values and commitments, a “unified social will” – fills a similar role for the *Gesellschaft* as religion does for the *Gemeinschaft*. An account that similarly appreciates the value of public opinion for large-scale democracies is Walter Lippmann’s (1922) treatise on the topic, where

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2 This concept is introduced very briefly in *Julie or The New Heloise* (1761), published a year before *The Social Contract*. 

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public opinion is taken to be the “prime mover in democracies” (ch. 16). It is practically what makes the difference between winners and losers in the political sphere: “There have been skilled organizers of opinion who understood the mystery [of public opinion] well enough to create majorities on election day” (ibid.). In more recent times, public opinion has garnered much attention from political scientists (and other actors such as media outlets and political parties), as the set of political views and attitudes held by citizens. Pioneering work was made by the Michigan school, with the introduction of the American National Election studies resulting in the *American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). Public opinion understood this way as the political views of citizens has been the dominant interpretation of how to understand and use the concept since. The connection to studies in political participation, and in particular electoral participation, is clear — it is important to understand public opinion to understand how and why people participate in politics (e.g. vote) the way they do. In this sense, public opinion is important. It is what gives representative democracy content, with the main political actors — the parties — attempting to “articulate and aggregate” political views among the citizens, where the notion that political representatives should provide “opinion representativeness” is paramount in legitimating politicians making decisions on citizens behalves (e.g. Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011).

The understanding of representation as intimately tied to opinion congruence has a longstanding tradition in empirical research on representative democracy (e.g. Stimson, 1995). As mentioned, Miller and Stokes (1963) initiated a research program that has seen subsequent developments e.g. in terms of dynamic opinion representation (Stimson, Mackuen & Erikson, 1995), and in developing typologies of such representation (e.g. Andeweg & Thomassen, 2005; Esaiasson & Holmberg, 1996; Holmberg, 1997). Further research has mapped the extent to which political opinions are congruent with enacted policy, with a focus on the differences between the degree of representation of different groups (i.e. the poor or the wealthy, see e.g. Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005). Following this tradition, the central assumption to link the studies in the dissertation to the functioning of representative democracy is that the people are represented in terms of their political opinions. As discussed above, no party can claim to represent the people as a whole, rather, it is a feature of party
government that singular parties represent only partially (i.e. in terms of their respective constituencies).
Methods and Data

All three studies of this dissertation utilize large-scale population surveys, where comparisons are made across cases and time-points. The particular methods are discussed more extensively in each study respectively, whereas this section discusses some general methodological considerations for the dissertation as a whole.

Case Selection

Firstly, the cases studied in this dissertation are contemporary democratic European polities. In the first two studies, the aim is to present comparative descriptive inferences for a wide range of European countries, whereas the third study focuses on the single case of Sweden specifically. To claim to study ‘Europe’, in general, naturally requires an answer to the question which Europe one means, and in particular where to draw lines of demarcation. The cases of European polities in this dissertation follows the general logic of the research literatures addressed, where there is a relative large number of uncontroversial ‘core’ cases of European polities, most commonly in practice derived from data available in comparative survey studies labeled as ‘European’ (see e.g. Caughey, O’Grady & Warshaw, 2019; Reiljan, 2020). The uncontroversially European countries are in general the member states of the EU, with the addition of the four EFTA (Liechtenstein, Iceland, Switzerland, Norway) countries as well as the United Kingdom. While there are certainly marked differences between the countries included in this population, they share some features— they are highly economically developed countries, and in political terms, the question of European integration is (at least potentially) salient. However, there are several borderline cases to be included or excluded, both in literal geographical terms as well as in political-cultural terms. For instance, a country such as Belarus is rarely included in comparative studies of European politics, even though it has reasonable claims to contain the geographical center point of Europe. The construct of Europe is a political phenomenon rather than a geographical one, with the center of gravity significantly shifted westwards.

For the purposes of this dissertation, a clear delimitation is that only polities that reach a reasonable degree of democraticness are part of the
intended population of study. This condition logically follows the aim of the dissertation, since the purpose is to study aspects of public opinion central to the functioning of representative democracy. Thus, a number of ambiguous cases are excluded by this criterion alone, and makes a discussion of the Europeanness of countries such as Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Russia superfluous (and hence bracketed), at least for the time period studied. The democratic European countries that make up the target population are thus in practice identical to the member states of the Council of Europe (2023), west of the Black Sea. While this forms a contiguous geographical area, the main argument for studying these countries comparatively is that they have political and economic features in common. These have roots in culture and history, even if the set of countries is quite heterogeneous, if all aspects are considered. Nevertheless, here we find a set of economically developed democratic countries, where it is fruitful to study developments of public opinion as prerequisite features for the good health of representative democracy. Additionally, these cases are not all of equal importance. In particular, microstates such as San Marino and Andorra are excluded from consideration, not only due to their small size, but also due to their highly particular political circumstances (see e.g. Dumienski, 2014).

The third paper of this dissertation focuses on the case of Sweden, regarding the opinion structure within political parties. There are both theoretical and practical motivations for the selection of Sweden as a case to answer the question posed in Paper III. Firstly, the question of intra-party opinion structure (regarding the pattern known as May’s Law (May, 1973)) tends to be studied in single-country studies. The units of analysis are political parties, where the individual political circumstances of the country are of paramount importance, and practically considered idiosyncratic enough to impede cross-country studies. The patterns of intra-party opinion structures have been studied with similar frameworks, e.g. for the Dutch case (van Holsteyn, Ridder & Koole, 2017), the Irish case (Kennedy, Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2006), and the Portuguese case (Belchior & Freire, 2011). The most straightforward reason to add the Swedish case to this selection is the lack of studies in recent times on Nordic politics on this topic (but see Polk & Kölln (2019) for related studies on party members; Widfeldt (1999) regarding earlier developments). Secondly, Sweden is a case that is relatively typical for a set of European democracies in terms of change both in the party system, as well as in decline of party activism.
and membership (e.g. Kölln, 2015). Thirdly, there are practical reasons regarding the possibility of studying intra-party patterns, depending on the data available. As discussed by Norris (1995), one needs quite particular data to be able to comprehensively study the opinion structures within parties with the framework of May’s Law. Here, the availability of multiple sources of survey data on different levels of the parties allow for a more thorough test of the predictions of May’s Law than have been carried out in the aforementioned other single-country studies. More extensive data is not necessarily a sufficient reason to add another case study, but in this case it allows for a more credible answer to the questions posed. In particular, whether the patterns of intra-party opinion structure predicted by May actually prevail.

Data Selection

For practical reasons, the dissertation relies on already collected data. To match the ambitions outlined regarding the comparative studies (in Papers I and II), data from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2023) is utilized. ESS surveys representative samples of populations in a wide range of European countries, and is available biennially from 2002 to 2020. While there are alternatives such as the Eurobarometer, the World/European Values Survey, and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, the main strength of ESS is the wide number of observations available (both in terms of actual individuals surveyed, as well as in aggregate country-year observations). Since the ambition in both these papers is to study change over time, all countries included only once in ESS are excluded. Additionally, the democracy criterion excludes a few countries in ESS (according to Polity V scores, see Marshall & Gurr, 2020), namely Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and Israel (where the latter three nonetheless may or may not be included as European countries) from the raw collocated ESS data. This leaves 30 countries in the sample, with up to 10 distinct time points (every other year 2002-2020). Figure 2, below, shows the coverage across the European polities included in ESS. As can be seen, there is generally a very high degree of coverage for the countries in focus. However, a few number of countries that would otherwise have cleared the conditions of inclusion are omitted due to unavailability in the ESS data (e.g. Serbia; see the appendix to Paper I for full details on coverage).
The data for Paper III, concerning the intra-party opinion structures in Sweden, is assembled from three different sources, with data on different levels of the political parties. Firstly, the Swedish National Election Studies (SNES, Andersson et al., 2021) are used for voters and party members. For the higher echelons in the parties, the Local and Regional Councils Survey (KOLFU, Karlsson & Gilljam, 2018) as well as the Members of Parliament Survey (RDU, Karlsson & Gilljam, 2014) are utilized. These surveys have been conducted in connection with Swedish elections (and subsequent terms for politicians) since 1985 (for SNES/RDU jointly, KOLFU in 2008 and 2012), with the period up to 2018 covered in Paper III. These survey sources have rarely been brought together in research before, but as a collected dataset, they provide opportunities for comparing different echelons within parties, as is necessary for analyzing intra-party opinion structures.
Measurements of Public Opinion

The reliance on previously collected data for the analyses in this dissertation naturally significantly limits the possible measurements of public opinion, which is a variable of importance in all three studies. Besides the consideration of scope of coverage, the availability of sufficient items regarding public opinion is the most important criterion for data source selection. In Papers I and II, the demands on the data are relatively similar in this respect, too. In both these papers, vote choices of individuals needs to be available, as well as their political attitudes, for analyses on the respective topics to be possible. The ideal set of measurements of public opinion would include a battery of questions on political views, ranging from the more abstract and fundamental (i.e. where respondents place themselves on political dimension(s)) to the concrete and contingent (i.e. respondents' stances on particular policies and proposals). No data source in the universe of available sources is ideal in this sense. For the analysis in Paper III, the demands are similar in terms of variables available, but the requirements of comprehensive coverage on several levels of the political parties poses demands that are harder to meet with extant comparative data.

Previous studies on comparative European public opinion have used different approaches and materials, based on the varying demands on the data. For instance, on affective polarization, Reiljan (2020) relies on CSES data, as does Schmitt and Freire (2012) concerning ideological polarization (with the addition of a set of national election studies). Regarding the connection between “Left-Right orientations and party choice”, van der Eijk et al. (2005) similarly relies on a collection of national election studies, which limits the number of cases to “only five countries” (p. 168). Freire (2006, 2008) relies on two waves of the World/European Values Survey, for analyses of the connection between left-right orientations and a set of other (in particular “social factors”) characteristics. Other authors have also relied on the European Social Survey for analyses on public opinion topics. Analyses based on a single wave of ESS are carried out by van der Brug and van Spanje (2009) on the dimensionality of public opinion, as well as by Thorisdottir et al. (2007) on the connection between psychological characteristics and left-right orientations. For analysis over time using ESS, Otjes and Rekker (2021) study the connection between ability to place oneself on the left-right dimension and political system, and Caughey et
al. (2019) provide a comprehensive discussion on dimensions of public opinion using this data in addition to other sources. The choice to use ESS for the first two studies of this dissertation is by no means intended to be a remarkable one, rather, it is a logical choice. While there are certainly shortcomings with the ESS data, the main strength in terms of public opinion measurements is that it provides a small set of repeated political attitude items. Additionally, ESS provides comparatively a comprehensive scope of coverage, both across time and space. The material also meets the criteria in terms of an item on vote choice being available in all administered surveys.

The choice to utilize Swedish data in Paper III is also based on the data available being of comparatively very high quality. The Swedish National Election Studies has long been considered “data rich” (Holmberg, 1994), and a particular selling point is the connection to reliable studies of Members of Parliament (ibid., p. 316). Thus, by collecting sources of data on the population (voters and party members) as well as politicians (in local and regional councils as well as in parliament), the echelons of the political parties can be differentiated and incongruences in their political opinion analyzed. These data sources also provide a set of repeated items on political opinion that are identical, and repeated over time, which is otherwise rarely possible when bringing together elite and mass surveys.

Turning to the actual measurements of political views, the primary dimension of political opinion is captured relatively well by the ubiquitously available item on left-right self-placement. As it is commonly known (e.g. Laver & Budge, 1992), the left-right scale is a “super issue”, which serves to organize political competition on a main axis. In the primary materials used for the studies, both the Swedish National Election Survey (Andersson et al., 2021) as well as the European Social Survey (ESS)\(^3\), individuals are asked to place themselves on an 11-point scale, ranging from “left” to “right”. One of the main challenges to utilizing such an item is that it may be interpreted differently in different contexts, which makes comparisons potentially problematic (see e.g. Bauer et al., 2017). To some extent, the attitudinal content of the left-right scale is examined as an empirical question in Paper II, where the results indicate that such a construct should not

\(^3\) Items are worded very similarly. In SNES, it is formulated as “In politics, people sometimes refer to left and right. Where do you place [yourself] on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means left and 10 means right?” In ESS, “In politics people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”
be taken to mean similar things across different political contexts. In some
countries (e.g. in Northern Europe), left-right placements are strongly re-
lated to views on economic redistribution, while left-right placements are
related to immigration attitudes e.g. in Western Europe. The solution to
this conundrum employed in the studies of this dissertation is to keep
cases, i.e. country contexts, separate. Since left-right views may even be
interpreted quite differently in neighboring countries (e.g. the stark diffe-
rence between Spain and Portugal a case in point, see Paper II), the units of
analysis and aggregation remain on the country-level for practically all
analyses (as is commonly done, e.g. in studies on affective polarization, see
Wagner, 2021).
Secondly, in addition to left-right self-placements, the ambition to
cover political views amounting to the whole opinion space naturally re-
quires extending the analysis to other issue dimensions as well. In particu-
lar, the rise of a secondary (by some called “cultural” (e.g. Kriesi et al.,
2006) or a “GAL-TAN” (e.g. Hooghe et al., 2002)) dimension in Euro-
pean political contexts has made this all the more important. Here, there
is a more pertinent challenge regarding the available data. The ideological
contents of a potential secondary scale is theoretically contested, and sug-
gestions on the contents of such a scale subject to scholarly debate (see e.g.
de Vries et al., 2013; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008). Since there hardly exists a
dimension that is as clear for individuals to simply place themselves on (as
with the left-right construct), this needs to be derived from items with an
assumed degree of orthogonality to the left-right dimension⁴. Suggestions
in the literature are, for instance on topics regarding immigration, Euro-
pean integration, nationalism, the environment, feminism/sexism, and
LGBT rights.
Regarding items on political views in the survey materials, a require-
ment for the analyses in the papers is that they are available repeatedly.
Both in ESS as well as in SNES, there are some items that are only used in
singular years (e.g. based on specific themes). This excludes them from
consideration in these papers, due to the ambition of analyzing change
over time. Turning first to ESS, there are five distinct items available con-
sistently across surveys.

⁴ Such a dimension is occasionally present in surveys as an individual item. Most prominently, in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, experts place parties on a “GAL-TAN” scale (Bakker et al., 2015). In the Swedish National Election Survey, respondents are asked to place themselves on a “green” scale in the 2010 edition (Holmberg & Ekengren Oscarsson, 2017).
Those are items on attitudes regarding:

- European integration
- Government intervention to reduce income inequality
- LGBT rights\(^5\)
- Party bans
- A set of six questions regarding immigration

Empirically, the six questions regarding immigration are strongly correlated, although they are relatively different in content. Three of them regard whether the respondent thinks that more or fewer immigrants should be allowed to immigrate regarding different immigrant groups\(^6\), and three of them regard whether immigration contributes to (1) the economy, (2) cultural life and (3) quality of life in the country in general. For all 30 countries, Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) is greater than 0.8 (median 0.87), indicating very high scale reliability. Thus, analyses are carried out utilizing this as a single item, an additive immigration index where all six items are of equal weight. With the resulting list of six ideological-attitudinal items, i.e. left-right placements, immigration attitudes index, EU integration attitudes, income inequality attitudes, LGBT rights attitudes, party ban attitudes, no patterns amounting to dimensions are found empirically. Using principal component analysis, there seems to be an indication that left-right placements and income inequality attitudes are connected, as well as EU integration-, LGBT rights- and immigration attitudes. However, scale reliability coefficients show that these are hardly useful as index constructs. For the left-right/income inequality attitudes items, correlations (Pearson’s \(r\)) are lower than 0.4 for all countries, with median correlation 0.15 (\(\alpha < 0.6\) for all countries, median \(\alpha 0.25\)). Regarding the possible secondary scale construct (immigration-, LGBT rights- and EU integration attitudes), Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) values are similarly low — for all countries it is lower than 0.65, with median value 0.45, far from conventional levels for an acceptable level of reliability. Thus, the analyses proceed with using the items individually, where particular weight is placed on the left-right placement item, in accordance with the discussion above. Naturally, more issue items would have been desirable, to exhaustively cover the opinion space in each country respectively. However, the recurrently mentioned aspects

\(^5\) More precisely, that “Gays and lesbians should be free to live as they wish”

\(^6\) See appendix to Paper I for exact wording.
that are taken to be of most significance besides ‘primary’ issues such as left-right placements and economic redistribution attitudes, secondary scale candidates are sufficiently included in views on immigration, EU integration and LGBT rights. Furthermore, the importance of these different attitudes (possibly amounting to dimensions, or at least proxies for them) are explored at greater length in Paper II.

In the third study, on the Swecish case, data availability depends on items included recurrently in SNES that also have matching formulations in the survey of Members of Parliament (RDU). Similarly to the material from ESS, a few items are available for analysis with these conditions. There are a few candidates on ‘traditional’ economic left-right topics (on privatizing healthcare, reducing income inequality, reducing the public share of expenditure), as well as candidates for a secondary scale (on reducing military expenditure, receiving fewer refugee immigrants, banning cars for private use in cities, banning pornography). The analysis on ideological incongruence in the third paper is based mainly on left-right placements, but the ambition is to cover further aspects of public opinion as well. For these purposes, the additional opinion items used are firstly the item on refugee immigration, which captures the most important aspect of the secondary dimension in Sweden (cf. Oscarsson, 2017). Secondly, an additive (“GAL-TAN”) index is constructed, consisting of the refugee item, in addition to items regarding NATO membership, military expenditure, and banning cars for private use in cities. As such, this latter construct is intended to capture militaristic attitudes, environmental attitudes, and immigration attitudes jointly, as a measure of a secondary dimension. These items exhibit some of the highest correlations among the items available, while also being comparatively very weakly correlated to the left-right self-placement item. However, the construct does not reach conventional levels of scale reliability, with e.g. Cronbach’s α consistently lower than 0.5. From explorative principal-component analysis, no clear dimensions (except for items correlated with the left-right placements, e.g. on economic redistribution) appear in the data material available. Furthermore, the exact availability of items across years and party levels differ quite significantly, with the left-right placement scale and the refugee immigration item being available consistently.

Similar challenges are thus presented by the combination of ambitions of what to cover in terms of public opinion, and what is actually available,
in the sets of sources for Papers I and II, and Paper III, respectively. Firstly, the overarching dimension of political competition is taken to be captured by the left-right scale, which is ubiquitously available, and utilized in previous research to a very wide extent (e.g. Bauer et al., 2017). This operationalization of the primary scale of political competition does not have a given ideational content, as is explored further in Paper II. However, it serves the purpose of analyzing the primary dimension of conflict. The more challenging question is whether the materials available are sufficient to cover, and potentially discover, secondary dimension(s) of public opinion. Similar approaches of focusing on immigration and EU integration are utilized e.g. by Malka et al. (2019), operationalizing the “cultural” dimension as a set of attitudes on sexual morality, an item on women’s role in the workforce, and a single item on refugee immigration. Similarly to the approach in the studies of this dissertation, de Vries et al. (2013) capture “cultural attitudes” by three items on “anti-immigrant attitudes” (p. 230). More ambitious attempts to uncover dimensionality in the public opinion structure is presented by Caughey et al. (2019), who uses item-response theory to analyze four dimensions of “conservatism”, namely “relative economic”, “absolute economic”, “social” and “immigration” conservatism. While the items found in the respective surveys used in this dissertation do not exhaust the potential items for secondary dimension(s), they are arguably sufficient. Similarly to previous research, immigration attitudes take a prominent role, in addition to e.g. attitudes on EU integration (ESS) and environmental issues (SNES).

It should be noted that the measurement of dimensions, namely the primary left-right placement, and items on policy topics, are not on equal footing. The items themselves are naturally quite different, and they plausibly are on different depths in terms of tapping the political outlook of respondents. Thus, comparisons between metrics derived from these different measurements should be taken with some caution. The degree to which left-right placements and political attitudes explain variation in vote choice (Paper II), and aspects of the variation itself in these metrics (Paper I), are in focus in the analyses. In these circumstances, it is not clear that e.g. a higher degree of polarization on the left-right dimension than on immigration attitudes is not a mere result of the differences in the items. However, this is a problem that is hard to avoid with the way that public
opinion is generally shaped and measured – the left-right scale is the dominant language in which political outlooks and preferences are summarized (e.g. de Vries et al., 2013). This underscores the importance of comparing changes in these metrics, rather than levels – while it might be hard to ascertain whether left-right or immigration attitude polarization is highest in a nonarbitrary way, it is nonetheless possible to uncover whether one or the other are becoming more or less important over time.

Analyzing Dynamics of Public Opinion

To study change over time, slightly different methods are employed in Papers I and II, and Paper III, respectively. For the studies (1 and 2) that employ comparative analyses across European cases, the method of showing change over time is inspired by the one introduced by Schmitt and Holmberg (1995, subsequently used e.g. by Dalton (2021)), where country-year estimates of some metric are regressed on a time (year) indicator. Any indication of change is thus reduced to a single value per case (country) studied. In the third study, a single national case is in focus, which significantly reduces the number of data points that are to be displayed in any analysis of change. Thus, the patterns of change can be presented sufficiently parsimoniously, even if the cases analyzed are on a party-echelon level.
Figure 3. Change in left-right polarization illustrated, the case of Czechia.

An example of the method used in Papers I and II is illustrated above in Figure 3, where polarization estimates according to the metric introduced in Paper I is shown by year for the Czech case. The slope of the fitted line shows the bivariate linear regression estimate, which is the metric of change. The clearest strength with this metric is the simplicity, with the change across time points summarized in a single value for each country and estimate combination. However, there are naturally drawbacks to the method as well. Firstly, the number of observations are generally very low (at most n = 10 with the ESS data), which yields very high bars to clear for conventional levels of statistical significance to be passed. Czechia, for instance, has one of the strongest estimates of change among the cases studied, but the bivariate regression yields a $p$ value of 0.055. Additionally, the method might rely heavily on outliers, resulting in particular in the risk of an “end-point fallacy” as noted e.g. by van der Eijk et al. (2005). The most important reason to nevertheless utilize such a simplification, where a single-value estimate is all but necessary, is due to the relatively high number of cases. With estimates on (at least) two attitude items/dimensions, 60
change coefficients are presented for comparative analyses of European polities.

Methodological Themes and Contributions

The research designs in the respective studies are intended to follow from the aims of each study. For all three studies, there is extant research that brings empirical evidence to the questions posed, but there is also room for methodological improvements and contributions within each subfield.

On the topic of Paper I, ideological polarization, there is considerable debate on methodological approaches how to estimate it. Naturally, it follows from conceptual discussions on polarization (e.g. Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams & Pope, 2008). The approach utilized in Paper I follows the logic of the influential conceptualization provided by DiMaggio et al. (1996). In brief, this means that ideological polarization is about dispersion, modality, constraint, and sorting (see Paper I for a longer discussion). The methodological innovation in Paper I consists mainly in the measurement of the first two aspects of polarization, which is argued to be best understood as a joint concept of polarization – consisting of both dispersion, as well as modality, in the distribution of ideological views. The first aspect, dispersion, is measured uncontroversially as the variance in the given distribution. The second aspect, modality, is understood as the ‘grouping’ in the distribution based on party choice. In practice, this is measured as the $\eta^2$ metric (corresponding to the $R^2$ of OLS regressions with party choice categories as independent variables, and respective political attitude as dependent variable, see e.g. Bartels (2013) for an application). This measurement departs from the mentioned conceptualization by DiMaggio et al. (1996), and renders the measurement (and conceptualization) a partisan flair. It is motivated both by theoretical considerations, but also due to the structure of opinions, as measured – with few discrete options (e.g. 11 on the left-right scale), it is not plausible to estimate modality e.g. in terms of hierarchical clustering (see e.g. Mehlhaff, 2022; Traber, Stoetzer & Burri, 2023 for similar suggestions). From these two aspects of polarization (dispersion and partisan clustering), a multiplicative polarization index is constructed. This novel polarization index is applied to the distributions of political attitudes, and could be utilized in
further research for polarization among other groups (e.g. gender, age) as well (see Paper I, section 3 for a longer discussion).

In the second paper, the analysis concerns the degree to which political attitudes (in particular left-right placements) explain variation in vote choice. Since the dependent variable is a nominal categorical variable, it is appropriate to use multinomial logistic regression (e.g. Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000, ch.8). The focus is not the estimates as such, but rather, how well the independent variables in each particular model (and sample) explain the variation in the dependent variable. For these purposes, the McFadden (1973) pseudo-$R^2$ is utilized. This measurement of fit is not identical, and cannot be interpreted identically, to the standard $R^2$ from OLS. However, it serves the purposes of providing a comparable estimate of the degree of variation explained across models well. Previous forays into this area has made other methodological choices. van der Eijck et al. (2005) turn the relationship the other way around, using $\eta^2$ estimations of the degree to which party choices explain variation in left-right placements. This is done to facilitate comparability to other measurements in the same study (see ibid. p. 169). Dalton (2010) estimates variation explained in an OLS setting, which requires a transformation of party choice into some interval variable. In Dalton's (2010, p. 108) case, this is done by assigning each party the average left-right score given by the general public (mean placement in the survey). Hence, the approach utilized in Paper II has some methodological strengths compared to previous studies – it is more principled than van der Eijck et al.'s (2005) estimations, and requires fewer assumptions about the correctness of placements of the parties on a scale compared to Dalton (2010).

In paper III, the analysis concerns ideological incongruence within the political parties. In the study of this topic (i.e. on May’s Law), Norris (1995) has previously clarified the demands for proper tests of May’s Law in a fruitful way (see also van Holsteyn et al., 2017, p. 683). The conditions to a large extent depend on the data available – that several (at least three) strata within parties needs to be available; that attitudes are compared between parties; that radicalism is clearly conceptualized in ideological terms; and that groups of activists within the parties are specified. Paper III takes the research further in this respect, since it brings together materials on party voters, members as well as elites, with measurements that largely meet these criteria, to a greater extent than previous studies. The methods
involved in displaying intra-party incongruence is relatively straightforward, and lends itself easily to graphical presentation and comparison. This established logic of exploring incongruence, and testing May’s Law, is followed in Paper III, with the addition of some simple OLS models. Additionally, an overlooked criterion of the mobilization of a party on the particular dimension analyzed is applied in Paper III. This is more of a theoretical than a methodological point, but has far-reaching consequences for which cases that are of interest in such an analysis.

The methodological approach of this dissertation is, as discussed briefly in the introduction, to provide comparative descriptions. The structuring idea is to move from the question of whether ideological polarization is changing (increasing), to that of whether left-right positions (or other political attitudes) matter for electoral choices, to the opening up of the political parties as units where ideological differences may matter as well. The thrust of the argument regarding the salience of these descriptions relies on the idea that the questions studied are important, both for understanding the state of representative democracy and in terms of lacunae in the literature, and that the comparisons across cases (in time and space) provide meaningful answers. Thus, the analyses carried out follow a political science tradition of descriptive inference, rather than answering causal questions. In Gerring’s (2012) sardonic terminology, what this dissertation provides is ‘mere description’. This should however not be taken as a less ambitious alternative to inquiries on questions of causal nature. Rather, what Gerring underscores is that the descriptive task is “an eminently important one” (p. 732), which has generally been devalued in political science to the discipline’s detriment. Conclusively, the ambition is that we learn more about what is changing in public opinion, regarding the links between people and power, in the context of 21st century Europe.
Outlining Empirical Patterns

While the empirical patterns for each question is investigated more thoroughly in respective paper, an introduction to the general patterns of the political opinion structure is provided below.

Firstly, regarding the positions of European political parties, Figure 4 (below) illustrates their placements according to expert evaluations (CHES, Jolly et al., 2022), on the "general left-right" as well as the GAL-TAN positions of the parties. There is a clear connection between the two, where parties that assume a leftist position are most often on the Green-Alternative-Libertarian side of the secondary dimension, while parties on the (economic) right are more often on the Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist side. Regarding party positions, there is a high degree of variation across both the dimensions individually, but less in both dimensions simultaneously. This holds true for both Western and Eastern Europe. In both regions, roughly 80% of parties are found in either the lower-left (left/GAL) or upper-right (right/TAN) quadrants, while the other two quadrants are sparsely populated (albeit slightly more in Eastern Europe).

![Diagram showing the relationship between GAL, TAN, and general left-right positioning of political parties.]

Figure 4. Chapel Hill Expert Survey, party placements in 2019.
Regarding the political opinion of citizens, the left-right schema is the most prominent and important instrument for the understanding of political placements. With the European Social Survey data utilized in studies two and three, Figure 5 below presents distributions of left-right placements per country. A striking pattern is that, in most countries, the majority (or at least the plurality) of respondents are centrist. The median placement in all countries except Montenegro (with a slight leftwards deviation) is at the midpoint, equivalent to being “neither left nor right”. In almost all countries, the tails are relatively thin, with a few exceptions (e.g. Montenegro with fatter tails to the left, Latvia and Luxemburg with fatter tails to the right). The general conclusion is that the typical European voter in the 21st century is centrist, in terms of left-right positions. This pattern holds across regions and contexts.

![Graphs showing left-right positions](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 5. Kernel density graph of left-right positions, Epanechnikov kernel, bandwidth 0.08.

\[^7\] Limited to democracies according to Polity V scores. Left-right scores rescaled to $-\frac{1}{2}$ (most left) to 1 (most right), from an 11-point scale.
Figure 6. Kernel density graph of immigration attitudes, Epanechnikov kernel, bandwidth 0.1.

The distributions of immigration attitudes as above in Figure 6 shows a quite different pattern compared to left-right placements. Here, almost all citizenries again exhibit unimodal distributions of attitudes, but there is considerable variation in average attitudes between countries. The modes are generally not placed at the center, and there are some clear regional patterns in the distributions.

The most liberal average views are found in some of the Nordic countries (Iceland, Sweden, Norway), while the most restrictive views are found in the South or East, e.g. Greece, Cyprus, Hungary and Czechia.

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8 Immigration attitudes are rescaled to range from -1 (most liberal) to 1 (most restrictive). Based on an additive immigration index constructed from ESS items, see the appendix to Paper I for the components.
Figure 7. Correlations between attitude items/dimensions. Boxplots showing median, quartiles, and adjacent values, of country-specific (Pearson) correlation estimates (from ESS, 2002-2020).

While the distribution of these attitudes as such shows some main aspects of the opinion spaces, i.e. averages and dispersions, it is arguably more important to understand the connection between different opinion dimensions, to grasp the structure of the opinion space. Figure 7 above shows the correlations between different items, where the aim is to capture both the left-right dimension (the self-placement item, income inequality attitudes) as well as secondary scale-items (immigration, EU integration, homosexuals’ rights attitudes). The selection is in practice based on those widely available in ESS. The first four items from the top show the distribution of correlations between left-right positions of individuals, and their positions on various items, per country. It is clear that for most countries, leftist positions are associated with more liberal views on immigration (in

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9 Throughout, limited to the 30 European countries that meet the criteria of being democracies according to Polity V, as well as having coverage over at least two time points in ESS. See Appendix for coverage.
red) and on homosexuals' rights (in light gray). The clearest positive association is, as expected, regarding income inequality attitudes, where leftist positions are associated with more positive views regarding the proposal that the "government should reduce differences in income levels". However, this association is generally not any stronger than the one regarding the correlation between left-right positions and immigration attitudes. Further, the strongest patterns of correlation are found between immigration attitudes and EU integration views, and between immigration attitudes and views on homosexuals' rights. The correlations go in the expected direction – more liberal views on immigration are associated with both more liberal views on homosexuals' rights, and with more positive attitudes to EU integration. Otherwise, no clear directions of correlations are persistent in the European citizenries.

Additionally, a conclusion from Figure 7 is that correlations between different attitudes are generally quite weak. Median correlation coefficients are lower than 0.2 for all combinations except for the two combinations that suggest a secondary GAL-AN dimension, connecting immigration attitudes with EU integration views and homosexuals' rights attitudes respectively. Further analyses of the empirical structure of the opinion space in Europe (and specifically Sweden in Paper III) are left for the studies, where there is naturally more space to explore the nuances of respective question.
Summary of Studies

Paper I: Are the Europeans Polarized?

The first study of the dissertation concerns the recently much debated topic of polarization, in a qualified sense. The aim is to study the degree of ideological polarization among the citizenries in Europe, understood in distinction to other discussions regarding affective polarization (e.g. Wagner, 2021) and polarization among elites or parties (e.g. Banda & Cluverius, 2018). With the background that it is intermittently claimed that we are living in ‘polarized times’ (see e.g. Klein, 2020), the study explores both the general (static) picture of polarization in European polities, as well as whether polarization is changing (dynamics).

The study takes as a point of departure the conceptualization of polarization provided by DiMaggio et al. (1996), namely that polarization is about (1) dispersion of opinions; (2) modality, i.e. the extent to which opinion is concentrated to modes; (3) constraint across attitude domains; and (4) consolidation/sorting, i.e. the degree to which attitudes are correlated with individual characteristics. The aim is to cover the whole composite concept of polarization, and the paper develops an argument for why the first two characteristics should be understood and measured jointly. From that discussion, a novel polarization index measurement is suggested and applied. This polarization construct also departs partially from DiMaggio et al.’s (1996) conceptualization, in the sense that the ‘modality’ is rather taken as ‘grouping’ across partisan lines – ideological polarization is argued to be higher when ideological positions are more clearly structured by party choice. This renders polarization conceptualized and measured as partisan ideological polarization. In brief, some developments of polarization on issues that do not become part of the political competition organized by parties will be downplayed in the analysis. On the other hand, the analysis emphasizes that partisan competition is central to understanding changes in political attitudes, and any polarization changes that are found are part of organized political competition in respective political system.

With this measurement of polarization, as well as standard measures of explained variation in political attitudes across domains and by a set of
sociodemographic characteristics, the degree of polarization in 30 European polities is analyzed pooled over the whole available time period (2002-2020) as well as over time. For reasons discussed at greater length in the paper, the main measurements of ideological positions are left-right placements, as well as immigration attitudes (according to the index discussed above). The results suggest that polarization is higher in left-right terms than on immigration attitudes, in all European polities. However, polarization is increasing on immigration attitudes in most countries, whereas there is no clear pattern of increase in polarization in left-right terms. Further, the US case is used as one of contrast, where the European polities are clearly not seeing a general increase in polarization to the extent found for the US. Thus, the discussions of polarization that are centered on the case of the US cannot be generalized to be valid for the European democracies, where patterns are different.

Paper II: Does the Left-Right Scale Still Matter?

The second study of the dissertation concerns the degree to which left-right placements continue to matter, in the sense of structuring vote choices among European citizens. The dependent variable of the analyses is vote choice, again utilizing ESS data for 30 countries over recent years (2002-2020).

The study is motivated against the backdrop of recurring claims of the obsolescence of the left-right scale, and the idea that time has come to move “beyond Left and Right” (Giddens, 1994, see e.g. Noël, Thérien & Boucher, 2021 for a comparative discussion). While such claims are more often found in media commentary (e.g. Sartwell, 2014), scholarship on the left-right scale is more nuanced and the usefulness of such a construct often defended (e.g. Bobbio, 1996; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Lindqvist, 2022). However, while there are plenty of studies on the relationship between attitudes and left-right positions in different contexts, there are no comprehensive treatments of the relationship between left-right placements and vote choices (see e.g. Dalton, 2010; van der Eijk, Schmitt & Binder, 2005 for forays into this area). Hence, this study contributes by exploring further the degree to which the left-right scale matters, in the sense that it is related to vote choice, taking into account the contextually varying attitudinal contents of such placements.
The analysis proceeds in two steps in the paper. Firstly, the degree to which left-right placements, as well as other political attitudes, explain vote choice is studied for all considered European polities. In all cases, left-right placements are stronger predictors of vote choice than any of the attitudinal candidates (i.e. on immigration, income inequality, and EU integration). However, the degree explained of vote choices is generally quite low, with few individual country-estimates above 0.2. Additionally, the left-right scale is losing predictive power regarding vote choice in a majority of the cases studied, although this trend is quite weak in substantial terms. The attitudinal item that shows the clearest pattern of increasing explanatory power is immigration attitudes, with some regional variation. Secondly, the analysis concerns the strength of attitudinal predictors of left-right placements—i.e. what the left-right scale consists of, across different cases. Here, regional variations are uncovered, where there is no general agreement that left-right placements are mostly about economic inequality attitudes. In northern Europe in particular, economic inequality attitudes are by far the strongest predictors of left-right placements. In Southern and Western Europe, immigration attitudes seem to structure left-right placements to a larger extent, while left-right placements in Central/Eastern Europe are rather associated (albeit quite weakly) with LGBT rights attitudes. In sum, there does not seem to be a universal left-right scale across European cases. However, left-right placements continue to be important for the ways that citizens make their vote choices, while there is some suggestion of a challenge from immigration attitudes to the supremacy of the left-right dimension.

Paper III: May’s Law may Prevail

The third study of the dissertation concerns the opinion structure of political parties, focusing on the different echelons of political parties. John May (1973) suggested that the parties consist of several different strata, those of ‘high’, ‘intermediate’ and ‘low’ status, with some suggestions on the ideological positioning of the people inhabiting those levels (ibid., p. 136). The main idea of May’s “laws of curvilinear disparity” is that actors

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10 Published in Party Politics as Hultin Bäckersten (2022).
in these levels have differentiated incentives, which leads them to take particular relative positions. With this in mind, May claims that the intermediate stratum is the most extreme (e.g. in left-right terms), while elites take a position between that of “non-leaders” and the mid layer. The intermediate level actors are more extreme, since they have no incentives to moderate their stances, while the leaders take their cues both from voters (seeking to remain close to voter positions to maximize votes) as well as “sub-leaders” (seeking to remain close to sub-leader positions to be supported by party activists). This pattern has been received as “May’s Law” in the singular, and has mixed empirical support from previous studies (see e.g Norris, 1995; van Holsteyn et al., 2017). Thus, May’s Law has a similar status regarding opinion structures in intra-party analysis as Duverger’s Law does for the relationship between electoral system and party system. Arguably, it has a solid theoretical foundation, but the evidence is weak enough that a ‘law’ is a misleadingly strong concept (accordingly, Norris (1995) suggests that it should be called ‘May’s rule’). Rather, it is a suggested regularity, which may require some conditions to be satisfied for it to be applicable.

The study contributes with a thorough test of May’s Law in the Swedish setting, utilizing an agglomeration of survey material, of Swedish party voters, party members and Members of Parliament. The material covers 1985 to 2018, with political views in terms of left-right positions, immigration attitudes, and a GAL-TAN index. A further theoretical contribution concerns the applicability of May’s Law, where the notion of incentives for taking extreme positions arguably depend on whether the party takes a marked position, distinct from the center position. If the party claims to be centrist (or does not take a particular position on the concerned spectrum at all), the suggested logic of incentives for members and elites is not plausibly in play. Thus, a hypothesis that the parties that more clearly ‘organize’ on a particular dimension are the ones where the pattern predicted by May’s Law could be expected to exist.

The results suggest that this modified and qualified formulation of May’s Law is indeed applicable for the parties that organize left-right competition in Swedish politics, in particular the Social Democrats and the Moderates. These patterns of incongruence are stable over time. In terms of immigration attitudes, a pattern where the higher up the party echelons one goes, the more liberal people become, is found for all parties except
for the Sweden Democrats. This is plausibly a pattern that is relatively
dated, given the dramatic shift in immigration policies of the major Swe-
dish parties in recent years. Additionally, on the GAL-TAN index, a pat-
tern of elite polarization is found, which is also stable over time.

In conclusion, the study additionally answers questions regarding the
ideological representativity of the Swedish political parties. While one
could expect that declining levels of party membership would mean that
parties only retain more radical individuals, this does not seem to be the
case. Rather, patterns of relatively strong opinion representativity are per-
sistent. There are slight deviations from this—on left-right issues, which
are arguably the most important for political conflict in general in Swedish
politics, party activists are significantly more radical than the voters in the
left-right-organized parties, and party elites (MPs) are logically slightly
more radical than the voters (and less radical than the members).
Concluding Reflections

This dissertation aims to address the state of democracy by examining the stability of public opinion, as the very fabric of which representative democracy is constructed. While there are widespread conjectures about public de-alignment, polarization, and the failure of parties to meaningfully organize politics, the results of the studies reveal that these claims hold true only to a limited and qualified extent. In conjunction, these results show that some things are indeed changing in European democratic politics, in terms of aspects of public opinion that are central to representative democracy, but there are no clear signs of a ‘fracturing’ of its fabric. If democratic party government is indeed “-ever”, in Peter Mair’s (2013, p. 1) terms, then its demise is more subtle than what is evidenced in the studies.

The understanding of representative democracy discussed in this dissertation rests upon the conceptualization provided by Nadia Urbinati (2006, 2014). On this account, representative democracy is diarchical, based on two pillars – those of will and opinion. Any such non-minimalist account of democracy renders the concept of representative democracy composite and complex, with boundaries that are arguably indeterminate on the margins. The focus of this dissertation is on the opinion side of democracy, where the conceptualization has affinities with both deliberative (cf. Chambers, 2003) and participatory (e.g. Pateman, 2012) accounts. The opinion aspect of democracy is procedural, and a point of clarification is that the understanding of democratic opinion in this sense is not limited to policy correspondence with representative preferences in the public (e.g. Stimson, Mackuen & Erikson, 1995). While this is naturally a boon to any democratic system, it is not by itself sufficient to conclude that all is well with representative democracy. In addition to the content, attention also has to be paid to the forms of representation. In particular, for the purposes of this dissertation, how and to what extent it is taking place through the parties, whether the dominant language of politics structures political participation, and whether citizens are becoming polarized in ideological terms. These angles contain elements of both form and content, and incorporates but also aims to go beyond pure “substantive representation”, in Pitkin’s (1967) terminology. In Urbinati’s (2014) terms, ‘opinion’ in representative democracy is a synonym for ‘judgment’, which naturally requires that citizens train and use their judgment continuously.
Thus, it is not ‘mere opinion’ that is the focus, but rather the whole integrated process of participating in political life, inside and outside the established institutions (such as political parties), that is the wider area of concern.

Contributions

Primary contributions of the dissertation are to fill lacunae in the knowledge regarding empirical developments in respective area of study in recent times in Europe.

The first study shows that polarization is only increasing in Europe in a qualified sense, and nuances discussions regarding the notion that current times are ‘polarized’. While this might hold true in an unequivocal sense in the US setting, it is not as clear for the European polities. The second study shows that the left-right scale continues to be of significant importance in structuring political conflict in the European polities. Left-right placements explain significantly more of the variation in vote choices than political attitudes do, although the trend of left-right explanatory degree is slightly negative for most cases. The third study shows that the ideological (‘substantive’) representativeness of the political parties does not seem to be significantly imperiled by declining levels of party engagement (e.g. in terms of membership). The study focuses on a single European case, Sweden, where the generalizability to other European contexts is naturally relatively limited. However, the strength with this case study is the comparatively richer data material, where differentiated patterns are found for different attitudinal dimensions. A pattern that is recurrently found in the different contributions is that the left-right scale remains the primary dimension for structuring political opinion, although it might be undergoing a gradual transformation. Additionally, immigration issues are becoming more and more important in most European political contexts, both in terms of polarization and the degree to which it is connected to vote choices.

The theoretical contributions in the studies are naturally related to the considerations on the empirical results. The result that immigration attitudes are becoming more important is plausibly related to it being a question that has surfaced in general in European politics in recent decades, with a so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (e.g. Hutter & Kriesi, 2019) affecting most
if not all of Europe. Thus, a pattern where the left-right dimension is perennially important (although it is flexible, as seen in Paper II), and alternative issues surface with new challenges, seems to be the norm where the developments in recent decades fit in. Whether immigration issues become less important over time, and may be replaced with other questions that become salient subsequently, remains an open question. Furthermore, the flexibility of the left-right scale admits that it absorbs new issues, which also is the case for most European countries in recent times, where immigration issues explain more of the variation in left-right placements over time (Paper II).

Further specific theoretical contributions are related to the particular literatures, e.g. in the third study, a contribution regards the understanding of May’s Law, in terms of the applicability only to parties that take clear positions on the dimension at hand. The first study contributes with a discussion on how mass ideological polarization should be understood, with the influential conceptualization by DiMaggio et al. (1996) as a point of departure. The concept of mass ideological polarization remains under-specified in the extant literature, and the study is intended to contribute with a discussion on how to understand this qualified concept of polarization, as well as a suggested way of measuring it.

Limitations and Prospects for Further Research

The studies in the dissertation naturally come with a set of limitations, which also gives ample suggestions for further research. The results in the third study indicate that May’s law might hold more water than other recent studies contend (e.g. van Holsteyn et al., 2017). Further research should explore whether a qualified version of May’s law holds in other contexts as well, or if this is an idiosyncrasy of the Swedish system, where the left-right dimension have previously been found to be particularly strong comparatively (e.g. Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). For the Swedish case, a very clear pattern of curvilinear ideological incongruence was evident among the parties that take non-centrist positions on the main dimension of competition. The hypothesis that this carries over to other contexts as well is worth testing, and might resolve inconsistent findings in the literature on intra-party opinion structures. The first and second studies
both seek to answer questions of a similar nature, i.e. in terms of comparative description across time and country cases. The results thus give clear indications of the state of ideological polarization and left-right-voting-relationships in recent times in Europe, but does not explore causes or consequences of change. A fruitful avenue for further research would be to study the relationship between these aspects of public opinion in European polities, and other country-level variables. Is polarization on immigration questions for instance driven by having received larger (or smaller) numbers of immigrants in the preceding years? Are different types of party systems differently able to structure vote choices according to the left-right dimension? Are other issues becoming more salient for vote choices as new parties enter parliament? Such questions are a natural next step, building on the analysis provided in the studies in this dissertation.

Furthermore, the analyses in the studies are all limited to utilizing quantitative materials and methods, where other approaches would complement the picture as it is painted here. Analyses of intra-party structures are, for instance, fertile ground for qualitative studies regarding how different positions in political parties are understood from a first-person view (see e.g. Wolkenstein, 2019b). While relative ideological outlooks in terms of aggregate positions are stable, the role of a party activist may very well be changing to a large extent when party membership is declining. In polarization research, qualitative methods are also generally underexploited, and could shed some light on the disconnect between the intuitive sentiment that polarization is increasing, while quantitative evidence does not show such a clear trend. The conceptualization of the tenets of representative democracy, and what is at stake when the conditions of public opinion are changing, could also be developed further in political theory. The notion of polarization as a menace for the current political environment is widespread in media commentary, but the relationship between different types of polarization and the state of democracy needs more attention (see e.g. Stavvakakis, 2018). In general, the empirical research on the partisan linkage in representative democracy would be well served by a closer connection to developments in democratic theory (van Biezen & Saward, 2008), and the topics of concern here are no exception.
Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on the developments of key aspects of public opinion in the representative democracies of Europe. In the empirical analyses, there seems to be indications of gradual change in how public opinion is functioning. Nevertheless, in times of declining participation in terms of both party membership and electoral participation, and when things are arguably changing in the wider opinion climate (as suggested e.g. by Fukuyama (2020)), the main findings indicate stability. The political parties are still the primary organizers of political competition, with ideological representativity on similar levels over recent decades. There are some signs of increasing ideological polarization, but the main conclusion is that levels of polarization in most European countries remain alike over the last two decades. Additionally, the left-right dimension continues to structure vote choices among citizens in all European countries to an extent that no political attitudes come close to, although around two thirds of the cases exhibit declining levels of left-right-vote connection. In sum, public opinion is organized relatively similarly, with some marginal changes, over the last two decades in European politics, in terms of the aspects studied in this dissertation.

These results do naturally not mean that one can conclude that all is well with representative democracy in contemporary Europe. As e.g. the V-Dem institute has examined and debated extensively in recent years, there seems to be a gradual process of autocratization taking place in some European polities (Papada et al., 2023). Additionally, there are several accounts in the wider literature on political life in contemporary democracies that suggest that democracy may be deteriorating in terms that are not captured well by indices such as those of V-Dem. As mentioned above, Mair (2013) claimed that the post-cold war times are marked by a ‘mutual withdrawal’ of both citizens and party elites from the public sphere. Regarding public opinion, with populist resurgence mainly on the political right, but also suggested as a strategy for the political left (see Mouffe, 2018), there are suggestions that we are living in times of ‘hyperpolitics’, where “everything is politics” (Jäger, 2022). Picking up on this idea, Wendy Brown (2023) suggests that a concomitant root of hyperpoliticization is, in fact, nihilism in political life, where values no longer have any stable or even particular meaning. Bearing these interventions in mind,
there is some degree of intuitive merit to the idea that things are dramati-
cally changing in the areas studied in this dissertation. Conjectures to the
fact that the political parties are ‘losing touch’ with the attitudes of citizens;
that citizens are becoming more ideologically polarized; and that the tra-
ditional form of left-right competition is becoming obsolete, all seem rea-
sonable at face value. However, the results from this dissertation show that
this is not the case – if we are looking for dramatic changes in the structure
of public opinion in representative democracies, it is not found in any of
the areas studied in this dissertation.
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