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Does political polarisation undermine democratic accountability? Evidence from 28 European democracies

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ABSTRACT

Political polarisation has drawn significant attention recently due to its potential adverse impacts. Evidence suggests that various forms of socio-political polarisation are associated with weaker democratic and economic performance. This research investigates the relationship between two types of political polarisation and macro-level accountability – that is, citizens' ability and opportunity to select, monitor, and control their governments. Using data from the European Social Survey, World Bank, and V-Dem databases, the study analyses 202 observations from 28 European countries over twenty years. The findings indicate a negative correlation between polarisation and democratic accountability. Specifically, countries with higher levels of polarisation exhibit weaker accountability, and as a country becomes more polarised, its democratic accountability further declines. The relationship is robust across alternative operationalisations of polarisation and different model specifications. This research underscores the detrimental effects of polarisation on democratic functioning and calls for more in-depth studies to better understand this relationship.

KEYWORDS Polarisation; democratic accountability; European Social Survey

Political polarisation has garnered significant attention in the past decade, with concerns about its potential threats to democratic functioning. Existing evidence indicates correlations between socio-political polarisation and weaker democratic and economic performance. Potential adverse consequences range from the rise of illiberalism and populism to the higher incidence of severe political instability events like civil wars and adverse regime changes (Enyedi 2016; Esmer 2019; Frye 2002, 2010;

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Goldstone *et al.* 2010; Goldstone and Ulfelder 2004; McCoy *et al.* 2018; Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016; Patkós 2019, 2022; Somer and McCoy 2019).

The investigation focuses on the negative consequences of political polarisation on accountability, irrespective of polarisation's exact type – partisan or ideological – and origins – like realignments in party system (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Stonecash *et al.* 2018), elite polarisation (Druckman *et al.* 2013; Gallop and Greene 2021; Levendusky 2010; Smidt 2017), negative campaigns (Ansolabehere 1999), economic crisis (Bisgaard 2015; Stanig 2013), or social sorting (Mason 2015, 2018).

Accountability arises from the relationship between representatives and the represented and is considered the bedrock of liberal democracy (Dahl 1972). Theories on the links between polarisation and accountability suggest that polarisation causes a deterioration in democratic accountability by increasing the costs of abandoning one's original party and switching to another camp (Kiss 2012; Körösenyi 2013; Svolik 2019), or alternatively, by increasing the weight of directional partisan motivations in opinion formation (Claassen and Ensley 2016; Druckman *et al.* 2013; Kunda 1990). We argue that besides the most obvious individual-level aspects of polarisation (heightened partisanship that increases individual-level partisan motivated reasoning) polarisation has system-level aspects too, exerting its effect across a partisan-constrained informational and institutional environment.

Drawing upon country-year aggregated data and macro data from the European Social Survey (ESS), the V-Dem database and the World Bank's Governance Indicators, the research investigates whether two different types of polarisation – partisan and ideological – predict lower democratic accountability, covering 202 cases from 28 European countries over 20 years, between 2000 and 2020. The results show that, in a comparative European perspective, a polarised atmosphere predicts negative consequences regarding democratic accountability. This is true for both within-country and between-country interpretations of the relationship – this dual focus is crucial in exploring how polarisation impacts democratic accountability across different contexts and over time. By focusing on the between effects, we see that differences between countries' general level of polarisation matter; accountability is significantly weaker in more polarised countries. By focusing on the within effects, we can capture what happens when polarisation in a specific country changes. The results are again negative, showing that accountability declines in countries that become more polarised compared to their usual level.

The effects of polarisation indices are substantively large and robust across various model specifications (pooled OLS, random effects, fixed effects, and within-between random effects models), even when controlling for the spread and strength of citizens' partisanship. In many cases, the effects persist even when both polarisation indices are included

in the models simultaneously, suggesting that different types of polarisation contribute uniquely to the decline of accountability. These components are not only distinct from each other but also meaningful in their own right. However, the effect is more robust for partisan polarisation than for ideological polarisation. These findings enhance our understanding of the relationship between political polarisation and democratic performance, highlighting a significant and robust negative relationship between accountability and both partisan-affective and ideological types of political polarisation. By shedding light on these dynamics, this article informs scholars and decision-makers about the challenges posed by polarisation in democratic societies.

Democratic accountability and polarisation

What is polarisation?

Political polarisation is the phenomenon whereby competing political groups become increasingly divergent. It is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with important implications for governance (Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina *et al.* 2006; Fiorina and Abrams 2009), economic development (Frye 2002, 2010; McConnell *et al.* 2018; Patkós 2022) and democracy (McCoy *et al.* 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; Orhan 2022). Divisiveness can manifest itself in many ways and be measured along several axes. Ideological polarisation means that voters' self-identification on the ideological scale (Ellis and Stimson 2009; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), as well as their policy positions (Campbell 2018; Levendusky 2009; Theriault 2008) and the ideological positions of the parties become increasingly divergent (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006). Affective polarisation means the extent of emotional likes and dislikes between competing political groups (Iyengar *et al.* 2012). Partisan polarisation is similar to affective polarisation in the sense that it aims to capture a partisan, even tribal and certainly more affective than policy-oriented division yet it is measured differently. It posits that the main form of appearance of polarisation is that people identify themselves as members of increasingly partisan and increasingly divergent 'Us versus Them' groups in practically every types of political debates. This type of polarisation is often captured by measuring the divergence of opinions in two partisan camps in important political issues (Druckman *et al.* 2013; Jacobson 2003, 2010; Jones 2010; Patkós 2023).

What is accountability and how is it related to polarisation?

In liberal democracy, accountability involves the actions of an agent, or collective entity, acting on behalf of another and operating within a framework of incentives and sanctions, at least in part under the

supervision of the latter (Cameron *et al.* 2023). This form of accountability is particularly focalised within the nexus between voters and elected officials, in which the electoral mechanism serves as the primary conduit for the implementation of rewards and punishments. In other words, accountability emerges from the relationship between representatives and the represented, and is considered the bedrock of liberal democracy (Dahl 1972). Without claiming to be exhaustive, three prominent approaches to the conceptualisation of accountability could be drawn upon, which up to now have largely remained separate. One approach concerns the proper *sanctioning of violations of rules and norms* (Abrams *et al.* 2013; Anduiza *et al.* 2013; Blais *et al.* 2015; Claassen and Ensley 2016). A second approach includes the work on *latent public opinion* against which the acts of the incumbents and the responsiveness of the system is measured, in other words, how citizens preferences are reflected in governance (Arnold 1990; Cameron *et al.* 2023; Key 1961). The third approach is concerned with general *retrospective evaluations* (Achen and Bartels 2017; Fiorina 1981), which may be considered to be in their simplest form the economic voting (Lewis-Beck 1990; Lewis-Beck *et al.* 2013; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). The following is an overview of the three strands of literature on accountability and their relationship to polarisation.

Accountability understood as correctly identifying and sanctioning the violation of norms

The first strand of research on democratic accountability concerns the electoral sanctioning of transgressions of rules and democratic norms. In highly polarised contexts, voters frequently prioritise their partisan identity over democratic principles. This is evidenced by findings showing that the majority of voters are partisans first and democrats second (Graham and Svobik 2020). Moderate conflict is a necessary component of a healthy democracy, as it allows for partisan-motivated reasoning where voters may forgive their preferred leaders for minor transgressions or policy deviations. However, in highly polarised contexts, when competing blocs perceive the out-group as a threat to democracy, partisan reasoning increases and voters even accept or forgive more serious violations of democratic norms (Kingzette *et al.* 2021). This effect is further heightened when winning status is involved in the analysis, as voters' support for norm-eroding policies increases when their own party is in power (Simonovits *et al.* 2022). This intensified partisan reasoning can transform political adversaries into enemies, thereby transforming democratic conflict from agonism to antagonism (Mouffe 2013). In this antagonistic environment, polarisation leads people to blame political incivility solely on the other side and to become increasingly unwilling to want their

politicians to compromise with the opposition (Wolf *et al.* 2012). In such instances, politicians may breach norms in the name of democracy, while voters lose faith in the political system, perceiving it as unresponsive to their needs. In such an atmosphere, which has been labelled as partisan polarisation, voters cease to expect that politicians will be held to account, thereby fundamentally altering the relationship between representatives and the represented (McCoy and Somer 2019).

Accountability in mandate theory – is the agent correctly pursuing its mandate?

Robert Dahl's conceptualisation of democracy emphasises that a key characteristic of a democracy is the government's continued responsiveness to its citizens' preferences, considered as political equals (Dahl 1972). One of the earliest models to describe how voters' preferences influence public policy was the median voter model (Downs 1957). This model posited that politicians would seek to align themselves with the preferences of the median voter to secure electoral victory. However, this model has undergone significant evolution over time. The early formulations of democratic accountability, as exemplified by the works of Miller and Stokes (1963), underscored the significance of politicians' perceptions of voter preferences. However, empirical studies frequently lacked data on incumbents' perceptions, making it challenging to accurately measure and analyse accountability. The principal-agent model of accountability further complicates this by introducing other mediating players beyond elected politicians and voters, such as special interest groups, unions, and corporatist institutions. These entities create a complex and multifaceted web of accountability relationships that vary across different European polities.

Heightened partisanship and stronger partisan motivations weaken accountability in the framework of mandate theory. Polarisation intensifies the impact of party endorsements while diminishing the role of substantive information and increasing confidence in uninformed opinions (Druckman *et al.* 2013). Affective polarisation fosters support for extremist candidates and blinds partisans to ideological extremity (Iyengar *et al.* 2019), reducing voters' inclination to penalise their own party for extremism (Pierson and Schickler 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, strong in-party bias led individuals to blame out-party-led governments more intensely (Jin *et al.* 2023; Martinez-Bravo and Sanz 2023). Over time, reliance on party label over incumbency has grown, eroding incumbent accountability in favour of partisan loyalty (Egan and Prior 2023). Beyond individual motivations, the personalisation of politics (Farkas and Bene 2021; Garzia 2019), the mediatisation of communication (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999), and the hollowing out of intermediary institutions (Mair 2013) have deteriorated the

information environment critical for accountability. Empirical findings show that voters, particularly the less informed, are more forgiving of politicians deviating from party lines on less salient issues (Arceneaux 2008), and even legislators taking previously opposed positions are not penalised (Broockman and Butler 2017), suggesting that accountability increasingly hinges on party loyalty and issue salience rather than policy coherence. This transformation reflects the rise of identity politics over interest-based competition, challenging the core assumption of mandate theory that accountability is rooted in responsiveness to policy preferences. Furthermore, adverse selection undermines accountability when politicians withhold crucial information from voters (Patty 2023), and even under optimal conditions, setting benchmarks for evaluating incumbent performance remains fraught, as democratic accountability depends on informed debate and available alternatives (Patashnik *et al.* 2023).

Accountability in retrospective theory – are we better off than before?

In contrast to the mandate theory of democracy (Dahl 1972), the retrospective theory offers a more realistic and less demanding presupposition about voters' democratic abilities.¹ In retrospective theory, the focus of research is on the overall performance of the incumbent government. The theory postulates that voters make a judgement about governance at the end of the electoral cycle and re-elect incumbents if they are satisfied with its performance (if not satisfied, they replace them), thus achieving ex-post accountability (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). Furthermore, democracy, as a procedure for selecting leaders, also imbues elections with a normative content in retrospective theory. This is based on the assumption that they result in a responsive government that is oriented towards the public interest. In order for voters to hold their elected officials to account, it is sufficient for them to consider changes in economic prosperity (Fiorina 1981).

Polarisation also presents significant challenges for accountability in the context of retrospective theory. This is due to the effect of *motivated reasoning*, which can be deconstructed into two main effects: divergence and desensitisation (Little *et al.* 2022). The term *divergence* is used to describe a widening gap in evaluations between rival groups. When there is no divergence, average assessments within each group rise or fall in response to changes in economic conditions in parallel, yet the distance between partisan groups' evaluations tends to be constant. *Desensitisation*, on the other hand, refers to the phenomenon whereby these rival groups no longer react to changes in the real world, meaning that good or bad performance cause no systematic variation in groups' evaluations.

Highlighting it on the case of Covid this means that the crisis's severity caused neither within- nor between-group variation on the leader's approval, because the perception of the crisis depended on one's prior political predispositions (Freeder and O'Brian 2022). Furthermore, desensitisation may pose an even more pernicious threat to democratic accountability, as it makes even moderate voters less responsive to new information (Little *et al.* 2022). As empirical evidence indicates that the economy's influence on vote choice has diminished in recent years (Ellis and Ura 2021; Freeder 2019), this trend parallels the increase in partisan polarisation (Iyengar *et al.* 2019). While divergence primarily leaves centrist voters intact due to their lack of inclination, desensitisation affects centrist voters as well (Little *et al.* 2022). The consequences of polarisation in increasing motivated reasoning, namely divergence and desensitisation, have the potential to change the accountability relationship. This change in turn de-incentivises politicians, leading to a weaker response from voters to changes in performance. Thus, when rival voter camps increasingly diverge in their assessments of economic performance (divergence) and fail to modify their evaluations in line with changes in the economy (desensitisation), due to a partisan information environment, democratic accountability is undermined.

The theoretical approach and the hypotheses of the research

While mandate theory explains accountability as responsiveness to electoral preferences and the sanctioning model focuses on voters penalising norm violations, retrospective theory offers a broader framework by integrating evaluations of past performance, incorporating both responsiveness and sanctioning. Thus, it is particularly suited to analysing accountability at the macro level, especially in cross-country studies. Heightened partisanship, although central, is only one part of the mechanism linking polarisation to accountability; the political environment also plays a crucial role. Evidence from Brazil shows that voters remove corrupt mayors when informed (Ferraz and Finan 2008, 2011), and providing comprehensive information on incumbents' performance mitigates voters' myopic biases (Healy and Lenz 2014). These findings underline the necessity of an open information environment and expose the risks posed by partisan polarisation, where partisan bubbles constrain public discourse.

Accordingly, our research adopts retrospective theory as the most fitting broader framework, as it captures overall government responsiveness and citizen oversight. However, existing studies on the relationship between polarisation and accountability remain inconclusive: Orhan (2022) identifies a correlation between affective polarisation and lower

democratic performance, while Broockman *et al.* (2023) find no direct link between affective polarisation and accountability in individual-level experiments. Summarising the various approaches to accountability, partisan-motivated reasoning at the individual level has been more extensively tested, yet the macro-level constraints of a partisan-dominated informational environment and weakened institutional norms are equally significant. Thus, we argue that polarisation's effect on accountability cannot be fully understood without considering both individual-level and macro-level mechanisms.

In highly polarised contexts, partisan competition pervades political life. Policy information no longer primarily serves voter evaluation but rationalises party loyalties; elections are framed as status contests between partisan groups, strengthening group identities (Huddy *et al.* 2015; Mason 2015; Mason and Wronski 2018). Consequently, political participation becomes a mechanism of status affirmation rather than governance influence, and political information itself serves partisan competition rather than fostering informed electoral choice. This dynamic compromises citizens' capacity to articulate policy preferences and undermines democratic oversight.

Building on this theoretical framework our main expectation is that, *there is a negative relationship between polarisation and the quality of democratic accountability (H1)*. Our repeated cross-sectional data structure allows for a more nuanced investigation by distinguishing two dimensions of the relationship. The *between-country aspect* suggests that more polarised countries exhibit lower levels of democratic accountability. Simultaneously, the *within-country aspect* proposes that rising polarisation within a country over time leads to a decline in accountability. We have no theoretical grounds to prioritise one interpretation over the other; both mechanisms are plausible and warrant investigation.

Therefore, our specific hypotheses are:

H2a: *In more polarised countries, the quality of democratic accountability is lower.*

H2b: *An increase in polarisation is associated with a decline of the quality of democratic accountability.*

Data and variables

In order to test our hypotheses we used country-year level aggregated survey data from the European Social Survey (European Social Survey 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018) and country-year level macro data from 28 European countries between 2000 and 2020, resulting in 202 country-year observations. Table 1 shows the country-year observations included in the analysis.

Table 1. The list of participating country-year observations in the analysis.

Data round	AUT	BEL	BGR	CHE	CYP	CZE	DEU	DNK	ESP	EST	FIN	FRA	GBR	GRC	HRV	HUN	IRL	ISL	ITA	LTU	LUX	NLD	NOR	POL	PRT	SVK	SVN	SWE	Total
1	*	*		*		*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	21
2	*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	23
3	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	21
4	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	22
5	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	24
6	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	24
7	*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	24
8	*	*		*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	21
9	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	26
N	6	9	5	9	5	8	9	8	9	8	9	9	9	4	2	9	9	4	4	5	2	9	9	9	9	6	9	9	202

Dependent variable

To empirically assess democratic accountability, this study employs the Voice and Accountability (VA) index from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) project (Kaufmann and Kraay 2024), normalised to range between 0 and 1. The VA index is a widely cited composite metric that captures the extent to which citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as the freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the independence of the media. These dimensions reflect core aspects of macro-level democratic accountability: the citizens' ability to select, monitor, and replace political elites. Rather than relying on a single source or methodology, the VA index draws on over 30 distinct data sources, encompassing public opinion surveys, expert assessments, and institutional evaluations. These indicators are standardised and aggregated using an Unobserved Components Model (UCM); a statistical method that estimates a latent governance trait while correcting for measurement error and accounting for source heterogeneity, facilitating consistent cross-national and longitudinal analysis (Kaufmann and Kraay 2024).

A substantial share of the VA index's inputs is derived from public opinion surveys that capture citizens' perceptions of political participation, institutional responsiveness, and freedoms of expression and association (e. g. the Gallup World Poll, the Afrobarometer and Latinobarómetro surveys, the European Quality of Government Index, the Global Corruption Barometer). These survey-based sources anchor the VA index in lived political experiences, thereby enhancing its face validity. Complementing the survey-based inputs, the VA index integrates evaluations from non-governmental organisations and research institutes specialising in democracy, governance, and human rights (like the Freedom House, the Reporters Without Borders, or the Heritage Foundation), as well as private risk and intelligence firms that provide expert assessments on the quality of governance and democratic accountability (like the Economist Intelligence Unit, the Political Risk Services Group, or the World Competitiveness Yearbook). Together, these institutional assessments offer critical perspectives on the legal protections, structural conditions, and informational foundations necessary for a functioning democratic system. Finally, the VA index incorporates governance assessments from multilateral organisations that provide critical evaluations of institutional quality and participatory opportunities (for example the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development or the World Bank Enterprise Surveys). These multilateral sources ensure that the VA index captures structural dimensions of democratic governance across diverse regional contexts.

The methodological diversity of these sources ensures that the VA index is not disproportionately influenced by any single ideological

orientation, regional bias, or data type. It integrates subjective perceptions from citizens, normative evaluations from democracy watchdogs, and objective indicators from third-party experts. The UCM aggregation method further enhances reliability by weighting sources according to their consistency and measurement precision. This design provides a best estimate of the underlying level of democratic accountability for each country-year observation.

Importantly, the VA index captures both the institutional foundations of democratic accountability – such as electoral competitiveness and civil liberties – and citizens’ perceptions of government responsiveness. This dual focus is particularly relevant for our theoretical framework, which posits that polarisation undermines accountability through two interconnected mechanisms: *partisan motivated reasoning at the individual level* and a *partisan-constrained informational environment at the macro level*. In polarised societies, individual perceptions of government legitimacy and accountability increasingly reflect partisan identities rather than objective assessments, a distortion that the VA index’s citizen-based survey components are well positioned to capture. At the same time, macro-level media freedom indicators embedded within the VA index measure the broader health of the information environment, an essential condition for democratic accountability that, under conditions of polarisation, deteriorates as media ecosystems fragment along partisan lines. Thus, the VA index’s design – incorporating both institutional structures and citizen perceptions – aligns precisely with the dual-level theoretical mechanism of this study, providing an integrated measure that captures how polarisation simultaneously reshapes individual judgments and constrains the broader flow of information essential for holding governments accountable.

The Voice and Accountability (VA) index has been widely employed and validated in contemporary research. It has served as a key measure in studies on the effects of e-participation on democratic accountability (Mao et al. 2025), governmental responsiveness to environmental challenges (Cole et al. 2025), and institutional safeguards against corruption in OECD countries (Cunha and Camões 2025). Its methodological foundations have been extensively defended by Kaufmann et al. (2011) and it is a core component of the Quality of Government Standard Dataset (Teorell 2016). While acknowledging that no measure is perfect, the VA index remains one of the most comprehensive and empirically validated tools for capturing national-level democratic accountability.

Independent variables

In order to enhance the robustness of the results, we used two different types of polarisation. Both variables measure societies’ political dividedness, yet they refer to slightly different types of polarisation, one of them

addressing differences in viewpoints, policies, and issues, while the other is more about differences between partisan political camps, as follows. Both of them are calculated based on European Social Survey (ESS) data. The ESS provides rigorously collected, openly available cross-national data on social attitudes and behaviours. Since its launch in 2001, the ESS has conducted surveys in multiple European countries at regular two-year intervals, ensuring consistency and comparability across different time periods. These biennial rounds – although with gaps for almost half of all countries in some of the data rounds – allow scholars to track long-term societal trends and shifts in attitudes with high-quality, standardised data, making the ESS a particularly useful tool for longitudinal research. The sample we have consists of 202 country-year observations, from 28 countries, between 2000 and 2020.

Ideological polarisation (IPI) aims to capture differences in people's ideological stances, referring to political values and policy positions regarding questions of major importance in European societies. It is the standard deviation of self-reported ideological positions on a left-right scale, calculated for all countries and years, which is commonly used to assess mass-level ideological dividedness (Hobolt and Hoerner 2020; Moral and Best 2023; Vegetti 2014).

Partisan polarisation (PPI) addresses a more partisan, tribal, and possibly more affective type of dividedness compared to ideological polarisation. It is calculated from ESS data as proposed by Patkós (2023), aiming to capture the extent to which the political life of a community can be captured as an 'Us' versus 'Them' battle. This method compares average levels of government satisfaction for two groups: government partisans and opposition partisans. The ratio shows how characteristic an 'Us vs. Them' type of partisan dividedness is in each country-year case. Higher values indicate more polarisation. Using the European Government-Opinion Voters Data Set (EGOV), which categorises European voters and party identifiers based on their individual party preferences, dividing them into pro-government and pro-opposition groups (Patkós and Plesz 2022).

Among the most ideologically polarised countries, observations include Cyprus, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The most partisan-polarised cases are found in Hungary, Spain, Poland, and Greece. Conversely, the least ideologically polarised observations come from Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria, while the least partisan-polarised observations typically come from Switzerland, Finland, Lithuania, Belgium, and Austria.

Both variables are normalised to change between 0 and 1, higher values indicate stronger dividedness. To calculate PPI, a partisan government needed to be in office during the survey's fieldwork period (Patkós 2023; Patkós and

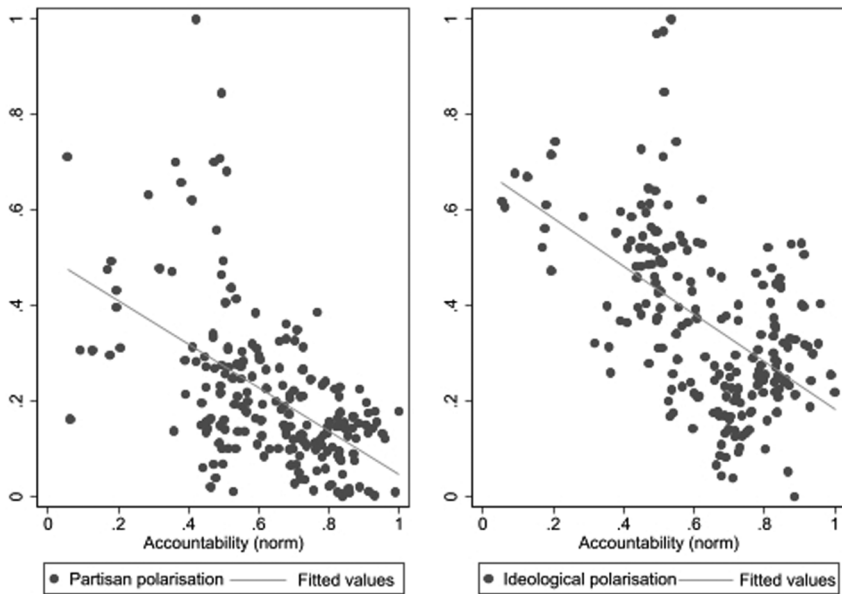


Figure 1. The relationship between partisan and ideological polarisation and accountability.

Plesz 2022). However, this condition was not met in eight country-year observations within the sample, despite all other variables being available. To address these missing values, we applied regression imputation.

Figure 1 shows the correlations between the two polarisation variables and accountability. Accountability is negatively correlated to both types of polarisation. The two types of polarisation are in a moderate positive relationship with each other.

Control variables

We control for a range of important aspects that may influence accountability besides polarisation. We include two variables that are more about the political-institutional context (length of democratic tradition and type of democracy) and three survey-based variables that are more strictly about societies' political culture (average level of political interest, proportion of partisans in society and strength of their partisan attitudes).

Democratic experience

First, we suppose that democratic experience matters, as countries with a long democratic experience offer a 'tradition of accountability' to their citizens. In contrast, in non-democratic systems, citizens have no real

possibility to hold their politicians to account. Non-democratic episodes in countries' lives could therefore strongly influence political culture, for example, they may lower turnout rates, citizens' subjective competence, political efficacy or levels of political knowledge and interest. A recent non-democratic experience could also affect countries' institutional choices that then are consequential for the level of accountability. To control for differences in democratic experience, we included a continuous variable indicating the number of years past from the last non-democratic episode in each country, starting from 1946. We identified a case as 'non-democratic' if its democracy score (which ranges from 0 to 10) in the Polity V database was lower than 8 points.²

Consensus/majoritarian features – Lijphart's first dimension

We also control for Lijphart's first dimension – which refers to the level of power sharing between the parties and the executive – to consider differences in the structure of the governance. Lijphart (1984) classified democracies into majoritarian and consensus types. Majoritarian democracies, based on the principle of majority rule, concentrate power and prioritise the majority's will, potentially overriding minority interests. In contrast, consensus democracies disperse power, ensuring representation for all significant societal segments. They typically feature proportional representation, checks and balances, and minority veto rights, offering the opposition more influence. Systems with more majoritarian features are often regarded as ones where correctly attributing responsibility for certain political outcomes is easier, leading to the assumption that politicians of majoritarian systems are more easily held to account. Majoritarian systems, however, amplify power differences, as they strongly limit the opposition's participation in decision-making, which could weaken accountability.

Lijphart's first dimension is a composite variable that captures 'the extent of compromise and negotiation between political elites on the level of parliaments and parties' (Armingeon *et al.* 2023: 81). The four items used to construct the index are (1) the absence of minimal winning and single-party majority cabinets, (2) the number of effective parties in parliament, (3) the proportionality of electoral systems, (4) and a measure for cabinet dominance calculated by taking the average cabinet duration. Each country-year observations are the moving averages of 10 years of the four indices. Higher values indicate more consensus features (Armingeon *et al.* 2023).

Political interest, partisanship and strength of partisan attachments

An adequately high portion of citizens that show relatively high interest in public issues is crucial for a healthy functioning of democracy, and

interest often goes hand in hand with partisanship. This means that political interest is inherently partisan (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), and independent, unbiased but politically well-informed voters constitute a quite negligible part of the electorate (Achen and Bartels 2017). Nonetheless, interest does not equal to partisanship, and, neither interest nor partisanship equal to strong partisanship. Interest, such as moderate partisanship, increases many forms of political participation, from information seeking to elections turnout rates (Frank and Coma 2023), which may favour accountability. However, partisanship – and more prominently, strong partisanship – is positively related to biased opinion formation (Bartels 2002), which could imply a negative relationship between partisanship and accountability, as have been amply illustrated with examples in the theoretical part. To disentangle the role of political interest, partisanship, and the strength of partisanship, and to offer a nuanced picture that differentiates both aspects of partisanship (spread and strength) and the effect of polarisation from plain partisan reasoning, we include these three aspects separately.

Share of partisans

We capture the prevalence of partisanship with the share of partisans in each society. The original question is a dummy variable, indicating those feeling closer to a certain party than to the others.

Strength of partisanship

Strong partisans tend to apply more bias in their political evaluations, which can lead to lower levels of accountability in the political system. To consider this aspect, we control for the average emotional distance of people from their preferred party. We measure the strength of partisanship with the average affective distance of respondents from their preferred parties, which is originally measured on an interval scale ranging from ‘not close at all’ to ‘very close’, the country level averages range from 2.2 to 3.5, higher values indicate stronger partisanship.

Except for democratic experience, all other control variables – as well as the independent and dependent variables – are normalised to range between 0 and 1.

Here we refer back to the differentiation we made between individual-level aspects of polarisation (individual level partisan motivated reasoning) and system-level aspects of polarisation (a partisan-constrained informational and participatory environment and partisan-constrained institutional norms). We believe that by controlling for the strength and

prevalence of partisanship, we can control out the impact of individual-level aspects, hence our results will reflect the impact of possible system-level effects of polarisation on accountability.

Analysis

In order to understand the connection between polarisation and accountability, we employed two distinct modelling approaches. Initially, we utilised a pooled OLS (Ordinary Least Squares) estimation to forecast accountability. Our approach involved constructing two separate models, each corresponding to a different type of polarisation. These models were designed to predict the impact of ideological and partisan polarisation indices independently. Additionally, we developed a third model that incorporated both polarisation indices. This model allowed us to determine whether the two types of polarisation contribute to the result with a unique component that is not only distinct from the other but also meaningful in its own right. This approach ensured a more nuanced understanding of the effects of polarisation on accountability. We also included time-fixed effects (ESS data rounds) in the models as well as the above-described control variables (political interest of the community, share of partisans, strength of partisanship, length of democratic experience and type of democracy). To correct for any potential heteroscedasticity, we used robust standard errors clustered for countries, this method guarantees the reliability of the standard errors despite the potential for varying error variances among the data points, allowing for more reliable hypothesis testing and confidence interval estimation.

In assessing multicollinearity within the regression models, variance inflation factors (VIF) values were calculated. The results indicate that mean VIF values remain below 2 for the above three specifications, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a significant concern for our models. The results are shown in [Table 2](#).

Models 1 and 2 in [Table 2](#) demonstrate that, when controlling for a set of variables likely to be important in predicting accountability, increasing polarisation reliably decreases accountability. The explanatory power of all models is remarkably high, with an R-squared value of approximately 0.84. Both polarisation indices exhibit a robust negative influence on the dependent variables in these models. When incorporating both types of polarisation simultaneously, partisan polarisation maintains its highly significant effect, whereas the impact of ideological polarisation is only significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. This suggests that the two variables indeed refer to different types of dividedness, although the effect of partisan polarisation is more robust.

Table 2. OLS regressions predicting accountability with time-fixed effects and controls, robust standard errors clustered for countries.

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
Partisan polarisation (norm)	-0.187*** (0.053)		-0.156*** (0.049)
Ideological polarisation (norm)		-0.171** (0.07)	-0.138* (0.07)
Consensus traits (norm)	0.085** (0.034)	0.141*** (0.037)	0.094** (0.04)
Democratic experience (years)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)
Share of partisans in society (norm)	0.17*** (0.049)	0.227*** (0.051)	0.213*** (0.05)
Strength of partisanship (norm)	-0.293*** (0.096)	-0.266*** (0.092)	-0.252*** (0.09)
Political interest (norm)	0.169*** (0.047)	0.145*** (0.048)	0.144*** (0.044)
Time-fixed effects (ESS rounds) included	✓	✓	✓
Constant	0.47*** (0.05)	0.445*** (0.055)	0.495*** (0.053)
Observations	202	202	202
R-squared	0.841	0.84	0.85

Standard errors are in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Transitioning from minimal to maximal levels of ideological or partisan polarisation results in a shift comparable to moving from accountability levels typical of countries like Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, or Denmark (with accountability scores around 0.9) to those found in countries like Germany, Belgium, Austria, or the United Kingdom. Alternatively, it is akin to moving from the accountability levels of these latter countries to those typically seen in Estonia, Slovenia, Portugal, and Spain. When both polarisation variables are included in the model, their impact understandably diminishes, but not drastically, with partisan polarisation decreasing from -0.19 to -0.16 points and ideological polarisation decreasing from -0.17 to -0.14 points.

The positive coefficients for the control variables suggest that accountability increases (1) the longer a country has been democratic, (2) the more consensus traits there are in the institutional system, (3) the more partisans there are in a society, and (4) the more interested people are in politics in a society. Contrarily, the negative coefficient for the strength of partisanship indicates that the stronger the partisanship of people on average, the lower the accountability in the political system, which supports assumptions on a negative link between individual-level aspects of polarisation (partisan-motivated reasoning) and accountability.

In order to illustrate the relationship between partisan polarisation and accountability over time with real country examples, we selected six countries – four often or mostly polarised (Poland, Hungary, Spain, and Greece) and two consistently non-polarised (Belgium and Germany). While the role of other variables (controls and fixed effects) is also important, these graphs support the proposed relationship. In Hungary, polarisation data shows extreme fluctuations between 2006 and 2010, ranging from extreme to plainly high levels, which is not reflected in the change in accountability. However, from 2010 onwards, under Viktor Orbán's second term, rising polarisation visibly coincided with declining democratic accountability. Spain shows a similar pattern to Hungary: an increasing trend in polarisation coincides with decreasing accountability levels between 2002 and 2012, but accountability does not follow the substantial fluctuation in polarisation after that, indicating that accountability is a slower-moving variable than polarisation, and that other important variables may play an important role in the explanation. In Poland and Greece, the relationship between the two variables is unequivocally negative: when polarisation increases, accountability tends to decrease, suggesting that higher polarisation undermines accountability. For Belgium and Germany, the trends are stable, indicating no substantial fluctuation for either variable during the observed period.

As a second strategy, we constructed within-between random effects models (REWB) with random slopes. These models are often preferable compared to other types of models (pooled OLS, fixed and random effects) when analysing cross-sectional time series data for a number of reasons (Bell *et al.* 2019; Bell and Jones 2015). This solution makes it possible to decompose the impact of within-country variations and between-country variations of polarisation on accountability. This is important, as societies might be differently affected by an unusual raise in their polarisation (which is the within effect) than they are affected by being generally strongly polarised across all time periods (which is the between effect).

Extending the model with random slopes also reduces the probability of having false positive results – as Bell *et al.* (2019) show, fixed effects, random effects and pooled OLS models – even when using clustered standard errors – generally give anti-conservative standard errors, if there is random slope variation in the data but a model does not allow for it.³ Table 3 shows the results of the REWB models with random slopes. Descriptive statistics for within and between components of the variables are presented in Section C in the Online Appendix. For between effects, the scale ranges from Switzerland to

Table 3. Within-between random effects models predicting accountability.

	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)
Partisan polarisation, within	-0.133*** (0.044)		-0.111** (0.045)
Partisan polarisation, between	-1.033*** (0.282)		-0.419** (0.176)
Ideological polarisation, within		-0.214*** (0.066)	-0.195*** (0.065)
Ideological polarisation, between		-0.506*** (0.117)	-0.336*** (0.129)
Share of partisans in society (norm)	0.195*** (0.061)	0.313*** (0.055)	0.265*** (0.057)
Strength of partisanship (norm)	-0.241*** (0.086)	-0.231*** (0.08)	-0.219*** (0.078)
Political interest (norm)	0.027 (0.062)	0.026 (0.056)	0.046 (0.056)
Consensus traits (norm)	0.086 (0.066)	0.164*** (0.049)	0.085 (0.056)
Democratic experience (years)	-0.002** (0.001)	0 (0.001)	0 (0.001)
Constant	0.901*** (0.092)	0.663*** (0.061)	0.745*** (0.068)
Random-effects parameters			
Country: Independent			
sd(PPIbc)	0.417		<0.0001
sd(IPIbc)		0.236	0.228
sd(_cons)	0.118	<0.0001	<0.0001
sd(Residual)	0.062	0.066	0.065
Mean DV	0.637	0.637	0.637
N	202	202	202
Prob> chi2	0.000	0.000	0.000
SD of DV	0.196	0.196	0.196
Chi-square	67.521	98.168	115.780
Akaike crit. (AIC)	-424.980	-432.255	-439.173

Standard errors are in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Hungary for partisan polarisation, and from Ireland to Cyprus for ideological polarisation. The highest fluctuations (both highest and lowest within effects) are generally observed in the most strongly polarised countries.

The negative coefficients for both the within- and between components of the two analysed polarisation indices suggest that (1) accountability is significantly lower in more polarised countries, and (2) when a country gets more polarised, the level of its democratic accountability decreases, and this is true for both types of political dividedness we considered. Therefore, we can accept both our main hypothesis (H1, about an overall negative effect) and the subhypotheses (H2a and H2b) decomposing this main effect into a within- and a between-group effect.

When considering partisan and ideological polarisation simultaneously (Model 3), we observe that both types and components of the two

polarisation indices retain their significance. This suggests that these indices are meaningful in their own ways, capturing different yet significant aspects. In substantive terms, our results indicate a substantial effect of between-country differences for both variables, particularly for partisan polarisation (Figure 2). Moving from maximal to minimal levels of partisan polarisation averages across countries, the impact on accountability is comparable to shifting from the general levels of accountability seen in countries like Hungary around Orbán's 2010 electoral victory or Greece in the early 2010s, to the levels experienced in countries like Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark during and after the same period. Although the within-country effects are significant, they are smaller in magnitude compared to the between-country effects, as within-country fluctuations in both polarisation and accountability are much less pronounced than between-country fluctuations. To illustrate the within-country effect more clearly, the maximum variation in within-country partisan polarisation is akin to the decline observed in Hungary between each ESS data round from 2005 to 2018 (refer to the first panel in Figure 3).

Turning to the effect of the control variables, the effect of the *prevalence* of partisanship and the negative effect of the *average strength* of partisanship hold in these models, too. Both variables' effect is significant and substantial. This means that the question of whether partisanship is good or

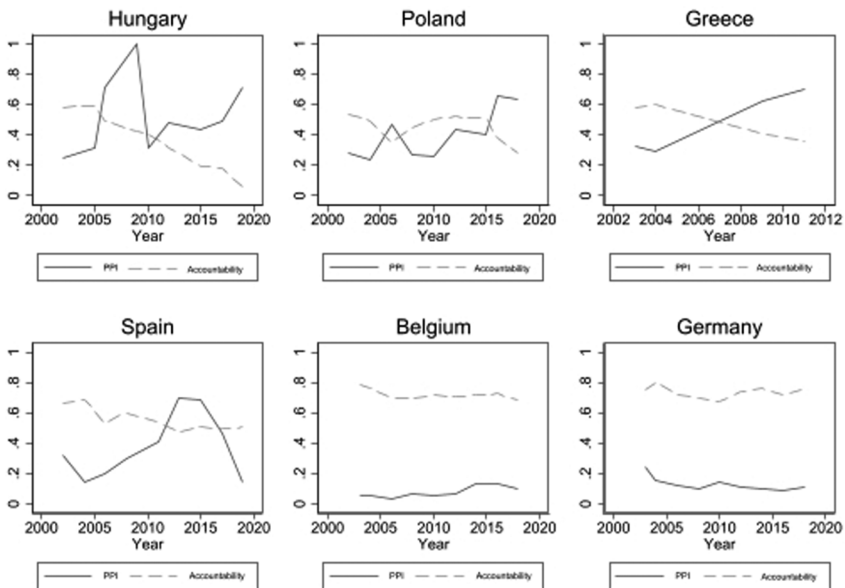


Figure 2. The relationship between partisan polarisation and accountability over time in six countries.

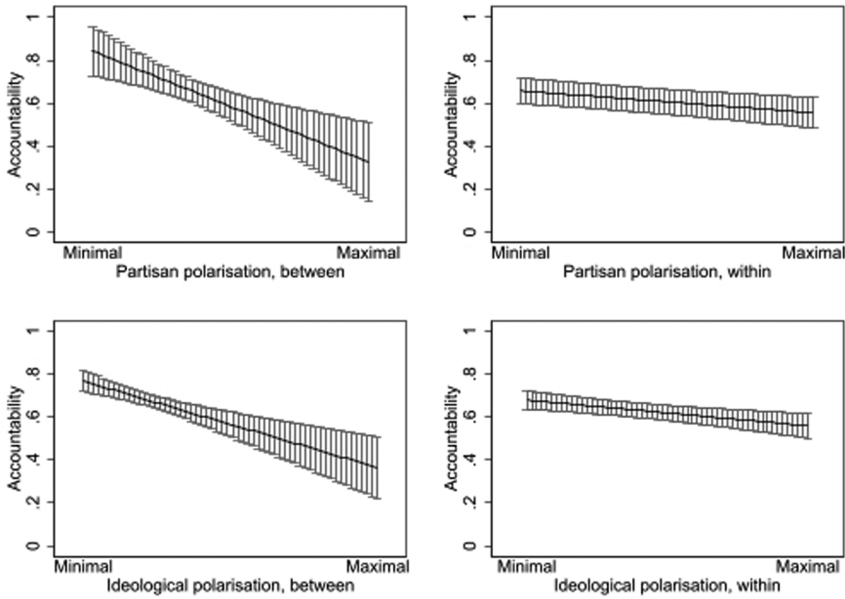


Figure 3. Predicted relationship between types of polarisation and accountability. The estimates are derived from a within-between random effects model with varying intercepts for countries and random slopes, with control variables, based on model 3 in Table 3. Confidence intervals (95%) are represented at endpoint markers.

bad for democratic accountability is too simplistic to be answered correctly. Hence, these results point to the importance of looking at the role of partisanship in a nuanced way, always differentiating between its spread and strength. The effect of the other controls disappears or becomes unstable in these models.

We tested the robustness of our results through several approaches. First, we explored alternative operationalisations for our independent variables, building models that include V-Dem's polarisation indices. While expert survey-based polarisation indices provide valuable insights, they come with certain limitations. These assessments are inherently subjective, influenced by the selection of experts and their diversity in terms of background, expertise, and geographic representation, with an eventual lack of diversity potentially skewing the data. Acknowledging their limitations, we propose viewing these indices as second-best options for capturing polarisation, which, despite their limitations, provide additional validation and ensure the reliability of our findings.

The expert survey-based counterpart of ideological polarisation is the *Polarisation of society* variable of the V-Dem database (VDEMSP), while for an alternative operationalisation of partisan polarisation, we used the

Political polarisation variable of the V-Dem’s database (VDEMPP). In section B in the Online Appendix, we provide a more detailed description of the composition of these alternative independent variables, together with a more detailed discussion on their limitations.

While the V-Dem database provides annual data, as introduced earlier, the ESS follows a biennial structure with some missing observations in case of almost the half of all participating countries. To ensure comparability across different polarisation variables, we included only those observations in models using V-Dem’s polarisation measures that also had corresponding ESS data. This approach guarantees that the effects of various independent variables are assessed within the same consistent sample. Table 4 presents a summary of additional models computed to test the robustness of the results, with all models reported in the Online Appendix (Section D).

Table 4 reports the effects of polarisation indices in 48 models, including specifications with time and/or country fixed effects, random effects and

Table 4. Summary of the results of the robustness tests.

No.	Type/specification of models	Independent variables included	PPI	IPI	VDEMPP	VDEMSP
Table A1	OLS without controls, standard errors clustered for countries	One polarisation index included in each model	***	***	***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***	***	***	***
Table A2	OLS with controls, standard errors clustered for countries	One polarisation index included in each model	***	***	*	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***	***		***
Table A3	OLS without controls, with country and year fixed effects	One polarisation index included in each model	***		***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***		***	
Table A4	OLS with controls, standard errors clustered for years, country fixed effects	One polarisation index included in each model	**		**	**
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	**		**	
Table A5	OLS with controls, country and year fixed effects	One polarisation index included in each model	***	**	***	**
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	**	*	**	

(Continued)

Table 4. Continued.

No.	Type/specification of models	Independent variables included	PPI	IPI	VDEMPP	VDEMSP
Table A6	Random effects GLS models without controls, with years included	One polarisation index included in each model	***	*	***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***		***	
Table A7	Random effects GLS models, with controls and ESS rounds included	One polarisation index included in each model	***	***	***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***	***		*
Table A8	Within-between random effects model without controls, within effects	One polarisation index included in each model	***	*	***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***		***	*
Table A8	Within-between random effects model without controls, between effects	One polarisation index included in each model	***	***	***	***
		Both polarisation indices (either ESS or VDEM) included at once	***	*		

***negative relationship, $p < 0.01$, **negative relationship, $p < 0.05$, *negative relationship, $p < 0.1$.

no sign: non-significant positive or non-significant negative relationship.

Note: PPI=Partisan polarisation, ESS data; IPI=Ideological polarisation, ESS data; VDEMSP=Polarisation of society, V-Dem data; VDEMPP=Political polarisation, V-Dem data.

within-between random effects as well. All types of polarisation indices are present in 16 models, eight times alone and eight times with the other polarisation index at once. Partisan polarisation has a more robust effect as a predictor (PPI is significant in all models, while VDEMPP is significant in 14 cases out of the 16), while ideological polarisation has a significant effect in 12 (VDEMSP) and 11 cases (IPI). While the relationship between accountability and ideological polarisation seems less stable, compared to former works that did not find a significant relationship between ideological polarisation and adverse democratic or economic outcomes (Orhan 2022; Patkós 2022) or identified such effects primarily in non-democratic contexts (Hajnal 2025), our results unveil possible negative consequences of ideological polarisation that up to now have remained hidden. To sum up, we conclude that accountability is significantly negatively related to various versions of political polarisation, and while there is some variation in the details in different model specifications, the negative relationship we found is robust.

Discussion

The debate surrounding the electorate's capacity to effectively exercise democratic accountability remains unresolved to this day. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the retrospective theory has been subjected to considerable criticism on the grounds of its high contingency (Anderson 2007; Healy and Malhotra 2013; Freeder 2019). Consequently, the theory's normative function as a means of satisfying democratic accountability has been subjected to significant scrutiny. Some have even declared the theory's end and recommended its abandonment (Achen and Bartels 2017; Brennan 2017), while others (Galston 2018; Stokes 2018) have acknowledged the criticisms but remained less pessimistic, emphasising that 'the rule is effective but inefficient: some good coaches [incumbent politicians] will be fired and some bad ones, retained' (Stokes 2018: 132). In the field of retrospective theory, a significant body of literature contrasts V. O. Key's reasonable electorate with the ideologically innocent, politically ignorant, and issue-illiterate voters of the Michigan model. In other words, some scholars reject the idea of accountability in totality (Achen and Bartels 2017; Brennan 2017), or labelling as merely a metaphor (Illés and Körösenyi 2022, 2024), while others accept that individuals do make mistakes, but emphasise that the electorate as a whole seem to be able to reward and punish the incumbent in a more accurate manner (Stokes 2018). In accordance with Healy and Malhotra (2013), we rejected this rigid division and, in our account of European democratic accountability, we adopted a middle-ground approach, assuming that voters can exert accountability, although they sometimes make mistakes. We proposed, however, that polarisation could be a feature in systems that turn that 'sometimes' into 'more often'.

In recent decades, this middle-ground literature on the citizens' role in electing, monitoring and sanctioning their politicians has expanded to identify several key systematic biases under which democratic accountability fails, but in predictable magnitudes and directions. These biases include myopic voting (Achen and Bartels 2017), negativity bias (Stanig 2013), partisan bias (Bisgaard 2015), attribution mistakes (Gomez and Wilson 2001, 2003) and so forth. This study did not confine its investigations to individual-level biases; rather, it was interested in the macro-level characteristics that predictably shape the quality of democratic accountability.

The study examined the relationship between political polarisation and democratic accountability (namely, the ability of citizens to participate in politics, freedom of speech, freedom of association and free media). It found that the former creates an environment in which the latter is so degraded that democratic accountability is predictably compromised: we showed on a wide European sample between 2002 and 2022 that polarisation and accountability are negatively related. We tested this question using two distinct concepts of polarisation, ideological and partisan. We found reliable evidence supporting that both higher *levels* of various types of political polarisation in a country,

and an *increase* in various types of polarisation in a country consistently predict lower accountability. The within-between random effects model with random slopes we chose also reduces the probability of having false positive results (Bell *et al.* 2019). The fact that the two aspects of polarisation often retained their negative effect even when both types were included in a model at the same time suggests that distinct types of polarisation are indeed somewhat different from each other yet both being meaningful predictors. The negative relationship was robust both to different operationalisations and to a wide range of model specifications. To conclude the theoretical discussion started above, our results suggest that citizens, while sometimes making mistakes, generally have the tools and ability to adequately hold their politicians to account, while polarisation indeed turns that ‘sometimes’ into ‘more often’.

The results contribute to the state of the art in multiple ways. They validate a theoretically well-founded hypothesis on the link between accountability and polarisation that has long been present in the literature. They also show that this negative link is robust to very different understandings of polarisation. Additionally, the results highlight the importance of thinking about the role of polarisation in a nuanced way. It seems that besides individual-level consequences related to partisanship – in our case captured with the spread and strength of partisan attachment – polarisation has more general, systemic effects as well, contributing to the decline of accountability and creating a partisan-constrained institutional, informational and participatory environment. Therefore, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the challenges posed by political polarisation in contemporary democracies, highlighting the need for further research into this complex relationship to ensure the health and functioning of democratic systems.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the epistemic competence of voters, see the work by Kelly (2012).
2. Time series of the Polity V data base end in 2018 for this variable, for the period between 2019–2020 we assumed no important changes. For Germany, we considered the average number of years past from democratization in West Germany (1949) and from the unification of the former East and West Germany (1990).
3. Nevertheless, we tested the relationship between polarisation and accountability in further types of fixed effects, random effects and pooled OLS models too, and the results are very similar – we will come back to this question at the end of this section west.

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Ethical approval

The research was approved by the Institutional Ethics Review Board of ELTE Centre for Social Sciences (document number: 1-FOIG/26-30/2023).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available: Patkós, Veronika; Plesz, Bendegúz (2025). Replication data for 'Does political polarisation undermine democratic accountability? Evidence from 28 European democracies'. figshare. Dataset. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28891256>.

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