Deliverable 3.1 – Report on voting behavior in Europe

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Deliverable D3.1 – Report on voting behavior in Europe

Executive Summary

Elections are central to our definitions and understandings of liberal democracy. Declining electoral turnout and increased support for populist, radical and extremist parties are seen as existential challenges to established democracies across Europe. This report examines the state of knowledge and the empirical evidence regarding electoral behavior in Europe and its connection to political trust.

The scholarship and the evidence reviewed in this report emphasize that turnout is declining on average but not in all European countries and that higher turnout tends to be associated with higher political trust, but not in all European countries. The scholarship and the empirical evidence also point towards trends of electoral dealignment and a possible realignment with new emerging challenger parties. The original analyses presented in this report suggest, however, that voting for such challenger parties is not always associated with lower political trust, even if, in many cases, it is. Particularly, voting for radical right parties tends to be associated with lower levels of political trust, but there are notable exceptions, especially in Central and Eastern European countries. Voting for radical left parties is very unevenly associated with political trust, such that the association is close to nil on average in Europe. Other challenger parties are able to capitalize on political discontent as well, but the extent to which they do so varies on a case-by-case basis.

Beyond providing a nuanced picture of the link between changes in electoral behavior and the crisis of political trust, this report emphasizes the need to invest in better data collection and harmonization for the analysis of electoral behavior. It provides recommendations to improve the existing data through Eurostat, the Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey and the European Elections Studies. Investing in better data will contribute to a better understanding of the nature and scope of changes in electoral behavior in Europe for better monitoring of the health of our democracies.

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1 Introduction

Laura Morales (CSIC)

The ability to participate in competitive and fair elections is at the heart of any meaningful definition of liberal democracy. In democratic countries where turnout is not compulsory, declining electoral participation is viewed as a signal of declining trust in politics and democratic institutions, of political disaffection and dissatisfaction with democracy. Indeed, very low levels of electoral participation can place the legitimacy of the legislative and executive branches of government at risk. Although, as this report will show, electoral participation has not been declining steadily and uniformly across the whole of Europe, it is undeniable that a considerable number of European countries are facing increasing electoral abstention rates that ring as alarm bells pointing to a serious crisis of political support for democratic regimes.

At the same time, most European countries are seeing a rise in the electoral backing of populist, radical and extreme political parties and electoral lists. How much these electoral choices manifest a desire of citizens to 'protest' with their votes at the ballot box and how much they reflect a genuine shift in ideological and policy preferences is still up to debate. Either way, these choices reflect a discontent with the political status quo and what mainstream and traditional parties have to offer.

While fluctuations, trends and patterns of electoral behavior change are facts of the current political scene that are not up to much scholarly dispute, their interpretation is not always as straightforward as it may seem. It is a recurrent truism that electoral choices are extremely difficult to interpret. Votes — and, even more so abstention — do not come with notes disclosing their exact meaning. Voters need to weigh multiple issues, priorities and electoral pledges when casting their ballot, and those who abstain may do so for a variety of reasons — disinterest, indifference, forgetfulness, dissatisfaction, feelings of futility, a desire to protest and many more — that do not all carry the same meaning.

One important aspect for the interpretation of those multiple possible meanings is the extent to which electoral abstention and voting choices are connected to the lack of political trust. Are those who abstain (partly) doing so because they do not trust political actors and institutions? Are voters who cast their ballot for populist, radical or extreme parties — or just simply new challenger er parties — doing so (partly) because of political mistrust?

This report has two main objectives in the context of the ActEU project. First it provides a summary of the scholarship on the trends and meaning of electoral abstention and of changes in voting choices in the context of electoral de-alignment, the emergence of new cleavages and increasing

polarization, as well as their connection to political trust. Second, it provides a descriptive analysis of those trends and cross-national patterns in electoral turnout and vote choices, as well as its association with political trust.

The report is structured around four more chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the state of the art on electoral turnout, voting for populist, radical and extremist parties, and the connection to political trust. Chapter 3 describes trends and cross-national patterns of turnout in a multilevel setting across Europe and examines how these are associated with patterns of trust in political actors and institutions. Chapter 4 examines cross-national and longitudinal patterns of voting choices across party families for national legislative elections and the extent to which we can observe a shift in the link between those electoral choices and levels of political trust. Chapter 5 summarizes the key findings and contributions to our state of knowledge and offers policy-relevant recommendations when appropriate.

2 State of the art on the comparative study of overtime trends in electoral participation, voting choice and political trust

Wit Hubert and Mikołaj Cześnik (SWPS)

Declining political trust is generally believed to be a major factor shaping contemporary voting behavior and influencing the rise of radical parties. In this chapter, we want to present an in-depth overview of the relationship between political trust, electoral participation, and elections in contemporary European democracies. By doing this, we aim to emphasize that political trust — understood as the confidence citizens place in the justice and efficiency of political institutions and processes — is the main determinant influencing electoral behavior. Most of the studies we cite in this report show that low or declining trust in political institutions can manifest itself in several ways, affecting both voter turnout and the choices individuals make at the ballot box. This relation must be interpreted in the broader context of political change, linking declining trust to the emergence of new political divisions and the rise of radical parties. The report focuses on the interplay of declining political trust, socio-cultural change and economic grievances in shaping voting behavior and, in particular, the rise of protest voting and support for radical parties.

In the state of the art presented in this chapter, we point out that social and economic transformations such as globalization and post-industrialization have created new winners and losers, leading to changes in political preferences and the emergence of new political divisions. Such developments have given radical parties — particularly those of the right — the opportunity to exploit cultural instability and economic crisis to mobilize voters who feel left out of mainstream politics. This relationship is two-fold and mutually reinforcing: first, disillusioned voters are looking for parties that promise to challenge the status quo and solve their problems. The second element is the loss of confidence in parties and already existing institutions, which strengthens the appeal of radical alternatives. Section 2.3 focuses primarily on the growth of radical right-wing parties, but it also considers the degree to which some radical left-wing parties have benefited electorally from the economic crises and associated austerity measures. While that section of the report focuses mainly on the rise of radical right-wing parties, it also acknowledges the increasing electoral success of some radical left-wing parties, especially in the face of economic crises and austerity measures.

The theme of extreme voting is discussed in more detail in section 2.4. There we note that diminished trust over time can fuel 'protest voting', where individuals cast their votes for anti-establishment or populist parties to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. This form of

voting signifies a rejection of traditional political actors and a desire for change, often driven by the belief that established parties are untrustworthy and unresponsive to citizens' concerns. In our view, the reciprocal relationship between these phenomena (abstentions and extreme/protest voting) should be highlighted here, with low trust often driving both abstention and protest voting. The numerous studies cited in section 2.4 support these findings, highlighting the key role of political trust in shaping both voter participation and political systems dynamics.

In sum, this chapter seeks to review the existing scholarship, which conveys a complex picture of how declining political trust interacts with other social and political factors to shape voting behavior and drive political change. Distrust can lead to apathy and disengagement from the political process, but it can also motivate individuals to seek alternative political actors and movements that promise to disrupt the status quo. We also seek here to illuminate that voting behavior is shaped by a complex web of individual-level factors, such as an individual's socio-economic status, age and gender, and contextual factors, including a country's electoral systems and economic conditions. Wider societal trends, such as modernization, new cultural divisions and polarization, also play a role. The political world is continuously in evolution: party systems have changed, new political actors have come about, and the cleavages influencing vote choice have changed. Understanding such dynamics will be important in the evolving political scenario as well as in finding an answer to the challenges that contemporary democracies face.

2.1 The existing scholarship on declining electoral participation and its consequences for representative democracy

Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou (AUTH)

Electoral participation is part and parcel of modern democratic political systems. It derives from the *majority rule* principle of modern representative (liberal) democracies (Dahl 2020). By voting, citizens cast their preferences and influence the makeup of the legislature, giving (prospectively) mandates to elected officials and holding them accountable retrospectively (Rosema 2007). Consequently, political science and adjacent disciplines have expended great attention to understanding patterns and trends in electoral participation. A steady stream of research has been investigating *who* and *why* shows up in the polls. In other words, researchers have explored the socio-demographic and ideological profile of non-voters and the main antecedents of the decision to vote or not in elections.

At the contextual level, there's a long tradition of comparative politics to inquire into the role of institutions, like the electoral system, compulsory voting, the party system, and the economy by looking at aggregate results (Blais 2009; Stockemer 2016). At the same time, the scholarly literature has documented consistent gaps in voting among members of different social groups, defined, for example, by levels of educational attainment, age, and gender (Plutzer 2017). While the relative importance of each of those factors varies across time and space, they represent a core part of virtually every analysis and have been organized into integrative frameworks (Wass and Blais 2017, 463).

In this sense, despite the remaining gaps and the case dependence of many studies, the literature has a large basis for understanding the empirical regularities around patterns of turnout. We know much less, however, about the *effects of (low) turnout* on the political system. Asking "how much would the result of a given election have varied if turnout was higher?" is, methodologically speaking, a much more difficult question to answer credibly. The reason is that we cannot observe the *counterfactual* (see Bernhagen & Marsch 2010), and the research question does not lend itself to experimental manipulations. In what follows, we will provide a non-exhaustive overview of studies into the potential effects of turnout on political outcomes by focusing on the most recent relevant contributions for different types of elections.

Most studies of this research stream are premised on the assumption that non-voters (i.e., citizens who do not show up at the polls) differ systematically from voters in terms of political and ideological preferences. It is thus reasonable to expect that by not voting, the electoral result could be biased to the benefit of one party/party family and secondarily affect policy outcomes (see Lijphart 1997). The prevailing trend of tapering turnout levels (Blais 2009) and the lower propensity of lower SES voters to visit the poll have animated the investigation into the biasing effect of decreasing turnout to the detriment of left-wing parties.

Despite this hunch, the empirical evidence interrogating this claim has been less incontrovertible. Rubenson et al. (2007) investigated the 2000 Canadian Federal elections to find very weak evidence in that direction. By comparing the policy preferences of voters and non-voters using survey data, they find more support for homogeneity on most issues. By simulating higher turnout levels further, it appears that the electoral result would not have differed meaningfully. Studies into US Senate elections present a slightly different picture, with voters and non-voters differing in ideological makeup by being more Democratic-leaning (Citrin, Schickler and Sides 2003). Higher turnout correlates with increased Democratic support and the direction of this partisan differential is uniform across regions but varies over time. Importantly, not all elections would have resulted

in considerably different electoral results under higher turnout, and the effect is moderated by election-specific characteristics.

Most of the studies in this research direction focus on the US context. For example, a similar study into US Presidential elections suggests that the simulated democratic advantage induced by higher turnout is shrinking as time goes by (Martinez and Gill 2005). Meanwhile, by looking at gubernatorial elections in the US, Nagel and McNulty (1996), examined aggregate election results and found support for the same general pattern, but with noteworthy exceptions, where higher turnout benefited Republican candidates. More recently, and drawing on the toolkit of the credibility revolution, Hansford and Gomez (2010) use rainfall as an instrumental variable to identify the effect of turnout on several outcomes. Their analyses provide convincing support that Democratic candidates are *indeed* profiting electorally from higher turnout via the infusion of non-habitual voters who tend to be more Democratic. In like fashion, these voters' participation results in higher volatility and works against the pro-incumbent advantage. Although the results are, again, moderated by election-specific forces, like the partisan composition of the electorate and incumbency. Overall, thus, there's a credible case to be made for the representational bias amelioration that lower turnout facilitates.

In a different political context, Remer-Bollow et al. (2019) investigate the potential political biases in the 2009 and 2014 EP elections to demonstrate that left-of-center parties (but not Eurosceptic or Europhile parties) appeared to be punished electorally as a function of low turnout, compared to its legislative election equivalent. Their simulations reveal that right-wing and extreme parties would have suffered under higher turnout. The same is true for larger parties. This finding is at odds with prior research into EP elections (van der Eijk and Egmond 2007), which showed how increased turnout in EP elections is only non-negligible in a few cases and by small margins.

More recent contributions attempt to nuance the literature further by distinguishing among different types of non-voters. Dermont (2016) uses official turnout data from the city of St. Gallen in Switzerland to document patterns of participation in a series of elections. His analysis points to a five-level categorization of voters. Beyond a binary classification of *always-* and *never-voters*, he examines so-called *selective voters* (seldom, occasionally, frequently voting). Selective, in contrast to always- and never-voters, do not display distinctive characteristics. Therefore, understanding *when* and *who* they vote for can help us better understand trends in electoral participation, and whether falling levels are attributed to the increase of never-voters or the more infrequent participation of selective voters. Following a not-too-different logic, Terry (2016) distinguishes between structural turnout differences, influenced by enfranchisement, and non-

structural turnout variation, influenced by election-specific variables to show that structural changes in turnout can affect policy outcomes in favor of right-wing positions.

Finally, considering a different outcome, namely the spill-over effect of low turnout, Franklin and Hobolt (2011) provide valuable insight. It is well documented that electoral participation varies significantly across election types and levels of governance, with second-order elections (local and supranational/EP elections) consistently exhibiting lower levels of turnout (Reif and Schmitt 1980; Schmitt and Teperoglou 2017; Gendzwill 2021), because of the "less-at-stake" perception. In their 2011 paper, Franklin and Hobolt draw on the habitual voting literature (Dinas 2016) to examine the potential spill-over effect that first-time voting may exert on downstream voting patterns. Their findings confirm that, by experiencing their first vote at the European ballot, voters get demotivated to cast a vote at following, even first-order, elections, with potential cumulative effects as more generations get politically socialized in an environment of multilevel electoral contests.

In summary, the initial seeming truism of negligible effects of electoral abstention (Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Lutz and Marsh 2007) seems to be questioned and nuanced by more recent studies. Specifically, recent contributions have demonstrated that changes in turnout can affect election and policy outcomes, vindicating a long-held concern about decreasing turnout (Lijphart 1997). A common thread running through them has to do with the moderating effect of contextual forces on the association between turnout and several outcomes.

Beyond the opening of new research avenues, these studies also justify the interest in studying how turnout evolves across time and space. Low levels of turnout can also be viewed as an indication of widespread political disillusionment, along with other manifestations like voting for radical or populist parties, distrusting democratic institutions, receptivity to conspiracy theories, and polarization (Jørgensen et al. 2021; Maher et al. 2018). Quite separately, the same interest can stem from normative considerations of equal participation in elections (Dahl 1998).

In the framework of the ActEU project (see the Introduction to this report), it becomes important to map the evolution of turnout across EU countries, time, and levels of governance. Harking back to the purported importance of political trust in many democratic outcomes that is at the heart of this project, Chapter 3 in this report will explore the trends of turnout in Europe and its potential association with levels of political trust.

2.2 The existing scholarship on electoral de-alignment, new cleavages, polarization and the 'extreme' voting

Luis Ramiro (UNED) and Laura Morales (CSIC)

In this section, we briefly review the scholarship focusing on European citizens' voting choices, as this is the other dimension of electoral behavior that we examine in this report. Before doing so, providing some definitions is essential. We will examine the vote for 'radical' parties, which often is encapsulated by references to 'extreme' or 'protest' voting, as well as voting for challenger parties.

First, regarding the focus on 'radical' or 'extreme' parties, the far right, whether in the form of populist radical right parties or non-populist radical right parties, is a party grouping that has notably increased its popular support recently. Although definitions vary widely across scholars, what contemporary far-right parties have as common defining features is not their socio-economic policies, on which the parties of this family vary considerably between neoliberal stances and State intervention positions, but their nativism and authoritarian orientation (Mudde 2007). By contrast, contemporary Radical Left Parties (RLPs) are defined by their rejection of the social, economic and political inequalities that they associate with market and capitalist structures. They propose radical changes to promote equality, social justice and redistribution: policies aimed at market control, progressive taxation, public or State intervention, Welfare State expansion, and socio-economic rights protection (March and Mudde 2005; Fagerholm 2017). Beyond this emphasis on economic issues, many contemporary RLPs (but not all) also support progressive socio-cultural policies in areas such as immigration, equal rights for minorities or the environment (Gomez et al. 2016; Gomez and Ramiro 2022).

Second, while voting for radical or extreme parties can often be a form of 'protest' voting, the concept of protest voting encapsulates more varied forms of electoral behavior (see Camatarri 2020 for an overview). Alvarez et al. (2018) argue that this concept includes (1) voting for antiestablishment, unorthodox or ideologically extreme parties or candidates – which they refer to as 'insurgent party' protest voting, (2) voting for a less preferred party – tactical protest voting, (3) casting a blank, null or spoiled (BNS) ballot – BNS protest voting, (4) organized protest voting, and (5) officially sanctioned protest voting through "none of the above" voting choices. As they argue, some of these forms of electoral behavior cannot be analytically or observationally distinguished from conventional issue or retrospective voting, other forms of tactical voting or unintentionally spoiled ballots. Hence, gauging which portions of the vote for radical or extreme parties indeed constitute 'protest' voting would require assessing on a party-by-party and election

basis which share of their electorate conforms to issue or proximity voters and which share of their electorate does not conform to any of the traditional issue and ideological motivations for voting choices and are voting for these parties purely out of disaffection. Although previous studies (e.g. Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018) have shown that low levels of political trust are associated with protest voting in some settings, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this deliverable and, hence, we will not be focusing on protest voting per se.

Third, a closely related concept is that of voting for 'challenger' parties (also called 'insurgent' parties). The concept of challenger parties is often associated with party behavior and their situation in the political marketplace: never having joined a governing coalition before (De Vries and Hobolt 2012) and their lack of dominance within the political system (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Yet, the definition of challenger parties is also highly variable across scholars. For example, van Kessel (2015) questions that governing itself should be the defining criteria and assimilates the concept to Green parties, radical left and radical right parties in West European settings and with 'outsider formations' (Bolleyer 2013) for post-communist countries, resulting in a rather eclectic mix. Hino (2012) defines challenger parties by the issues they defend and considers them to be those that address 'new' issues, such as immigration, post-materialist values or ethno-regional identities and demands. Hobolt and Tilley (2016) depart from De Vries and Hobolt (2012) to define challenger parties as those that have not been in government, hold ideologically extreme views and put new issues on the agenda. Similarly, the 'newness' of the parties (i.e., their recent formation or emergence) is conflated in several definitions (e.g., Bolleyer 2013). In many cases, the concept of challenger parties is used very loosely without an explicit definition and restricting its scope to a given party family (e.g., Williams and Hunger 2022 for radical right parties). All in all, however, the majority of the political parties that are eventually classified as challenger parties tend to be radical left and radical right parties, hence why we will focus on them more specifically.

Together with the radical right, some radical left parties (notably, La France Insoumise, Podemos, or Syriza) have seen their vote shares increase in the last two decades, even if their electoral trajectory is somewhat unstable. Besides these radical parties of the right and left, various other challenger parties from the right and the centre of the political spectrum (as well as others that are not easily classified on the left-right divide), have also successfully appealed for the vote of European citizens at both European and national level (e.g., Ciudadanos, NEOS or M5S). What factors account for the nearly simultaneous electoral emergence of these parties? Is their rise connected to related factors? How does their emergence connect to the crisis of political trust and democratic legitimacy?

In this section, we provide a brief overview of the scholarly literature that outlines how traditional party systems have transformed through the parallel phenomena of the weakening of traditional parties, party system fragmentation, and the growth of support for radical and challenger parties. Whether such dynamics of party change point to a process of electoral dealignment or whether they signal a pattern of electoral re-alignment is still a controversial matter among scholars.[1]

2.2.1 Realignment or dealignment?

Social modernization since the 1950s-1960s transformed living standards, increased education levels, widened information sources, increased the individual freedoms and rights of minorities and women, and reduced economic hardships. That process of economic, social and political transformation drastically reshaped the sociocultural dividing lines that had historically structured political and electoral competition (Dalton 2018). The sociopolitical dividing lines that structured political conflict and party-voter allegiances (particularly class and religion) considerably reduced its ability to structure party choice (Franklin 1992).

Social modernization also generated losers and winners in these transformations, sometimes shifting who the losers and winners were compared to the interwar and post-WWII periods. As a result, some individuals and groups have benefitted from these social changes and have promoted them, while others feel threatened and insecure due to these changes. The overall consequence is that these large-scale transformations have generated new political preferences and, accordingly, new sociopolitical divides. Dalton et al. (1984) already suggested four decades ago that these transformations had the potential to alter the social bases of support for democratic political parties, breaking up previous electoral coalitions and political allegiances; hence, fostering a process of dealignment and the formation of new electoral coalitions and patterns of electoral and party competition (Dalton et al. 1984; Dalton 2018).[2]

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[1] For example, for the US, studies on the changes in partisan loyalties and voting patterns since the 1960s (particularly in the South) doubted the nature of the process (Stanley 1988), while more recent ones seem to consider the process an example of realignment (Abramowitz 2018).

[2] Dalton et al. (1984: 13) consider realignment 'a significant shift in the group bases of party coalitions, and usually in the distribution of popular support among the parties as a result'. Van der Brug and Rekker (2021: 777) consider that 'Realignment happens when some long-term and stable determinants of the vote are losing their ability to create stable connections between parties and voters, and are being replaced by other stable factors that connect (groups of) voters to parties. Dealignment on the other hand means that the stable and long-term factors that used to be important as determinants of party choice (such as, social

Interestingly, the processes of dealignment and realignment entail not only a modification of the social electoral coalitions that support different parties but also a change in the attitudinal orientations of the different parties' voters' predispositions. In this way, Western societies would have experienced a transformation of the social and attitudinal factors shaping the parties' electoral coalitions, globally modifying then the determinants of party choice (Kriesi et al. 2008; van der Brug and Rekker 2021). These new dividing lines could alter the structural (social and attitudinal) basis of party support, have modified -structurally and stably- party and electoral competition, and have created a new and increasingly relevant cultural cleavage besides the classic economic cleavage, a new cultural cleavage whose saliency has grown since the 1980s (Dalton et al. 1984; Dalton 2018).

2.2.2 New cleavages?

Many scholars contend that social modernization, globalization, regional integration through the EU, and migration have generated (or are in the process of generating) a new cleavage based on a 'cultural divide' (Kriesi et al. 2008; Kriesi 2010; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009; Bornschier 2010; Hutter 2014; Hooghe and Marks 2018). This new cleavage notoriously revolves around opposing views regarding migration and diversity policies, but relatedly also around a wider range of social identities, sociocultural and political values (e.g., traditionalism vs modernization, supranationalism vs national sovereignty, nativism vs multiculturalism) and views about individual and group rights (such as those of migrants, women, LGTBIQ+ people or ethnic and religious minorities).

This new cleavage is thought to have modified the social electoral coalition of traditional parties, crosscutting previous allegiances based on class or religion, at the same time that it has increased its relevance as a determinant of individual electoral behavior and has enhanced the importance of factors such as educational level or generational replacement in the explanation of party-voter allegiances (Kriesi et al. 2008; Stubager 2010, 2013; van der Brug and Rekker 2021). Around this cleavage, groups of winners and losers of the post-industrialization, globalization or social modernization processes – in other words, people who benefit or feel economically or culturally threatened by these changes –, would tend to show divergent political attitudes and voting

class, religion or left–right ideology) have lost their relevance and are not being replaced by other stable long-term predictors.'.

preferences (Kriesi et al. 2008). This new and increasingly influential divide has also laid the ground for the emergence of new radical right parties and the electoral success of some that were historically present in established European democracies (Rooduijn et al. 2016). Similarly, these social changes are also thought to be at the origin of increasing polarization processes in many European societies whenever the political competition and the debate focus on highly sensitive issues for the different groups along the dividing lines of the contemporary political conflict.

2.2.3 Polarization

The analysis of negative partisanship, voter polarization and affective polarization originated in the US through the study of the evolution of in-party and out-party feelings. The analysis of partisan animosity in Europe is more recent although a long tradition of study of the political identities of opposing groups in Europe predates current research on affective polarization (Wagner 2024). The analysis of polarization focuses on a variety of aspects, such as (i) the ideological distance between parties, (ii) between the preferred policy positions of parties, politicians and citizens, or (iii) between citizens and political elites.

However, the now rapidly expanding study of affective polarization concentrates on the analysis of the animosity between supporters or sympathizers of the various political parties (Druckman and Levendusky 2019; Iyengar et al. 2019). In any case, the measures of animosity towards parties and partisans are closely related. While research on the US case has found high and increasing levels of affective polarization (Kalmoe and Mason 2022), these findings have not been replicated yet in other Western and established democracies. Although affective polarization levels are considerable outside the US too, there is no general growth trend and neither does every democracy replicate the high levels of affective polarization found in the US (Wagner 2021; Boxell et al. 2024; Garzia et al. 2023; Ryan 2023).

These inconsistent results – in terms of the universality of the patterns – hinder the identification of common factors fostering affective polarization. Among them, some institutional elements – such as majoritarian democratic institutions – have been identified as conducive towards polarization due to the disincentives for elite cooperation (Gidron et al. 2020). In any case, elite behavior is thought to be very influential on affective polarization, and studies show that elite cooperation tends to reduce it (Wagner 2024).

The burgeoning research on the link between affective polarization and ideological polarization in Europe seems to point to a connection between ideological distance from a party and its (economic and cultural) policies, and the animosity towards that party's supporters (Renström et al. 2021; Kawecki 2022; van Erkel and Turkenburg 2022; Algara and Zur 2023; Gidron et al. 2023).

The analysis of negative partisanship, a conceptually distinct but related phenomenon, shows that in Europe far-right parties seem to be by far the most disliked (Meléndez and Kaltwasser 2023; Bjånesøy 2023; Helbling and Jungkunz 2020; Reiljan and Ryan 2021; Harteveld et al. 2022; Gidron et al. 2023).

2.2.4 Voting for radical right and radical left parties

An already extensive scholarship has studied the aforementioned themes. In some cases, the differentiation between manifestations of these processes and their causes is somewhat blurred, especially when discussing electoral re-/dealignment, polarization, voting for radical parties, protest voting, the rise of challenger parties and the relevance of the new dimensions of political conflict. One way to structure the analysis is to approach it through a framework based on an analysis of demand-side factors – individual attributes that make voting for these parties more likely – and supply-side factors – the programmatic, ideological and organizational attributes that make some parties more appealing – that may explain these varied phenomena. This approach has been used to study both the support for radical right and radical left parties (Golder 2016; Gomez and Ramiro 2023).

In explaining the vote for radical-right parties, Golder (2016) proposes demand-side explanations based on modernization, economic, and cultural grievances. Regarding modernization grievances, the effect of the rise of globalization and post-industrial economies on some socioeconomic groups has been especially highlighted by some authors (Betz 1994; Minkenberg 2000) and considered by many others.

These changes have increased the economic and job precariousness and socioeconomic vulnerability of workers with less needed skills, lower education levels or employed in sectors experiencing international competition. This precariousness generates a loss of economic security, anxiety and frustration that is not adequately understood and met by mainstream parties, making these groups available to support more extreme and new political options. Thus, economic modernization is shown to generate groups of losers that form the potential electorate for the radical right (Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Givens 2005; Evans 2005; Arzheimer and Carter 2006;

Arzheimer 2009; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012) and, in fact, for other non-mainstream or challenger parties.

Closely related, economic grievances are also shown to contribute to the vote for radical right parties. The impact of these factors can be traced in different ways and the findings are mixed regarding the direct impact of economic factors and economic precariousness. Some studies have found that precariousness and financial insecurity foster voting for the radical right (Jackman and Volpert 1996) but many others did not find an effect or found that these factors favour the radical left rather than the radical right (Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Knigge 1998; Arzheimer and Carter 2006).

However, the economic context might indirectly affect the vote for the radical right. Economic crisis, scarcity, competition for economic and social resources, and perceptions of economic threats favour prejudice and discrimination towards outgroups that can be blamed for this enhanced competition for public goods, a situation that can foster the appeal of the radical right (Golder 2003). Such an overall context would favour the identification of immigration as a threat and the scapegoating of immigrants that characterises the discourse of radical right parties, constituting a favourable context for the support for radical right parties that oppose both immigration and globalization (Bolet 2020). Some studies suggest that this has enabled an expansion of the radical right vote from the small middle-class groups that were their base in the 1980s (when the parties had a mostly neoliberal platform) to the low-skilled, economically insecure native working classes, who can experience competition for job and social benefits, to which the radical right could appeal with their more economic protectionist and interventionist platform (Arzheimer 2009). Hence, certain economic contexts can foster anti-immigrant orientations and favours the successful use of these themes by the radical right (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Sniderman et al. 2004; Mayda 2006; Sides and Citrin 2007) and anti-immigrant sentiments are very clearly related to voting for radical right parties (Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Norris 2005; Ivarsflaten 2008; Rydgren 2008).

This connects with demand-side cultural explanations of the radical right vote. On the one hand, ethnically diverse societies with sizeable or politically influential sections of the population of immigrant origin create the opportunity for some parties to exploit identity, cultural and national identity anxieties (Dancygier 2010). On the other hand, as mentioned before, anti-immigrant attitudes have been consistently found to increase the support for the radical right (Lubbers and Scheepers 2002: van der Brug et al. 2005; Norris 2005; Ivarsflaten 2008; Rydgren 2008). However, as Golder argues (2016: 485), this does not prove the cultural grievances thesis because these attitudes might have their origin not in cultural but in economic anxieties. What different analyses

have found is that both economic and cultural worries affect anti-immigrant orientations (Sniderman et al. 2004; Mayda 2006; Sides and Citrin 2007).

However, the results of the empirical tests of some of these expectations have produced mixed or inconclusive results (Golder 2016). The examination of the effects of economic variables, such as unemployment, is not conclusive and the effects of the interaction between economic insecurity and immigration is far from definite. Golder (2003) finds that high levels of immigration and unemployment favour the vote for the radical right, Arzheimer (2009) finds that both factors do not strengthen each other, and Lubbers et al. (2002) do not find any effect of unemployment. Some examinations of the labour market competition hypothesis (that native voters with the same skills as immigrants, therefore competing for their jobs, support the radical right) do not find support for this expectation (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007; Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller et al. 2015) while others, based on analyses of the context in which individuals live have found a greater basis for arguing that job competition fosters voting for the radical right (Golder 2003; Ivarsflaten 2005; Lubbers & Scheepers 2005). In a recent study, Bolet (2020) also finds that exposure to immigrants favours radical right support, especially in more deprived areas, supporting the labour market competition hypothesis.

However, other studies problematize this link. Research on the contextual effects of large immigrant populations on electoral behavior has found mixed results; with some finding a positive impact on the vote for the radical right in places where there is a large immigrant population (Knigge 1998; Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Golder 2003; van der Brug et al. 2005) and others finding no effects (Norris 2005; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Rydgren 2008; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012).

Other explanations of radical right voting focus on supply-side elements, such as the political opportunity structure, party organization and the programmatic stance of the radical right. Regarding the political opportunity structure, analyses on the effect of the proportionality or permeability of electoral systems on the radical right vote have not reached conclusive results. Some studies have found that electoral systems that are more proportional and lower access costs foster voting for the radical right (Jackman and Volpert 1996, Golder 2003) whereas others have not found an effect or have even identified the reverse impact (Carter 2005; van der Brug et al. 2005; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Arzheimer 2009; Bustikova 2014).

Similarly, research produces mixed findings regarding the effects on radical right support of key party competition features, such as the convergence of mainstream parties, their centrist or right-wing placement, or their adversarial, accommodative or dismissive strategies. Some studies find a positive effect of mainstream parties' convergence on radical right voting (Abedi 2002; Carter

2005; Spies and Franzmann 2011) and others find no effect or the opposite impact (Norris 2005; Arzheimer and Carter 2006). Although studies suggest that a centrist strategy by mainstream parties favour the vote for the radical right (Carter 2005; van der Brug et al. 2005) other scholarship does not confirm this finding (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Spies and Franzmann 2011). Regarding the strategies of mainstream parties, an accommodative strategy might weaken the radical right but only if that happens before the radical right has owned the issues on which they base their support (Meguid 2005).

Another key aspect that might affect the rise, success or vote for the radical right is the stability of the cleavage structure. This is connected to dealignment processes and electoral volatility. If the cleavages structuring electoral and party competition are stable, it restricts the electoral potential of new parties; if the cleavages are unstable, weak or new cleavages arise, this increases the electoral availability and the voters' willingness to support new and, often, radical parties (Kriesi et al. 2006).

The decline of the structuring capacity of the class and religious cleavages, and the rise of new societal and political divides in the transition to post-industrial societies have increased the relevance of a new cultural cleavage built upon sociocultural changes that separate social groups with distinct socioeconomic and educational divides (Kitschelt 1988; 1997; Rydgren 2005). These social changes, hence, weaken patterns of class and religious voting, weaken party identification and traditional party loyalties, increase electoral volatility and voters' distrust towards politics, parties and politicians and foster the support for new and challenger parties making voters electorally available to a diverse range of parties (Betz 1994; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). While in the past the electoral market (or the demand side of the electoral market) was relatively closed, dealignment processes have opened it and made voters available to support challenger, radical and, especially, radical right parties.

Not incompatible with the dealignment argument, other scholars argue that what has been happening in contemporary societies is a realignment process by which a new cultural cleavage has gained relevance favouring the alignment of parties and voters along cultural attitudes (towards immigration, identity, minority rights, women's rights, environmental claims, etc.). The increased salience of this divide favours radical right support. The cultural backlash or the silent counter-revolution hypotheses argue in favour of this dynamic explaining the rise of the radical right (Ignazi 1992, 2003; Kitschelt 1995; Norris and Inglehart 2019): the rise of the radical right is the reaction to a cultural change that has promoted progressive cultural values (feminism, cosmopolitanism, rights for sexual and ethnic minorities, etc.). Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) found that the perception of a cultural type of threat had a higher explanatory capacity to account

for the radical right vote. Another attitudinal aspect associated with the cultural backlash is the role that anti-feminist attitudes and new types of sexism play in favouring the vote for the radical right (Anduiza and Rico 2024).

In any case, the theoretical and empirical ability to distinguish between dealignment and realignment mechanisms is limited. In both scenarios, economically vulnerable groups may end up supporting the radical right because they perceive that they have experienced a decline compared to other groups and previous periods (Bornschier and Kriesi 2012; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016). Some authors focus on the perception of cultural and identity decline or deprivation (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007; Inglehart & Norris 2016; Sniderman et al. 2004), some focus on the sense of socioeconomic status decline (Gest et al. 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017) and still others analyse the perception of status-based threat or decline resulting from economic and cultural change (Gest et al. 2018; Gidron & Hall 2017).

Finally, among the political opportunity structure factors, some analyses have found that strong party organizations tend to favour the support for the radical right (Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Carter 2005; Art 2011).

Beyond some analyses that initially considered radical right parties as protest parties the research on this party grouping has found that the voters and the parties share a great deal of political and policy positions (van der Brug et al. 2000, 2005). Among the variety of radical right parties, Kitschelt (1997) famously suggested that their winning formula was one of authoritarianism in the cultural dimension and pro-market liberalism in the economic dimension. This argument has been abandoned in later years as analyses have shown that successful radical right parties present centrist or even pro-welfare economic programmes (de Lange 2007; Mudde 2007) or try to avoid any focus on economic issues concentrating in anti-establishment, nativism or ethnonationalism (Rydgren 2004, 2005).

Although the attention to radical right parties has considerably outweighed that to radical left parties, scholarship on the latter has gradually expanded in the last two decades. Radical left parties (RLPs) have been a common feature in most Western European party systems since World War II, with some even playing significant roles in the interwar period in certain countries (Escalona et al., 2023). However, they have generally remained weak in Central and Eastern Europe, with few exceptions, and have played a relatively minor role in these societies since the fall of the Socialist authoritarian regimes in 1989.

After a widespread crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, the electoral significance and political influence of RLPs began to grow, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession and subsequent

austerity policies in several Western countries. During this period, countries such as France, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain experienced notable increases in the support for RLPs (March 2011, 2016).

RLPs are unified by a core ideology that opposes capitalist market economies and emphasizes addressing the unequal distribution of resources (March and Mudde 2005; Fagerholm 2017). Despite this common foundation, RLPs differ in their degree of anti-capitalism and association with Socialist principles. From the late 1980s and 1990s onward, many RLPs embraced issues introduced by the so-called New Politics — feminism, pacifism, and environmentalism — which have evolved into progressive stances in the cultural dimensions of political conflict in contemporary democracies. This shift has led to varying levels of cultural progressivism among RLPs, forming a basis for differentiating traditional RLPs from more culturally progressive RLPs (Gomez et al. 2016).

While left-wing radicalism has consistently attracted scholarly interest due to its electoral presence across various democracies, the RLPs' typical role as a minor political actor has historically drawn less attention compared to far-right parties. Recent research has clarified some important characteristics of the electorates of these parties. The electorate supporting RLPs tends to be formed by a distinctive coalition: service and industrial workers (with variation by country), socio-cultural professionals and semi-professionals, and young and precarious workers, including the unemployed (Ramiro 2016; Gomez and Ramiro 2023). This voter base is characterized by left-leaning preferences on socioeconomic policies and strong progressive, cosmopolitan views in the cultural sphere (e.g., minority rights, immigration). Only on issues related to the EU does the RLP electorate diverge from this cosmopolitan outlook, often adopting critical or Eurosceptic positions (Beaudonnet and Gomez 2017; Gomez and Ramiro 2023).

Research has identified that RLPs tend to maximize their electoral appeal by moderating their radical economic platforms while promoting progressive socio-cultural policies, such as minority rights and environmentalism (Visser et al. 2014; Krause 2020; Gomez and Ramiro 2023). However, as minor parties, the support for RLPs is particularly susceptible to the influence of contextual factors: socioeconomic crises, economic hardship, and political dissatisfaction have been found to influence their support significantly (March and Rommerskirchen 2015; Gomez and Ramiro 2019, 2022; Gomez et al. 2024).

2.3 Where does 'political trust' fit in these developments? Review of the literature

Wit Hubert and Mikołaj Cześnik (SWPS)

In this section, we will now review the scholarship on the relation between trust and voting behavior by looking at how reduced political trust can impact people's choices on whether to take part in elections and who they decide to vote for. We will delve into two aspects of this connection: non-participation characterized by citizens refraining from voting entirely because of distrust in the political system and radical (protest) voting which involves disenchanted individuals casting their votes for non-traditional candidates to showcase their discontentment.

2.3.1 Electoral abstention and political trust

Two frequently studied phenomena in political behavior and democratic participation are electoral abstention and political trust. There is a reciprocal relationship between these two concepts. Not only do they affect each other, but they also share some common explanations. Political trust refers to the degree to which citizens trust political institutions, political parties and the political system more generally. The effect of political trust can be defined most simply by stating that when political trust is high, the number of citizens who are willing to participate in the electoral process will also be high (Grönlund and Setälä 2007). On the other hand, when political trust is low, the number of people who do not electorally participate will increase (Hooghe et al. 2011). We now elaborate on these above-mentioned relations and present the most relevant findings.

A large number of studies show that there is a strong positive relationship between trust in political institutions and electoral participation. Lower trust in political institutions correlates with lower voter turnout and a higher abstention rate (e.g., Bélanger 2017; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017; Bélanger and Nadeau 2005; Franklin and Hobolt 2011). Political trust turns out to be a key determinant of electoral behavior in every type of democracy – as confirmed by a large set of studies utilising different methods. Important causal relations between political trust and diverse aspects of political behavior – across a wide range of settings.

Hetherington's (1999) paper investigates the correlation between political trust and the 1968-1996 presidential vote and uses historical trends and patterns to argue that levels of political trust had an influence on voters' decisions when it came to choosing whom to vote for in the United States presidential elections between 1968 and 1996.

In a chapter on 'Political Trust and Voting Behaviour' in the renowned 'Handbook on Political Trust', Bélanger (2017: 242) situates his contribution: 'In this chapter, I review the main theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence relating political trust to voting decisions. Furthermore, I discuss whether trust in electoral processes can explain partisan biases and strategic voting.' To find this out, according to this researcher, it is necessary to combine different methodological techniques, albeit at a micro (individual) rather than macro (aggregate) level (ibidem).

In a research paper examining non-voting in European elections, Hadjar and Beck (2010) use a multilevel analysis to identify the social mechanisms through which the individual-level choice not to vote is affected. It is likely that findings of this kind provide a sophisticated analysis of patterns in voting and non-voting behavior across Europe. Hooghe and Marien's (2013) comparative analysis of trends in political trust and political participation across Europe began to address the question of whether low generalized trust correlated with lower levels of all forms of political engagement, or if there was greater density in those who trust their elites and participate in their politics.

Canadian researchers Éric Bélanger and Richard Nadeau (2005) carrying out a secondary statistical analysis of electoral data (period 1984-1993) already noted two decades ago the impact of the erosion of political trust dictated by political scandals on the increase in the number of non-voters. The study analyses how decreased trust influences electoral choices. It suggests that lower levels of political trust correlate with reduced voter turnout and a propensity to support alternative or challenger parties rather than mainstream options. However, recent studies are questioning the strength of the link between political trust and electoral participation. Daniel Devine (2024) examined 61 different studies to understand the relationship of political trust with other political outcomes, conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis, and here shows that it is weakly to moderately correlated with voter turnout, vote preference, and preferences on policy, but does not correlate with informal participation.

2.3.2 Extreme electoral behavior (extreme'/'protest' voting) and the lack of political trust

Extreme or protest voting is the process whereby a voter 'registers a protest' or 'expresses political disaffection' by voting not for a particular candidate or party but against it (Alvarez et al. 2018). This process takes place in many political systems throughout the world and is far from new in Europe. For example, an analysis of voter behavior during the 2019 elections in Belgium showed that growing dissatisfaction and declining political trust were the main determinants of the choice

of populist parties (Close and van Haute 2020). This suggests that when voters feel alienated from mainstream politics, they are more likely to seek alternatives that reflect their frustrations.

The relation between electoral behavior (extreme voting), sometimes called 'protest voting', and lack of political trust is clearly described in the literature. Lower levels of political trust, or a trust decline, are strongly related to an increased probability of voting for parties considered anti-establishment or populist (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Okolikj et al. 2024). Once constituents lose confidence in the established political parties and institutions, this might steer them towards protest camps, where they can voice their frustrations and unhappiness with the existing status quo (Okolikj et al. 2024). Protest voting could then represent an 'exit' from a traditional political context, in which disillusioned voters are looking for an alternative to the parties that they no longer trust (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). The underlying reason for this connection is twofold. Firstly, lower trust in political parties can make voters see them as untrustworthy and unlikely to keep their promises, and thus less prone to vote for factions based on their ideological preference (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). Secondly, decreasing trust over time rather than merely low absolute levels of trust can also lead to protest-voting behavior (Okolikj et al. 2024). Voters who became more distrustful of the political system over time may be more prone to vote for anti-establishment factions to express disapproval of the current situation. Remarkably, research suggests that this 'spiral of distrust' can linger even if protest factions are absorbed into governmental coalitions (Okolikj et al. 2024). Either way – whether these factions are co-opted into the political centre or left to seethe on the fringes – the political institutional distrust of their supporters helps to fuel their electoral success. Importantly, this relationship between political trust and protest voting is not restricted only to two-party systems: low levels of trust can lead voters to look for third or fringe parties that are a viable alternative in multiparty democracies (Okolikj et al. 2024; Kutiyski et al. 2021). The more elastic and open the factional system, the more ways protest factions can proliferate and attract disaffected voters (Petrarca et al. 2022).

In short, inadequate levels of political trust (or, in some studies, reduced trust in government over time) is a major factor behind radical electoral behavior and protest voting. As voters lose faith in mainstream parties and establishments, they may resort to anti-establishment or even populist candidates to act as 'protest' votes and push for change.

Chapters 3 and 4 build on the state of the art presented in Chapter 2 to review the available empirical evidence on the connection between political trust and electoral behavior.

3 Empirical comparative analysis of electoral participation trends and their connection to political trust

Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou (AUTH)

The literature review chapter highlighted the purported centrality of (high levels of) electoral participation for democracy, in terms of normative considerations around legitimacy and equality of participation. A new generation of empirical studies support the widespread concern around electoral participation by showing how low levels of participation can produce partisan bias in election results, among other outcomes like policy bias. In this chapter, in line with this deliverable's overarching aim, we provide a comparative mapping of trends in electoral participation across countries, years and levels of governance (national, local and supranational).

The primary interest in this chapter is not turnout trends per se, but the cross-country patterns in the association between political trust and electoral participation. In other words, we ask how, if at all, political trust is associated with casting a vote, both at the country and the individual level. To do this, we rely on several sources of data. We begin by looking at how turnout rates have evolved across countries in recent decades, based on official country-level election result data from the *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA) project, and compare trends in European Parliament (EP) elections with trends in national/legislative elections. Surveys tend to notoriously overestimate turnout rates through self-reports, primarily because of social desirability bias, but also because of non-response, and recall issues (Lahtinen et al. 2019; Jackman and Spahn 2018; De Bell et al. 2018), with the survey-actual turnout gap ranging from anywhere around 10% to more than 40% percentage points, depending on the country and survey characteristics, and averaging around 13%, according to Selb and Munzert (2012).

We next consider the bi-variate link of trust and turnout at the country level, by looking at the correlation between means of self-reported levels and turnout levels, in EP and legislative elections. For these analyses, we draw on survey data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS), rounds 1-10, which correspond to the period of 2002 to 2020, with a two-year interval. Similarly, for EP elections, we rely on data from the *European Election Studies* (EES), and specifically the four waves between each EP election between 2004 and 2019. In contrast to the European Social Survey, we had to devote some time to an ad-hoc harmonization of turnout and trust items across waves for the European Election Studies. The result is a lean, needs-based European Election Studies cumulative data set. Finally, for the sub-national level, we rely on the *European Values Study* (EVS) of 2017 to map the proportions of habitual voting in local elections. Finally, we extend

our analysis to consider the relationship between trust and turnout at the individual level, but only for national elections, using the European Social Survey for data availability reasons.

Our data selection decisions were primarily driven by reasons of data availability. For the survey data, the European Election Study is the only cross-country project to include questions about voting in EP elections, and the European Social Survey is the only pre-harmonized cross-country survey project. We identify a great discrepancy between the availability of comparative survey data on local elections, compared to elections in other levels of governance, besides the 2017 European Value Survey data. We are thus unable to conduct any longitudinal analysis. The same is true for official records of electoral participation, which are not easy to find assembled or to assemble ad-hoc. As a result, we restrict our trend analyses to turnout on EP and legislative elections.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the main trends in turnout between EP and legislative (often referred to as national) elections. Then, we move to examine the link between trust and turnout at the country level for the national level first, and the European level next. We examine the local level very briefly, before looking at the association of trust and turnout at the individual level, through a regression model. In all analyses, we aim for a correspondence between the level of governance of the object of trust and the type of election.

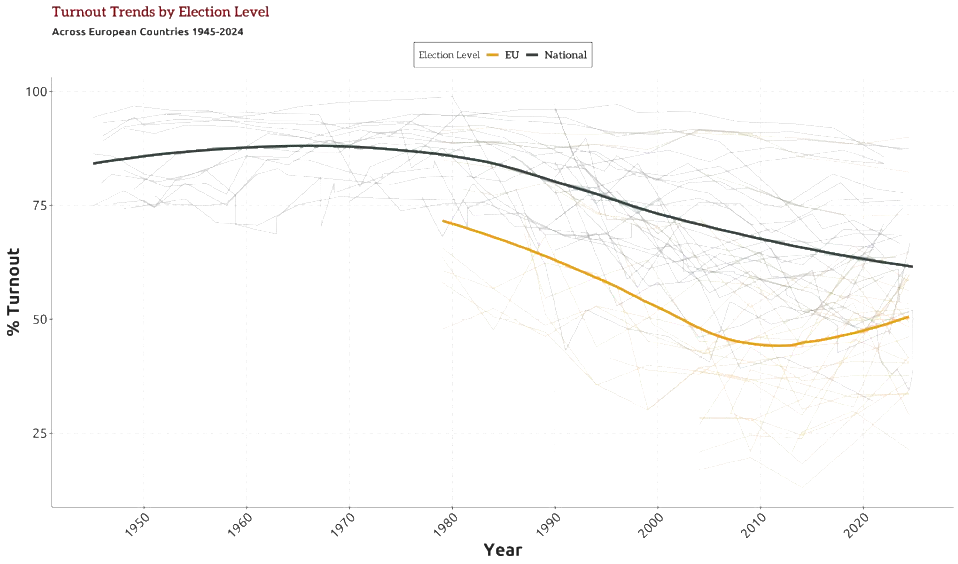
3.1 Comparative trends for voting at Legislative and European Parliament elections

We begin this section by looking at comparative trends in voting for EP and legislative elections. It is well established in the literature that EP elections, due to perceptions of *less-at-stake*, generate consistently lower turnout levels, compared to legislative elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Schmitt and Teperoglou, 2017).

This is clearly depicted in **Figure 3.1**, below, which plots country-trends in turnout, based on official election records (IDEA, 2024) in EU member countries. Unsurprisingly, this plot confirms the well-known trend of tapering electoral participation in recent decades. Mean electoral participation has fallen markedly, in a nearly linear fashion across the included countries, by almost 30% percentage points between the 1940s and the early 2020s. From the close to universal participation rates of upper 80% to around 70% at the turn of the millennium to 60% in the most recent electoral contests, turnout in legislative elections has, on average, been trending down (see also **Table 3.1** below for a decade-by-decade breakdown).

A similar trend can be detected for turnout in EP elections. Beginning with the first direct EP vote in 1979 with a mean turnout of 70%, voter participation in EP elections has followed a downward turn, falling to approximately 46% in the 2000s, with a slight uptick in the most recent EP elections of 2024, at almost 50%. Comparing turnout between those two levels of governance, national and European, it becomes immediately clear how the EP elections have trailed behind national-level electoral contests. Despite country-trends of EP and legislative elections turnout overlapping in some cases, they represent distinct clusters of country-trend lines, as illustrated in **Figure 3.1**. During the entire duration of the period under study, the legislative-EP turnout differential has been at 18 percentage points, on average, and peaked during the 2010s (see **Table 3.1** below).

Figure 3.1: Comparative trends of voting in European Parliament and Legislative Elections 1945-2024) (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) project

In some countries, the legislative-EP turnout differential over time is remarkable (e.g., in Sweden, Denmark, Slovenia and Slovakia), while in others, like Italy, Greece and Luxemburg, the participation in the two levels of elections is rather similar. Further, turnout in countries' first EP election is usually high but appears to drop in subsequent elections. This pattern holds in most countries, except for the post-communist countries, where turnout was low in the inaugural elections of 2004, but has been trending upwards in more recent contests. Overall, EP elections across all countries show remain second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980). The country-by-

country comparison over time for legislative elections illustrates some interesting patterns. Firstly, we observe a clear drop in participation from the late 2000s. While this trend is sharper for some countries, especially in Southern Europe, its absolute size varies across countries. These are also countries that were most severely affected by the deep economic recession in the Eurozone crisis.

Table 3.1: Average Turnout in Legislative Elections 1945-2024, by decade (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

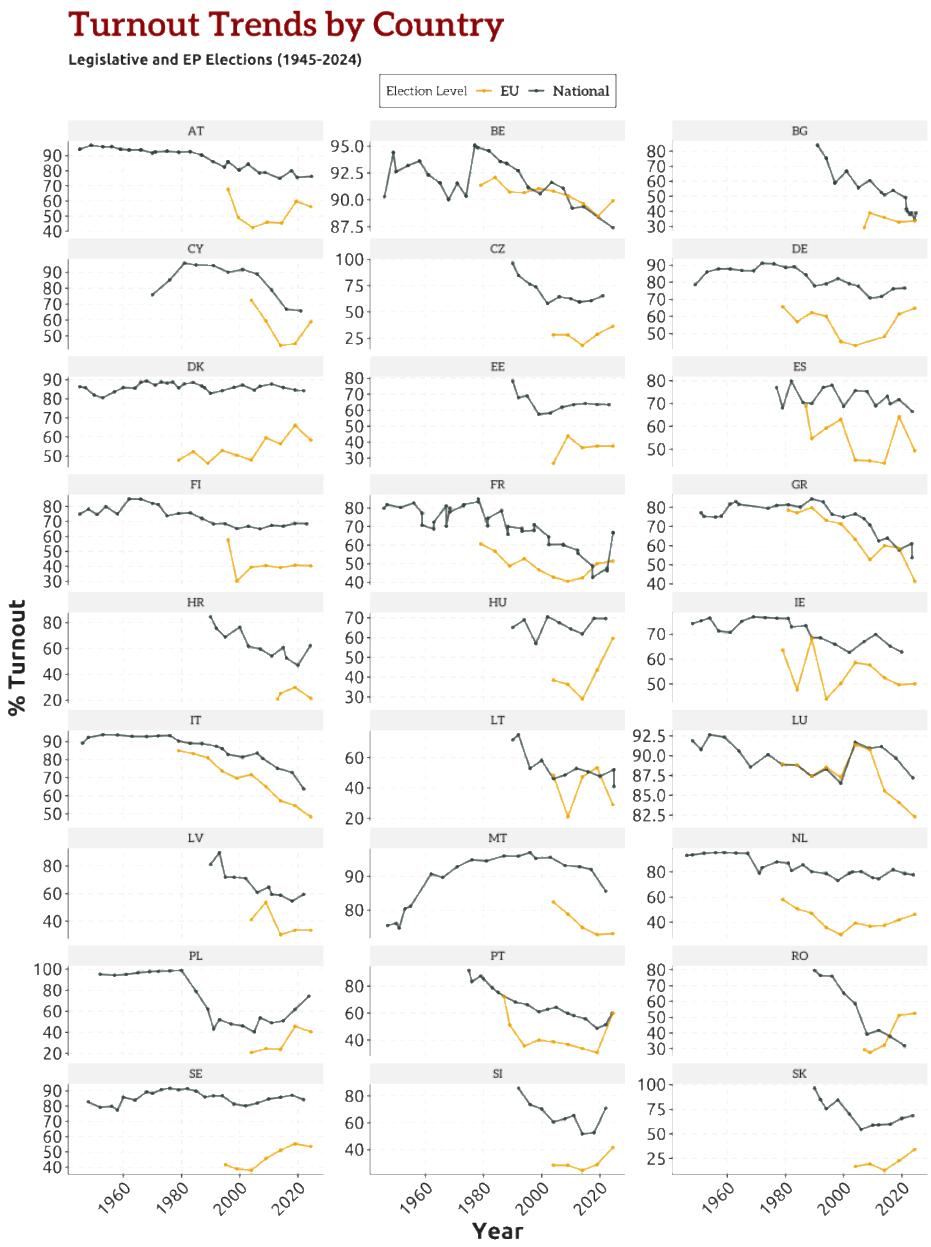
Decade	Average Legislative Election %	Average EP Election %	Average differential %
40s	87.2	-	-
50s	85.5	-	-
60s	86.8	-	-
70s	87.6	70.1	17.5
80s	83.8	67.1	16.7
90s	77.5	57.0	20.5
00s	70.2	46.7	23.5
10s	66.4	46.0	20.4
20s	60.9	49.8	11.1

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) project

Turnout trends in EP elections are rather inconsistent across member states. A possible explanation for this is that the ebbs and flows of turnout for EP elections are usually related to the timing of the EP election within the electoral cycle of the legislative election and on whether a concurrent legislative (or local) election takes place (e.g., Schmitt et al. 2020), as well as to the nationally-specific political context (see Figure 3.2 below). In summary, electoral participation in legislative elections today is lower, on average, than in the previous decades, but the year-to-year trend in each country is more dynamic. The same trend is true for EP elections, with the recent

2024 EP contest showing the potential of a slight reversal of this trend. In terms of turnout levels, we find clear support for the Eastern–Western European divide, with many post-communist countries having lower levels of turnout across both levels of elections.

Figure 3.2. Comparative trends of voting in European Parliament and Legislative Elections 1945-2024), per country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) project

3.2 The country-level association between trust and turnout across levels of governance

3.2.1 The country-level association of trust and turnout in legislative elections 2002-2023

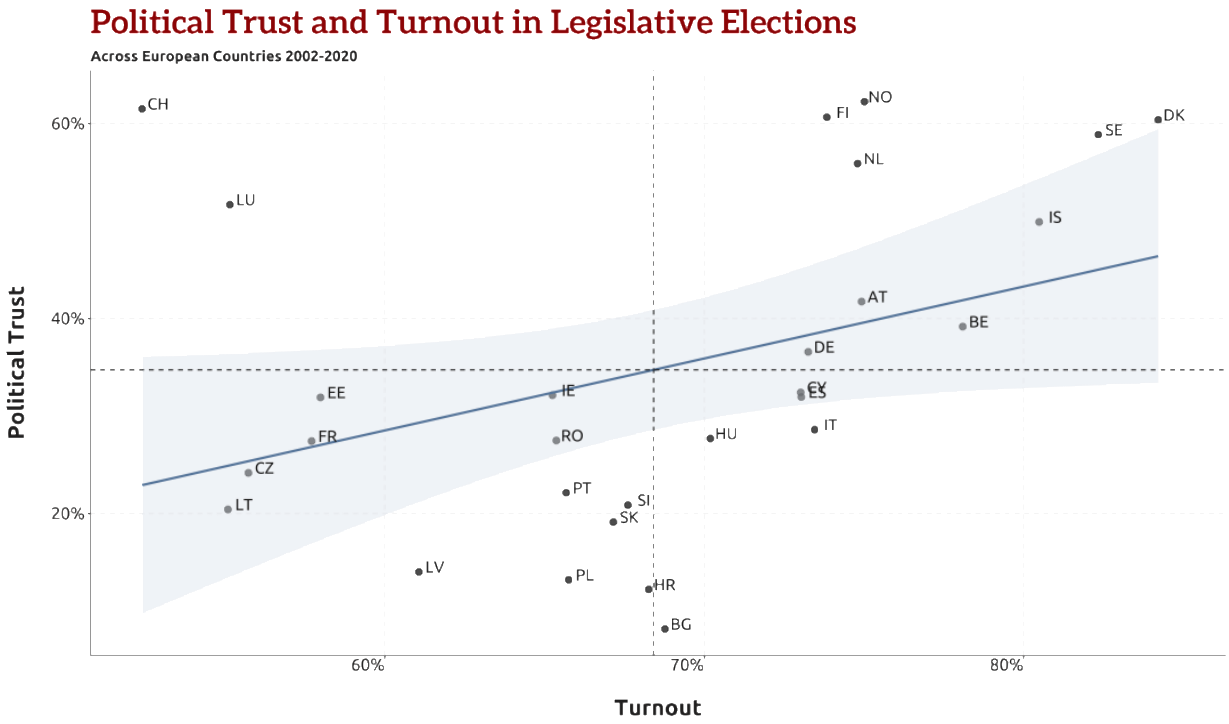
Having examined the aggregate trends in turnout in legislative and EP Elections, we now turn to explore the potential association between political trust and electoral participation at the country level. To do this, we draw on rounds 1-10 of the European Social Survey. In other words, we ask: do countries with high average levels of political trust demonstrate higher levels of electoral participation? As Devine (2024) points out, the existing literature has used different object of trust (generalized/social trust, trust to the executive, or trust to the Parliament) to analyse this relationship. In what follows, we will examine, thus, the relationship between levels of trust towards the country Parliament and levels of turnout in legislative elections, across the same set of member countries.

Before moving to visualize the data, we briefly explain the measurement and operationalization of those concepts. To tap into political trust, we use the question "*Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly… …[country]'s parliament?*", and calculate percentages at the country level, by dichotomizing it. We do not consider missing and non-responses as meaningful values. In like fashion, we use the question "*Some people don't vote nowadays for one reason or another. Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?*" to operationalize turnout, by keeping only the Yes-No response options. We are greatly abetted by the consistency of question wording and response format across all survey waves. For all descriptive analyses, we weight the data using the European Social Survey population and post-stratification weights, following the European Social Survey guide (Kaminska 2020).

By looking at **Figure 3.3,** one can recognize the expected association, with average trust and turnout levels being positively correlated with each other, but only modestly, at best, so. Pearson's R is at 0.35, which translates to a shared variance of 12%. More meaningful, perhaps, than correlation coefficients are the resulting taxonomy of countries. Based on the means across country-level trust and turnout, we can split the countries into four quadrants. Those could be named *High Trust-High Turnout*, *High Trust-Low Turnout*, *Low Trust-Low Turnout*, and *Low Trust-High Turnout* countries. We explore these categories in more detail below.

To start with the first, the High Trust-High Turnout country category is comprised, across the years, of Germany, Belgium, Austria, Iceland, the Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Second, the High Trust-Low Turnout countries include Switzerland and Luxembourg. Low Trust-Low Turnout countries, next, are Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Latvia, France, Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria, Portugal, Romania, Ireland, Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Finally, the Low Trust-High Turnout countries are Hungary, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Cyprus.[3]

Figure 3.3 The correlation between trust and turnout at the country level (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on 2002-2020 European Social Survey data.

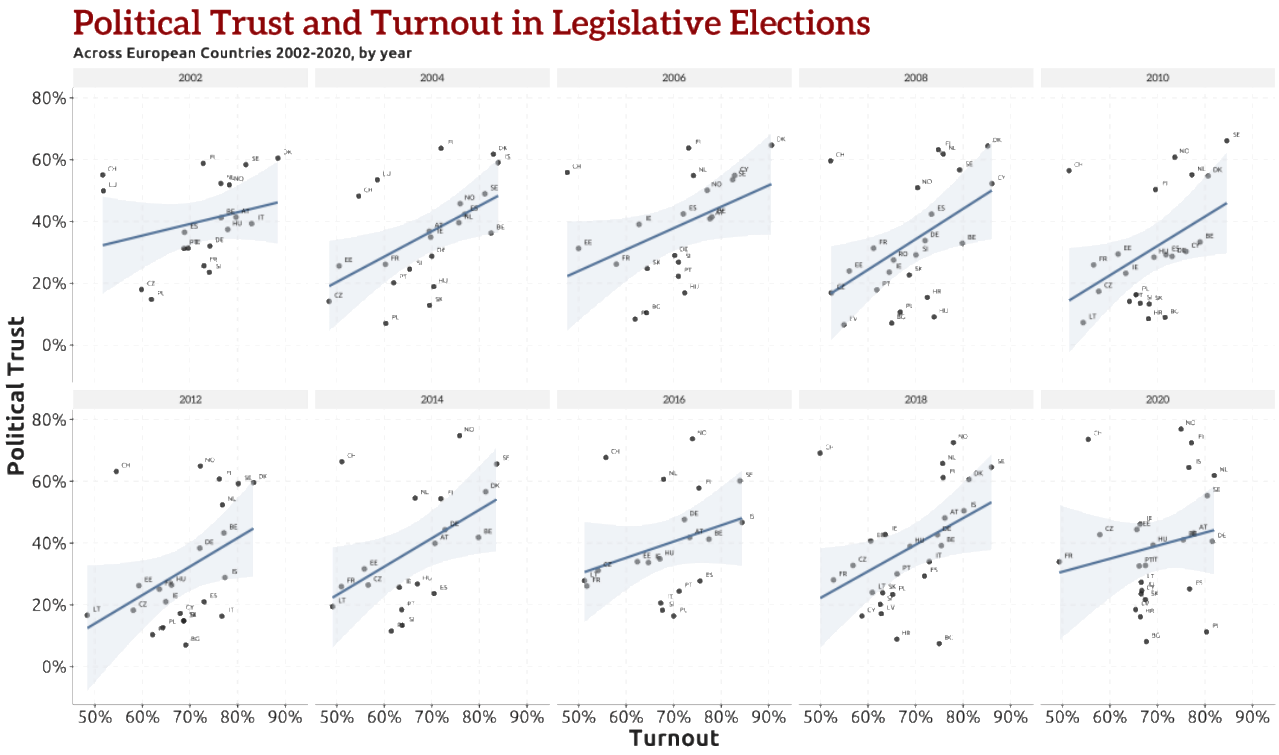
It is evident that the patterns in this trust-turnout taxonomy correspond, even if imperfectly, to geographical dividing lines between Northern/Western Europe (High Trust-High Turnout), Eastern Europe (Low Trust-Low Turnout), Southern Europe (Low Trust-High Turnout) and Central

[3]These observations are all based on survey estimates of trust and turnout. In some cases, by cross-tabulating actual and survey estimates of turnout levels, we found considerable discrepancies that could alter the countries' configuration patterns.

Europe (High Trust-Low Turnout) as a small residual category of outliers, which includes only two countries.

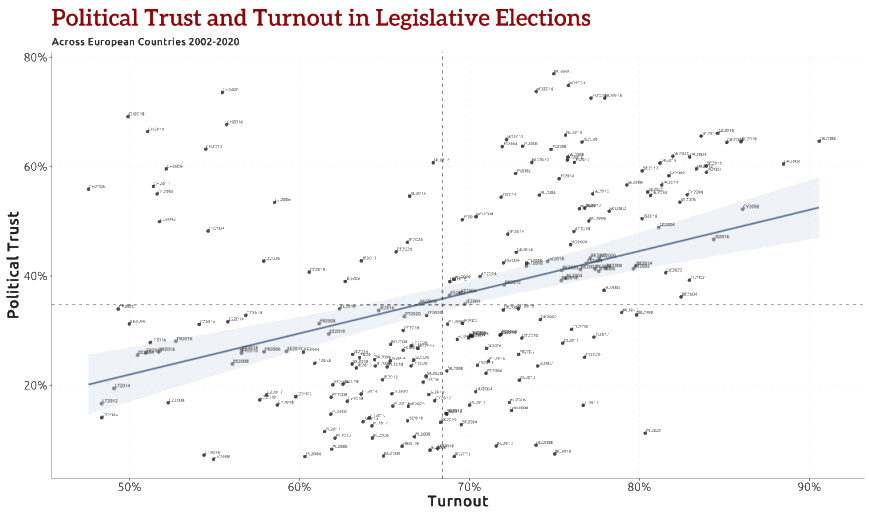
In this context, the most interesting country clusters, from the perspective of the association between trust and turnout, are the countries of Central and Southern Europe (Low Trust-High Turnout), since they highlight the weak association between trust and turnout, and the need to broaden the analytical lens to consider the political and institutional context of those countries. Southern Europe, for example, has had comparatively higher polarized party systems than the countries of Western and Northern Europe (e.g., Bosco and Verney 2020). At the same time, while averaging by country across years might mean that we are missing interesting parts of variation, the year-country breakdown (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5), reveals considerable stability in country classifications for legislative elections.

Figure 3.4. The country-level correlation between trust and turnout in legislative elections, by year Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on 2002-2020 ESS data.

Figure 3.5. The country-year correlation between trust and turnout in legislative elections Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on 2002-2020 ESS data.

3.3 The country-level association of trust and turnout in European Parliament elections 2004-2019

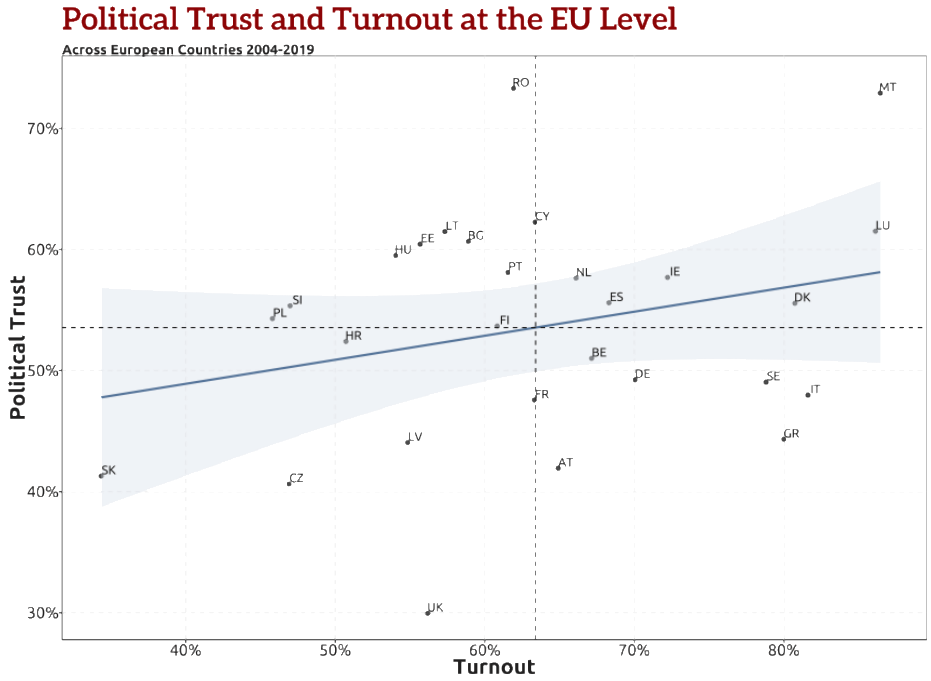
Turning now to the supranational (European Union) level of governance, we will ask the same question. What is the country-level association between trust and electoral participation levels? And how does it compare to the national level? Before jumping to the findings, a few data-related remarks are in order. Due to data availability, we draw on the European Election Studies for this section. In contrast to the European Social Survey, the European Election Studies does not provide a pre-harmonized cumulative dataset. We proceeded to a limited post-harmonization of relevant European Election Studies items from waves 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019. Similar to the European Social Survey section, we draw on the question for turnout, which is some variation of "*A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections, while others voted. Did you cast your vote?*" (see **Appendix 3A** for the precise question wording). While the question wording varies by wave, we don't expect question wording to have too much of an influence on validity.

The situation is a bit trickier for the trust question. For waves 2004 and 2019, the question asks about trust towards the European Parliament. For waves 2009 and 2014, the question asks about trust towards European institutions. We cannot know how sensitive our country estimates are to changes in the object of trust. However, as shown in Chapter 4 by Carstens et al. in Christensen et al. (2024) for ActEU deliverable 2.1, trust items referring to the EU level load on a common dimension, juxtaposed to a separate dimension of trust questions to national-level institutions,

allowing us to cautiously consider them quasi-equivalent (item wording by year is reported in the Appendix). To explore their correlation, we proceeded to dichotomize the items similarly to the European Social Survey data above.

The impression emerging from the data is not too different, but at the same time presents some interesting differences to discuss (**Figure 3.6).** To begin with, we can identify the same small positive relation between country-level trust and turnout levels, with almost the exact same strength (Pearson's R= 0.29). Country clusters differ, however. We will begin by describing the resulting country categories, before comparing them with the national-level equivalent.

Figure 3.6 The correlation between trust and turnout at the European Level. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

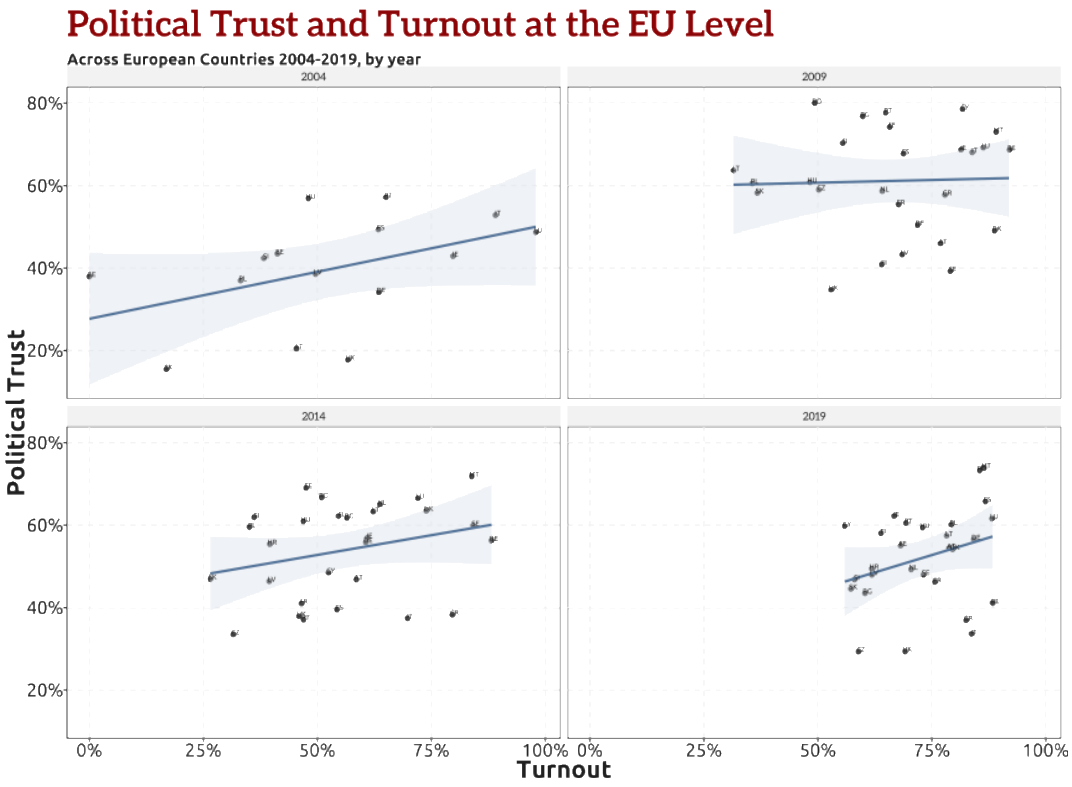


Source: Author's Elaboration based on 2004-2019 European Election Studies data.

In the High Trust-High Turnout quadrant, one can find Luxemburg, Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, Malta, and Ireland. The High Trust-Low Turnout countries, then, include Romania, Lithuania, Cyprus, Portugal, Finland, Poland, Slovenia, Hungary, Estonia, and Bulgaria. In turn, the Low Trust-Low Turnout category is comprised of Croatia, Slovakia, Latvia, the United Kingdom, and France. Finally, the Low Trust-High Turnout country group includes Belgium, Germany, Austria, Greece, Italy, and Sweden.

Once again, by and large, these country clusters seem to map onto geographical regions, but in a less clear-cut way. This is primarily driven by an increased number of countries moving, compared to the national-level configurations, from the Low Trust-Low Turnout quadrant into the High Trust-Low Turnout quadrant, and some countries from the High Trust-High Turnout quadrant dropping into the Low Trust-High Turnout quadrant. In other words, while for most of those countries' turnout trends are similar across levels of governance, levels of trust vary in a twisted way: some high-trust countries at the national level trust the EU relatively less, while many nationally Low-Trust countries tend to trust the EU more than their national-level institutions, blurring the clean correspondence of geography into trust-turnout patterns. A breakdown of the trust-turnout correlation by year is presented in Figure 3.7 below.

Figure 3.7: The country-level correlation between trust and turnout in EP elections by year. (Alexandros Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on 2004-2019 European Election Study data

3.4 Comparative analysis for habitual voting for local elections

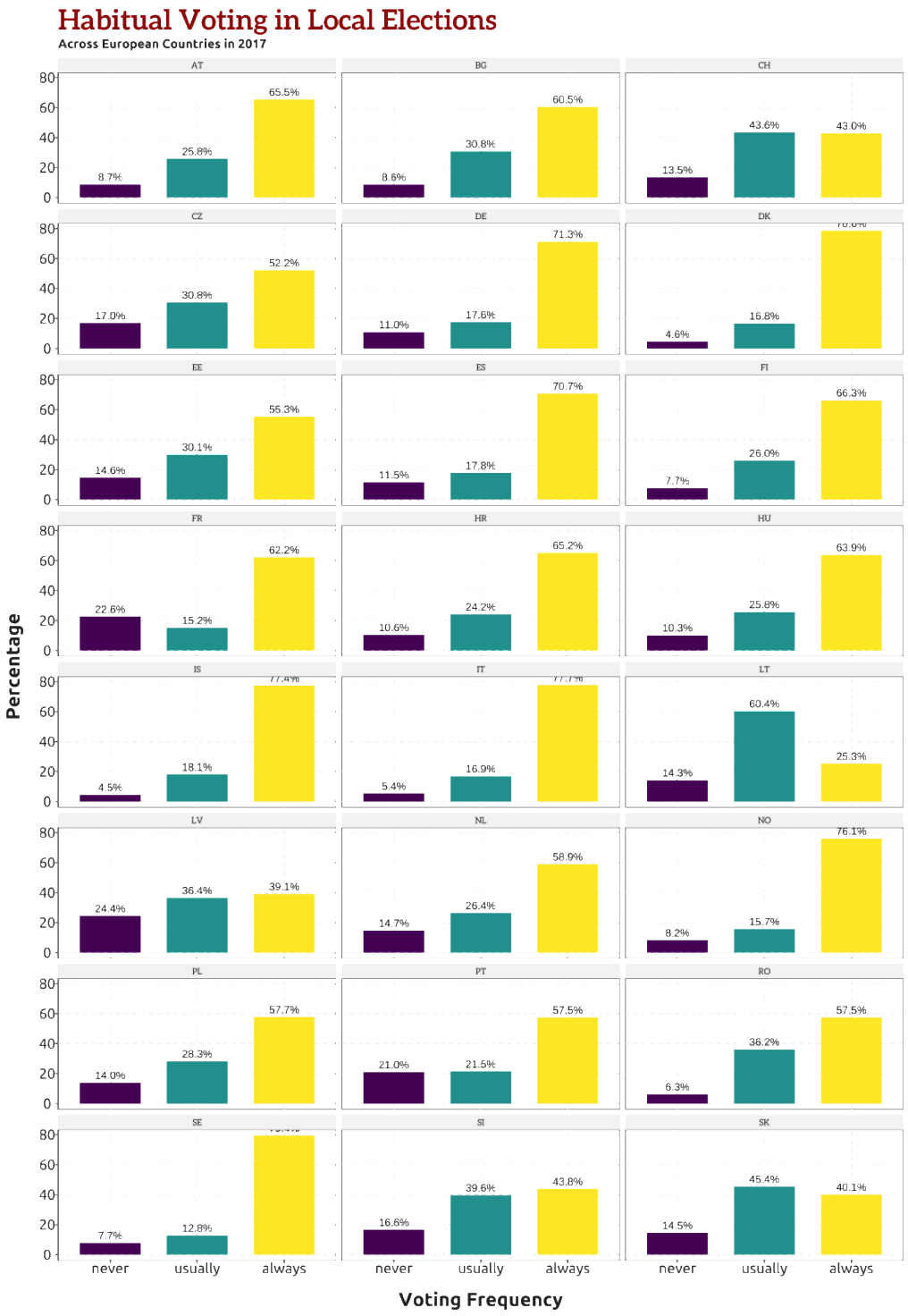
In the previous sections, we explored how trends in turnout have evolved across levels of governance comparatively and investigated patterns of association between trust and turnout levels at the country level. Due to data limitations, we cannot undertake a similar exercise for the local level. First, to the best of our knowledge, there is no central database for official turnout records in local elections, whose structure also varies considerably between countries. The cross-sectional surveys asking questions about local-level electoral participation are very few as well. For the period and the countries that this project studies, we were able to identify only one data source with relevant information for only one of its waves.

The 2017 wave of the European Values Study asks a slightly different question about local electoral participation. Specifically, the question asks respondents "*When elections take place, do you vote always, usually or never? Please tell me separately for each of the following levels…1. Local level, 2. National Level, 3. European Level*", with three response options (always, usually, never).

Below, we present the weighted proportions of those responses by country for all countries of interest (Figure 3.8). Overall, the data paint a homogenous picture across countries, with "always" being the most frequent response in all countries except Lithuania and Slovakia. In these two countries, most of the respondents report that they usually vote. For the other countries, the percentage of respondents reporting that they always cast a vote ranges from a low of about 40% (e.g. Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic) to almost 80% in some cases (e.g. in Denmark), revealing considerable variation between countries. The same variation is observed by looking at the percentages of the respondents reporting that they usually cast a vote. In this case, the range is from a low of about 15% to a high of 60%. Overall, one could say that two somewhat compact groups emerge from the data based on the prevalence of habitual voting in local elections. The first group consists of Scandinavian countries in which we observe very high percentages in the category "always". The second is composed primarily of Eastern European and Baltic countries, where we find an increased trend to cast a vote "usually".

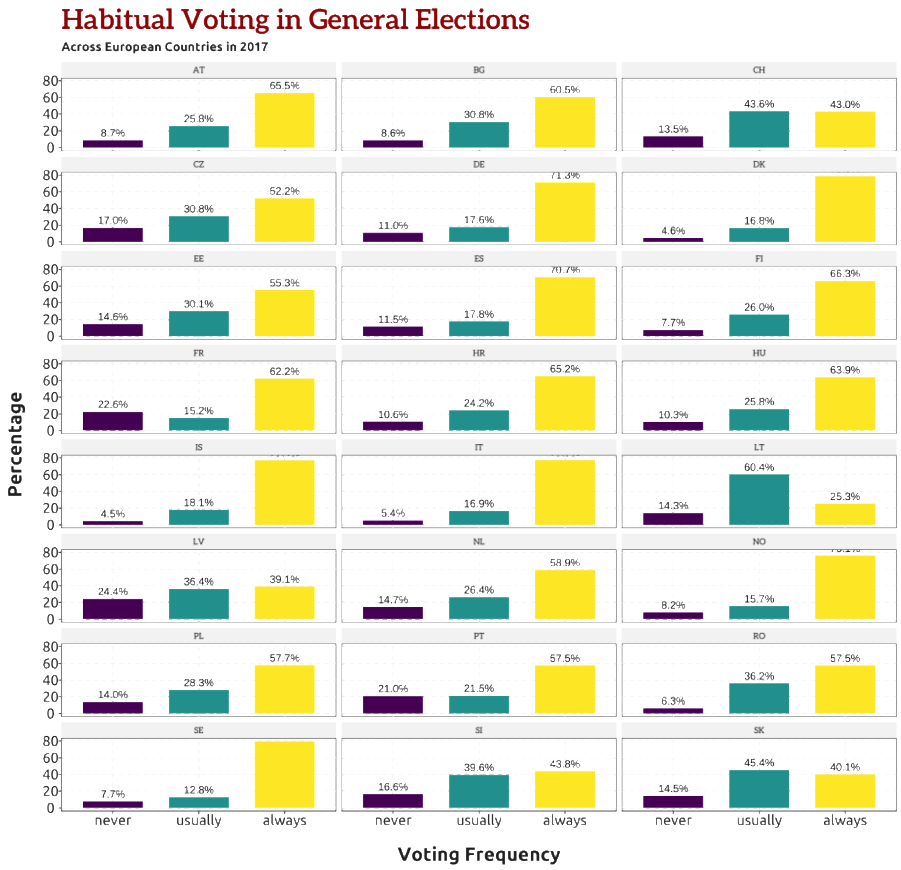
Moving to the analysis of habitual voting in general elections (Figure 3.9), once again the category "always" is the most frequent response among the respondents, except from Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia. For all other remaining countries of our interest, the variation in this category of regular voters ranges from 55% to a high percentage of 75%. From this country-by-country comparison another illustrative observation is that there is a group of countries in which a high percentage of respondents declare that "they never vote". The highest percentage is in Latvia (24%), following by France and Portugal (with small difference). On the other hand, Iceland, Denmark and Italy are those countries with the lowest percentage in the category "never". Comparing the overall trends with those from Figure 3.8 we can observe that since legislative elections are "first order elections" (Reif and Schmitt 1980) voters in all the countries participate at a greater extent. The elections for the subnational level of governance are "second-order elections" (Reif and Schmitt 1980) and the levels of participation are in general lower. Interestingly, from Figure 3.9 we cannot detect any homogenous trend within groups of countries based on the classic regional distinction between Southern, Western or Eastern Europe.

Figure 3.8: Habitual Voting in Local Elections, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on the European Value Survey 2017 data.

Figure 3.9: Habitual Voting in General Elections, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

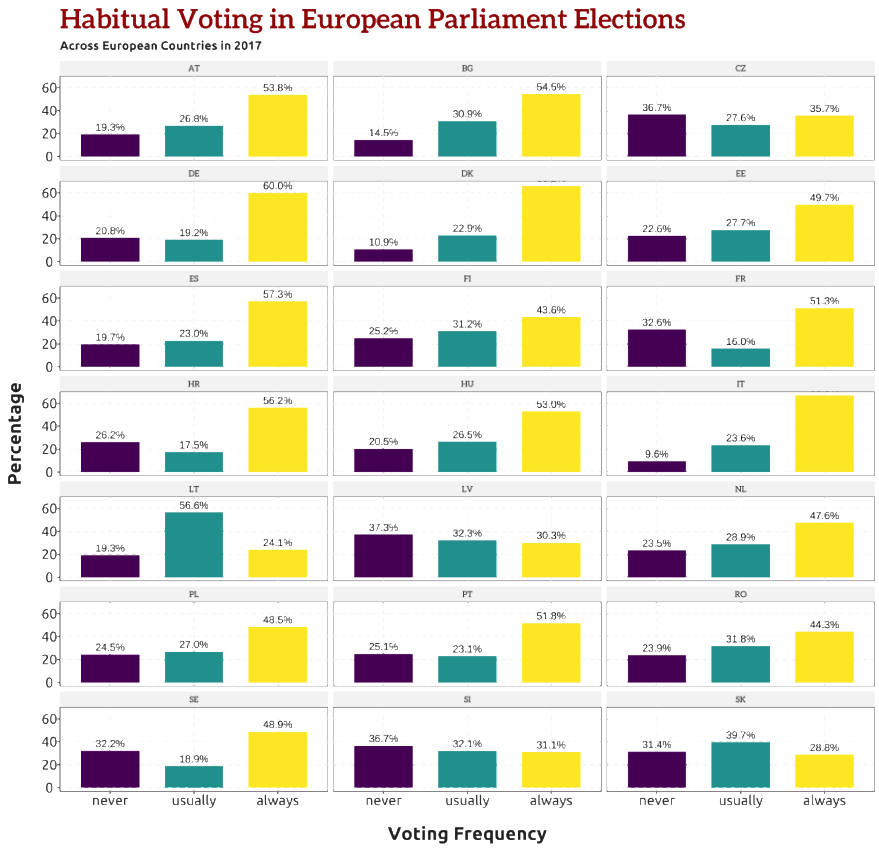


Source: Author's elaboration based on the European Value Survey 2017 data.

The trends for habitual voting in European Parliament elections (**Figure 3.10**) show some distinguishing patterns compared to those for local and general elections that we analyzed before. First of all, we see a more balanced distribution among the three categories ("always", "usually" and "never"). However, once again, in most of the countries, the category "always" receives the highest percentages. The range is between 36% and 60%, confirming the consistent tendency of lower participation in European Parliament Elections as second-order contests (Reif and Schmitt 1980). The percentage of respondents that "usually" cast a vote is highest in Lithuania (almost 57%) and in Slovakia (40%). Contrary to habitual voting in local and general elections, the category "never" tops all other categories in Latvia and Slovenia when examining voting in European contests. It is also high in many other countries, such as in the Czech Republic (37%), in France (33%) and in Sweden (32%). A general trend that we can discern from this country-by-country comparison is that in the Baltic and Eastern European countries, the levels of participation are significantly

lower. Another finding is that higher levels of turnout are recorded in some countries that belong to the founding members of the EU (e.g. in Germany and Italy, it "always" reaches 60%).

Figure 3.10: Habitual Voting in European Parliament Elections, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



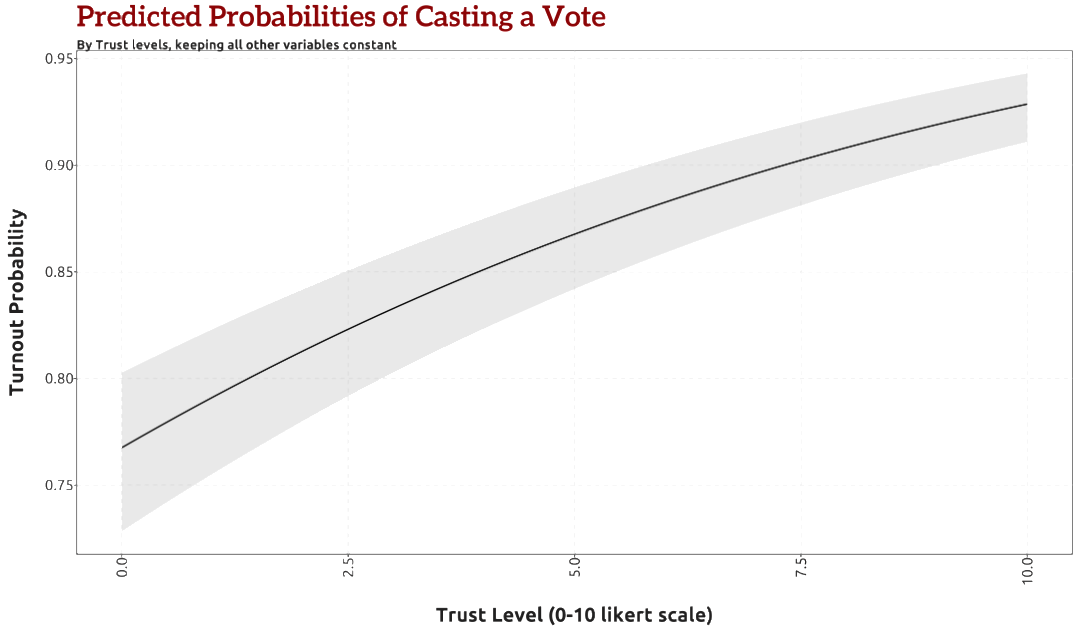
Source: Author's elaboration based on the European Value Survey 2017 data.

3.5 The individual level

Having examined the trends in turnout, in legislative and EP elections, and their country-level association with political trust, we now extend the same question to the individual level, to explore whether higher levels of political trust are associated with a higher propensity to vote. To do that, we return to the European Social Survey data set, presented above, and estimate the relationship with a multivariate logistic regression model with country and year fixed effects, controlling for key socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (obs. 382,626). The dependent variable is turnout at the last legislative election (Yes/No), and covariates include age, educational attainment (university degree/not), and gender (male/female). We arrived at this model by choosing the most

parsimonious one, after examining alternative specifications with additional socio-demographic controls that did not meaningfully improve model fit or covariate coefficients.

Figure 3.11 Predicted Probabilities of Turnout by trust levels. (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

Looking at Figure 3.11 above, we corroborate the country-level findings to the individual level, as we observe a clear positive association between high levels of trust in the country's parliament and the probability of going to the polls at the legislative election. The effects are positive and statistically significant at the 0.01 level, providing evidence of the importance of political trust for motivating electoral participation. This finding is robust to an alternative estimation with a Linear Probability Model (LPM). At the same time, the effect is relatively small and dwarfed by the comparatively larger effect of completing university education. The complete model output can be found in the Appendix 3B.

As was the case, with the country-level bivariate analysis, the results are in line with previous research demonstrating the modestly important effect of political trust on turnout. More specifically, our findings are consistent with the *resource model of electoral participation* (Brady et al. 2005) which highlights the role of education as a key driver of individuals' electoral participation.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, we focused on the relation between political trust and electoral participation across different levels of governance. We began by exploring the evolution of turnout trends between 1945 and 2024 in legislative and EP elections, to find a consistent, if declining, gap in participation between levels of governance, to the benefit of the national political arena. Interestingly, in more recent decades, this gap in turnout exists in a broader downward trend.

We then investigated the potential association of country-level trust and turnout levels and found support for a small-to-modest positive correlation between the two. Importantly, while the strength of the correlation is similar across the national and European levels of governance, the configuration of countries into the four quadrants (High Trust-High Turnout, High Trust-Low Turnout, Low Trust-Low Turnout, and Low Trust-High Turnout) varies in interesting ways between those two levels. Of note, many countries, mostly West European, that were classified as High Trust-High Turnout at the national level belong to the Low Trust-High Turnout group at the European level. Alternatively, many Low Trust-Low Turnout countries, mainly East European,, while being classified as Low Trust-Low Turnout at the national level, are High Trust-Low Turnout at the EP Elections. This difference in configurations seems to be driven by the difference in relative levels of trust, with the first group trusting the EU less than their national parliaments and the latter showcasing the opposite pattern.

This twist, together with South European countries being classified as Low Trust-High Turnout, highlights the limited role of trust in inducing turnout and the importance of the country-level institutional and political context. We arrive at a similar conclusion when examining the relationship between political trust and turnout at the individual level. There again, we observe a positive but limited association between them. We have much fewer insights for the local level, owing to the lack of available aggregate and survey data that would allow us to dive deeper into and compare trends between the local level and the other levels of governance.

Overall, our results are in line with previous research that has focused on explaining the turnout differential between legislative and EP elections (Reif & Schmitt 1981), the role of trust in fostering turnout (Devine 2024; Gronlund & Settala 2007, among others) and the variety of factors behind turnout (see Wass & Blais 2017), and have expanded on them by offering a multilevel governance perspective. The next chapter will investigate the connection between trust and voting choice.

Appendix 3A

Table 3A.1. Turnout Question wording across European Election Studies Waves 2004-2019 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

EES Wave	Question Wording
2004	Q09. A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of June 13 [check date if workday voting applied, while others voted. Did you cast your vote: Source 10 to 13d: EES and earlier studies>
2009	Q24. A lot of people abstained in the European Parliament elections of June 4, while others voted. Did you cast your vote?
2014	QP1. European Parliament elections were held on the (INSERT CORRECT DATE ACCORDING TO COUNTRY). For one reason or another, some people in (OUR COUNTRY) did not vote in these elections. Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections?
2019	Q6 The European Parliament elections were held on the [insert correct date for each country]. For one reason or another, some people in the UK did not vote in these elections. Did you vote in the recent European Parliament elections?

Source: Questionnaire of the European Election Studies Waves 2004-2019

Table 3A.2. Trust Question wording across European Election Studies Waves 2004-2019 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

EES Wave	Question Wording
2004	Please tell me on a score of 1-10 how much von personally trust each of the institutions | read out. 1 means that you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. If you do not know an institution well enough, just say so and I will go on to the next...Q13_2 The European Parliament?
2009	For each of the following propositions, please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following Statements...Q41. You trust the institutions of the European Union
2014	QP6. For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion... 2. You trust the institutions of the EU
2019	Q18. For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your attitude or opinion... 2. You trust the European Parliament

Source: Questionnaire of the European Election Studies Waves 2004-2019

Appendix 3B

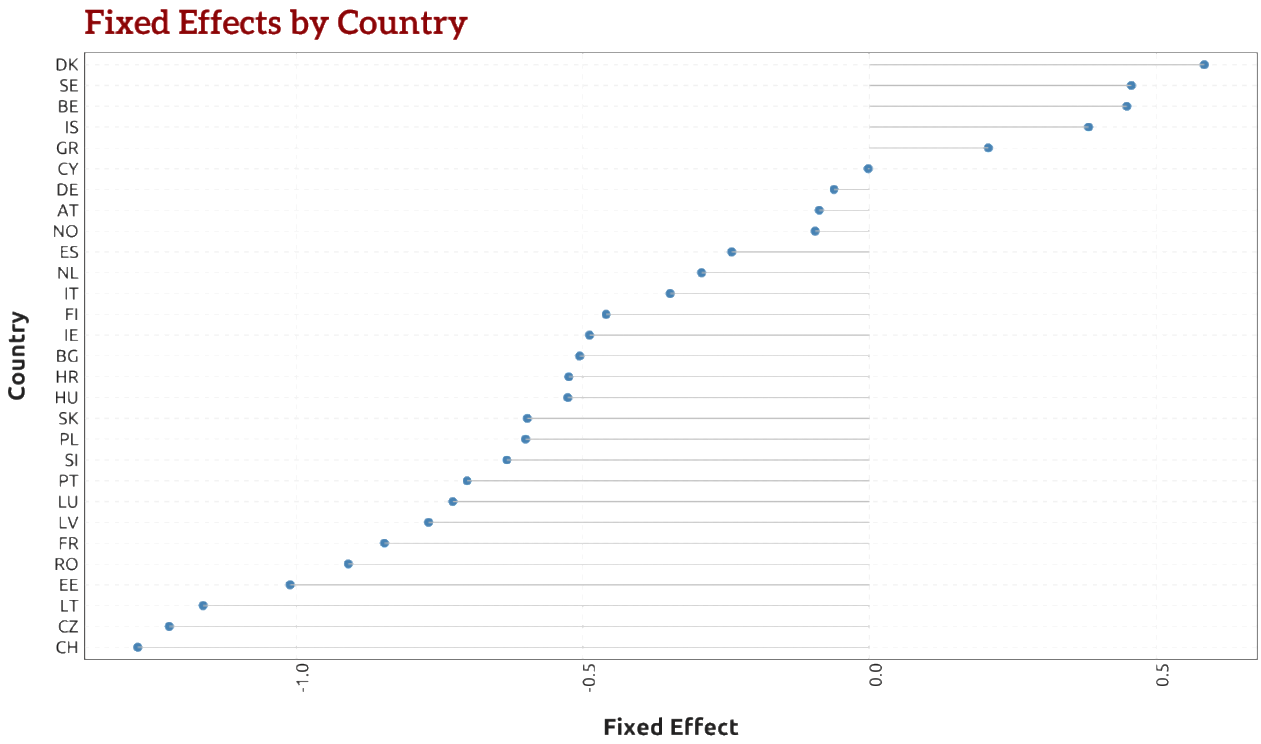
Table 3B.1: Full Model Output (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)

Dependent Variable:	Turnout (Yes / No)	
Model:	(1)	(2)
	Logit	LPM
Variables		
Gender: Female	-0.0359	-0.0030
	(0.0249)	(0.0040)
Education: University Degree	0.7591***	0.0999***
	(0.0496)	(0.0079)
Age	0.0257***	0.0039***
	(0.0020)	(0.0004)
Trust to National Parliament	0.1371***	0.0204***
	(0.0088)	(0.0014)
Fixed-effects		
Country	Yes	Yes
Year	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics		
Observations	383,626	383,626
Squared Correlation	0.10225	0.09321
Pseudo R^2	0.09572	0.09350
BIC	358,430.2	364,447.0

*Note: Clustered (Country & Year) standard-errors in parentheses Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1*

Source: Author's elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

Figure 3B.1. Country Fixed Effects (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Author's elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

4 Empirical comparative analysis of voting choice trends and their connection to political trust

Carles Pamies and Laura Morales (CSIC)

This chapter focuses on the trends in voting choices across European countries and whether and how they connect to patterns of political trust. The aim of the chapter is to describe how the vote choices of European citizens have evolved since the early 2000s and to examine if specific patterns of voting are reflective of differences in political trust. Due to data limitations, we focus on voting choices in national elections, and for that reason we also focus on trust in political actors and institutions, using the pooled datasets of the European Social Survey (ESS) for rounds 1 (2002-2003) to 10 (2020-2022).

First, we describe the evolution of vote choices by party family. Although this sounds like a relatively straightforward exercise, it is anything but. In fact, the ESS does not provide codes for the party values that can be matched with the most commonly used datasets with information on the ideological positions of political parties – the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) dataset and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) dataset – and this task had to be undertaken from scratch. Hence, we have classified the 2,722 party response options included in the country-specific variables containing the information of the parties respondents voted for in the previous elections into 10 party families.[4]

Drawing on a cross-referencing of how the CMP and CHES datasets classify political parties, our classification distinguishes between (1) Radical Left, (2) Ecologist / Green, (3) Social Democrats, (4) Liberal, (5) Christian Democratic, (6) Conservative, (7) Agrarian, (8) Radical Right, (9) Ethno-regional and (10) Other parties (see Table 4.1).

Whenever a party was coded consistently in both the CMP and CHES datasets or only in one of them, the party was automatically assigned the equivalent code in the ActEU classification. If there was a mismatch between CMP and CHES or the party was not classified in either, the team evaluated the nature of the mismatch when relevant, considered the existing information about the political party and adjudicated on a given value. Out of the 2,721 party responses, this only

[4] The variables in the ESS are those that follow the nomenclature format prtvXX#; for example prtvde2, prtvade2, prtvbde2, …, prtvfde2 for the case of Germany. While the values for political parties contained in those variables may be very similar from one round to the next, they will vary when new parties emerge, when parties change and when they disappear.

affected around 80 party responses and did not result in classifying such cases with a greater likelihood in any of the 10 party family categories.

Table 4.1 Comparing party family classifications (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)

CMP	CHES	ActEU project
eco ecologist	green	Eco/Green
lef socialist or other left	rad left	RadLeft
soc social democratic	socialist	SocDem
eth ethnic-regional	regionalist	Eth/Regional
lib liberal	liberal	Liberal
chr christian democrat	christdem	ChristDem
con conservative	cons	Conservative
agr agrarian	agrarian/centre	Agrarian
sip special issue	no family	Other (SpIssue / NoFam / Confess / DiverseAlliance)
div divers alliance	confessional	Other (SpIssue / NoFam / Confess / DiverseAlliance)
nat nationalist	rad right	RadRight

Sources: Own elaboration from Lehmann et al. (2024) and Jolly et al. (2022).

The category "Other" was only used when classifying into one of the 9 party families was not feasible and it includes special issue parties (e.g., Pirate Parties, anti-corruption coalitions, etc.), parties that are broad or personality-centered coalitions (e.g., Team Frank Stronach in Austria, Lista Di Pietro in Italy, the Women's Coalition in the United Kingdom), independent candidates (e.g., in Ireland) or parties that do not fit well any of the other party family categories (e.g., the 5 Stars Movement in Italy). The final classification of parties is made available in Pamies and Morales (2024).

Another important methodological aspect of the analyses is that we have included only those countries for which the pooled ESS dataset for rounds 1 to 10 included at least 3 data points that

are not fully consecutive with each other and, hence, could provide a reasonable description of trends throughout the 20 years period. Once these criteria have been applied, we have dropped the data for Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg and Romania. Hence, we present the results for 26 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Additionally, following the rationale outlined by Christensen et al. (2024) in Deliverable 2.1 on the comparative trends of political trust, we also present the results by regional clusters within Europe that reflect groups of countries with internally more homogeneous levels and patterns of political trust: the Nordic, Western and Central Europe, Southern Europe, and Eastern Europe clusters. [5]

The second section of this chapter proceeds to assess the empirical association between political trust and voting for each of the 10 party families previously mentioned. We create an average index of political trust with four items of trust in national political actors and institutions: political parties, politicians, parliament and the legal system. As shown in Chapter 4 by Carstens et al. in Christensen et al. (2024), there is a different dimensionality of political trust between national and EU actors and institutions and, hence, we have decided to exclude the item on trust in the European parliament for these analyses. Using multinomial regression models, we estimate the marginal effect of the average index of national political trust on the likelihood of voting for each of the 10 party families over time.

4.1 Comparative trends for voting choice at the national legislative elections

All the analyses in this section are undertaken with the question in the ESS on voting in the previous (last) national legislative election, which is formulated as "Which party did you vote for in that election?". We must remind readers that survey data can sometimes distort trends when compared to official electoral results data. However, as the goal of this chapter is to examine the association between these voting choice trends and political trust, it is preferable to undertake all analyses with individual-level data coming from surveys.

Starting with the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden and Norway), Figure 4.1 shows the trends in electoral support for the party families present in each of these countries for

[5] Christensen et al. (2024) group countries on the basis of political culture and accession waves to the EEC / the EU.

the period 2002-2022. There is no immediate obvious common pattern that stands out from these results.

Green and ecologist parties experience sustained increasing electoral support in Finland and Iceland but not so in Denmark or Sweden, and are latecomers to the political scene in Norway. Social Democratic parties have seen their electoral support decline significantly in Finland, Iceland and Sweden, but show trendless fluctuations in Denmark and Norway. Radical Left parties have experienced periodic ups and downs, especially in Denmark and Norway. Liberal and Agrarian parties have, for the most part, remained stable with the exception of the Icelandic ones, which have experienced highly fluctuating electoral support. In turn, Conservative parties have experienced highly divergent electoral outcomes across the five countries, characterized by relative stability in Finland and Iceland, electoral decline in Sweden and (to a lesser extent) Denmark, and increasing support in Norway.

Christian democratic parties have remained, primarily, stable where they are present with the exception of Norway, where the declining trend in their electoral support is the reverse of the growth trends of the Conservatives. We do not find a uniform trend for Radical Right parties either, as the parties in this party family have gradually increased their support in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, but are not meaningfully present in Iceland and have gradually reduced their support in Norway. Finally, the 'other' parties (by, and large, single-issue and other insurgent parties) have had very modest following in the Nordic countries, with relatively marginal electoral backing in Finland and Sweden.

Overall, hence, we do not find broadly common or consistent voting trends by party family for the Nordic countries, other than the continued fragmentation of the party-political space that has characterized these countries where the electoral systems are highly proportional.

Figure 4.2 presents the results for West and Central European countries (Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). In this case, we can observe a more general pattern of a declining trend in the vote for Social Democratic parties, especially since the mid-2010s, although in Switzerland and Denmark, we find evidence of improvement in recent years. Conservative parties show great variability across countries in this region: steady growth in the UK, strong decline in France (and in Ireland, but followed by a small recovery), and very weak support in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Switzerland.

The support for other traditional and mainstream parties gives evidence of the connection between the increasing support for some party families and the decline for others. The downward trend for Conservative parties in France appears to relate to the sharp increase in the support for Liberals,

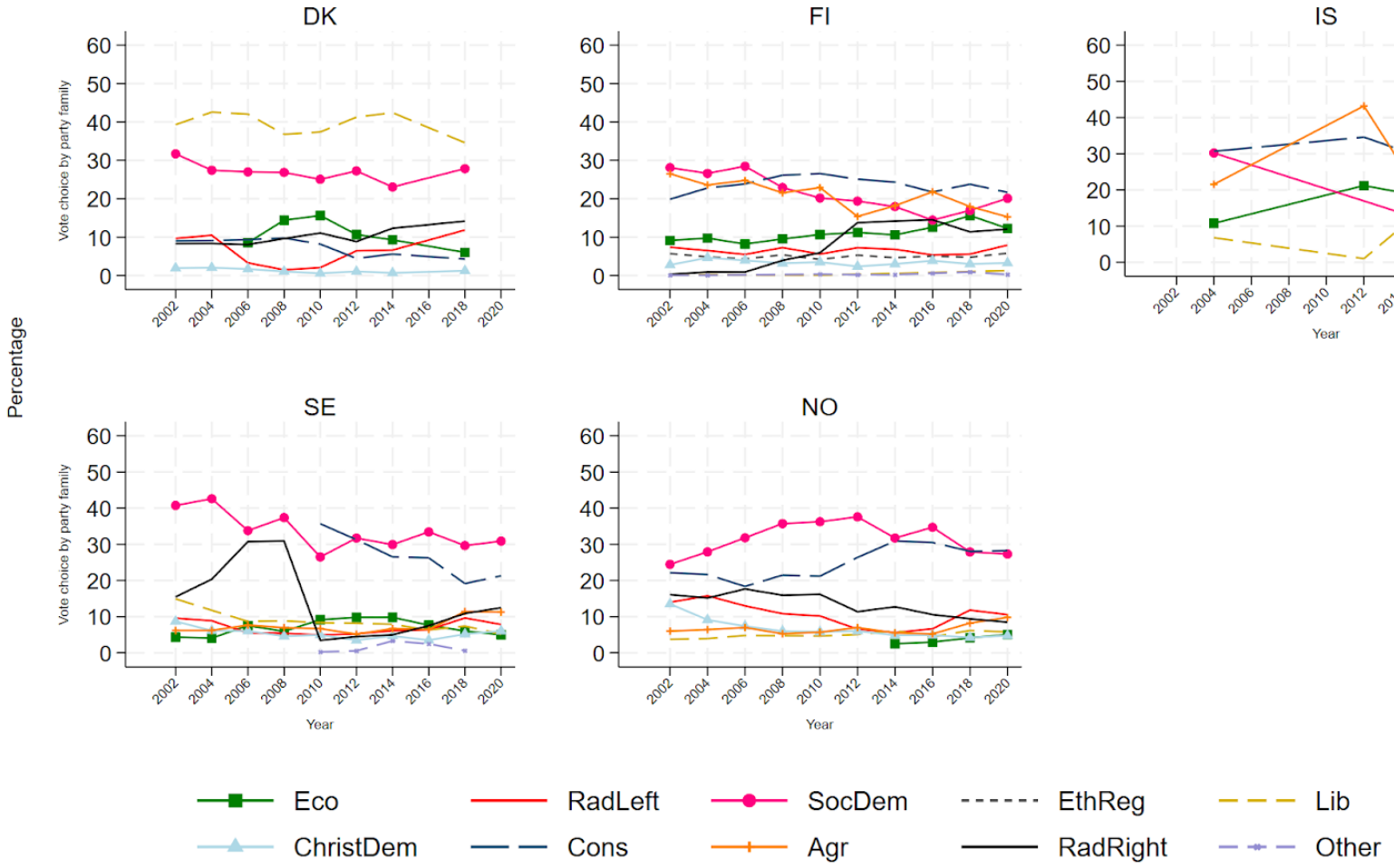
while in countries with little to no support for Conservatives tend to enjoy higher support for Christian Democratic parties. Overall, Liberal parties are stronger in The Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, while they are weaker in Ireland, sharply increasing their support in France, recovering in Germany, and only declining in the UK. The last traditional party family – Christian Democratic parties – appear to have clear ups and downs, and it is the only party family that has been the preferred choice for at least one point in all the countries where these parties are present (all but France and the UK).

As far as challenger parties are concerned, the data shows increasing support for Green parties in most countries, except in Ireland and the UK, where these parties enjoy very limited support. The Radical Left has experienced rather limited support in many countries in West and Central Europe, and is a minority option in Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, and the UK. At the same time, the Radical Left has mostly held its support in France, Germany and the Netherlands, and even experienced a sharp increase in Ireland. For the most part, the support for the Radical Right is generally higher than for the Radical Left in this regional cluster, except for Ireland (which is perhaps the country with the most dissimilar trends within the cluster) and Germany. Finally, Ethnic and Regional parties only enjoy strong support in Belgium (VU-ID, N-VA, DéFI), and the only other country where their support is at least somewhat noticeable is the UK.

Figure 4.3 focuses on Southern Europe and points to patterns and trends that diverge considerably from those found for the Nordic and West/Central European countries. First, we can discern a much smaller fragmentation of these party systems, with vote shares more often concentrated around two or three main party families, typically the Social Democrats and the Conservatives but not just these two. Second, this is a cluster where both Radical Left and Radical Right parties have received higher shares of electoral support throughout the studied period. Third, it is a cluster of countries where other challenger or insurgent parties have made considerable inroads.

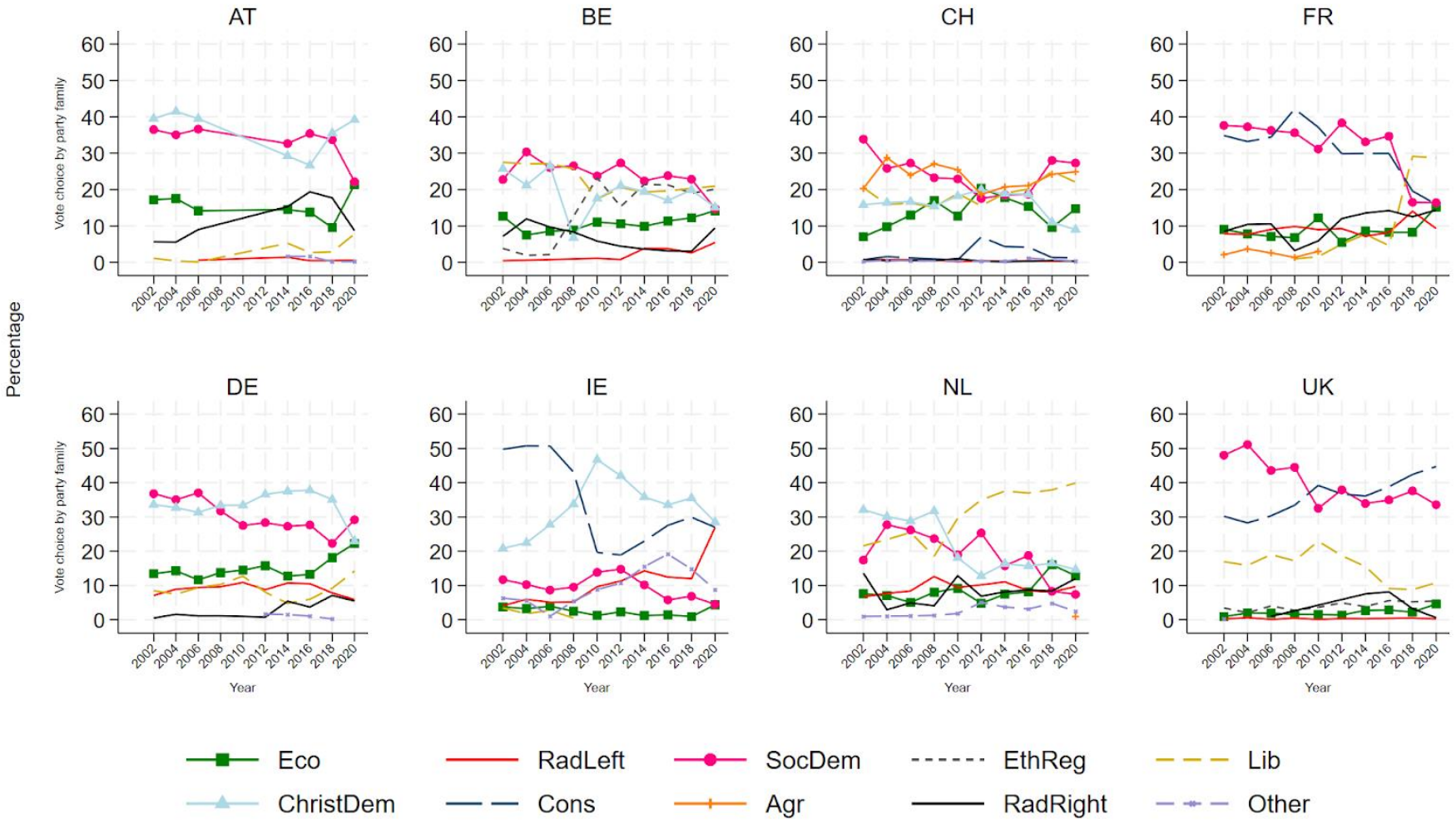
Overall, Social democratic parties have seen their electoral support eroded in all five countries. In Cyprus, the Radical Left (AKEL) was historically one of the two governing parties, and their trajectory is comparable to that of the Social democratic parties in Portugal or Spain. This downward trajectory is also visible for the other major mainstream party family in most of these countries: the Conservatives. In Portugal, where the Liberal PSD has been historically alternating in power with the Social democratic PS, the second mainstream party is also in a downward trajectory. Green parties have not made any noticeable progress in terms of electoral support in this cluster of countries. Instead, Radical Left parties have been the party family in the progressive camp to benefit from an expansion of electoral support, particularly since 2010 with the financial

Figure 4.1 Vote choice by party family in the Nordic countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

Figure 4.2 Vote choice by party family in West and Central European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

crisis. The main exception is Italy, where Radical Left parties have gradually declined throughout the period, with only marginal electoral support by 2022.

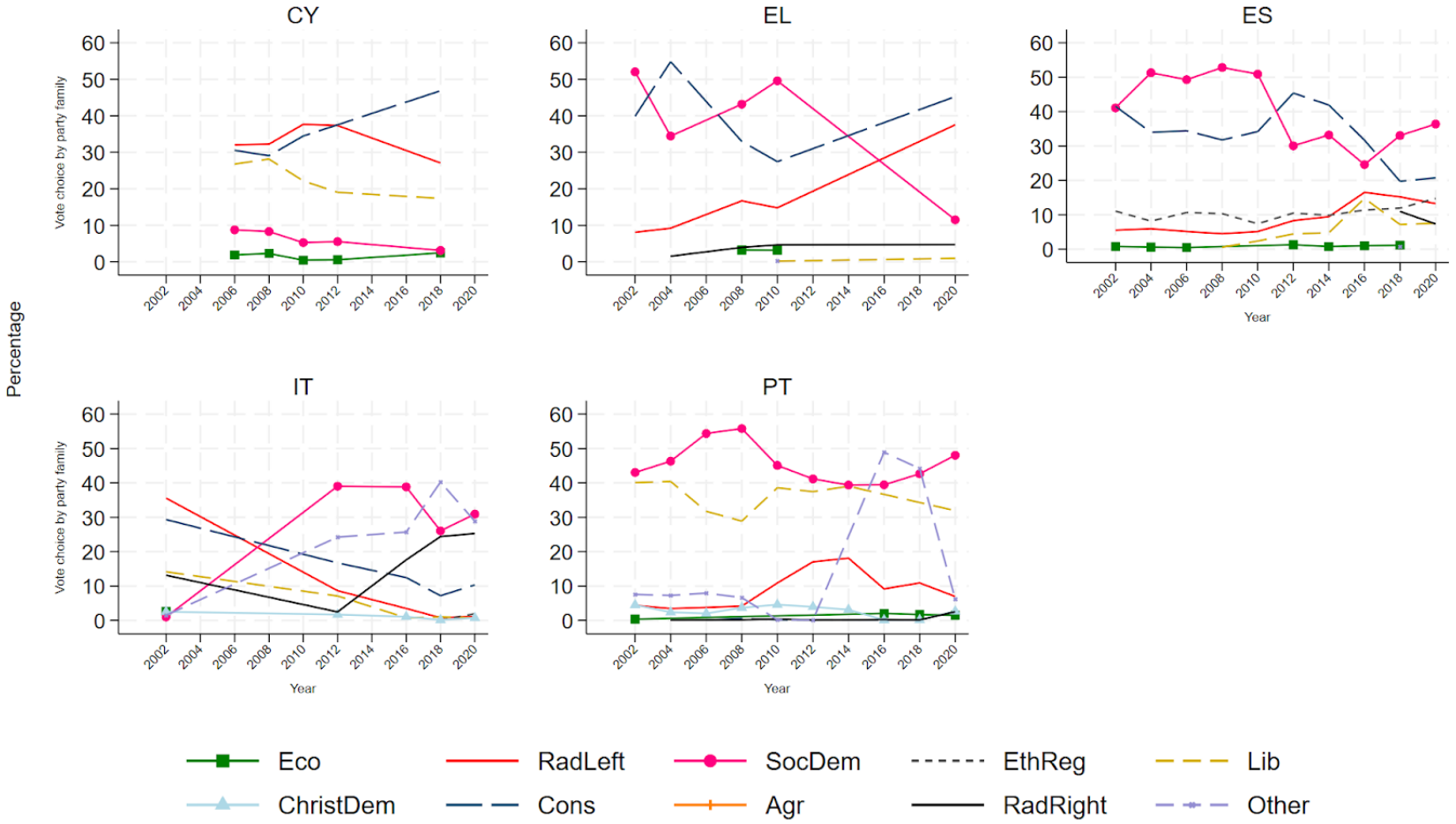
On the other end of the spectrum, Radical Right parties have particularly increased their support in Italy, with a more modest but still significant presence also in Greece, Portugal and Spain. Additionally, other challenger parties have made remarkable inroads in Italy with the electoral success of the 5-Stars Movement (M5S), which in a sense has replaced the equivalent phenomenon experienced by Radical Left parties in Greece, Portugal and Spain.

Overall, what the findings suggest for the South European cluster is a much more volatile scene than what is evident for Nordic or Western and Central European countries, where challenger parties have made electoral inroads that have placed them from challengers to governing parties (i.e., M5S in Italy, Syriza in Greece and Podemos/United We Can in Spain).

The final figure in this section, Figure 4.4, focuses on the post-Communist East European countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The findings demonstrate the heterogeneity of voting patterns and trends within this cluster. First, the dominant party families significantly vary from one country to the next. Second, the degree of party system and electoral fragmentation is also highly variable. Third, some countries display a fairly stable pattern of electoral behavior, whereas others show considerable volatility. Finally, in some countries, the once-challenger parties have become the dominant electoral actors whereas in other countries, mainstream parties have retained electoral dominance throughout most of the period studied.

The one common feature of voting patterns in this country – already fairly well known in the scholarly literature – is the near irrelevance of the vote for Radical Left parties. Only in Czechia can we find a significant share of voters for Radical Left parties, a legacy of the historical strength of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia that has been gradually fading away. In most other countries in this regional cluster, the post-Communist legacy is one of electoral rejection of Radical Left parties and coalitions. Green parties are also, by and large, electorally unsuccessful in this group of countries.

Figure 4.3 Vote choice by party family in the South European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)

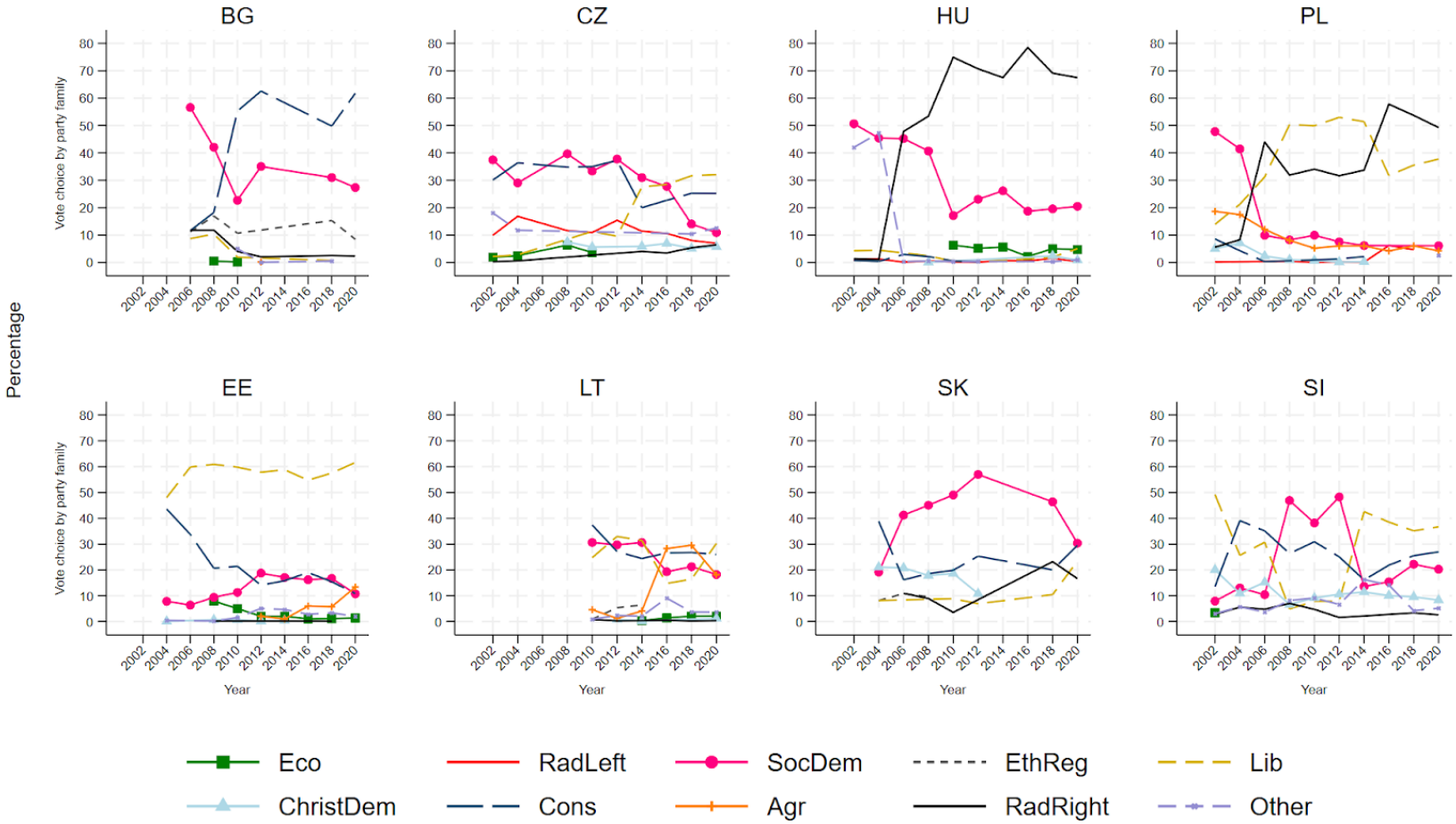


Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

By contrast, the electoral support for Social democratic parties is a lot more variable within the cluster. In most cases, their support has been declining throughout the period, but while in some countries they have remained relatively electorally competitive most of the time covered (e.g., in Bulgaria, Czechia, Lithuania, Slovakia or Slovenia) in other countries they have seen their electoral support decline to such levels where they are no longer competitive alternatives (e.g., in Hungary, Poland or Estonia). Such variability also affects the other two mainstream party families, Liberals and Conservatives. Liberal and moderate parties have remained fairly strong in terms of electoral support in Poland, Estonia and Lithuania, and new entrants have revitalized electoral support for Liberal-leaning lists around personalities in Czechia (ANO) and Slovenia (Civic List, Party of Miro Cerar/Modern Centre Party, ZaAB/SAB, LMS), which have been considerably more volatile in the latter than in the former. Conservative parties also have very variable electoral support in this cluster, with a fairly strong showing in Bulgaria, Czechia and Lithuania and either dwindling or volatile electoral support in most other countries. All in all, the results show that the core mainstream parties are, with few exceptions, no longer the dominant actors in this region.

Challenger parties of the radical right have been highly successful – as is well known – in Hungary (FIDESZ) and Poland (PiS) and have become the dominant parties for long periods, but they have also made inroads in Slovakia with the various cycles of short-lived electoral success of smaller Radical Right parties like Sme Rodina and L'SNS that have jointly gathered a significant 15-18% of the vote share. Moreover, while not placed squarely on the right of the political spectrum, the Agrarian Lithuanian Party (LVŽS) can also be described as a populist insurgent party that has gained considerable electoral clout since 2016. In sum, it is in the Eastern European countries where the electoral dealignment with mainstream parties – which were never too strong after the transitions to democracy after the fall of Communism – is most evident.

Figure 4.4 Vote choice by party family in the East European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

As a whole, the findings presented in this section suggest that electoral behavior has become (1) more volatile in the latter part of the period studied, (2) with evidence of electoral dealignment regarding traditional mainstream party families, but (3) the extent to which this has happened in Europe is highly variable across regional clusters and by country within each cluster. We see evidence of greater shifts in electoral behavior in South and Eastern Europe than in the Nordic countries and West/Central Europe. Challenger parties have been more successful in the former than in the latter, where mainstream party families have been more capable to withstand competition from newcomers.

4.2 Multivariate analysis of the association between political trust and voting choice in national elections

In this section, we focus our attention on the descriptive examination of the extent to which vote choices across party families and the mainstream/challenger distinction are associated with orientations of trust in political actors and institutions. To this end, we present the results of multivariate analyses where we assess the correlation between political trust and the party family of the party respondents voted for in the previous national legislative elections. The models estimated are multinomial logistic regressions [6] (with design and population weights when appropriate[7]) where the dependent variable is a categorical variable with 10 values, each for one of the party families described in the previous section (using the Social Democratic parties as the reference or baseline category), and the main predictor of interest is an index of political trust that contains the average value for the respondent's answers to four items on trust in political parties, the national parliament, politicians and the legal system (all measured in 0-10 scales). The models include variables to control for gender, age, the distinction between urban/rural residents and the distinction between those with and without a university degree. We interpret the effects by displaying the average marginal effects of political trust by party families and by clusters of countries holding all the other independent variables constant. Additionally, we show the adjusted predictions by year, sub-plotting by party family.

[6] The models are estimated using Stata's mlogit command.

[7] See Kaminska (2020).

We first assess the average marginal effects of political trust by party family in Figure 4.5, where we can observe the positive, nil or negative effect of trust in national political actors and institutions on voting for a party in each of the respective party family categories. The first finding that stands out is the stronger association of political trust with voting for either the Radical Right or the Christian Democratic parties but in opposite directions. Those who have higher levels of trust in national political institutions are more likely to vote for Christian Democratic parties and those who display lower levels of political trust are more likely to vote for Radical Right parties. Although these two party families are on the same side of the ideological spectrum, they attract extremely different voters in terms of political disaffection.

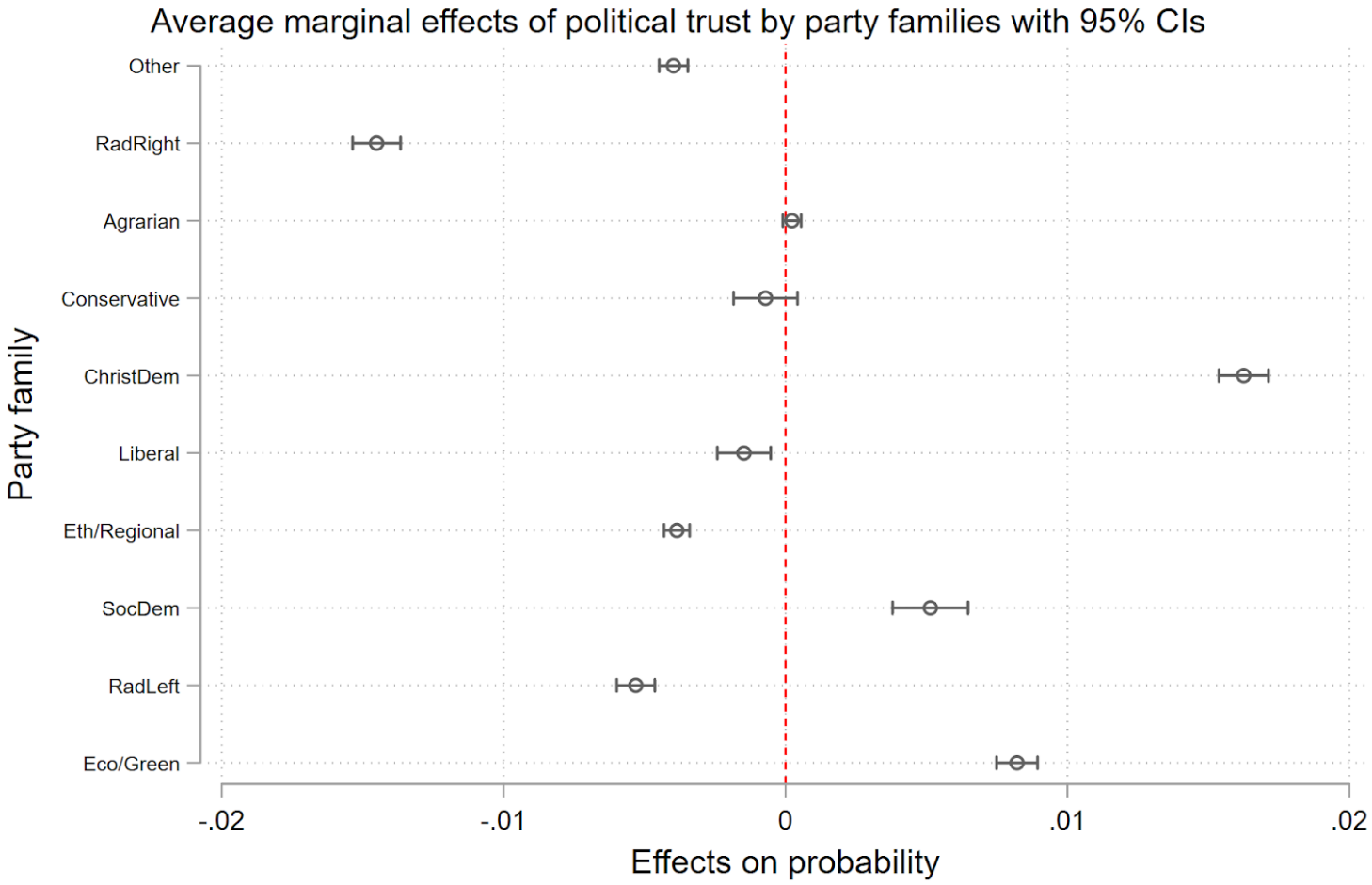
The second major takeaway from the findings is that – by and large – the effect of political trust on the electoral support for mainstream and traditional parties (Agrarian, Conservatives, Christian Democrats, Liberals and Social Democrats) is either positive or nil, whereas the effect of political trust on the electoral support for challenger parties (Radical Right, Radical Left, Ethno-regional and "Other") tends to be negative. Green parties – which in some countries are challenger parties and in others have already been involved in government coalitions for several decades – diverge from this pattern with a positive association with political trust.

Figure 4.6 plots the same relationship between trust in national institutions and party choice but with individual lines for each party family over time. Therefore, the graph is consistent with the results in Figure 4.5, while also offering additional temporal granularity.

We see again how Christian Democratic, Eco/Green and Social Democratic parties are positively associated with political trust, but this relationship has been declining over time for Christian Democratic parties, while for Eco/Green and Social Democratic parties the association has become stronger, and remarkably similar in the two most recent years. In fact, for these two party families the association in 2002 was close to the average of Agrarian parties (particularly Social Democratic parties), while in 2020 the association was closer to Christian Democratic parties than to any other party family.

The vote for Conservative and Liberal parties has also been more strongly associated with trust in recent years, from a slightly negative association in 2002 to a slightly positive association in recent years (but nil or close to nil overall, as shown in Figure 4.5). The opposite happens with Ethnic/Regional and the residual category of other parties, which started with similar levels of association as Conservative and Liberal parties but that have progressively been increasingly and negatively associated with political trust. Agrarian and Radical Left parties have been the party families that have remained most stable regarding the association with trust, but they departed from different starting points. Voters of Radical Left parties have been less trusting of national

Figure 4.5 The effect of political trust on vote choice in 26 European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

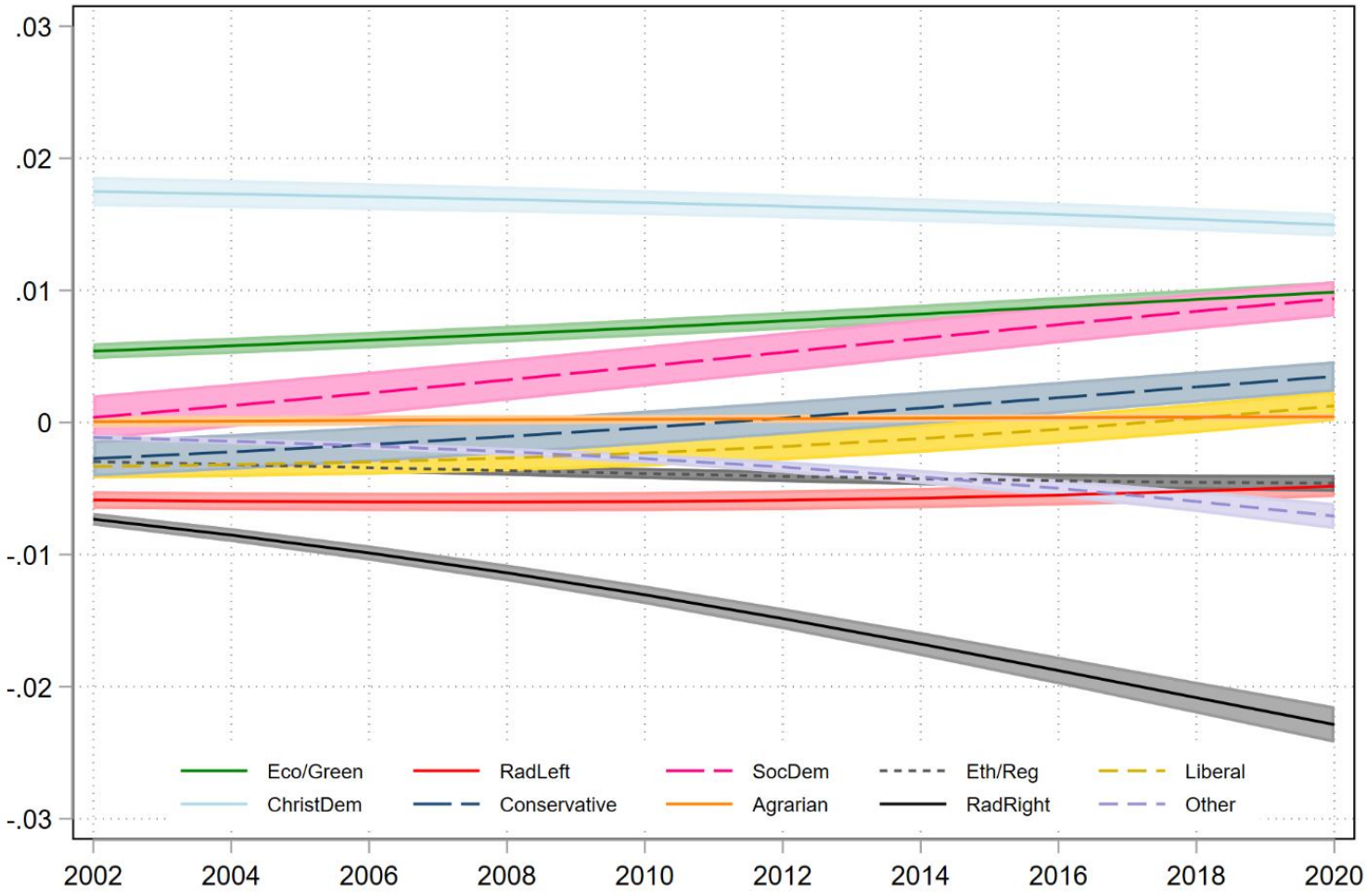
institutions since the start of the period, while voters of Agrarian parties were not visibly more or less trusting. Finally, the family of Radical Right parties has not only been the most associated with lower levels of political trust in national institutions during all the period, but also the party family that has fluctuated the most over time, in this case to higher levels of negative association with political trust.

Turning our attention to the average marginal effects of political trust by regions within Europe, and using the same clusters of countries as in section 4.1 and the controls of gender, age, urban/rural and education, we start with the Nordic region in Figure 4.7, which will be followed by the rest of the regions (West and Central, South, and East European countries). [8]

The general patterns regarding the association between political trust and party preference in Figure 4.5 are mostly consistent across the board with the results for Nordic countries. This is particularly visible in the case of the Radical Right (which is even more strongly connected with lower levels of trust in this regional cluster), and the only clear exception is the party family of Eco/Green parties, which are negatively associated with trust in Nordic countries. It is also worth mentioning that not all the countries have parties from all the party families in the studied period. Iceland, Norway and Sweden do not have major Ethnic/Regional parties captured in these survey waves of the ESS, hence the absence of estimates for these families. In fact, Finland is the only Nordic country that has all the party families as a response option for the ESS in the studied period.

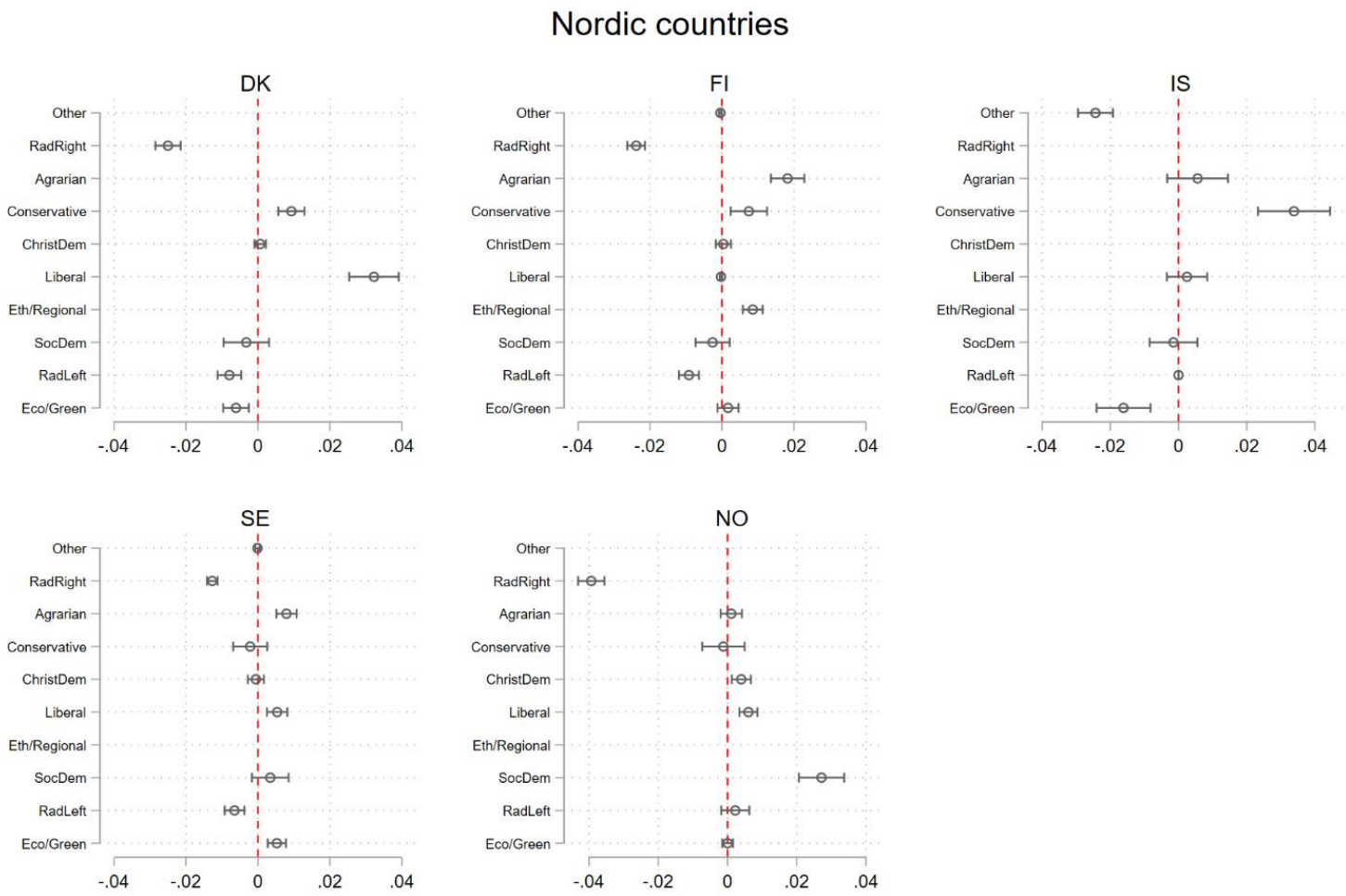
[8] The exact code, using Social Democratic parties (value 3) as the reference category is: "mlogit parfam poltrust_index year i.gndr agea i.urbanicity i.edulvl [pweight=common_weight], base(3)"

Figure 4.6 The effect of political trust on vote choice by party family and year (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

Figure 4.7 The effect of political trust on vote choice in Nordic countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

Unlike for the aggregate of countries, we cannot find a strong association of higher levels of national political trust and voting for Christian Democratic parties. In these countries the association is either nil or, if anything (in Norway), very weak. If we look instead at other mainstream and traditional parties, such as the Social Democratic parties and Conservative parties, we do find differences across the Nordic countries.

Looking at other party families and starting with the family of Agrarian parties, we find that in Finland, the association between trust and voting for Agrarian parties is stronger and more positive than for the pooled dataset with the 26 countries. As far as Conservative parties are concerned, in Iceland, the association between political trust and party choice is stronger and positive in the case of Conservative parties. For the other countries in which these two party families are present, the association appears to be more positive, which means that there is a stronger association of political trust with voting for Agrarian and Conservative parties in this regional cluster.

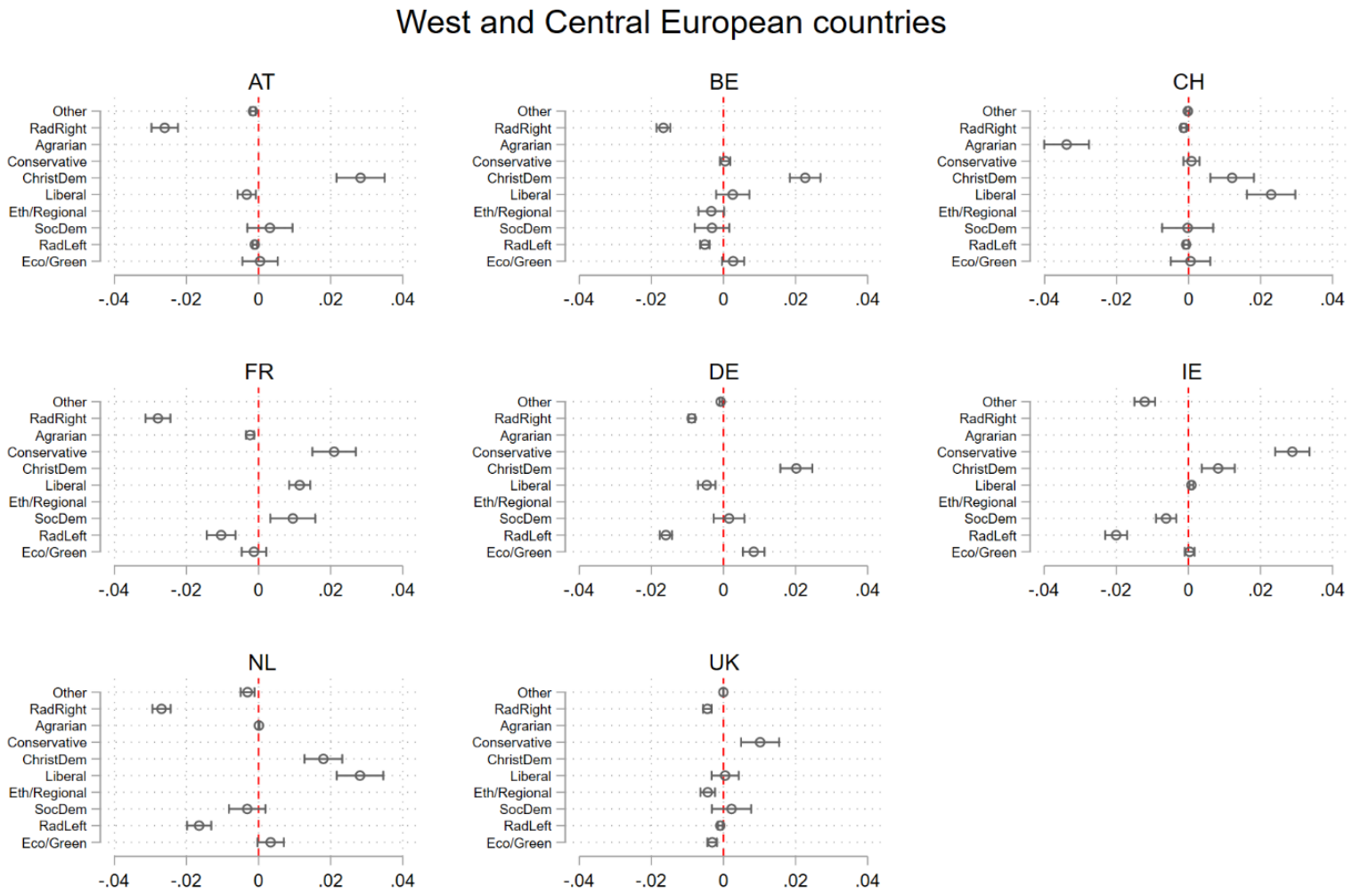
Finally, the association between national political trust and voting for Green parties is either nil or negative in the case of Iceland, while the association between trust and voting for Liberal parties is much stronger and positive in the case of Denmark.

Figure 4.8 shows the average marginal effects for the West and Central European countries. This is, along with East European countries, the largest cluster in terms of countries, as it includes 8 countries: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, France, Denmark, Ireland, The Netherlands and the UK.

Among the group of party families that are most similar to the trends for the pooled set of countries, we find the Radical Left (negative association), the Social Democrats (mostly nil/positive) and the Christian Democratic parties (positive association). Radical Right parties also follow similar trends, with estimates pointing towards a negative association between national political trust and voting for these parties, except for the UK and Switzerland, in which this association appears to be much smaller. Similarly, the vote for Liberal and Conservative parties also seems to be more pronouncedly associated with higher levels of national political trust in Western and Central European countries.

Switzerland is the only country where the vote for Agrarian parties (Swiss People's Party), which are only present in Switzerland, the Netherlands and France, is strongly associated with political trust. Ethnic and Regional parties are also only found in a reduced number of countries (only in Belgium and the UK), and the observed association is roughly the same (nil/negative) trust.

Figure 4.8 The effect of political trust on vote choice in West and Central European countries (Carles Pamies & Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

The association between political trust and voting for Green parties in this region is lower than in the aggregate, in which these parties were more clearly associated with higher levels of political is associated with lower levels of political trust. In the Netherlands, a country that has a more diverse group of parties classified as 'other' (Reformed Political Party, Pirate Party, 50Plus, and DENK), the association is very small, but also in the same direction as in Ireland.

Finally, the group of 'other' parties is only associated with political trust in the case of Ireland, where the only option coded as "other" are the independents, and in which the vote for these parties is negative.

Overall, even if the patterns are more complex and dissimilar to the pooled trend than in the case of Nordic countries, as shown by how some mainstream/traditional party families are negatively associated with political trust in certain countries (Agrarians in Switzerland, Liberals in Germany, and Social Democratic parties in Ireland), the trends are by and large remarkably close.

In South European countries (Figure 4.9), the association that is most similar to the pooled dataset of all countries is the one between national political trust and voting for Liberal parties (nil effect). In these countries, the association between trust and party choice is also quite similar for regional parties, except for Spain, where regional parties are particularly important (and sometimes openly distrustful of national institutions), and where the preference for voting for these parties is more strongly correlated with lower levels of national political trust. Also in Spain, the patterns regarding voting for Social Democratic parties are also different from other countries in the region and from the pooled results for all countries in Figure 4.5, showing that voters of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) tend to trust more national institutions than in other countries. The other interesting result for this regional cluster is the residual category of 'other' parties, which are not strongly associated with political trust in the pooled dataset of countries, but in Italy, voting for these parties (Five Star Movement, Lista Di Pietro, Democrazia Europea, Civica Popolare Lorenzin) is negatively associated with political trust.

Moving to the less similar patterns, and disregarding Agrarian parties, which are not present in this regional cluster for the analyzed period, we focus first on the Radical Right party family. In the aggregate analysis of all the countries these parties are negatively associated with political trust, but in South European countries the association is nil. A similar pattern is present if we look at the Christian Democratic parties (only present in Italy and Portugal), for which we do not find a clear association with trust in these countries compared to the positive association for all the countries.

Two party families show dissimilar patterns across countries in this cluster. The association between political trust and voting for Conservative parties was nil for the pooled set of countries, yet we can find positive associations in Greece and Spain. Meanwhile, for Radical Left parties we find countries in which, similarly to the pooled findings, the association is negative (Greece, Portugal and Spain) while in others it is positive and even stronger (Italy and Cyprus).

Finally, the vote for Ecological and Green parties in Southern European countries does not seem to be associated with either lower or higher levels of trust in the national institutions, while for the pooled figure including data for all 26 countries, the relationship was positive.

Altogether, the cluster of South European countries is more clearly dissimilar to the overall European patterns than the previous two regional clusters. The most evident difference is regarding the Radical Left party family (a positive relationship in two out of five countries), followed by Eco/Green parties (no association at all except in Greece, where it is negligible), also Conservative parties which have positive associations in some countries (Greece and Spain) and negative in others (Cyprus).

The last regional cluster of East European countries in Figure 4.10 includes several countries for which the associations for most party families are either nil or very low (Estonia, Slovakia and Slovenia), and others in which the effects are stronger across the board (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania).

Starting with the most similar patterns, we can see how the associations between political trust at the national level and party choice in the East European countries are remarkably comparable to the pooled trends for all countries for Radical Left parties (negative or nil) and the residual category of 'other' parties (also nil to negative association). With the exception of Czechia, where the voters of liberal parties (ODA, Civic Democratic Alliance, ČSNS, VV, and ANO 2011) appear to be more trusting of national level institutions, the data also shows some convergence in this cluster as compared to the general trend for Liberal parties (nil to negative association).

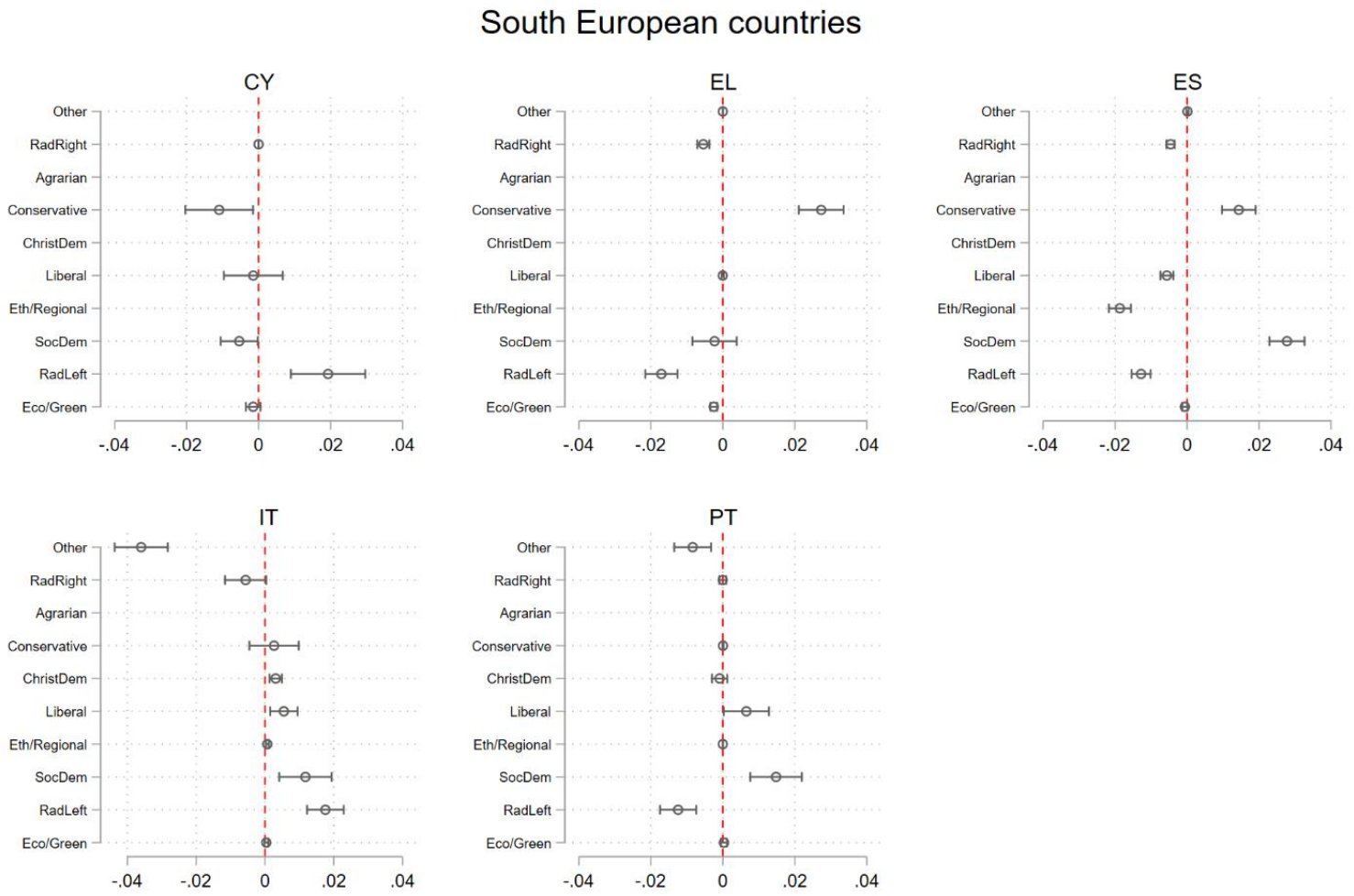
For the rest of the party families the differences are evident. Starting now with the party families that had a positive association with trust, for Christian Democratic parties and Ecological/Green parties the association in Eastern European countries is mostly non-existent, while for Social Democratic parties is also nil, but remarkably negative in Czechia (ČSSD) and Hungary (HSP, MSZP, and DK).

If we examine the party families that have a negative association with political trust in the pooled dataset, we find that this is not the case in Eastern European countries for Ethnic/Regional parties (nil generally in Eastern Europe, positive in the case of Bulgaria), and also not the case for Radical

Right parties, for which the associations with trust in Hungary (HTJP, Fidesz-KDNP, and Jobbik) and Poland (PiS, PWN, KORWiN, and Kukiz'15) are strongly positive.

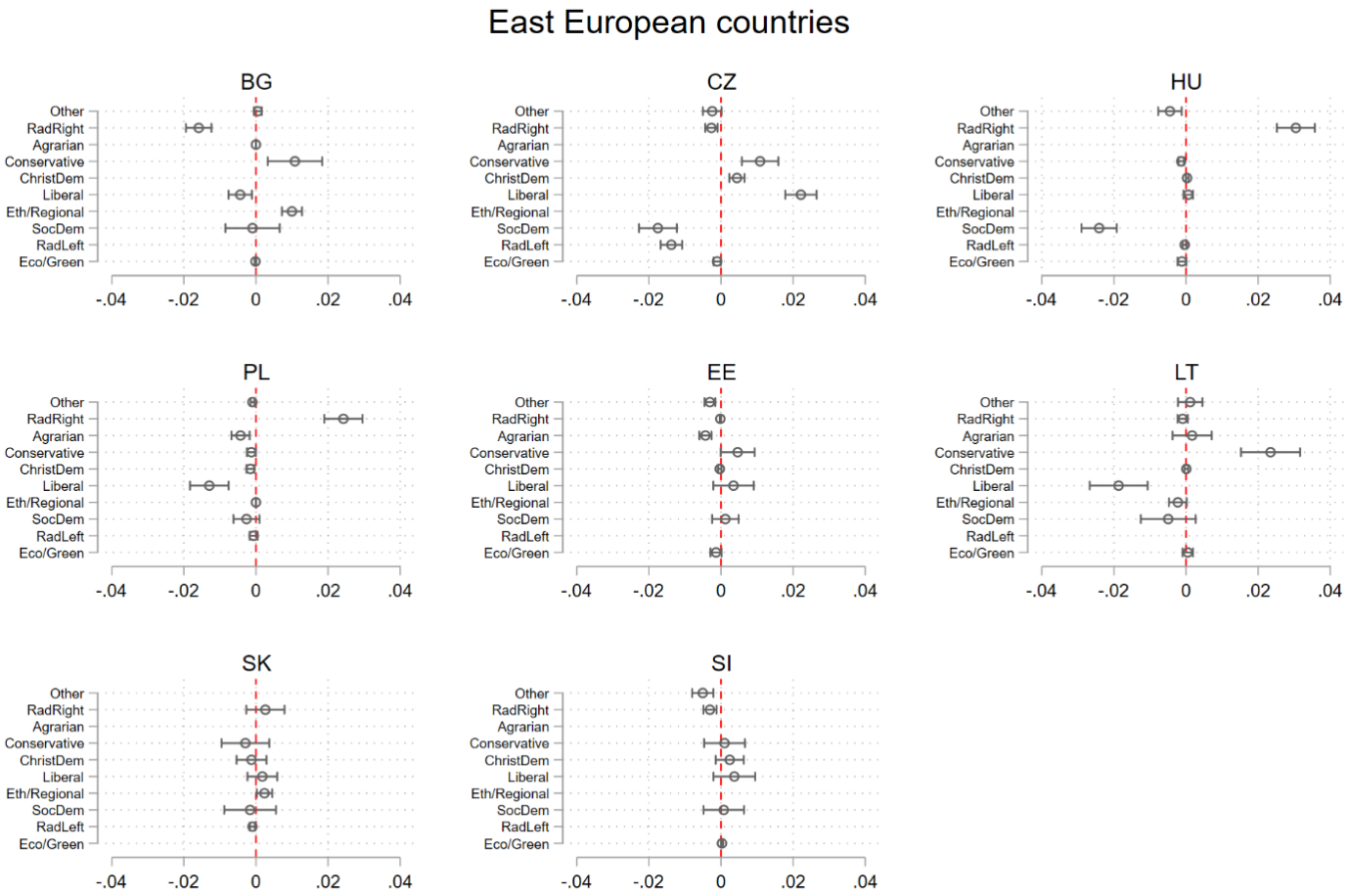
Finally, there are two party families that were neither positively nor negatively associated with national political trust in the pooled dataset, but that seem to be more clearly associated in this specific regional cluster. This is the case of voting for Conservative parties, which are positively associated with national political trust in countries like Bulgaria, Czechia and Lithuania, and the opposite happening for Agrarian parties, which are negatively associated in the cases of Poland and Estonia.

Figure 4.9 The effect of political trust on vote choice in South European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

Figure 4.10 The effect of political trust on vote choice in East European countries (Carles Pamies and Laura Morales, CSIC)



Source: Own elaboration using the European Social Survey and Pamies and Morales' (2024) party family classification.

All things considered, in East European countries the picture is further blurred as compared to the overall patterns and trends for Europe as a whole. The most evident departures are the Social Democratic party family, which is never positively associated in this cluster with political trust (and negatively in Czechia and Hungary), and the Radical Right party family, which is clearly associated with political trust in two countries, and with nil associations in all the other countries except in Bulgaria. Conservative parties are also differently associated with national political trust in East European countries, being positively associated in Bulgaria, Czechia and Lithuania.

5 Conclusions

Carles Pamies and Laura Morales (CSIC)

This report has examined voting behavior in Europe by looking specifically at how variations in political trust affect patterns of electoral turnout and voting choices. We first presented a literature review of the existing scholarship connected to the comparative study of overtime trends in electoral participation, voting choice and political trust. This was followed by an empirical chapter focusing on the comparative trends and analyses of the relationship between electoral participation and political trust across different levels (EP, national and local elections). Finally, we further analyzed the connection between political trust and electoral behavior by looking into the relationship between political trust and voting choice.

The literature review presented the theoretical and empirical arguments connecting political trust and electoral participation. Firstly, we argued that despite the numerous studies outlining the empirical patterns of electoral turnout, the exact ramifications of changes in electoral participation and their effects on representative democracies are less well known, while also acknowledging that the potential effect of political trust on electoral participation might be important to better understand the consequences of declining electoral participation.

Secondly, we discussed that to understand the electoral behavior in Europe, particularly the dynamics of 'extreme' or 'protest' voting and the patterns of the vote for radical parties, we need to take into account the processes of realignment/dealignment, cleavage emergence (cultural divide) and polarization, as well as the demand- and supply-side explanations. Thirdly, we analyzed how the literature connecting electoral participation and political trust indicates that higher levels of political trust tend to be connected with higher levels of turnout and lower levels of protest voting.

The first empirical chapter examining the relationship between political trust and electoral participation is generally in line with previous research in terms of the positive association between trust and turnout. Using data from the European Election Studies for the EP elections and the European Social Survey for legislative elections, we find that higher levels of trust are associated with higher levels of turnout, even when controlling for age, gender, and education in national elections. More fine-grained country-by-country analyses show that this relationship is not the same for all geographical regions, and we identify some regional patterns, particularly in legislative elections, with higher trust and turnout in Northern and Western Europe, higher trust but low turnout in some countries of Central Europe (Switzerland and Luxembourg), lower levels of trust and higher participation in Southern Europe, and finally lower levels of trust and

participation in Eastern Europe. Due to data limitations, the information about the local level can only be analyzed through the European Values Survey single cross-sectional study of 2017, which gives little evidence of any clear patterns or trends.

The second empirical chapter expanded the comparative analysis of the relationship between political trust and electoral behavior by examining the trends in voting choices and their connection to political trust in national actors and institutions. Overall, in terms of vote choice, the analyses show increased volatility in recent years and dealignment regarding traditional and mainstream parties, but there are considerable differences across regional clusters. In Nordic countries, there are no clear voting trends by party family, while in Western and Central European countries, we also find different voting trends and signs of volatility. In Southern Europe, we observe even more volatility, with challenger parties successfully becoming governing parties. Finally, in East European countries, we find the most evident electoral dealignment, with highly successful radical right challenger parties.

The multivariate analyses in this second empirical chapter sheds light on different country-level and longitudinal differences in the relationship between political trust and party choice. We find that those who have higher levels of trust in national political institutions are more likely to vote for Christian Democratic parties, while those who display lower levels of political trust are more likely to vote for Radical Right parties. For many of the mainstream/traditional party families, including Agrarian, Conservative, Christian Democratic, Liberal and Social Democratic parties, we find that the effect of political trust on the electoral support for mainstream and traditional parties is either positive or nil, while the effect of political trust on the electoral support for challenger parties (Radical Right, Radical Left, Ethno-regional and "Other") tends to be negative, while Eco/Green parties seem the only party family that departs from this general pattern, perhaps due to their status of challenger party family in some countries and of more traditional or established party family in others.

The multivariate and longitudinal analysis shows that the effect of political trust on the electoral support of Ecologist/Green and Social Democratic parties has improved over time, while it has declined for Christian Democratic parties, whose voters are the most trusting to national level institutions. Additionally, we find a group of party families for which the relationship has not changed (Agrarian and Radical Left), another group of party families that are now more associated with political trust than in 2002 (Conservative and Liberal), and another group that has been progressively more associated with lower levels of trust (Ethnic and Regional, Other, and Radical Right parties).

If we look at this relation across regions, we find many similarities, but also some relevant contrasting findings, and as we move from Nordic countries to Western/Central, and then to Southern and Eastern Europe we find more differences from the overall patterns for the pooled dataset of European countries. As far as mainstream parties are concerned in Western and Central Europe, we find that mainstream/traditional party families are negatively associated with political trust in some countries (for instance, Agrarians in Switzerland, Liberals in Germany, and Social Democratic parties in Ireland). In Southern Europe, we find that the vote for Conservatives has positive associations with political trust in some countries (Spain) and negative in others (Cyprus). In Eastern Europe, the Social Democratic party family is never positively associated in this cluster with political trust (and even negatively in Czechia and Hungary), while Conservative parties are also differently associated with trust as compared to the aggregate trends, being positively associated in Bulgaria, Czechia and Lithuania.

Finally, we also find contrasting findings regarding challenger parties. In Southern Europe we find positive associations between trust and voting for Radical Left parties in two out of five countries, and for Ecologist/Green parties we find no association except in Greece, where it is negligibly negative. Lastly, in Eastern Europe, the Radical Right party family is clearly and positively associated with political trust in two countries, and with nil associations in all the other countries except in Bulgaria.

In conclusion, on average, voting for Radical Right parties tends to be negatively associated to individual levels of political trust in national actors and institutions, but this pattern is not found in all European countries, especially it is not replicated in the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Equally, on average, voting for the traditional mainstream parties tends to be connected to higher levels of political trust, but there are important cross-national variations to this pattern for all the party families concerned (Agrarian, Christian Democrats, Conservative, Liberal and Social Democratic). Although in many countries challenger parties are more popular among those with lower levels of political trust, there are many exceptions to this broad pattern. Hence, any automatic attribution of meaning to electoral voting patterns needs to be very cautious of these cross-national variations. Not in all cases can we find that a vote for challenger parties expresses unequivocal meanings of political alienation. Very often they do, but a more careful analysis is always warranted.

Besides the analytical conclusions, it is also worth noting that, once again, data availability is an issue. EU funding could be usefully channeled to ensure that better pooled data is made systematically available for EU member states. For example, Eurostat could be tasked with a more

systematic data collection of official electoral results (both turnout and party shares of votes and seats) for all levels of government: national, regional and local. Similarly, we recommend that the European Social Survey starts adding the Comparative Manifesto Project and Chapel Hill Expert Survey codes for the political parties listed in their questionnaires to facilitate data matching. We also recommend that the Eurobarometer and other EU-wide surveys regularly include questions about electoral participation and vote choices beyond European Parliament and national elections, so as to include questions on voting at the regional and local level as well. Finally, funding to pool all the waves of the European Elections Study to post-harmonize variables on electoral behavior and key political orientations would ensure that researchers can make the most out of that data infrastructure.

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About ActEU

How can we conceptualize and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question "How much trust do you have in the parliament?"? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU levels? How does social polarization on key policy issues of our times – immigration, climate change, and gender inequality– challenge the political trust in, and legitimacy of, democratic political systems? And what can policymakers and civil society do to master these challenges? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions pursuing two overarching goals: In phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU's multi-level structures. Providing an innovative conceptual framework on political attitudes, behavior and representation across Europe, we establish an original empirical infrastructure based on an innovative combination of methods and newly collected quantitative and qualitative empirical data (focus groups, experimental surveys, web scraping). In phase 2, these results will flow directly into the creation of a toolbox of remedial actions to enhance political trust in and legitimacy of European representative democracies. In cooperation with a newly created Civil Society Network, Youth Democracy Labs across 13 European cities and in exchange with political cartoonists "Cartooning for democracy", we will develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and some of the most polarizing policy areas, and craft tailor-made toolkits for both policymakers and civil society and the educational sector. Finally, we deploy a differentiated dissemination strategy to maximize ActEU's scientific, policy and societal impact in activating European citizens' trust and working towards a new era of representative democracy.

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