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Report on changing patterns of citizens' political participation

Executive Summary and Policy-Relevant Recommendations

Laura Morales (CSIC)

The ability that citizens have to shape political decision-making is not restricted to voting. Between elections, representative liberal democracies allow for a wide range of forms to try to influence the decisions that elected representatives and other government officials make. From fairly low-cost forms of putting pressure on officials with petitions, to higher-cost and more contentious forms of protest — such as participating in demonstrations, occupying buildings or blocking traffic. Although five decades ago many such forms of political participation were considered unconventional or even marginal, nowadays they have been incorporated into the political repertoires of large shares of the citizenry. Citizens may still not use them too often, but multiple forms of contentious politics are part of the menu of options that they know they have at hand and resort to them when necessary. Patterns of citizens' political participation have been changing for decades, as part of the wider process of social and political change linked to modernization, democratization and post-industrialization.

Against this backdrop, this report examines how much patterns of political participation have changed in the last two decades and whether any such changes can reasonably be linked to the current crisis of representative democracy facing established European democracies. Indeed, it is not uncommon to connect participation in contentious forms of political action with political discontent. This link is, nevertheless, not as straightforward as it may seem at first as non-electoral political participation can be the last resource of the politically alienated but it can also be an additional tool in the political arsenal of those who are the most politically resourceful and confident of making an impact.

Through a systematic comparative analysis of trends and patterns of non-electoral participation in Europe using data from the European Social Survey for the last two decades, this report shows that:

(1) Overall trends in political participation vary considerably depending on the mode of political action considered: for some, they have remained relatively stable over the 20 years studied, for others, we can observe an uptick in the last few years and, for others, we have witnessed an anomalous depression due to the COVID pandemic.

(2) Cross-national variation in the levels, patterns and trends of non-electoral participation is very substantial, such that the most prevalent mode of political participation differs across countries, as well as whether participation levels are stable, increasing or decreasing, or whether the use of each mode of political participation evolves in parallel or follow diverging trends.

(3) The association between trust in national and EU political actors and institutions and participation in non-electoral forms of political action is, on average, nil for most countries and forms of political participation, particularly for Nordic and Central and Eastern European countries. Nevertheless, we observe some meaningful patterns when the correlations are not nil: supporting a political campaign or cause by wearing badges or stickers and contacting politicians is often positively correlated with political trust, whereas boycotting products is typically negatively correlated with political trust, and signing petitions and participating in demonstrations displays a highly variable correlation with political trust across countries and sometimes within countries.

(4) By and large, the relationship between political trust and each mode of political participation is very similar for national-level and EU-level political trust, but we find interesting divergences for boycotting products, contacting politicians and participating in demonstrations that are country-specific and not universal, pointing to relevant context-related dynamics between political trust and this form of political action. They seem particularly consistent for Poland.

In sum, our in-depth analysis of patterns and trends of non-electoral political participation across Europe suggests that there has been no massive change in the last two decades and that we are not witnessing a generalized surge in non-electoral political action that is manifesting a clear syndrome of political discontent. Hence, more nuanced analyses are required to better understand which instances of political mobilization are expressing political disaffection and mistrust of political actors and institutions and by which social and political groups in European democracies.

The findings in this report invite two main policy-relevant recommendations. First, it would be useful if every four or five years key cross-national survey studies — such as the European Social Survey or the Eurobarometer — included more detailed modules allowing a more fine-grained understanding of citizens' patterns of non-electoral political participation. Second, the EU and national institutions need to make a greater and more forceful effort to protect citizens' rights to participate in politics between elections through a wide range of modes of action, including the right to protest.

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1 Introduction

Laura Morales (CSIC)

Analyses of the crisis of representative democracy very often focus on the attitudinal and electoral manifestations of citizens' dissatisfaction. However, considering other forms of political behaviour is fundamental if we are to understand all the dimensions that are relevant to our comprehension of the current situation facing established democracies across Europe. Against this backdrop, this report focuses on forms of political participation and action that are informative of the pulse of the citizenry because they often convey more messages than a vote cast in a ballot box. Indeed, the last few years have seen citizens making increasing use of mechanisms to express their views and making their voices heard, which clearly expressed deep dissatisfaction with what their respective political systems are delivering for them. The yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*) movement in France is one example of prolonged and deeply-rooted expressions of discontent, but we could name many more, such as the increasing use of online petitions — whether institutionally set up and recognized, linked to national parliaments, or on private provider systems — to express discontent with all sorts of policy-making decisions and the wider direction or composition of governments.

Nevertheless, increasing participation and involvement in non-electoral forms of political action are not necessarily always an expression of political discontent and mistrust. Extant research has shown that citizens have gradually expanded their repertoire of political action as a consequence of their increased awareness and understanding of how the political process operates. Hence, in some instances, rising engagement in political action may not be exclusively signalling a crisis of political trust and democratic legitimacy, but a more genuine interest in taking part in and shaping decision-making.

The main aims of this report are twofold. First, we describe systematically and in detail the overtime and cross-national variation in the uptake of various forms of political action to express citizens' views on the direction of societal and political issues. We do this by focusing on five forms of political participation: wearing or displaying campaign badges or stickers, boycotting products for social or political reasons, contacting politicians or government officials, participating in demonstrations and signing petitions. We examine cross-national repeated survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for two decades (2000-2020) focusing on each of these forms of participation at a time in order to understand both overtime patterns and cross-national variations in participation levels and trends.

Second, we examine the association between taking part in each of these forms of political action and trust in political actors and institutions. We focus on trust in national-level political actors and

institutions rather than consider a multilevel perspective due to data limitations. These analyses also provide a detailed overview of cross-national patterns and longitudinal trends.

We focus on these five forms of political participation exclusively partly because of data availability constraints — these are the five forms of political action that are consistently present in all rounds of the ESS — but partly also because they capture well a range of forms of political action that vary around several criteria: costs of participation, information provision and degree of contentiousness. Table 1.1 maps the five forms of political action across these three criteria. The five items map into multiple categories of this simplified 2x2x2 classification. Boycotting products is a trickier case, as the amount of information that participating in a boycott of products provides depends very much on the timing of the boycotts, the type of product entailed and the degree of coordination of the people involved in the boycott. Some boycotts are highly coordinated campaigns that send very clear messages across, other boycotts are less coordinated and are unable to carry sufficient information to the targets of the boycott.

Table 1.1. The five forms of political action classified (Laura Morales, CSIC)

Information & contentiousness Cost (time or money)	Low information		High information	
	Low contention	High contention	Low contention	High contention
Low cost	Campaign badge or sticker	(Boycotting products)	Signing a petition	(Boycotting products)
High cost			Contacting politicians / gov't officials	Participating in a demonstration

Source: Author's elaboration.

The report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 describes in detail the cross-national patterns and trends in participation in the five forms of political action considered. The results show that, on average across Europe, badge-wearing, contacting politicians and participation in demonstrations have remained relatively stable in the last 20 years at close to 10-15 per cent of the population. Instead, boycotting has seen a clear increase in popularity since the mid-2010s and petition signing has also seen steady growth in a considerable number of countries. The chapter also shows that some forms of political action are much more frequently used in some countries than in all other

countries. For example, citizens in the Nordic countries are more likely to resort to product boycotting, whereas citizens in France and Spain are more likely to resort to demonstrations, and the Swiss and Nordic citizens to petition signing.

Chapter 3 examines the association between political trust and each of the five forms of political participation, thus gauging the extent to which each of them are primarily expressing political discontent or an interest in shaping collective decision-making. The findings indicate that the correlation between political trust and the five studied forms of non-electoral political participation is highly dependent on the form of political action, the country and even the specific period. For example, for contacting politicians, the correlation between political trust and participating in this form of political action is positive for most countries and years but for some countries (the United Kingdom) the correlation is negative for most of the period and for some countries (like the Netherlands) we find the odd significant negative correlation. Importantly, the analyses show that participation in demonstrations is not consistently or pervasively correlated to political trust: for most of the countries and most of the periods, there is no correlation and when a correlation is significant it is positive in some countries and negative in other countries. Finally, Chapter 4 considers all these results and their implications and provides a series of policy-relevant recommendations for a range of stakeholders.

2 Trends and cross-national patterns of non-electoral participation in Europe (2002-2022)

Wit Hubert and Mikołaj Cześnik (SWPS)

2.1 The state of the art on changing patterns and cross-national variation of non-electoral participation

At the beginning of the 21st century, a turnaround of the patterns of political participation in Europe had been characterized by an increase in the popularity of non-electoral forms of activity. In some cases, it was characterized by a decline in traditional forms of political participation, such as voting in elections and party membership (Portos et al. 2020; Deželan 2023; Ley and Gavilanes 2024). According to some researchers, it is the decline in political trust and membership in traditional political parties that has led citizens to seek alternative channels of political expression (Dalton 2017; Kriesi and Oana 2022). This shift in attitudes can be perceived as a sign of disillusionment with mainstream politics. At the same time, unconventional modes of political action — the participation in protests and demonstrations — have increased. In the spectrum of these actions, new forms of political expression such as online activism have emerged. Also, consumer boycotts and ethical consumption are new forms of non-violent political expression that directly link consumers' purchasing decisions to values and beliefs. This has been manifested in an increase in boycott campaigns against companies or products perceived as unethical or representing a threat to environmental sustainability — a phenomenon gaining momentum all over Europe (Baptista et al. 2024). In response to this phenomenon, many industries are responding with corporate social responsibility measures (now more commonly known as CSR/ ESG) and a range of product certification schemes. Another important form of non-electoral participation, that is described in this chapter is contacting politicians and signing petitions. The ease of online petitioning and the ability to contact elected representatives directly via social media and email have lowered barriers to participation (Solijonov 2016). This is happening with a simultaneous decline in the popularity of political party membership evident in many European countries. The ease of signing and collecting signatures on petitions is related to a broader phenomenon of online activism. The new digital technologies and social media platforms have facilitated newer forms of political engagement, especially among the youth. Online petitions, boycotts, campaigns through social media, etc., are some of the popular tools for mobilizing public support and mounting pressure on decision-makers (Portos et al. 2020; Del Monte 2023). Movements such as the *Indignados* in Spain and *Nuit Debout* in France have effectively used social media to coordinate protests and spread their messages. However, digital participation also deepens existing

inequalities, as marginalized groups may have limited access to technology or face barriers to digital skills (digital exclusion and inequality). Online public debate involvement nurtures the political polarization process (Tucker at al. 2018; Munger and Phillips 2022). Understanding how digital technologies are facilitating and subsequently shaping participation beyond the electoral process will be central to interpreting the emerging political engagement landscape in Europe.

A number of factors have contributed to the increased prevalence of non-electoral participation in Europe. The following four major categories of causes will be discussed in relation to the growing popularity of this type of political activity: First, as numerous scholars have shown, there is a reduction in trust in traditional political institutions. This is frequently the result of discontent with what is thought to be a lack of responsiveness. The political system as a whole loses credibility when mainstream politicians' abilities and competence are poorly evaluated (Dalton 2017; Deželan 2023, Portos et al. 2020). Secondly, the impact of the economic crisis and austerity measures, which sparked demonstrations and provided a catalyst for citizens to actively mobilize and demand reforms, is another distinctive aspect (Solijonov 2016, Iglič et al. 2020). Third, other issues researchers point to include the growing importance of climate change, social justice, and inequality. This shift in priorities is most obvious among the younger generation and drives these cohorts to non-electoral forms of activism (Sloam 2022; Del Monte 2023). A fourth group of factors are those which have to do with the spread of digital technologies and social media. They make organization and coordination of non-electoral participation easier (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2016; Portos et al. 2020; Del Monte 2023).

The rise of non-electoral participation in Europe has important and multidimensional implications for democratic processes and policy-making in most EU countries. The trends described here pose challenges for researchers studying political systems and for experts developing new participatory policies. While participation beyond elections can complement traditional forms of political engagement, it also poses challenges in ensuring inclusive and representative decision-making processes (Deželan 2023, Del Monte 2023). In light of the above findings, it is worth recommending that further research should focus on understanding the interaction between electoral participation and non-electoral practices. In particular, the aspect of the long-term impact of non-electoral engagement on policy outcomes and the potential for integrating these forms of participation into institutional frameworks seems interesting (Portos et al. 2020; Solijonov 2016).

As we have repeatedly pointed out, non-electoral forms of political participation have become increasingly important across Europe in recent decades as voter turnout has declined in many countries. Below we outline the state of the art on the specific five forms of non-electoral participation analysed in this report. However, it should be emphasized that the following

summary shows the considerable limitations of the literature and thus indicates the validity of the following report.

2.1.1 Contacting politicians

Direct contact with politicians and government officials is becoming an increasingly popular form of participation and this is due to the increasing prevalence of electronic communication (email, social networking services, chat rooms, instant messaging). Some researchers point out that despite the de-massification of political communication (less popularity of mass media in favour of new media), citizens still want to be in touch with traditional political institutions (Aars and Strømsnes 2007). In East European countries, by contrast, contact with politicians is relatively less frequent. One hypothesis that explains such differences may be the high distrust of political institutions dating back to the Communist era (Del Monte 2023). In contrast to Eastern Europe, the Scandinavian countries, — for example, in Sweden and Denmark — contacting politicians is quite common, reflecting high levels of political engagement and easy access to representatives (Ley and Gavilanes 2024). However, the individual-level characteristics associated with the likelihood of contact with officials are not quite variable over time. In a study by Dubrow, Tomescu-Dubrow and Lavrinenko (2022), politically active individuals between 2002 and 2018 showed a similar frequency of contact with politician or official and this was the case in most of the countries analysed. Importantly, the same researchers point out that it is not easy to determine from the available comparative data whether citizens' contact with politicians is "particularised" or "generalised" (ibidem). The former occurs when an individual contacts an official on his or her own behalf to solve his or her own problem, the latter occurs when someone contacts an official to complain about a social or political problem unrelated to the individual.

2.1.2 Signing Petitions

Petition signing has been increasingly used as a form of political participation across Europe. In Europe, the forms of non-electoral participation are very different: economically harshly affected countries, such as Greece and Spain, show the highest proportions of petition signings, mobilizing voice "beyond the ballot box" (Portos et al. 2020). On the other hand, countries with more stable political climates tend to show lower engagement in non-electoral activities (ibidem). Such divergence points out how national contexts — including economic stability, political culture, and historical experiences — predict civic engagement practices (Fiorino et al. 2017, Besco 2024).

Interestingly, countries with declining voter turnout often showed increases in petition signing. Hooghe and Quintelier (2014) show that in Belgium, although the level of electoral participation went down, petition signing reached a dramatic increase, especially among younger cohorts. It follows that some citizens may shift from electoral to non-electoral forms of engagement (Portos et al. 2020). A separate and deliberately overlooked aspect here is that of the increased popularity of online petitions. However, it is relatively difficult to come across studies showcasing geographical distribution concerning the popularity of this form of political participation.

2.1.3 Participating in Demonstrations

Demonstration participation has been irregular over time in Europe, with significant peaks around specific events. The economic crisis of 2008-2009 ushered in an escalation of protest activity in most countries, particularly those seriously affected economically. Geographical clustering also reflected civil unrest dynamics. Research shows that social unrest occurs in clusters because they often occur in succession in the spatial closeness of each other. This evidence showed a contagion effect where unrest could transcend across borders, leading to synchronized protests in geographically proximate nations (Braha 2024). The intensity of protests also varied temporally, heightening during certain socio-political crises or movements, such as the growth of climate activism represented by the Fridays for Future movement and anti-racism protests in the wake of some dramatic global events (Borbáth 2024; Svensson and Wahlström 2021). For example, Grasso and Giugni (2016) reported an increase in demonstration rates during this time in South European countries such as Spain and Greece. Thus, one of the first apparent trends in European countries is a rise in demonstration participation. For example, countries such as Italy and France have seen more than 10% of their population demonstrating each year since 2002 (Borbáth 2024). Demonstrations have also been catalysed by the COVID-19 post-pandemic regulations; participation patterns have continued to change, pressuring wider demographic involvement. According to some studies (Clark and Lomax 2023), participation during the pandemic became more normalized throughout various social groups and decreased the previous educational and class-based inequalities associated with participation.

2.1.4 Participating in Strikes

This dimension of non-electoral activity varies quite significantly across European countries and is strongly linked to practices embedded in civic traditions. For example, the number of strikes remains relatively high in countries with strong labour movements, such as France, Belgium and Spain (De Schutter 2023; Holtmann et al. 2024). Introduced austerity measures and economic problems triggered strikes in countries such as Greece, Portugal and Italy during the European debt crisis. The variability in the intensity of protests is linked, according to some researchers, to the popularity of populist parties in Western Europe. The latter may amplify protest activity by formulating issues in a way that resonates with disaffected voters, thus mobilising them to action (Sawyer 2024). In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the number of striking citizens is lower. An explanation for this may be the lower level of unionisation resulting from the economic reforms adopted in the 1990s traditions and labour market reforms (Eichhorst et al. 2017). Furthermore, East European countries are characterized by a complex situation in which historical legacies influence contemporary trends in participation. An example of this is Hungary, where the last decade has resulted in numerous mass political protests (Borbáth et al. 2023).

2.1.5 Participating in Boycotts

Boycotts are particularly prevalent in West European countries, where there is a high level of political involvement alongside a high level of consumer awareness. For example, in some countries, such as the UK or Germany, boycotts are driven by consumer movements concerned with environmental protection, labour rights or animal rights (Mata et al. 2023). Boycotts have also been used as a form of political protest. An example is the boycott of products and services of companies that did not completely cut out of the Russian market after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Reshetnikova et al. 2024). This type of political activism was also evident in East European countries. Although these trends are observed across Europe, it is important to note that national contexts, political cultures and socio-economic factors shape specific patterns of political participation in individual countries. It is also worth considering the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Coen 2023). How many national and global crises affect the dynamics of participation should be the subject of a separate study. The importance of increased activism on the Internet and the emergence of new forms of political non-electoral behaviour is worth signalling here once again.

In this chapter, we describe a secular trend, which has been unfolding in Europe: the growth of the use of non-electoral forms of participation, such as contacting politicians and signing petitions, especially in countries that faced economic difficulties. Such changes are powered by factors such as growing distrust in traditional political institutions and the diffusion of digital technologies. For democratic processes, this increase in non-electoral participation offers both benefits and difficulties. Although technology has given citizens more ways to voice their complaints and maybe change policy, it also raises the possibility of issues with guaranteeing inclusiveness and representative decision-making procedures.

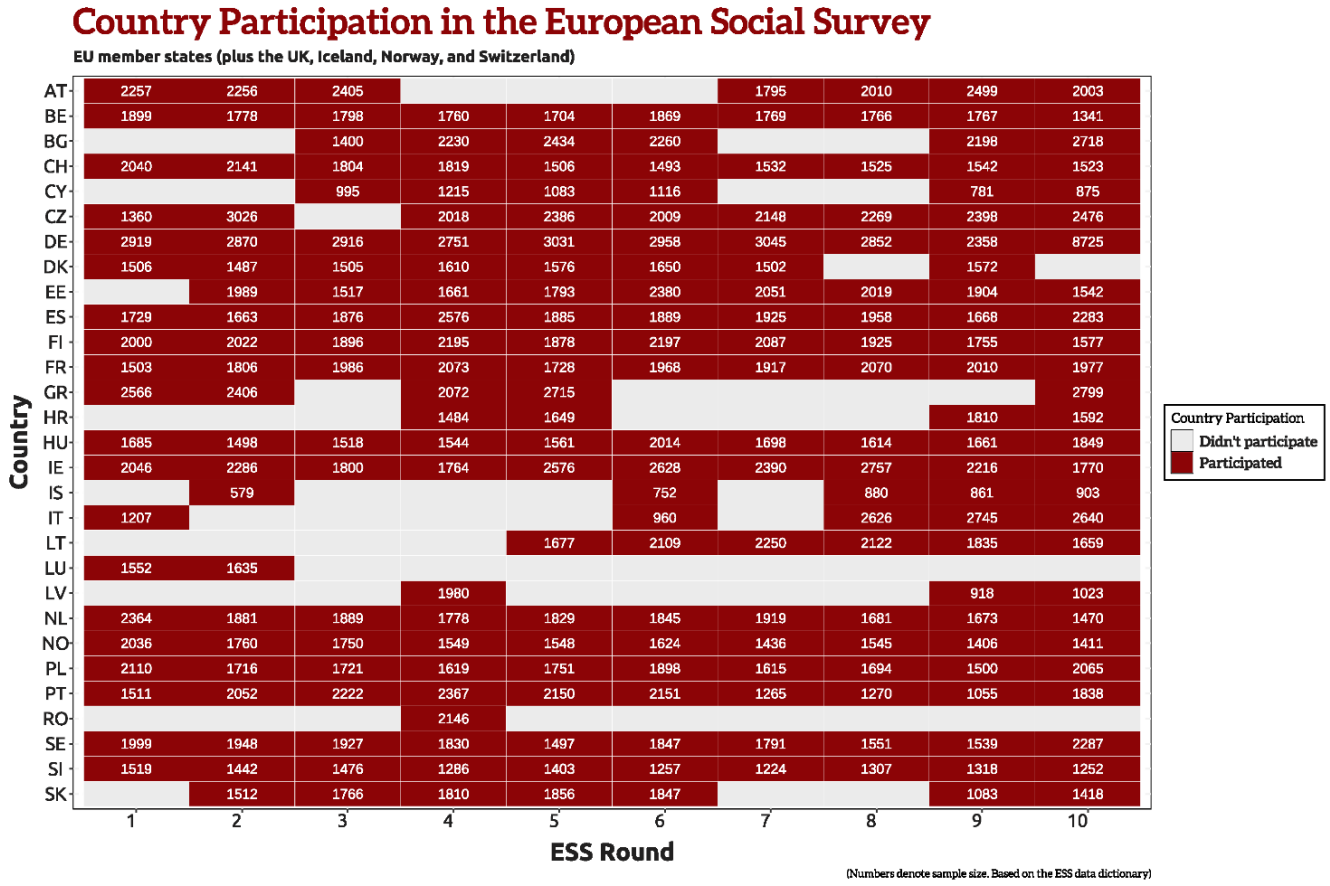
2.2 The trends in non-electoral participation for Europe and their cross-national variations

Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou (AUTH)

The previous section summarized the discussion on the variety of modes of political participation and the popularity of non-electoral modes of participation as a response to the European debt crisis. Taking this expansion of the repertoire of political action as a starting point (see also, for a detailed discussion, Theocharis and van Deth 2018), in a political context marred by the long shadow of the European debt crisis and the emerging political challenges (see Zeitlin et al. 2019 for a perspective on *polycrisis*), it becomes especially meaningful, in the context of the ActEU project, to map the cross-country trends in non-electoral participation. Concretely, we want to ask: a) how have levels of non-electoral political participation evolved over the years in Europe? b) are levels and trends uniform across countries? c) which is the primary mode? And d) is it the same one across all included countries?

The central aim of this section, thus, is to offer a broad overview of the main longitudinal trend between modes of non-electoral participation, as well as to attempt to identify patterns of similarities across countries across those different modes. To do so, this section draws on survey data from the European Social Survey 2002-2022, which corresponds to rounds 1-10. Our longitudinal horizon is dictated by data availability, at the time of writing, and we restrict our focus to EU member countries (plus the UK, Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland) for the purposes of ActEU. Moreover, differential country participation in the ESS means that not every country is represented equally, as illustrated by Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1. Country Participation in the ESS, by Round (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)



Country	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
AT	2257	2256	2405				1795	2010	2499	2003
BE	1899	1778	1798	1760	1704	1869	1769	1766	1767	1341
BG			1400	2230	2434	2260			2198	2718
CH	2040	2141	1804	1819	1506	1493	1532	1525	1542	1523
CY			995	1215	1083	1116			781	875
CZ	1360	3026		2018	2386	2009	2148	2269	2398	2476
DE	2919	2870	2916	2751	3031	2958	3045	2852	2358	8725
DK	1506	1487	1505	1610	1576	1650	1502		1572	
EE		1989	1517	1661	1793	2380	2051	2019	1904	1542
ES	1729	1663	1876	2576	1885	1889	1925	1958	1668	2283
FI	2000	2022	1896	2195	1878	2197	2087	1925	1755	1577
FR	1503	1806	1986	2073	1728	1968	1917	2070	2010	1977
GR	2566	2406		2072	2715					2799
HR				1484	1649				1810	1592
HU	1685	1498	1518	1544	1561	2014	1698	1614	1661	1849
IE	2046	2286	1800	1764	2576	2628	2390	2757	2216	1770
IS		579				752		880	861	903
IT	1207					960		2626	2745	2640
LT					1677	2109	2250	2122	1835	1659
LU	1552	1635								
LV				1980					918	1023
NL	2364	1881	1889	1778	1829	1845	1919	1681	1673	1470
NO	2036	1760	1750	1549	1548	1624	1436	1545	1406	1411
PL	2110	1716	1721	1619	1751	1898	1615	1694	1500	2065
PT	1511	2052	2222	2367	2150	2151	1265	1270	1055	1838
RO				2146						
SE	1999	1948	1927	1830	1497	1847	1791	1551	1539	2287
SI	1519	1442	1476	1286	1403	1257	1224	1307	1318	1252
SK		1512	1766	1810	1856	1847			1083	1418

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

For this reason, following the ESS weighting guide (Kaminska 2020), all analyses presented in this section are weighted by *analysis weights*, derived from design and post-stratification weights. The consistency of the ESS, in terms of item availability on political participation, means that we can track trends in several modes of political participation over a period of almost two decades in Europe. Specifically, we can explore how trends in a) badge-wearing, b) boycotting, c) contacting politicians, d) demonstrating, and e) signing petitions have evolved. These questions aim to tap into past behaviors and are formatted as yes/no questions, in a single-item battery, as summarized below.

Table 2.1. Summary of Item Battery on Non-electoral Political Participation across ESS Rounds (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

Mode of Participation	Question Wording	Response Options
	There are different ways of trying to improve things in [Country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you	
Badge Wearing	...worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?	Yes No Refusal* Don't know* No answer*
Contacting Politicians	...contacted a politician, government or local government official?	
Boycotting	...boycotted certain products?	
Demonstration	...taken part in a public demonstration?	
Petition Signing	...signed a petition?	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

This question format allows the identification of two distinct groups of respondents for each given mode: those who have been completely disengaged for a period of (at least) one year versus those who have been active in the same period. Nevertheless, this question does not allow the examination of the underlying frequency of those behaviors.[1] For our purposes, we focus on the percentages of "Yes" answers to investigate patterns and trends across our samples. Our analyses are based on aggregate, country-level, longitudinal trends and aim to identify similarities and differences between countries. For each mode of non-electoral participation, we use clustering with Ward's method and an Euclidean distance metric to minimize within-cluster variance and help identify groups of countries with the largest similarity in their time series trends. We present the country clusters (for countries with no missing data) for each mode and are interested in how country cluster configurations vary across all considered modes of participation.

This part of the report is structured around the included modes of participation and organized into subsections. We focus on an item-by-item presentation of longitudinal trends, to first examine the sample-level trend for each mode of political participation, before delving into the country-level patterns. In the penultimate subsection, we proceed to a cross-mode comparison. We close this section with a brief discussion.

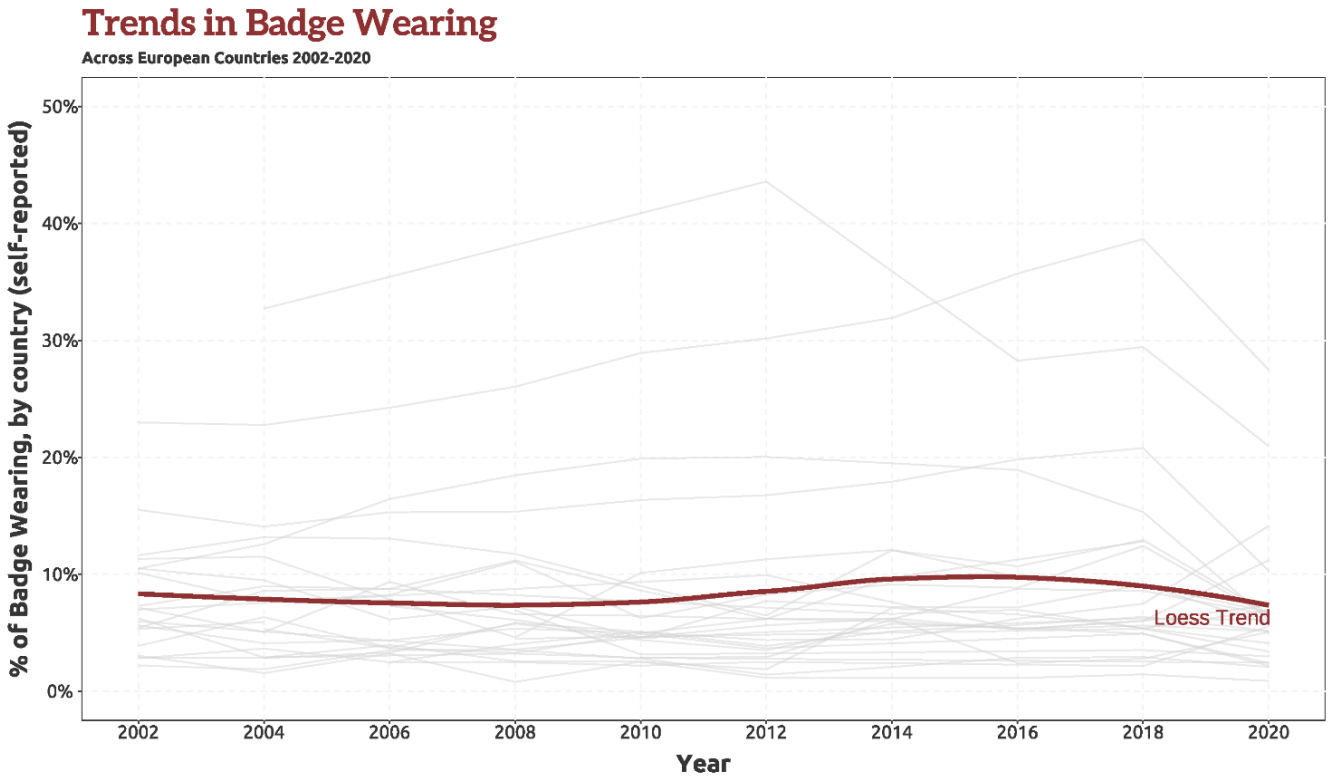
[1] See also the early discussion on issues with recall associated with those questions in the ANES report by Hansen and Rosenstone (1983).

2.2.1 Trends in Badge-Wearing

To wear or display a campaign badge or a sticker is one of the classic modes of non-electoral participation. As already analyzed in the introductory note of this report (see also Table 1.1), this mode is one of the less demanding among the others of our study. However, it reflects a strong affiliation of the respondent with a particular party or politician and could also serve as an indirect way to examine whether classic modes of campaign strategy have survived over time.

Figure 2.2 illustrates a rather trendless fluctuation in levels of badge-wearing, between 2002 and 2022, punctuated by a slight increase of two percentage points around 2014 and 2016, before returning back to an equilibrium of around 7 per cent, across the entire sample. Based on these data, it appears that badge wearing is, overall, an underutilized mode of political participation, with less than one in ten citizens reporting having engaged in it during the previous 12-month period.

Figure 2.2. Trends in Badge Wearing, 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

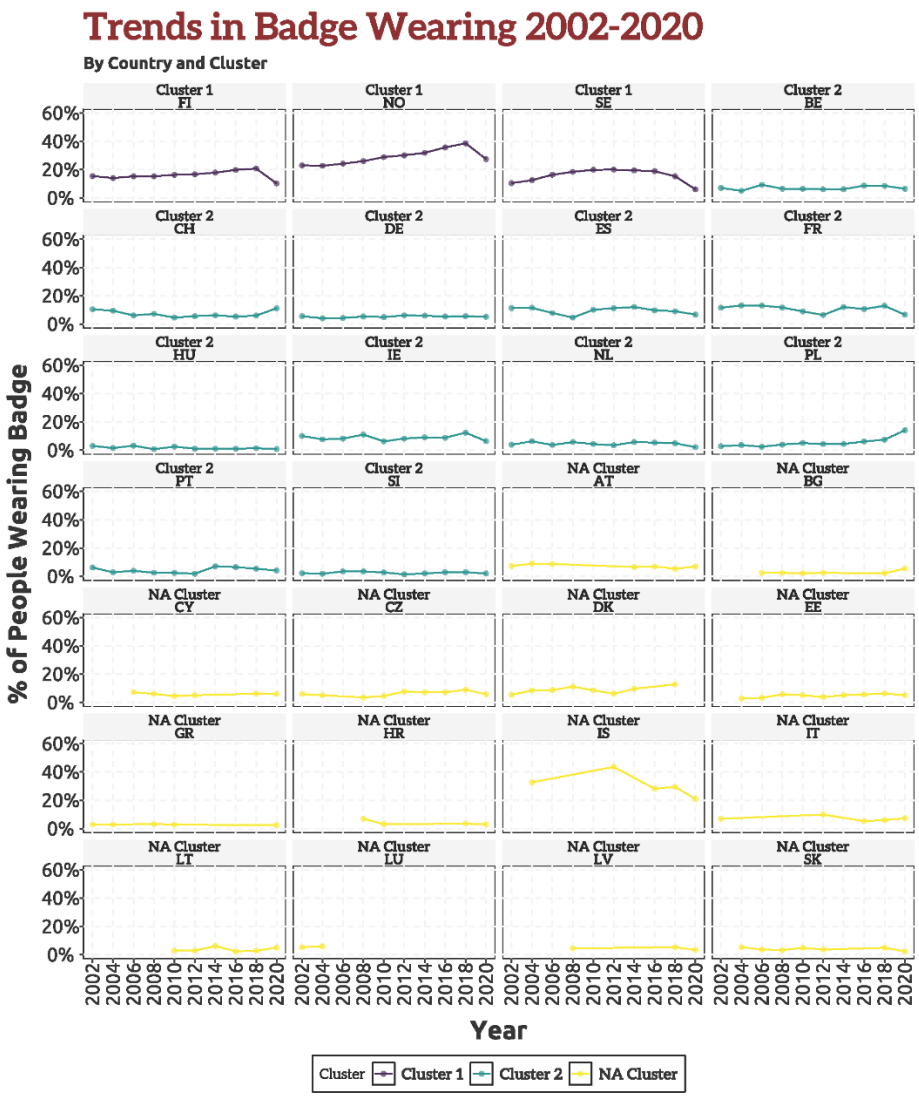


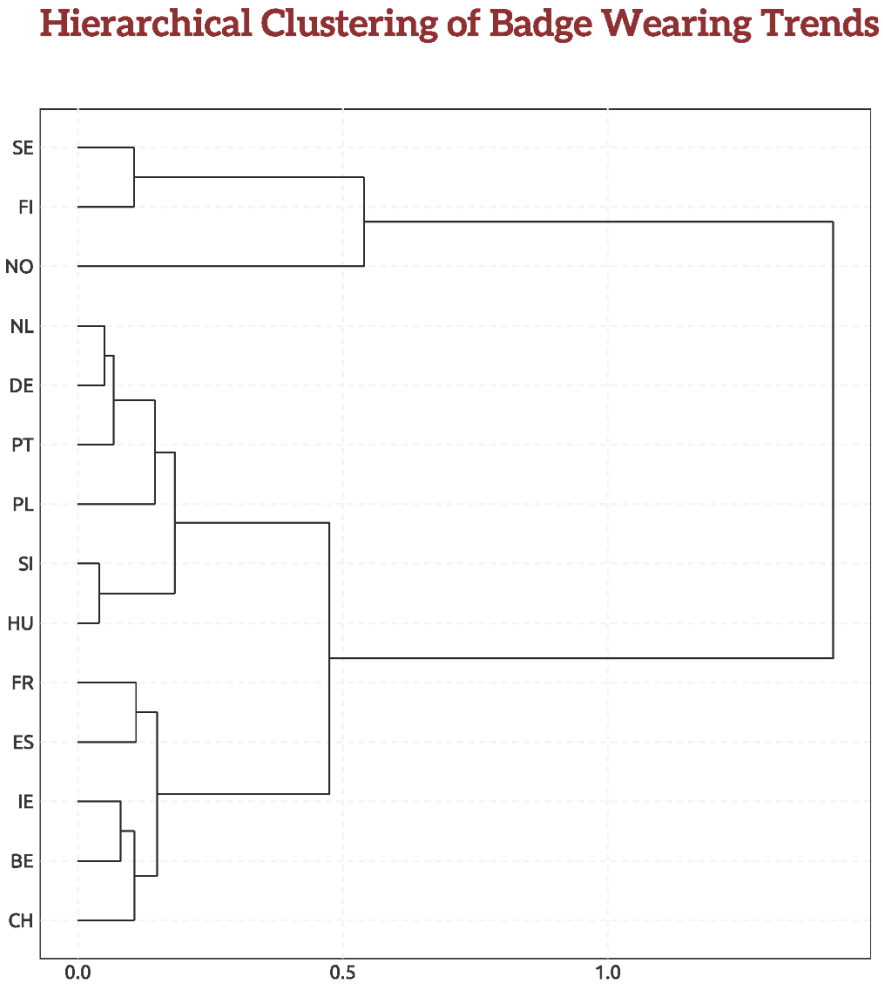
Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

At the same time, it is easy to discern some patterns of deviation from the dominant motive, with a handful of countries hovering consistently above the mean, and by a large margin. In Figure 2.3, we present a breakdown of the country-by-country, evolution The cluster solution may best be understood to illustrate a two-cluster pattern, where Finland, Norway, and Sweden comprise the first cluster of relatively high levels of badge wearing (consistently over 20%), and Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, France, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia the second, demonstrating levels around, and mostly below, the 10% mark. Countries in yellow are part of the NA cluster, since, due to non-complete time series, they have been left out of the clustering exercise. Moreover, it is easy to see how Iceland demonstrates considerable similarity to the first cluster of countries, while the other countries in this residual category would probably be included in the second, under a non-missing data scenario.

Overall, we might conclude that badge wearing is a relatively overlooked mode of political participation in Europe, with the slight exception of the Nordic Countries (excluding Denmark), and a stable trend across time.

Figure 2.3. Trends in Badge-Wearing 2002-2022, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)



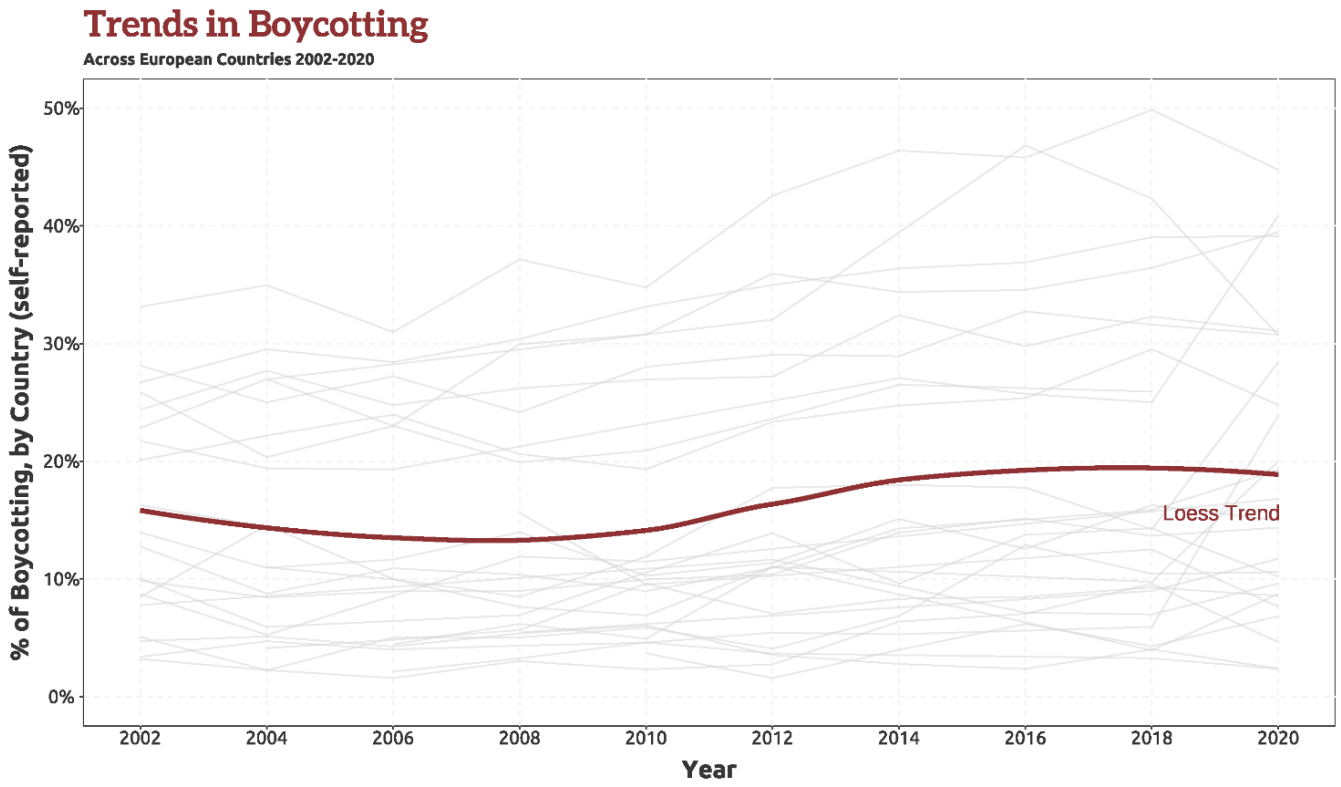


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

2.2.2 Trends in Boycotting Products

Moving now to boycotting, we can examine one form of non-electoral participation that has gained considerable attention over the last few years. In our study, we analyze boycott as a refusal and abstention from consuming specific products mainly for political reasons, but also for ethical or other social reasons. During the 2000s, as **Figure 2.4** shows, this variety of political consumerism was less widespread. It gradually gained traction in reaction to the anti-globalization movements and the active role of social movement organizations (see Lorenzini and Forno 2022). From 2012 to 2014-2016 there is a noteworthy overall increase in boycotting from 16% to almost 20%, which has held constant ever since, suggesting a potential shift and reordering in preferences in political participation. This increase in boycotting is, presumably, related to the rise of lifestyle activism and the choice of some citizens to align their ethical values to their consuming patterns (see Micheletti 2003).

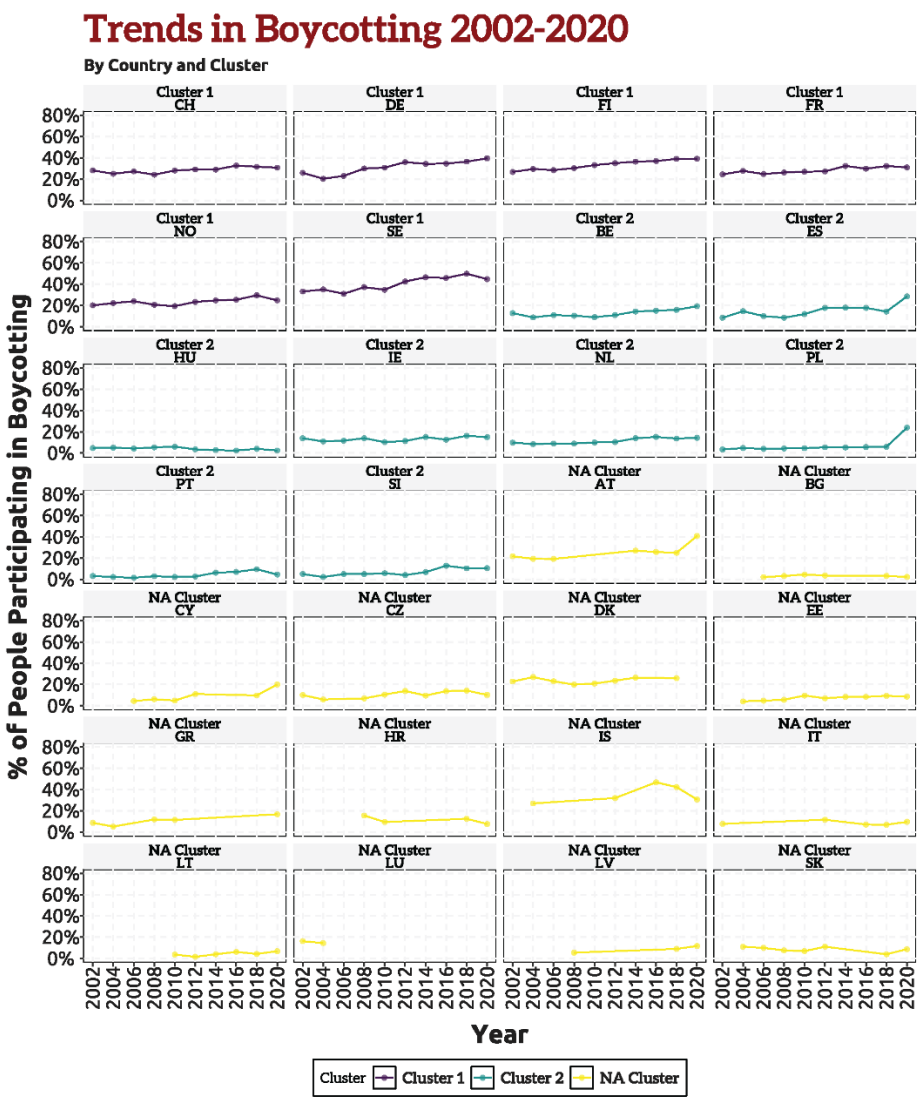
Figure 2.4. Trends in Boycotting, 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

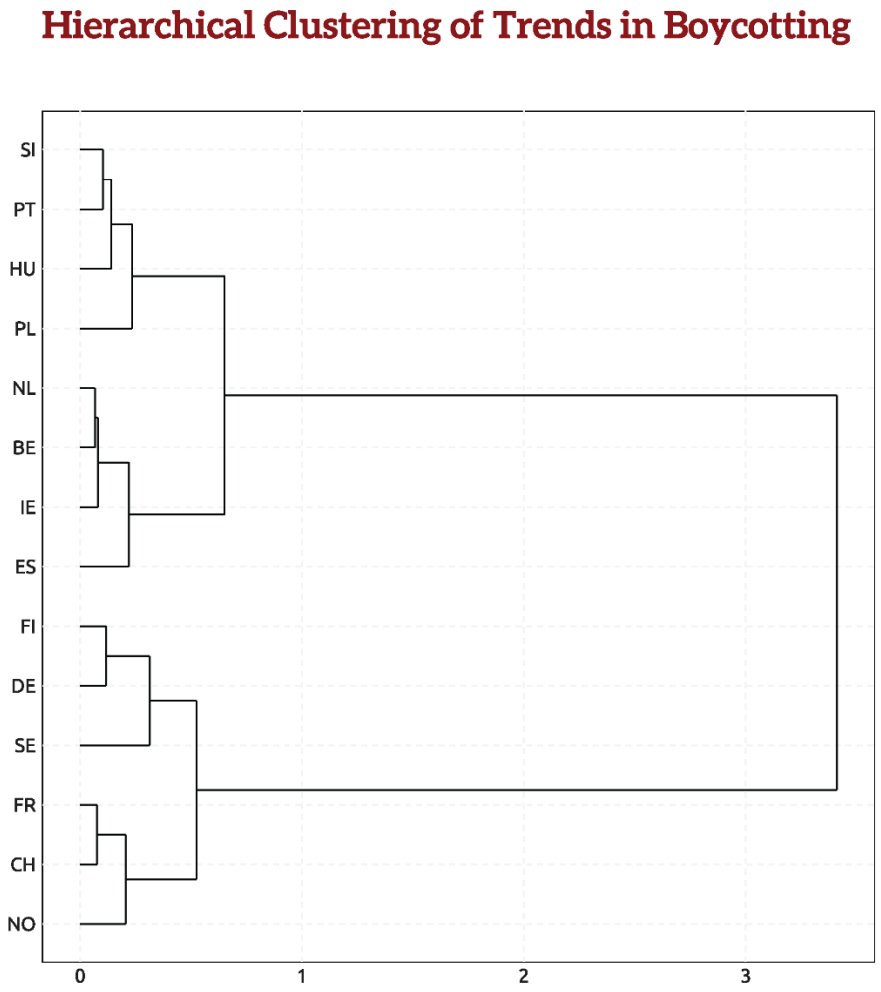


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

Similarly to trends in badge-wearing, one can easily discern meaningful differences between countries in our sample, with boycotting trending at below 10% in some countries, but well above 30% in others. Figure 2.5 looks into those differences in greater detail.

Figure 2.5. Trends in Boycotting 2002-2022, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)





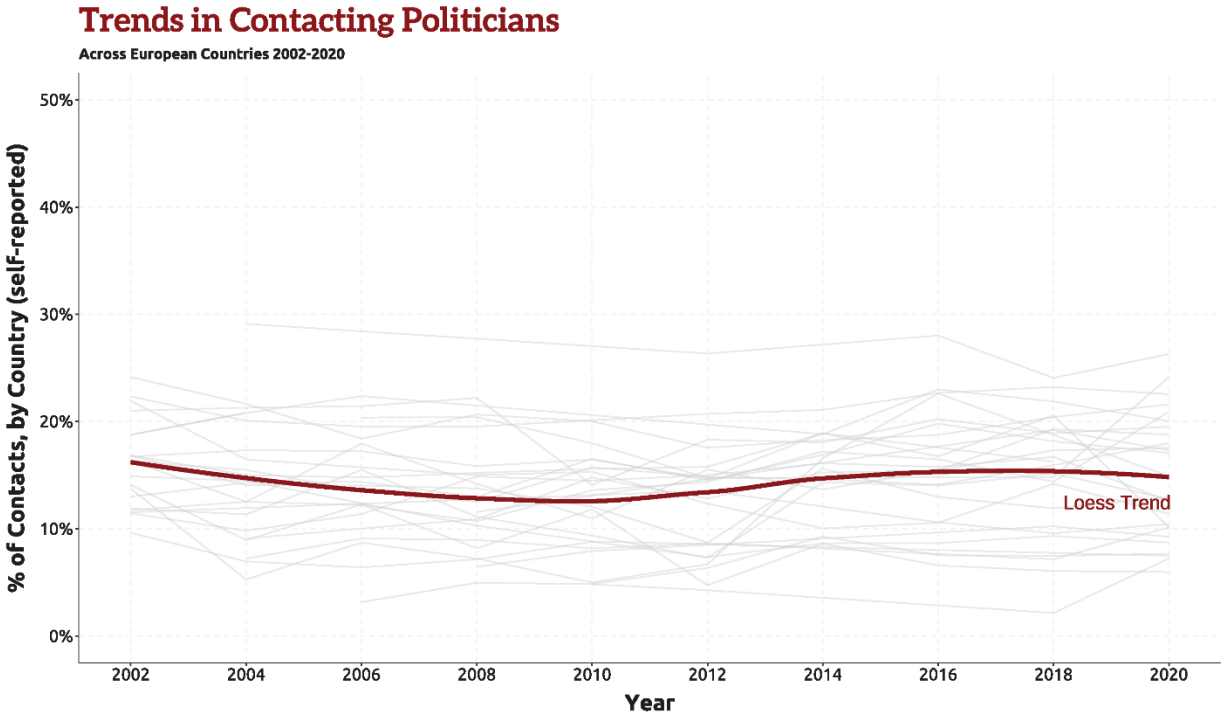
Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

What emerges from the hierarchical cluster analysis resembles, again, a pattern of two clusters of countries (for the countries with complete time series), with the first cluster being composed of Switzerland, Germany, Finland, France, Norway, and Sweden, and the second cluster by Belgium, Spain, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia, respectively. It appears that those clusters align, if imperfectly, with a Northern-Southern Europe divide, considering that most countries in the residual category, NA, would most likely belong to the second cluster, except for Norway, Iceland, and Denmark.

2.2.3 Trends in Contacting Politicians

The third mode under consideration in our section relates to contacting (or not) politicians to push for policy and is thus more related to conventional modes of political participation (and mainly to party-related activities). As Figure 2.6 shows, contacting politicians follows what appears to be a stable trend of around 15% across all included years, with a slight downturn in the early 2010s and a rebound post-2014. In contrast to the previous forms of non-electoral participation, levels of contacting politicians appear to be more homogenous across countries, with the lowest value at 4%, the highest just below 30%, and most country-line trends bunched around the mean trend.

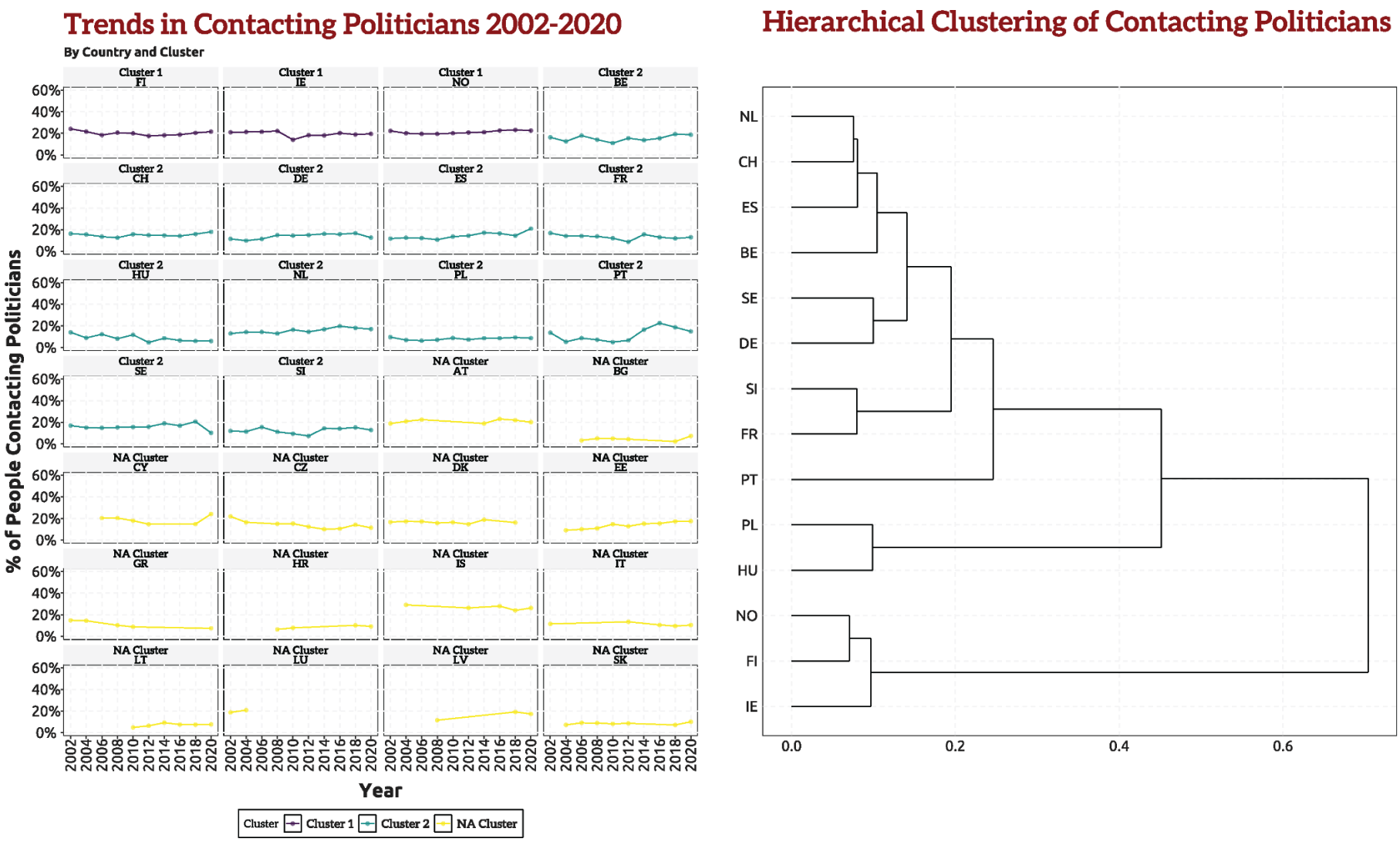
Figure 2.6. Trends in Contacting Politicians 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

This relative homogeneity is also reflected in the clustering results shown in Figure 2.7. The lowest levels in contacting politicians are observed in Poland and Hungary. Moreover, similarly low levels, below the 15% mark, are observed for most countries, including Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Slovenia. Juxtaposed to this first group of countries, Finland, Ireland, and Norway comprise the first cluster of countries with the highest levels in our sample. These countries hover, rather, around 25%. Iceland, as part of the non-complete time series cluster, displays levels similar to those three countries, leading us to assume that it would cluster in the first group too, as opposed to the remaining countries in the NA category, including Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Luxemburg, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

Figure 2.7. Trends in Contacting Politicians 2002-2022 by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

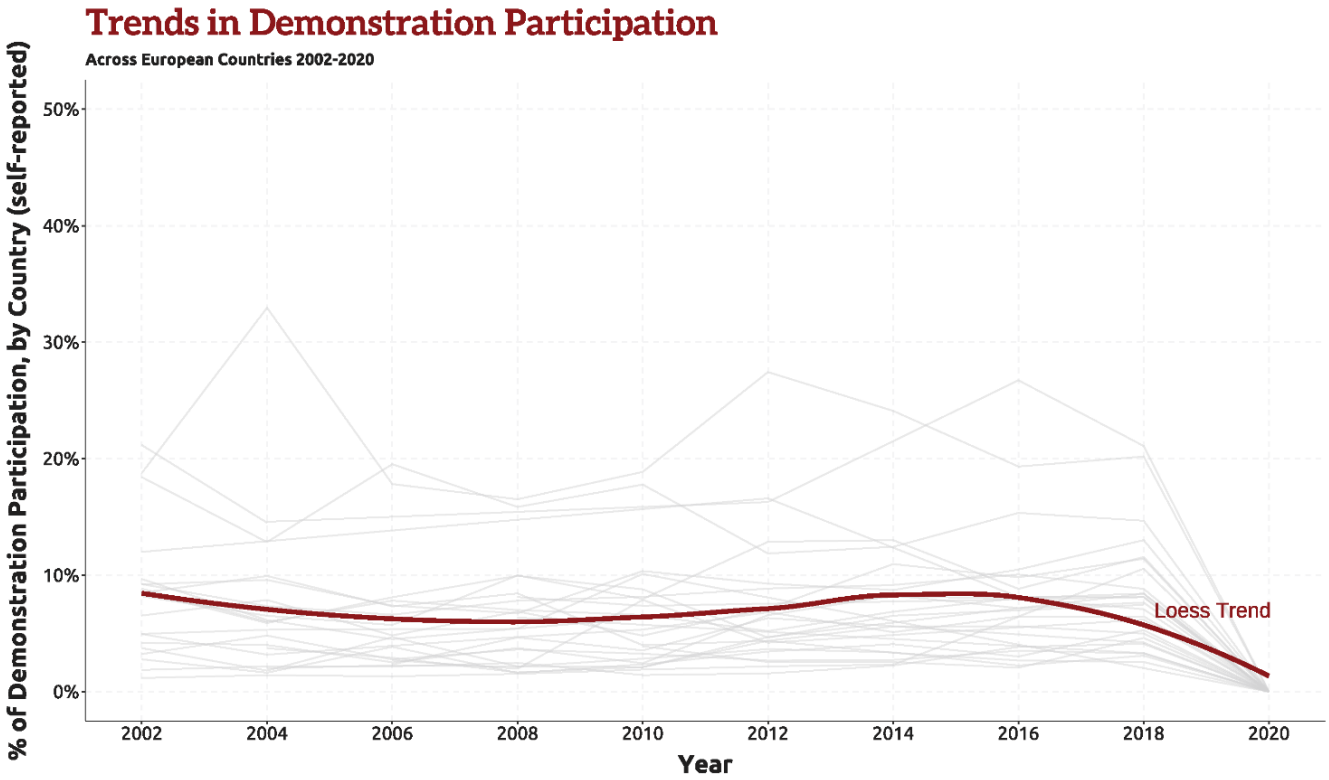


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

2.2.4 Trends in Participation in Demonstrations

The decision to participate in a demonstration is the one type of participation in our analysis that is most closely related to the activities of protest movements. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that during the period of the economic recession, especially in the countries of the Eurozone periphery, there was a considerable uptick in demonstrations. This is shown in Figure 2.8, where participation in demonstrations gained popularity from 2012 to 2014 and up to 2016 before tapering off in 2018. Of note, participation in demonstrations is virtually at 0% in the latest included round of 2020-2022 across almost all countries, owing, we can safely assume, to the outbreak of the pandemic, the resulting lockdowns and movement restrictions, and the fact that the ESS fieldwork was conducted in most countries between late 2021 and early 2022. This should, thus, not be interpreted as an abrupt condemnation of protests but a temporary anomaly, and future research will be able to map its underlying evolution more adequately.

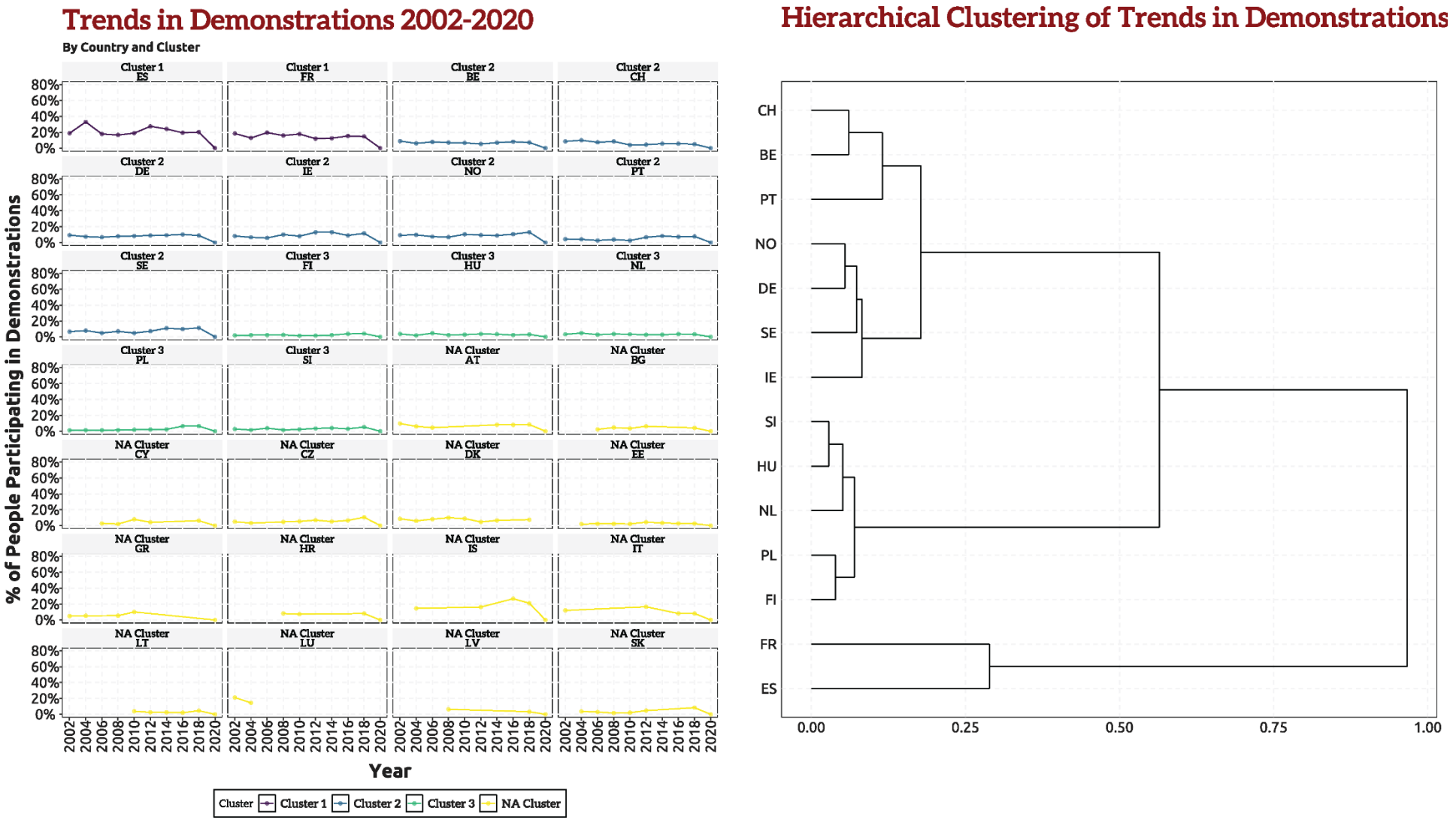
Figure 2.8. Trends in Demonstrations 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

However, despite the appearance of relative uniformity across countries, a few countries differentiate themselves based on their consistent pattern of higher-than-average levels of participation in demonstrations. As demonstrated in Figure 2.9, France and Spain seem to belong to a cluster of their own, with the highest levels of demonstrations. In France and Spain, the percentage of respondents reporting they participated in a demonstration within the last 12 months is consistently above 20%. Following this group of countries, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden, are part of a second group of countries with average levels of demonstrations of around 10%, across the time considered. Finally, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, and Slovenia seem to have the lowest levels of participation in demonstrations, in single digits. Bulgaria, Estonia, Slovakia, Latvia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Croatia, and Denmark (from the NA cluster) resemble the patterns of those countries the most, while Italy, Iceland, and Austria, might be classified as belonging to the second/intermediate country group.

Figure 2.9. Trends in Participation in Demonstrations 2002-2022, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

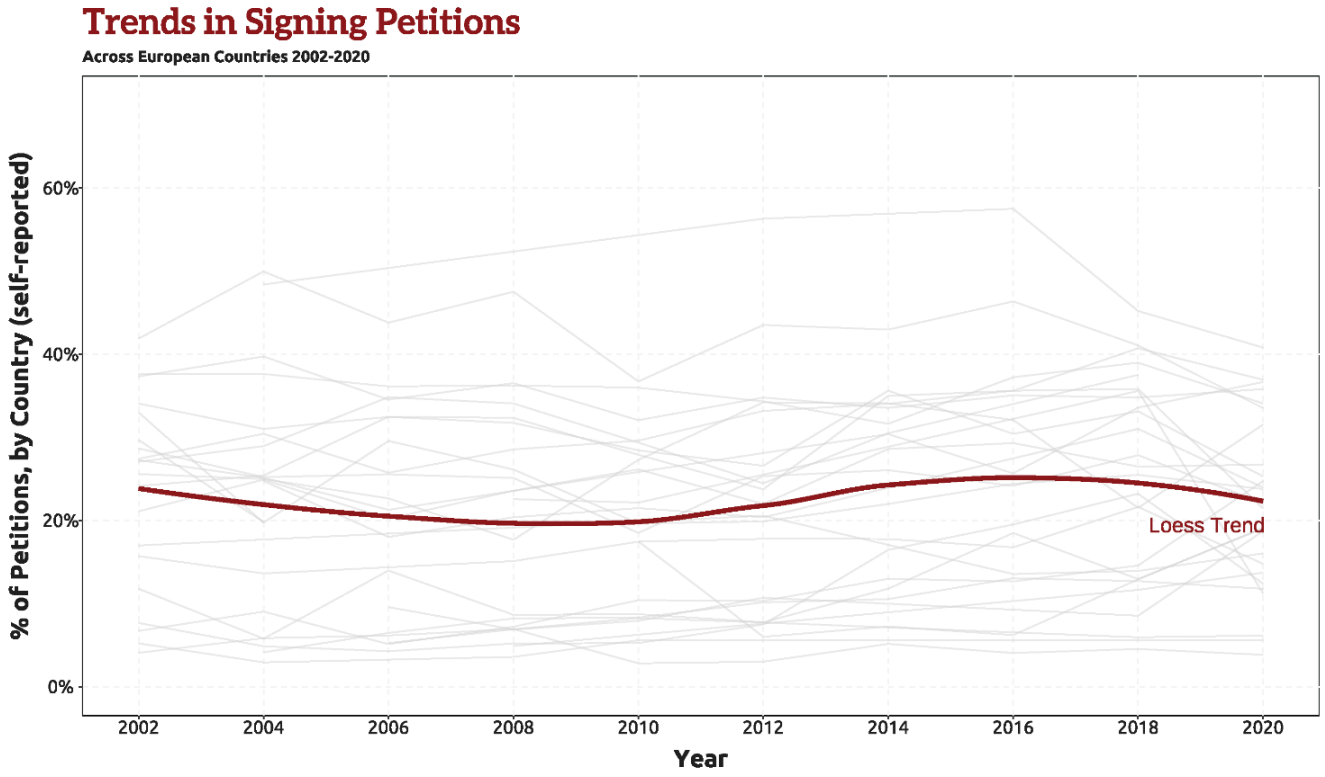


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

2.2.5 Trends in Signing Petitions

Finally, the last mode of non-electoral participation we will explore is petition signing. In Figure 2.10, the shape of the overall trend resembles a very slightly inverted *S*. Like previous trends in political participation, the evolution of signing petitions appears not to follow some specific direction. The overall trend, across countries, fluctuates slightly around 20%, with a small downturn before the onset of the 2010s and reaches its peak in the aftermath of the European debt crisis before returning, in 2020, to almost identical levels as in 2002.

Figure 2.10. Trends in Signing Petitions 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

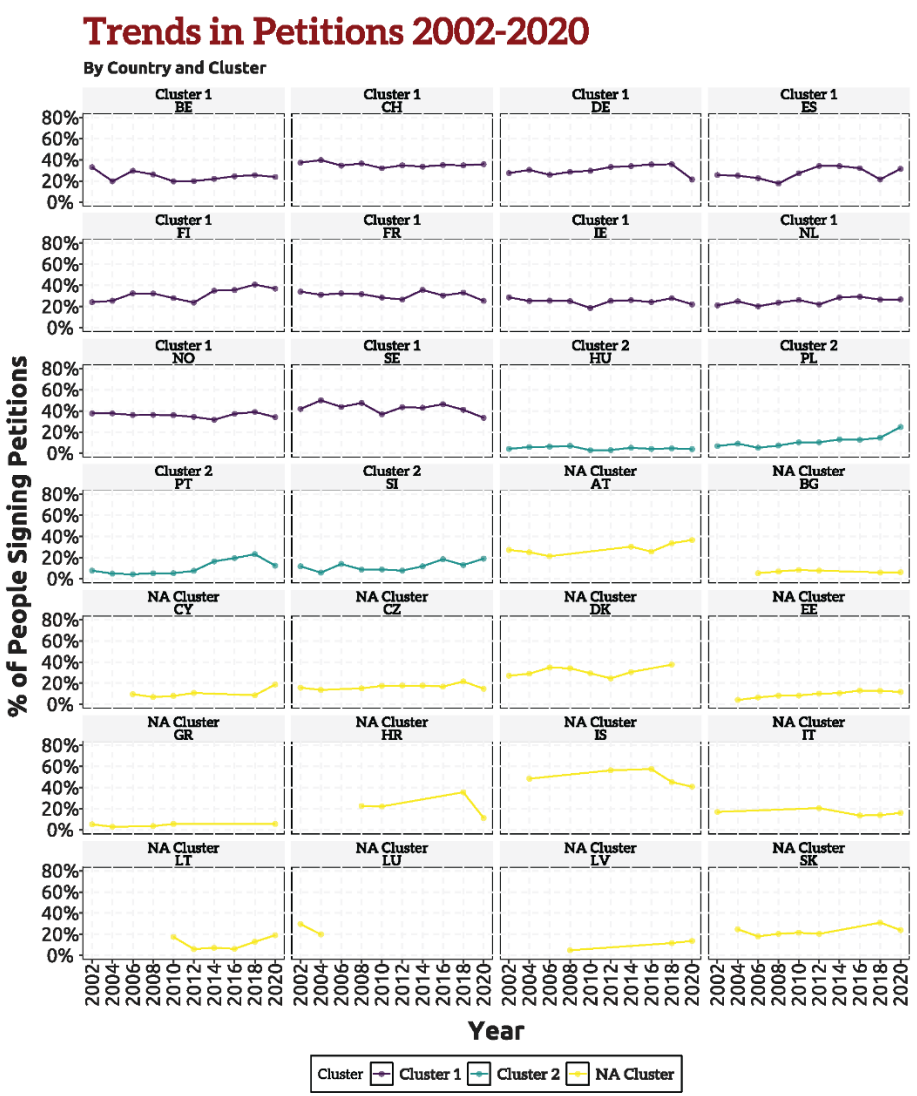


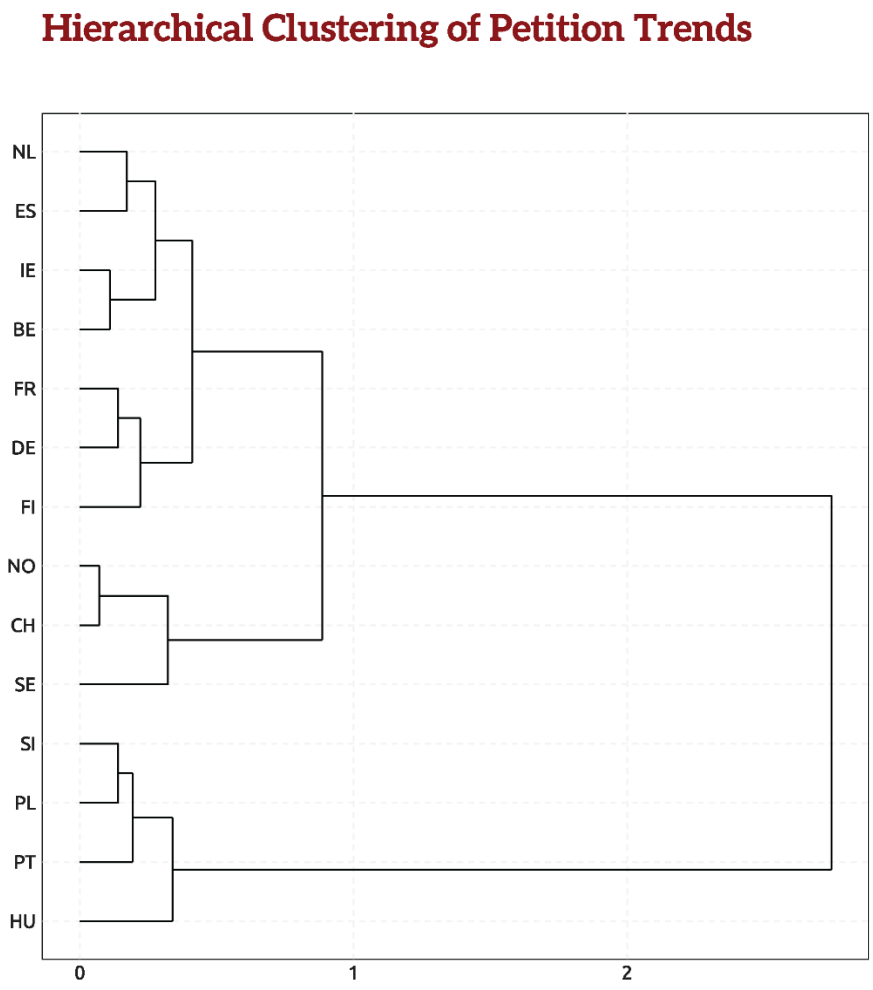
Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

Looking at the same figure reveals a notable spread between countries, with some country lines trending close to zero concisely, and others, respectively, around 30, 40, and even 50 per cent, even. Regarding country differences, the clustering algorithm suggests two groups of countries. With relatively high levels of petitions, respondents in Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Spain, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden tend to see petitions as part of

their repertoire of political participation. By contrast, respondents in Slovenia, Poland, Portugal, and Hungary appear less engaged, comparatively, with petitions. Looking at the group of countries left out of the cluster analysis, Austria, Iceland, Denmark, Croatia, Italy, and the Czech Republic demonstrate patterns closer to the first group, juxtaposed to Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania, Latvia, and Bulgaria, which look more similar to the second group, with lower levels of engagement in petition signing.

Figure 2.11. Trends in Signing Petitions 2002-2022, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)





Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

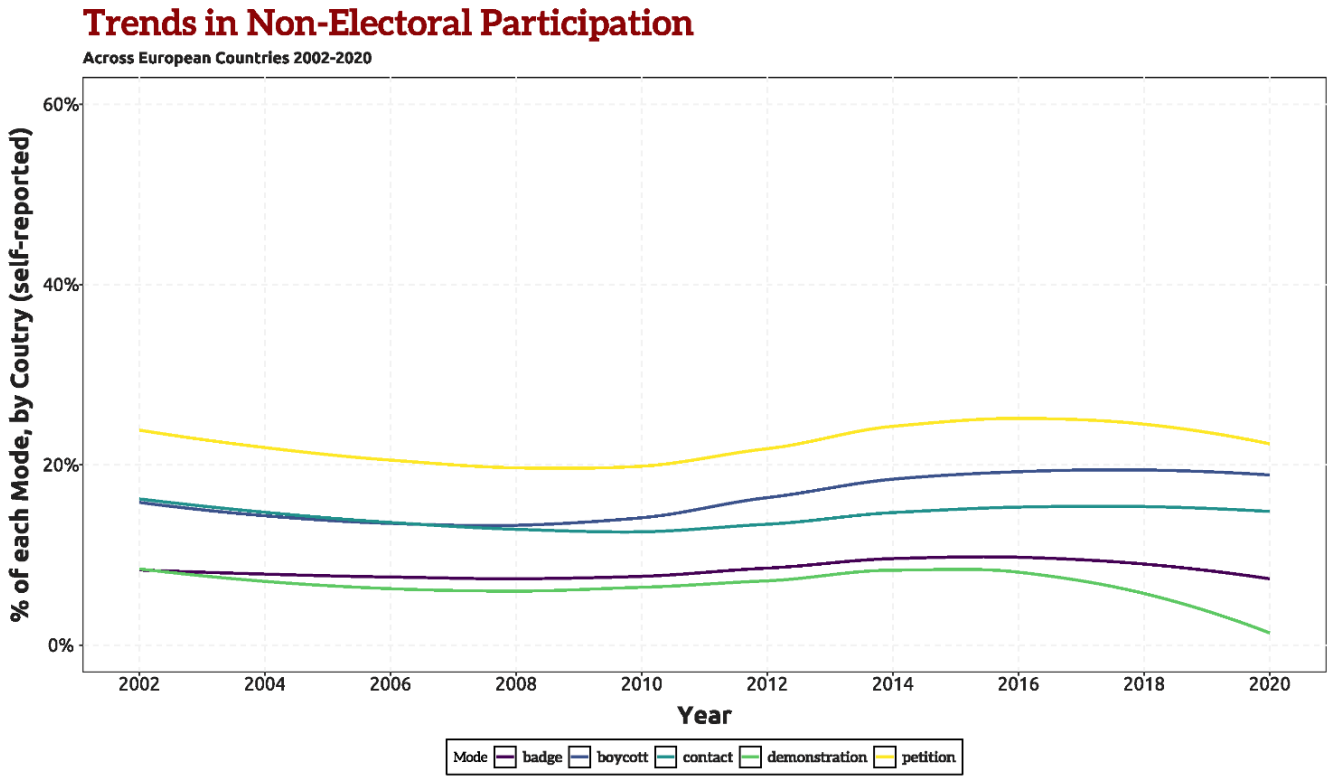
2.2.6 Cross-national variations

In the previous subsections, we examined how engagement with different modes of non-electoral participation has evolved over time. We highlighted the overall trend, and zoomed in on country patterns, by clustering them based on the similarity of their trends. In this section, we will look across different modes of political action to investigate their relative popularity, and how that might vary over time.

Looking at Figure 2.12, it is easy to see that all modes of political participation follow a very similar trend. Initial levels in the early 2000s slightly dropped before the turn of the decade, but appeared to rebound after 2012, in the immediate aftermath of the European debt crisis and the political antagonisms that ensued. In terms of rank order, petitions remain the dominant mode of non-electoral participation across the entire period under study, fluctuating at around 25%. Signing petitions, as a form of political activity, is followed by boycotting, as the second most popular mode of political engagement. Of note, boycotting appears to initially trail behind contacting politicians at the beginning of the millennium, before starting to overtake it around 2010. Since then, their differential has increased and appears to be stable at around 3 percentage points, in the overall sample.

Badge-wearing comes fourth in place, comparatively, by slightly overtaking demonstrations since the start of the data. Its trend remains mostly stable, with the pandemic helping its trends fork further apart. Overall, the rank order between these modes of political participation is mostly intuitive, with demonstrations (arguably the costliest) attracting the lowest levels of participation (see introductory section). Further analysis is needed to explore whether this tendency is mainly explained through a resource-based model of political participation (see also Quaranta 2013; Copeland and Bouilianne 2020).

Figure 2.12. Trends in Non-Electoral Participation 2002-2022 (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou, AUTH)

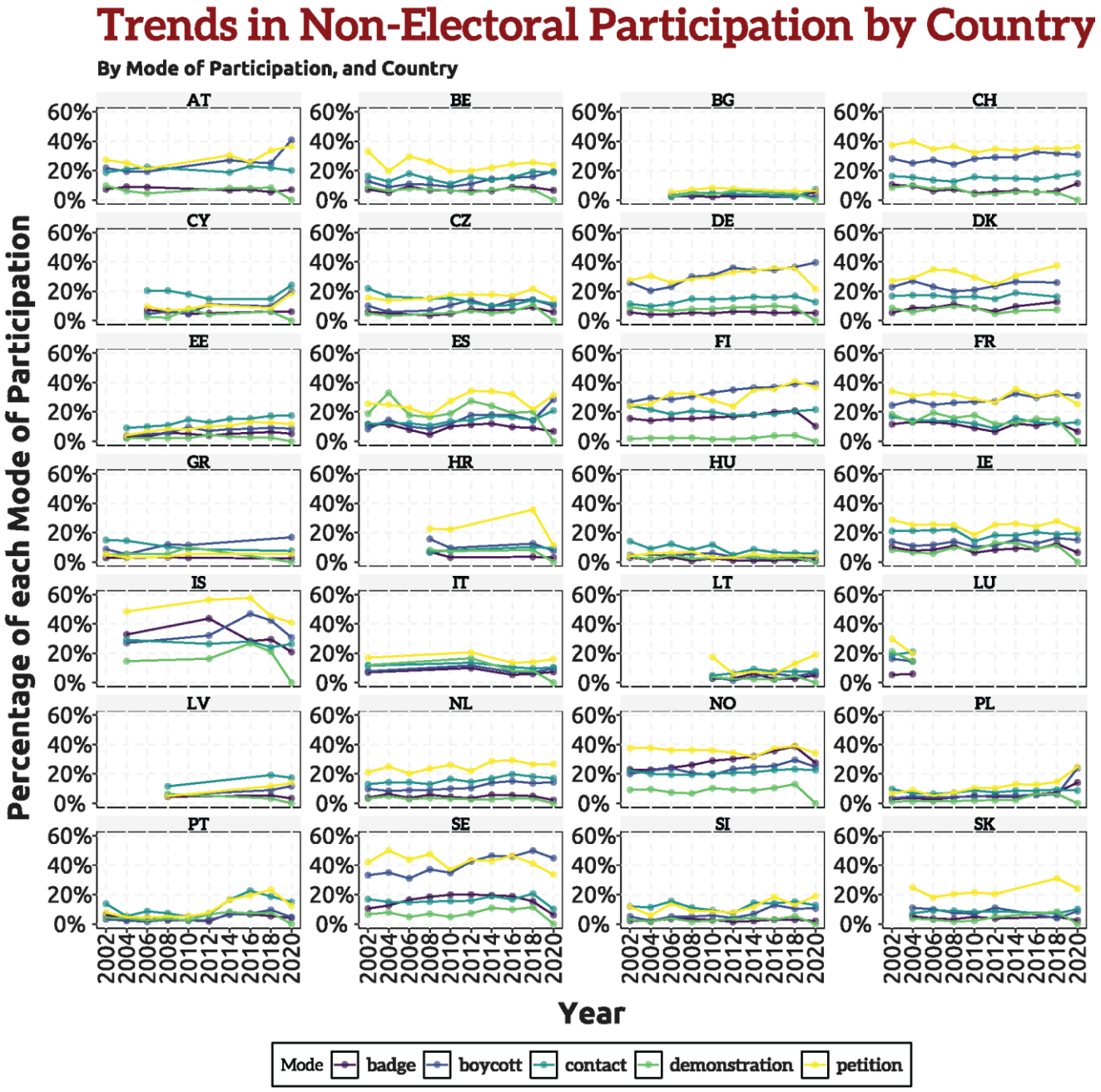


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

Turning now, once more, to country differences, in Figure 2.13, following the overall trends, signing petitions is the preferred mode of non-electoral participation in most countries, including in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Slovakia, albeit at different absolute levels.

Moreover, boycotts seem to be the preferred mode in Finland and in Greece, for almost the entire span of our data. In Finland, however, boycotts are closely trailed by petitions, while in Greece signing petitions comes after contacting politicians. Not too dissimilar, in Germany, Sweden, Austria, and Iceland, boycotting and signing petitions are tied, almost completely, with slight variations across years. Contacting politicians, finally, is the preferred mode in only two countries, Latvia and Hungary, and is tied with petitions in Portugal.

Figure 2.13. Trends in Non-Electoral Participation 2002-2022, by country (Alexandros-Christos Gkotinakos and Eftichia Teperoglou)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Social Survey data.

2.3 Discussion

The purpose of this section of the report was to map trends across modes of non-electoral participation in European countries between 2002-2022. To this end, we presented overall and country-specific trends in five modes of participation (badge-wearing, boycotting, contacting politicians, demonstrating, and signing petitions). The overall conclusion is that trends across all modes have been relatively stable in the period under consideration when the mean for Europe in its entirety is considered. A slight downward tendency of political participation in the late 2000s was reversed after the European debt crisis.

Despite, the relative uniformity in trendless fluctuations, levels of participation vary greatly across countries. In the previous subsections, we organized countries based on their clustering patterns, which varied slightly between each mode. A persistence pattern, nevertheless, was the gap in participation between Northern European (and, especially, Nordic) countries and the rest of the sample (and especially Eastern Europe). The only notable exception to this rule relates to levels of participation in demonstrations, where Spain and France, appear to be more readily activated.

Across the sample, the preferred mode of non-electoral political participation remains signing petitions, for the entirety of the period under study. Very few countries, like Greece, Finland, and Hungary, appeared to be pattern-breakers, privileging boycotting and contacting politicians, instead. Of note, boycotting has gained popularity during the last decade, becoming the second, overall, preferred mode of non-electoral engagement, displacing contacting politicians, which could suggest a shift away from traditional methods of political engagement with parties, to the benefit of coordinated, if individualistic, political consumerism patterns.

In closing this chapter, it is important to temper any conclusions around patterns and trends by appreciating the sensitivity of sample-level survey results to the countries included in our sample. We opened this section by highlighting how some countries have participated in most, if not all, ESS rounds, while other countries have in a few, or even one, and this data gap leaves the reader to wonder how, if at all, these trends and comparisons, could vary under a complete data scenario, and calls for more research in the future to extend this present report. Ultimately, our results should be viewed under a *Total Survey Error* (TSE) perspective, considering that differences in sampling frames, modes of data collection, and cross-cultural differences in perceiving and answering questions between countries could have impinged our analyses.

3 Examining the link between political trust and changing patterns of non-electoral political participation in Europe (2002-2022)

Carles Pamies (CSIC), Chiao Li (Sciences Po) and Laura Morales (CSIC)

3.1 The state of the art on the link between political trust and non-electoral political participation

Political participation is multi-dimensional, as it has been stressed both conceptually and empirically in the extant literature since the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Milbrath 1965, Verba et al. 1971). In that sense, participation is best conceived as an umbrella concept that accommodates very different forms of political action (Huntington and Nelson 1976: 14). Some scholars, in a now classic typology, have argued that individuals can participate politically using conventional and non-conventional forms (Barnes et al. 1979)[2].

Conventional political participation includes both electoral — for instance, voting or participating in electoral campaign activities — and non-electoral participation — such as raising money for a political cause, participating in political meetings, joining a citizens' association, or contacting public authorities. On the other hand, non-conventional political participation relates to non-institutionalized actions and repertoires, including (but not limited to) actions such as signing petitions, participating in demonstrations and strikes, boycotting and buycotting[3] products, participating in sit-ins or blocking traffic, damaging public or private property or employing violence for political reasons.

Far from being a purely conceptual definition, this distinction of the various forms of political participation has also been tested to understand whether it explains different outcomes in the political process (e.g. Verba et al. 1995). Electoral activities at the aggregate level (for instance, voting or participating in campaigns) have important consequences for the political process, but provide

[2] Some classifications, such as Hooghe and Marien's (2013), which follow Klingemann and Fuchs (1995), refer to the distinction between institutionalized and non-institutionalized political participation, depending on whether the specific form of participation relates or not to the electoral process and the functioning of political institutions. Other classifications, like Teorell and Torcal's (2007), distinguish between different forms of participation based on the main channel of expression: representational and non-representational.

[3] Buycotting refers to the form of political consumerism by which individuals deliberately avoid purchasing products or services for political reasons (Copeland and Boulianne 2022).

limited information regarding the exact meaning of the individual policy preferences manifested with the vote choice; whereas other non-electoral activities (like campaigns to collect signatures or participation in demonstrations) often convey more information about policy preferences but tend to have negligible consequences on the political process.

Hence, even if electoral participation is the cornerstone of representative democracies, as well as one of the main mechanisms to hold governments accountable and make politicians responsive to citizen demands, this form of political participation is fairly limited in its ability to account for citizens' policy preferences or to control politicians, and thus also not as useful as other forms of participation in steering the specific direction of policy-making. Instead, other forms of non-electoral participation — which are often typically performed between elections — are better suited to communicate more clearly the demands of those who participate, and therefore more helpful to shift politicians' policy positions and to contribute to a more transparent decision-making process.[4]

One factor often considered when explaining political participation is political trust — sometimes referred to as political confidence or confidence in institutions (see Denters et al. 2007; Zmerli et al. 2007; Citrin and Stoker 2018) — which is similarly a multi-dimensional concept.[5] For that reason, the relationship between political trust and participation, both conventional and non-conventional, has been studied in detail. Many comparative analyses have problematized the association between these two concepts,[6] which generally depart from the theoretical assumptions that a certain level of political trust is necessary to participate — particularly electorally (Grönlund and Setälä 2007; Hooghe et al. 2011; Bélanger 2017) —, but also that political distrust is a driving factor of non-conventional forms of political participation. Studies about the link between political trust and electoral participation tend to focus on turnout, although some studies have also investigated this relationship regarding party choice (Hetherington 1999).

In this report, we focus solely on non-electoral forms of participation which, as we discussed, have often been presented as negatively associated with political trust (Hooghe and Marien 2013). Similar to the theoretical work on political trust and electoral participation, the exact causal mechanism behind political trust and non-electoral participation is not fully clear (Levi and Stoker 2000). On the one hand, it has been argued that higher levels of confidence in political institutions should be associated with more non-electoral participation insofar as trust in institutions is

[4] A descriptive cross-country analyses of various forms of political participation, including non-electoral participation is offered by Teorell, Torcal and Montero (2007).
[5] A detailed review of the concept and developments of trust can be found as a separate deliverable within the ActEU project by Christensen et al. (2024).
[6] Some authors argue that the association is not simply between trust and participation, but between trust and perceived efficacy and participation (Gamson 1968).

typically also a reflection of higher levels of internal political efficacy. However, if individuals are unhappy with the political process they may also be more likely to engage in forms of political participation that are outside of the 'normal' or 'usual' channels of political action (Kaase 1999).

Compared to the work on the relationship between political trust and electoral participation, the studies on the connection between political trust and non-electoral political participation in Europe are scarcer, and the findings are mixed. In earlier studies, this relationship has been found to be linear and negative, with lower levels of political trust being connected with higher levels of engaging in "legal non-institutionalized participation" (Kaase 1999; see also Copeland and Boulianne (2022) for the relationship between trust and political consumerism). However, the same studies acknowledge that this relationship in the period analysed (1981-1996) is rather weak, probably due to the lack of sufficient organizational capacity (Kaase 1999: 16). Consistent with these findings, subsequent analyses that incorporate the concept of political systems' openness and that use more complex operationalizations of non-electoral participation also found that the relationship between political trust and "extra-representational participation" appears to be linear and negative, with a more frequent use of forms of non-electoral participation when the levels of political trust are lower (Braun and Hutter 2014).[7]

However, in other studies that also include non-democratic regimes outside of Europe, the relationship between political trust and non-electoral political participation in democratic countries seems to be curvilinear (or U-shaped), and both very low and very high levels of political trust are connected with more frequent use of non-electoral political participation (Cichocka et al. 2018; Kutuk and Usturali 2023). Finally, the relationship between political trust and participation in campaigns, demonstrations and strikes in a limited selection of European and Asian countries, has been found to be non-significant at all (Suh et al. 2013), which is consistent with studies conducted at the local level — such as Diani's (2000) case study of Italy that finds that higher levels of social and political engagement do not always result in more political confidence.

To the best of our knowledge, even if there are studies analysing trust in the EU with specific forms of non-electoral participation (see Morales 2017 for an analysis on participation in demonstrations) there are no studies systematically replicating these analyses between political trust at the EU level and the several different forms of non-electoral participation. This is striking, considering that the literature on political trust in the European Union is extensive, from studies about the general dynamics of political trust in the EU, about the connection between political trust in the national institutions and trust in the EU (Armingeon and Ceka 2013), the differences between trust in national and international political institutions that also include the EU (see Arpino and

[7] An analysis focusing on Central European countries has obtained similar results (Nový 2014).

Obydenkova 2020), the effect of fiscal austerity in trust in the European Union (Biten et al. 2023), or the relationship between political trust and regional wealth distribution (Lipps and Schraff 2020), among others.

All in all, the mixed and insufficient empirical evidence suggests that the relationship between non-electoral political participation and political trust is more complex than it may seem at first sight. For these reasons, our analyses and research take into account the multifaceted nature of both non-electoral political participation and political trust to give a more precise and nuanced account of these complex dynamics.

To empirically analyse this relationship, the next two subsections are structured as follows. First, we analyze the correlation between political trust (in the European Parliament and in national-level institutions) and various forms of non-electoral participation using survey data from the European Social Survey since 2002. Second, we analyze specifically the significant associations while adding important socio-demographic controls such as age, gender and education to account for potential confounding factors, and plot the predicted probabilities estimated using the same controls in logistic regressions.

3.2 The correlation between political trust and non-electoral political participation

For this descriptive examination of the correlation between political trust and non-electoral forms of political participation, we use the pooled datasets of the European Social Survey (ESS) from Round 1 to Round 10 (2002-2022). Following the same logic as in deliverable 3.1 of the ActEU project (Pamies et al. 2024), we only include countries with at least 3 data points for our variables of interest, thus including 26 European countries[8]: 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. In our graphics, these countries are ordered by regional clusters based on the political culture and accession waves to the EEC/EU, as well as for their homogeneous levels and patterns of political trust (Christensen et al. 2024), for a total of four clusters: (1) Northern Europe[9], (2) Western Europe, (3) Southern Europe, and (4) Central and Eastern Europe clusters.

[8] The list of excluded countries consists of Croatia, Latvia, Luxembourg, and Romania.
[9] 'Northern Europe' cluster represents the Nordic countries, referring to a specific group in Northern Europe that shares historical and cultural ties.

The national political trust variable is an index calculated by averaging four items that measure trust in national-level political actors and institutions, each on a 0-10 scale: (1) trust in the national parliament, (2) trust in political parties, (3) trust in politicians and (4) trust in the legal system.[10] Additionally, we add an item of trust in the European Parliament to account for EU-level political trust. This operationalization follows the recommendations and findings in Chapter 4 by Carstens et al. in Christensen et al. (2024) regarding the bidimensionality of political trust when national and EU actors and institutions are considered and is also consistent with the operationalization used in deliverable 3.1 of the ActEU project (Pamies et al. 2024). The inclusion of the variable of trust in the European Parliament followed substantive and empirical reasons, being the EU institution that citizens know best (Torcal et al. 2012), but also one of the most available items about trust in the EU in a number of surveys, including the ESS (Christensen et al. 2024).

The variables of non-electoral political participation are dichotomous, where respondents indicate whether they have participated in each of the following activities in the past 12 months: (1) worn or displayed campaign badges or stickers, (2) boycotted products, (3) contacted politicians or government officials, (4) participated in demonstrations and (5) signed petitions.

For each of the bivariate relationships, we include key socio-demographic control variables to account for gender, age, urbanicity and education. The graphs are then presented in regional order, following again the rationale of previous deliverables of the ActEU project (Christensen et al. 2024) across four regional clusters: Northern Europe, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and finally Central and Eastern Europe. We also weight the data using the appropriate ESS population and post-stratification weights, based on the recommendations of the European Social Survey guide (Kaminska 2020).

Each graph plots the political trust coefficients for every single form of non-electoral political participation item by year of the ESS round with existing data, sub-plotting by countries. The estimates and the confidence intervals are shown in darker solid colours when the bivariate relationship is significant at the 0.05 level, whereas the non-significant estimates are shown in lighter colours. The point estimates with darker shades of black are the significant relationships for the index of political trust at the national level, while the darker shades of red represent the significant relationships for trust in the European Parliament.

[10] Trust in the legal system is included as part and parcel of the third branch of government (the judicial branch). Trust in the police is excluded due to its narrower focus on law enforcement authorities.

We present the different forms of non-electoral political participation one by one, which provides cross-country and longitudinal evidence to disentangle the potential link between political trust and non-electoral participation.

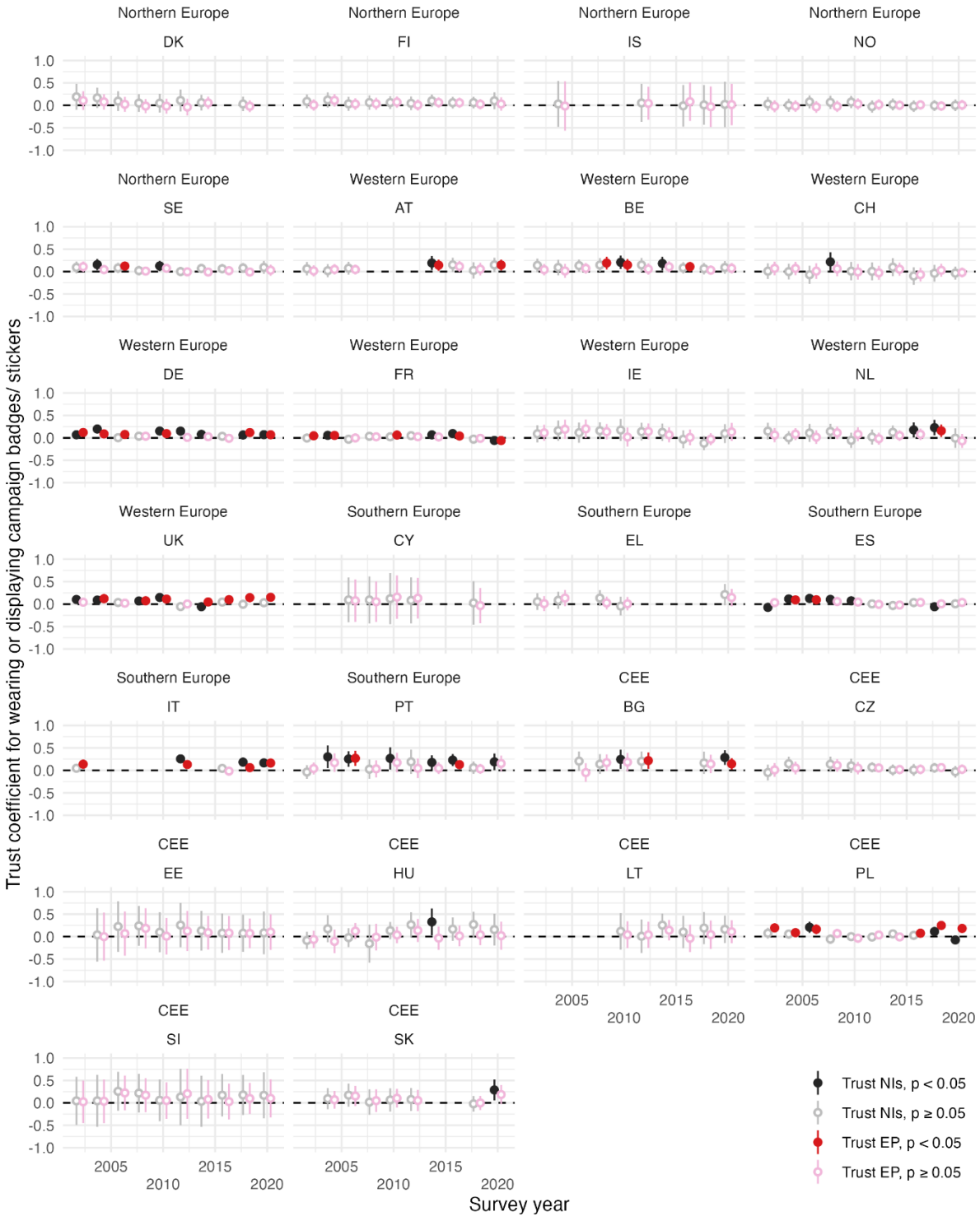
3.2.1 Worn or displayed a campaign badge or a sticker

The first item in **Figure 3.1** plots the political trust coefficients on the likelihood of wearing or displaying campaign badges or stickers. For all the items we will start with a description of the patterns at the national level (in black), and then at the EU level (in red).

In two-thirds of the countries (17 out of 26) there is at least one year in which the relationship between trust in national institutions and displaying campaign badges or stickers is significant. However, this appears not to be significant at all in almost all North European countries, except for Sweden in two out of ten ESS rounds. In West and South European countries, the relationship is significant in almost all countries, except for Ireland and Cyprus, whereas in Central and Eastern Europe the relationship appears to be weaker than in Western and Southern Europe, although stronger than in Nordic countries since it is significant in at least one occasion in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

The relationship — when existent — is also positive in most countries and waves. There are only five exceptions out of 46 data points with significant relationships (11%): the last wave in France (2020-2022), two waves in Spain (2002-2004 and 2018-2020), one wave in the UK (2014-2016) and the last wave in Poland (2020-2022). The remaining 89% of data points with significant relationships between trust and wearing campaign badges or stickers are positive. In some countries, the relationship tends to be significant (particularly in Germany and Portugal), while in other countries for the most part it is non-significant (Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Switzerland). In countries like Portugal and Bulgaria, the coefficients are noticeably larger, but in most other countries the coefficients are generally below 0.25, and particularly low in countries like France and Spain. Finally, there is no clear pattern over time, since we find both significant and non-significant relationships between trust and this form of non-electoral political participation at any point of the period.

Figure 3.1. Bivariate relationship between political trust and wearing or displaying campaign badges / stickers by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Coefficients are estimated using weighted logistic regressions, with a single index of trust in national institutions or trust in the European Parliament as the independent variable, controlling for gender, age, university education, and urbanicity.

Overall, even if positive, the relationship between national-level political trust and wearing or displaying campaign badges or stickers appears to be limited across countries and years, although it seems to be stronger in West and South European countries.

The bivariate relationship between wearing badges and trust in the European Parliament is remarkably similar. With very few exceptions, the associations follow similar patterns by which there is a correspondence in the frequency, degree and direction of the associations at the national and the EU level. For instance, in the most recent wave in Poland (2020-2022) and in the UK for 2014-2016 we find different directions in the coefficients (a negative relationship regarding trust in national-level institutions and a positive one for trust in the EP). Additionally, since 2014 — coinciding with the Brexit pre-referendum years — in the UK we find a significant and positive association between this form of non-electoral participation and trust in the EP, while this is not visible in the association with trust in national institutions.

3.2.2 Boycotting products

Figure 3.2 plots instead the political trust coefficients for the relationship between trust and boycotting products. Starting with the index of trust in national-level institutions, the first finding is that the bivariate relationship is overwhelmingly negative, particularly compared to wearing badges or stickers. This form of protest is also less significantly associated in these countries (only in 14 out of 26) and is significantly associated with trust in national institutions in Northern Europe and Western Europe as compared to Southern and Central and Eastern European countries. In Southern European countries most of the significant associations are found in Spain — and in Italy to a much lesser extent — while in CEE countries the significant associations are visible in Czechia (three negative, one positive) and Poland (two, all of them negative).

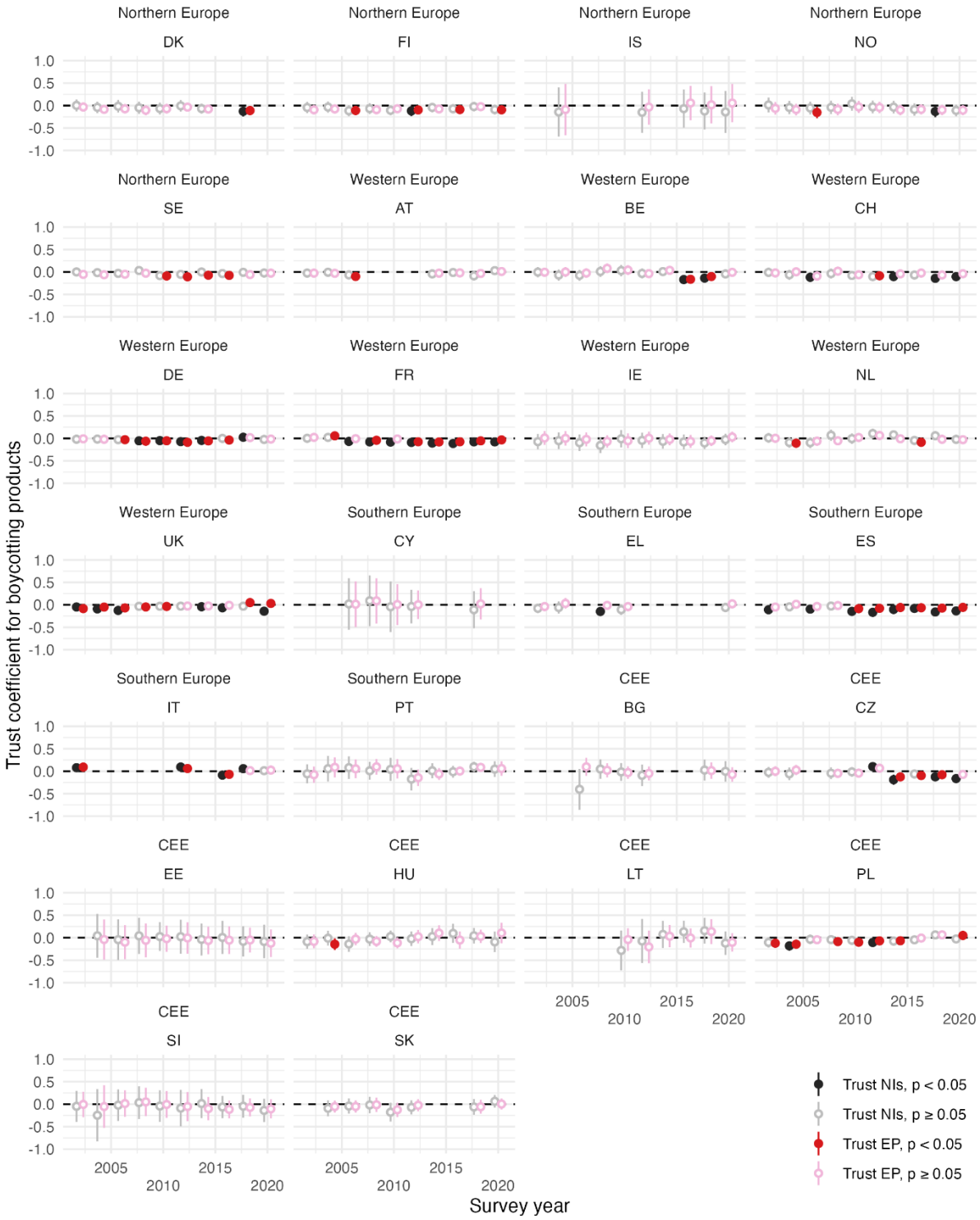
In all the countries where significant associations between political trust and boycotting are found, the relationship is consistently negative, at least at one point in time. Additionally, except for Italy, in all the other countries, the number of negative significant associations is larger than the number of positive associations, which is consistent with the literature (Copeland and Boulianne 2022). In France and Spain, the negative association is particularly clear (and to a lesser extent in Germany and the UK), and it is always negative in all these four countries.

Similar to our findings for the previous item on wearing badges and stickers, the point estimates for trust in the EP generally show similar patterns to those for national political trust, with only one exception. In Western Europe, we find one negative association in the UK (2020-2022) that is

not matched in the same ESS round to a positive association for national political trust, but instead to a negative one. We also find "lagged" mismatches in France, where the positive association on trust in the EP in 2004-2006 is followed by a negative association on trust in national institutions in 2006-2008.

In countries from all the regional clusters, such as Sweden (Nordic), Austria and the Netherlands (Western), Greece (Southern) or Hungary (Central and Eastern), we do not find significant associations for political trust in one of the levels, even if we do for the other. Poland is again the exception to the pattern, but it is not the only one that shows different associations for national and political trust in the EP. We also find that the associations tend to be consistent in their direction, and they are negative in all the data points for most of the countries, except for the exceptions already mentioned in France and the United Kingdom, but also in Italy (two positive, one negative) and Poland (six negative, one positive).

Figure 3.2. Bivariate relationship between political trust and boycotting products by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Coefficients are estimated using weighted logistic regressions, with a single index of trust in national institutions or trust in the European Parliament as the independent variable, controlling for gender, age, university education and urbanicity.

3.2.3 Contacting politicians or government officials

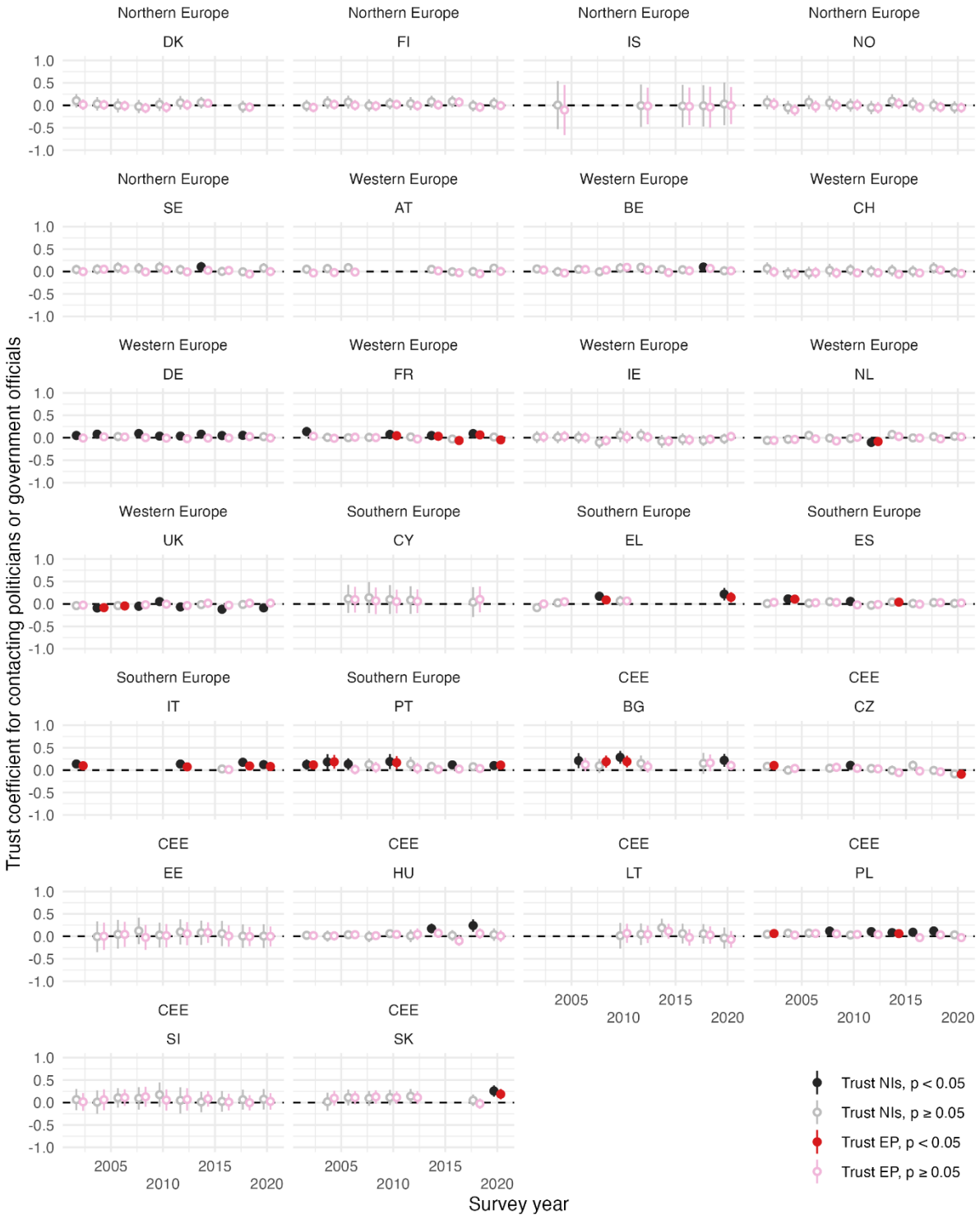
The coefficients of the effect of political trust on the likelihood of contacting politicians or government officials are plotted in Figure 3.3 and paint a similar picture to Figure 3.1 on wearing or displaying campaign badges and stickers. The Nordic and CEE regional clusters are still the least associated with this form of non-electoral political participation. However, the associations are present again in both clusters at least once, even if the asymmetry is even more evident within these two clusters, being Sweden the only Nordic country with a significant association (in 2014-2016).

The similarities with the coefficients for wearing or displaying badges and stickers include the evidence of how the coefficients are also plotted here in the upper quadrant of the graph, suggesting that — when existent — this association is usually positive, except in the UK (all waves but in 2010-2012 for trust in national institutions), France and Czechia (only for trust in the EP) and the Netherlands (also 2010-2012). Except in Bulgaria, the magnitude of the association is relatively low for contacting politicians, similar to the results for the bivariate relationship between political trust and boycotting.

Even with a small effect size that suggests a minimal association, the association between political trust in national-level institutions and contacting politicians is consistently positive in some countries. In Germany, in nine out of ten ESS rounds, the relationship is positive. In Italy, the association is significant and positive in 4 out of 5 waves, although Italy has participated in fewer ESS studies.

The coefficients for trust in the EP provide a different picture of the relationship. Compared to the previous two items of non-electoral political participation, the differences are noticeable in some countries. The most obvious case is Germany, where trust in national institutions is always positively correlated with contacting politicians or government officials, while the relationship between trust in the EP and this mode of political action is never significant in any of the ESS waves. In most countries, but particularly in Southern Europe, when the association between trust in the EP and contacting politicians or government officials is significant, it generally follows the same directions (see Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia). Finally, the countries with less congruence between these two dimensions of political trust are France (negative associations with trust in the EP and positive for national trust) and Czechia (negative in 2020-2022 for trust in the EP and positive for national trust).

Figure 3.3. Bivariate relationship between political trust and contacting politicians or government officials by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Coefficients are estimated using weighted logistic regressions, with a single index of trust in national institutions or trust in the European Parliament as the independent variable, controlling for gender, age, university education, and urbanicity.

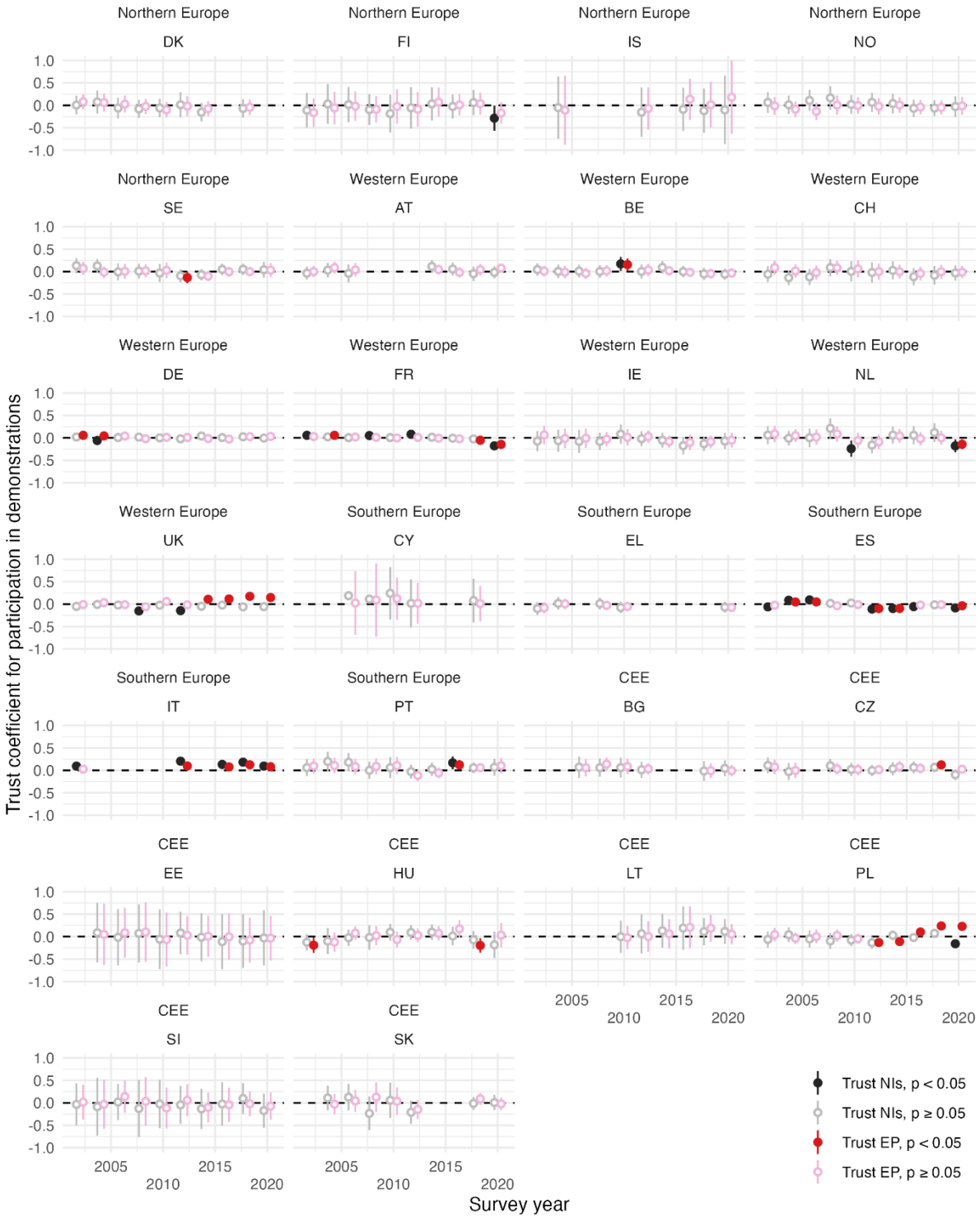
3.2.4 Participation in demonstrations

The next form of non-electoral political participation analysed is participation in demonstrations. To that end, we plot the relationship between participating in demonstrations and political trust in Figure 3.4. One of the main findings — consistent with the literature (Morales 2017: 143) — is the low number of countries where this association is significant (only 13 out of 26), even lower than for contacting politicians (15), and much lower than boycotting (17), and wearing badges or stickers (16). The number of data points (countries/waves) for which the correlation is significant is also much smaller, and only in 55 out of 444 occasions we find significant relationships (12%), which is again considerably fewer than for the other forms of non-electoral participation. For comparison, 17% of the data points show significant relationships for contacting politicians (74/444), 20% for wearing badges (87/444) and 23% for boycotting products (103/444).

Most cases with significant associations can be found, again, in Western and Southern Europe. The association in Nordic countries is negligible (except in Finland), while Poland is the only Central and Eastern European country in which there is a significant (and negative) association with trust in the national parliament, but only in round 10 of the European Social Survey (2020-2022). The wider range of confidence intervals suggests more variability and/or less precision in the estimate, while the weak associations between participating in demonstrations and trusting political institutions prevent us from finding clear patterns over time or across regions. We do not necessarily find larger coefficients in either the earlier or the latter part of the period, and we also do not find higher or lower levels of association between this form of participation and political trust in one region over the other — rather, only differences for specific countries.

Regarding trust in the EP, just like in the association for wearing or displaying campaign badges / stickers, we find again in Poland the most striking differences compared with trust in national institutions. In the early-mid 2010s the association was negative — but non-significant for national institutions — and since the late 2010s we find positive associations for trust in the EP and even negative for trust in national-level institutions, which show clear differences in the relationship between political trust and this form of participation in this country. In the earlier period in Germany, we find more frequent positive associations with trust in the EP as compared to trust in national institutions, while in Poland the opposite is true. Finally, in countries like France, Italy or Spain the two associations appear to be conjoined.

Figure 3.4. Bivariate relationship between political trust and participation in demonstrations by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Coefficients are estimated using weighted logistic regressions, with a single index of trust in national institutions or trust in the European Parliament as the independent variable, controlling for gender, age, university education, and urbanicity.

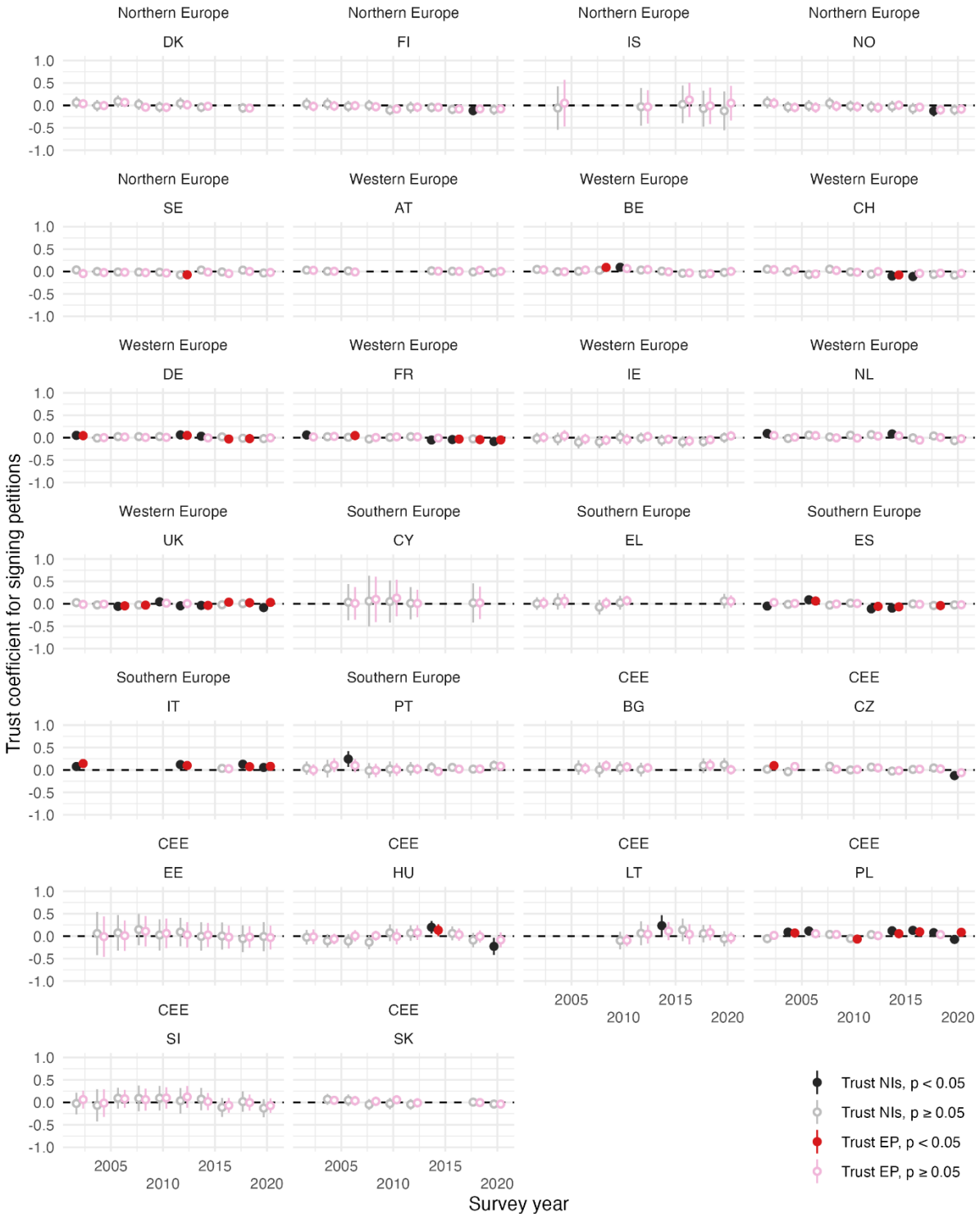
3.2.5 Signing petitions

The last graph plotting trust coefficients is shown in Figure 3.5, in this case regarding signing petitions. The non-association between trust in national institutions and signing petitions for Nordic countries remains true (only 5% of significant associations for trust in the national level institutions), followed by the regions with increasingly significant associations: CEE countries (15% of significant associations), West European countries (22%) and South European countries (26%). In Central and East European countries, we find mostly positive associations (70% of all the significant associations), with the majority of significant associations being found in Poland (in 7 out of 10 waves in the country), after which comes Czechia (2 out of 9) and only one round in Hungary and Lithuania.

Regarding West European countries, less than half of all the coefficients are positive. In Southern Europe, we do not find any association in Cyprus or Greece, and the only negative associations are in Spain (3 of the 4 significant associations), whereas in Italy and Portugal, the associations are always positive. In any case, both the CEE (70% of the significant associations) and Southern European countries (67%) are the regional clusters with the most positive associations — albeit weak — between signing petitions and trusting political institutions.

As observed in previous items, the coefficients for trust in the EP and national institutions regarding signing petitions show similar patterns. Yet, there are at least three findings that are worth commenting on. Firstly, in the most recent years, we find significantly negative associations with trust in national-level institutions that are not negative for trust in the EP in the United Kingdom and in Poland. Secondly, in some countries, the positive associations are only for the coefficients with one of the types of trust (EU or national). In Czechia the only positive associations are regarding trust in the EP, while the contrary occurs in Sweden. Finally, the associations for trust in the EP appear to be more positive in recent years as compared to trust in the national institutions. If we look into the last two waves — and aside from the UK and Poland — this is the case of Finland, Norway, Czechia and Hungary (negative for national trust), although not for Germany and Spain, even if the coefficients for trust in the national level institutions have the same direction, despite the nil association.

Figure. 3.5. Bivariate relationship between political trust and signing petitions by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Coefficients are estimated using weighted logistic regressions, with a single index of trust in national institutions or trust in the European Parliament as the independent variable, controlling for gender, age, university education, and urbanicity.

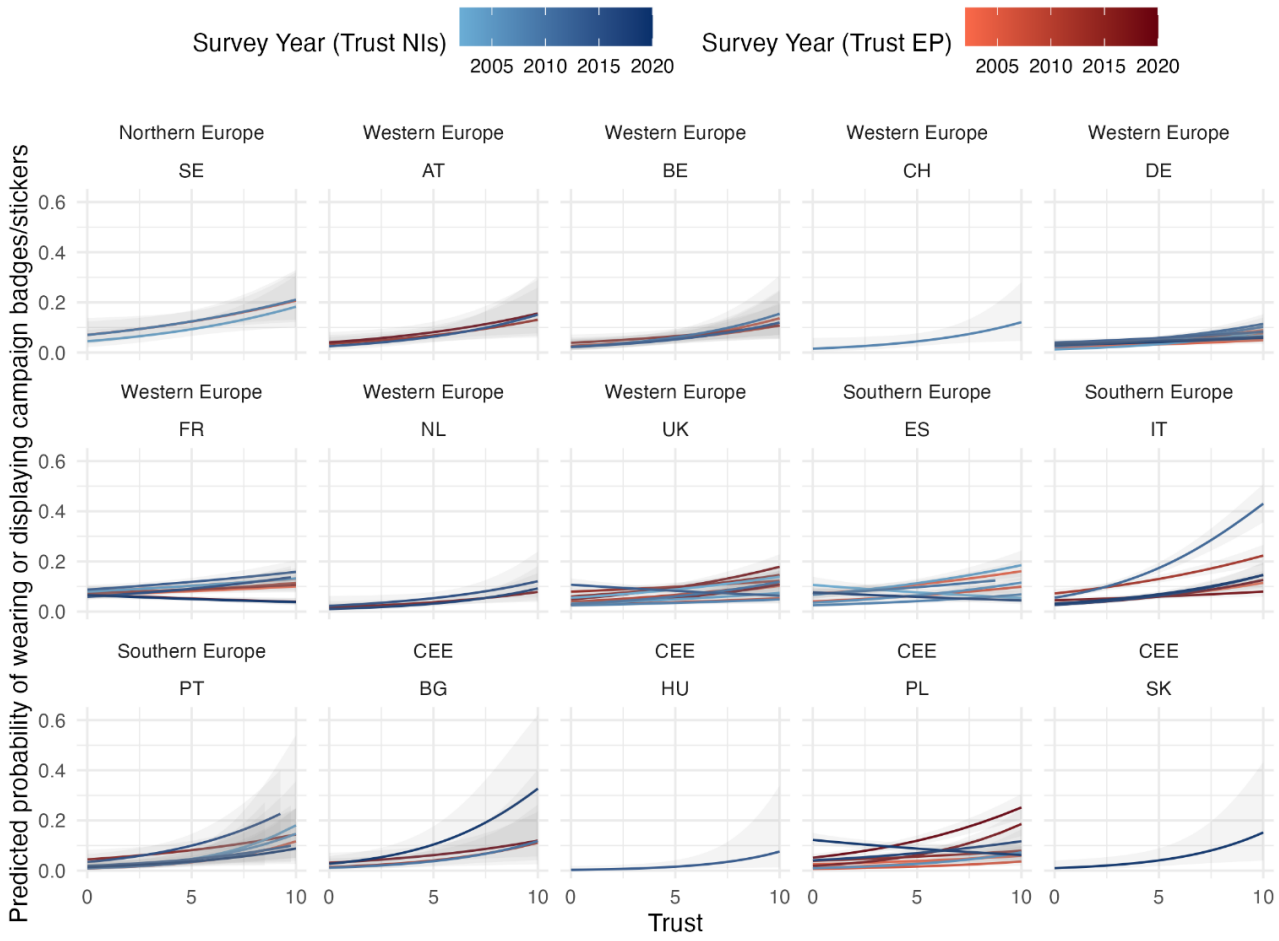
3.3 The effect of political trust on non-electoral political participation

Having examined the relationship between trust and the five different forms of non-electoral political participation, we now focus on the significant associations, controlling for gender, age, education, and urbanicity. This means that Figures 3.6 to 3.10 do not necessarily have all the countries or the same number of data points per country. As seen in the previous section, the significant relationships between trust and our non-electoral participation items are mostly in Western and Southern Europe. For all the analyses, we start with the description of the effects of trust in the national-level institutions on each form of non-electoral participation, after which we refer to the differences — or lack thereof — compared to the patterns for trust in the EP.

Figure 3.6 shows a breakdown of the predicted probabilities of wearing or displaying campaign badges or stickers by values of the political trust scale. In most cases, when we find significant relationships between trust and this form of non-electoral participation, and after including key socio-demographic controls, an increase in trust is associated with a higher likelihood of wearing or displaying campaign badges. There are, however, some countries in which this relationship is negative (the higher the levels of trust, the lower the likelihood of this form of participation), such as some recent years in France, the United Kingdom, Spain and Poland. Other than that, there is no clear overarching conclusion regarding the negative or positive evolution in this relationship over time, since in some countries like Italy in the first part of the period the association was stronger, while in other countries like Austria, Hungary, and Slovakia the only associations are in the most recent part of the period. The predicted probabilities for trust in the EP do not substantially differ from the predicted probabilities for trust in national-level institutions, except for two countries. On the one hand, in Italy, the intensity of the relationship is weaker for trust in the EP in most years, while the opposing occurs in Poland.

The negative associations between boycotting and political trust are further examined in Figure 3.7. Political trust generally exerts a negative effect on the likelihood of boycotting products. In other words, higher levels of political trust are associated with a lower likelihood of boycotting, while lower levels of political trust are linked to a higher probability of engaging in this form of political participation. Again, only in very few cases, the relationship is the opposite (one ESS survey round in Germany and Czechia, and two in Italy), but these are the exceptions to the general pattern. Additionally, no clear longitudinal trend can be found in these analyses, since both the general trends and the outlier do not seem to be exclusive to specific timings of the periods analysed. Overall, we find more different patterns between trust in the EP and boycotting and trust in

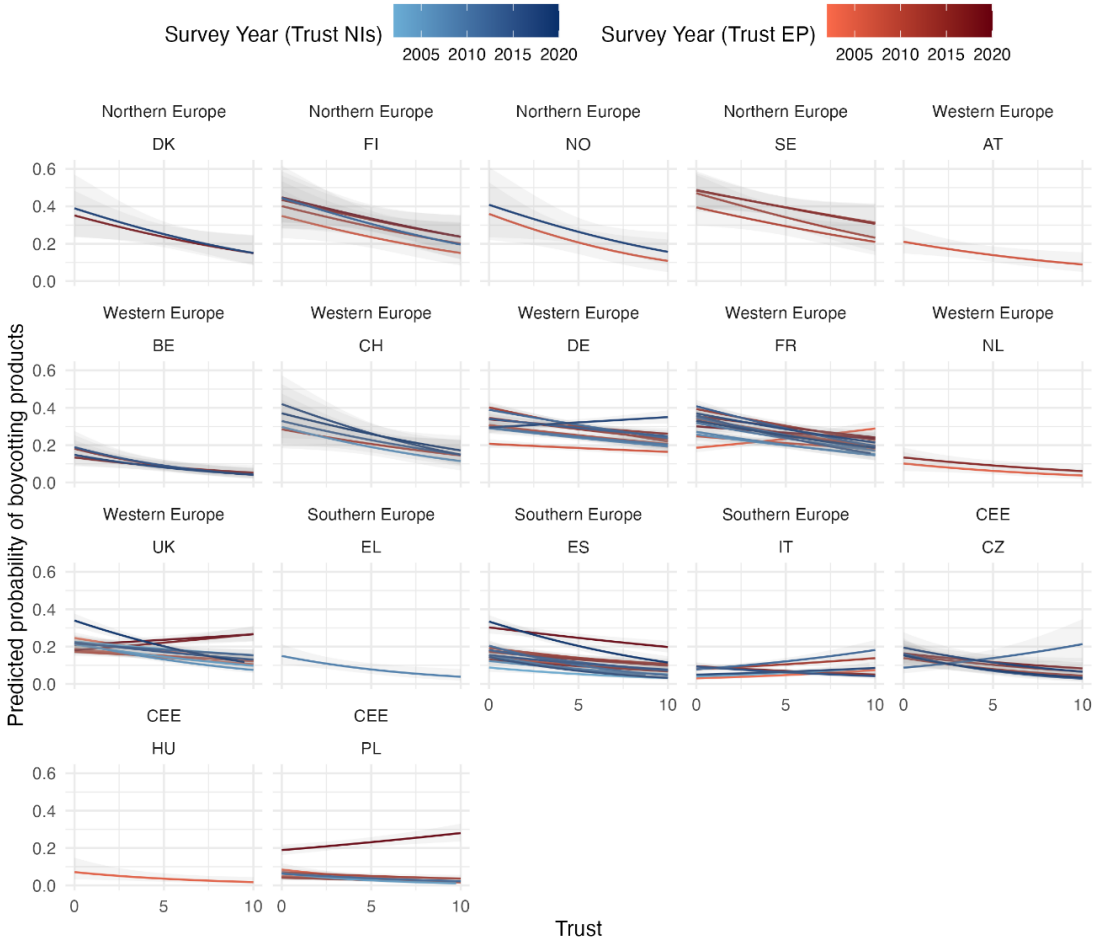
Figure 3.6. Significant effect of political trust on the likelihood of wearing or displaying campaign badges/ stickers by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated using multiple weighted logistic regressions, controlling for gender, age, university education, and urbanicity.

Figure 3.7. Significant effect of political trust on the likelihood of boycotting products by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated using multiple weighted logistic regressions, controlling for gender, age, university education and urbanicity.

national-level institutions and boycotting. Even if in most countries the relationship is similar, at least in France, for the United Kingdom and Poland, we find opposite slopes that are markedly different — and more positive — to the predicted probabilities for trust in national-level institutions. At the same time, in countries like Germany, the weaker intensity of the negative association with trust in the EP is visible.

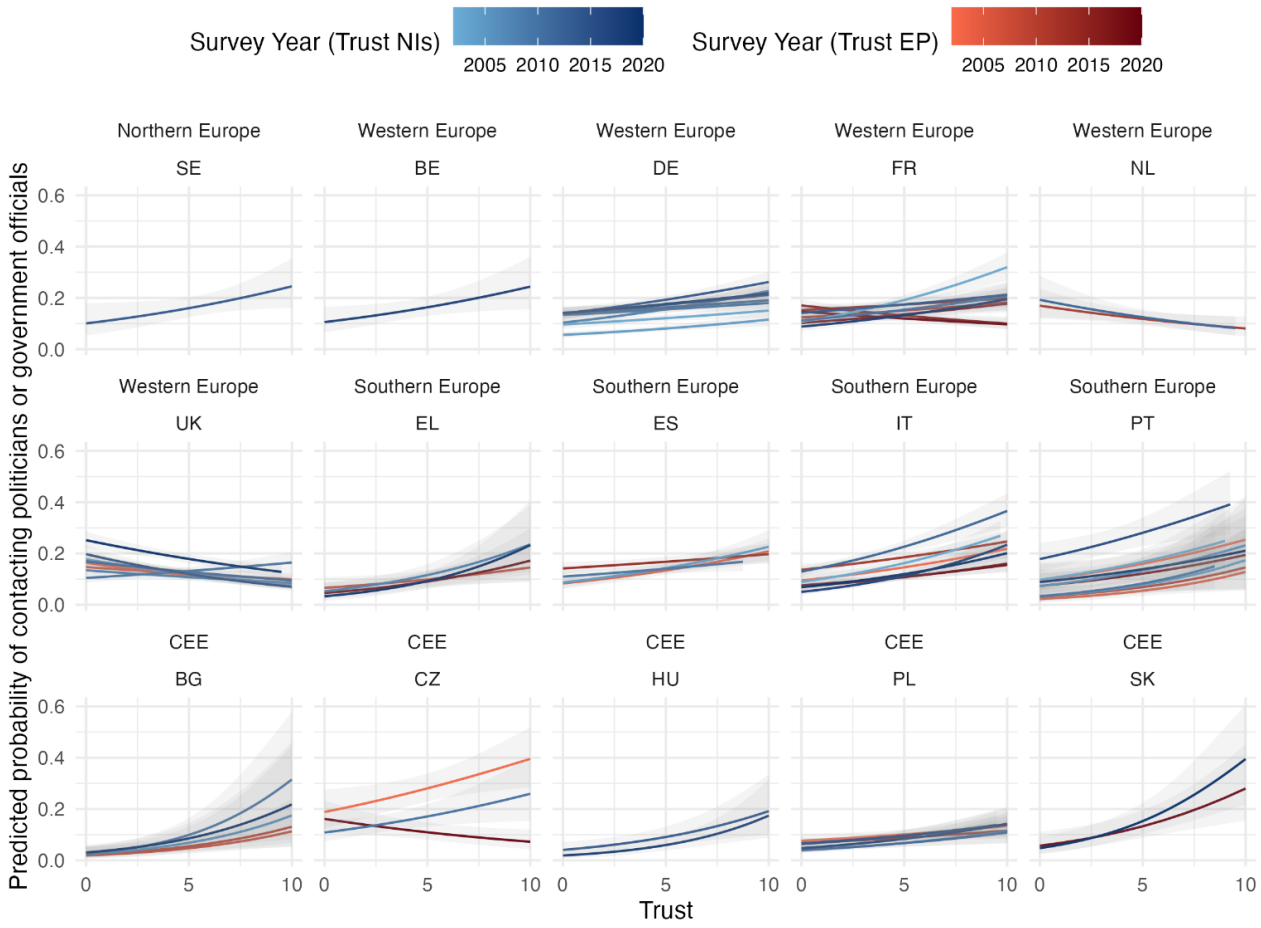
Figure 3.8 shows the significant effects between political trust and contacting politicians or government officials and is consistent with the corresponding figure in the previous section (Figure 3.3), showing mostly positive associations between the two variables. The size of the effect, as visualized in the slope and shape of the lines, is remarkably similar in countries such as Sweden, Belgium, France, Greece, Spain, Italy, Czechia, and Hungary, which means that when significant, the association is roughly of a similar intensity for each of the values of the political trust index. The exceptions to the generally positive associations are the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In Hungary, and to a lesser extent in Germany, there seems to be a weaker association between trust and contacting politicians or government officials, while in Slovakia and Portugal, we find a more pronounced relationship. If we look into the predicted probabilities for trust in the EP we find very similar effects, with all the lines having a corresponding line for trust in national level institutions. The only difference in the intensity (not in the direction) is in Czechia, where the predicted probabilities regarding trust in the EP are stronger.

In Figure 3.9 we find a mix of positive and negative associations between political trust and participation in demonstrations. In most countries, we only find a consistent direction in the association: positive in Belgium, Italy and Portugal, and negative in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Poland. However, we also find some countries in which the association is positive in some years and negative in others. In France we find mostly positive associations, with only one exception in recent years; whereas in Spain, we find a majority of negative associations (in recent years), while in the first part of the period the relationship was strongly positive. Finally, in recent years in Italy, we find strong relationships between trust and participation in demonstrations that are much higher in intensity than in any other country, perhaps only comparable with the earlier ESS rounds in Spain. The absence of significant associations for trust in the EP and participating in demonstrations in Finland, as well as the absence of significant associations for trust in the national level institutions in Sweden, Czechia and Hungary, makes it impossible to compare the predicted probabilities in these countries between the dimensions of trust. For Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal we mostly find similar effects for trust in the EP and trust in national institutions, but for Denmark,

the United Kingdom, and Poland, we find opposing slopes that also show different levels of association with participation in demonstrations.

The last plot (Figure 3.10) shows the predicted probabilities of signing petitions by values of political trust. As observed, the number of significant associations is greater, with 15 countries represented here, compared to only 10 countries in Figure 3.9. We find similarities and differences between the overall patterns here as compared to the other relationships plotted. Similar to the graph for participation in demonstrations, we also observe countries with only negative associations (in this case, Finland, Norway, Switzerland and Czechia), countries with only positive associations (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Lithuania), and countries with two directions of associations (mixed but mostly negative in France, the United Kingdom, and Spain; mixed but mostly positive in Poland; one negative association and one positive association in Hungary). The strength of the association (particularly when negative) is also stronger between political trust and signing petitions: the probability of signing petitions is approximately 0.5 for individuals who completely distrust national institutions in Finland, Norway and Switzerland, but it decreases to roughly 0.2 for those who completely trust them. Compared to the predicted probabilities for trust in national-level institutions, and except for the countries where only one type of association is plotted (either for trust in the EP or for national trust), only in Czechia, the slopes follow different directions. In this country, there is a lower probability of petition signing for non-trusters in the EU, while those who trust national institutions to a lesser extent are more likely to sign petitions. Finally, in Belgium, the associations for the two types of trust follow the same pattern but are more positive in the case of trust in the EP.

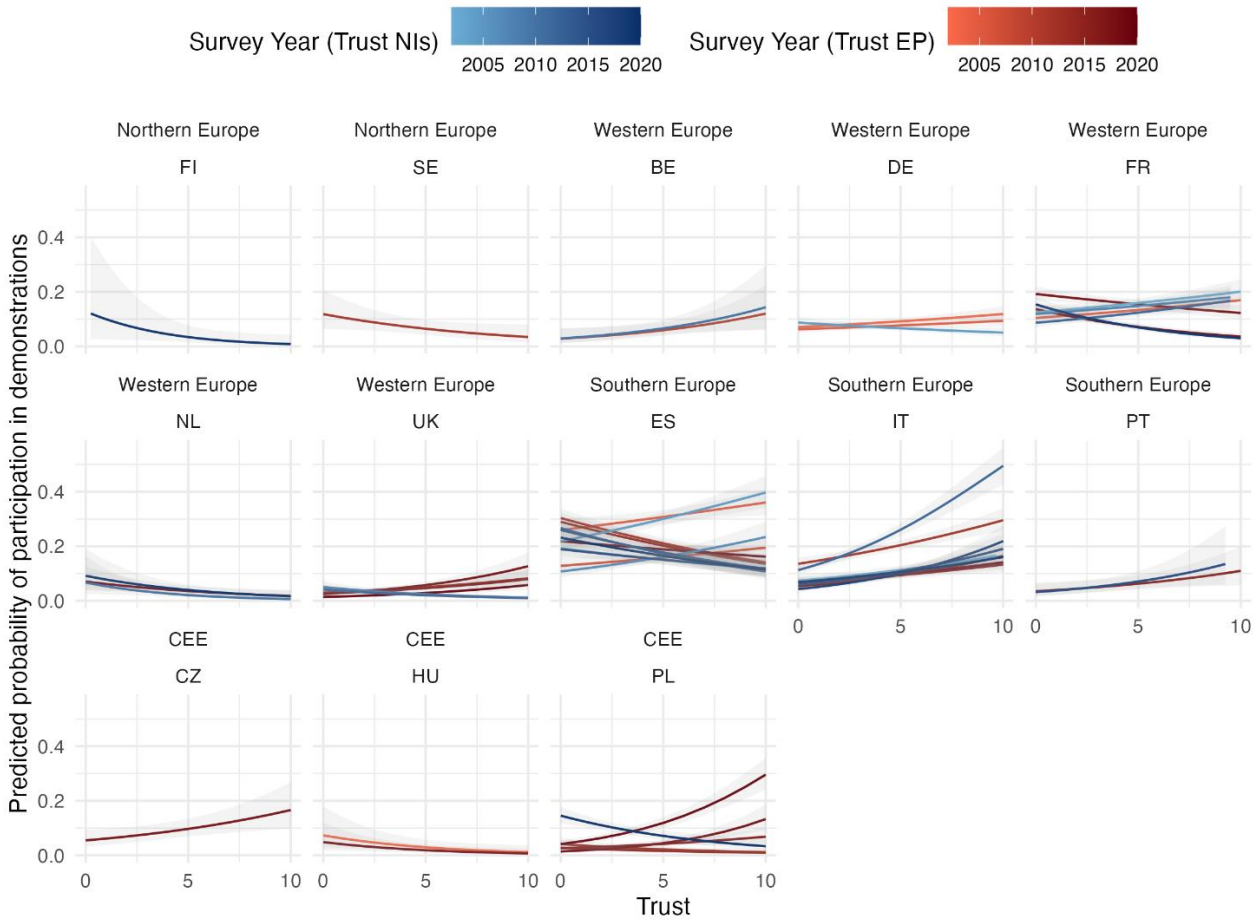
Figure 3.8. Significant effect of political trust on the likelihood of contacting politicians or government officials by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated using multiple weighted logistic regressions, controlling for gender, age, university education and urbanicity.

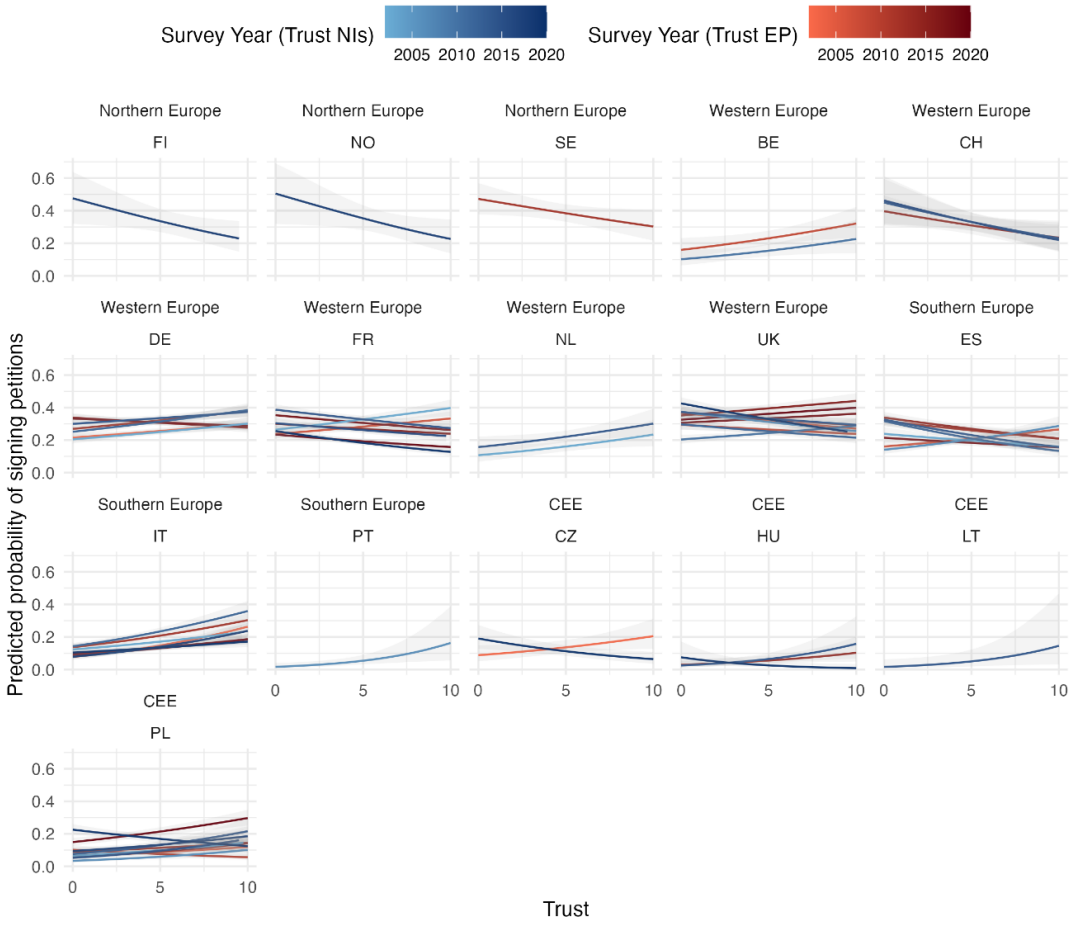
Figure 3.9. Significant effect of political trust on the likelihood of participation in demonstrations by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated using multiple weighted logistic regressions, controlling for gender, age, university education and urbanicity.

Figure 3.10. Significant effect of political trust on the likelihood of signing petitions by country and survey year, 2002-2022 (Li, Morales and Pamies, CSIC).



Source: Own elaboration from ESS Rounds 1-10.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated using multiple weighted logistic regressions, controlling for gender, age, university education and urbanicity.

4 Conclusions and key policy-relevant recommendations

Laura Morales (CSIC)

A wide range of modes of political action have, by now, been incorporated into the repertoire of political action of European citizens. If we focus on the last 20 years, using the European Social Survey between 2002 and 2022 (rounds 1 to 10), we can assess the patterns over time for five forms of non-electoral political participation that have been monitored continuously with this cross-national survey programme. With this data at hand, we find that badge-wearing, contacting politicians and participation in demonstrations are forms of political action that have remained relatively stable, at around 10-15 per cent on average, across Europe. The share of citizens boycotting products has considerably increased since the mid-2010s, reaching up to 30-40 per cent of the population in several countries but with average levels closer to 20 per cent in Europe as a whole. Petition signing has been steadily increasing in a considerable number of European countries but not all, and is the most commonly used form of political action of the five considered.

However, as shown in Chapter 2, how prevalent these forms of political action are and how much they are used varies considerably across countries in Europe: the mix of forms of political action included in the repertoire of Nordic citizens is not the same as that included in the repertoire of South European citizens. For example, badge-wearing is considerably more popular in Nordic countries than anywhere else, with Nordic citizens wearing badges at rates closer to 25-30 per cent compared to 5-10 per cent (or less) in most other countries. By contrast, participation in demonstrations is the preferred form of non-electoral action in countries like France and Spain, used by around 20 per cent of the population and with peaks reaching close to 40 per cent at highly contentious times. Instead, petition signing is very popular among Nordic citizens and the Swiss. Hence, we do not find consistent and universal trends in changes in political participation in the last two decades across all of Europe. Patterns and trends tend to be country or region-specific.

This multidimensionality of both political participation and political trust is important for our understanding of the extent to which higher degrees of political participation are linked to political disaffection and alienation. In fact, as shown in Chapter 3, more often than not political trust is not significantly correlated to non-electoral political participation, and the countries and modes of political action where there is a significant relationship are a minority.

For those cases where we find a significant relationship, it is usually never in the same direction for all countries and years. There is considerable cross-national variation and change over time, but a sizeable share of the correlations are positive (the higher the levels of political trust, the greater the likelihood of participating). However, the one exception is boycotting products, which displays a more consistent negative relationship with political trust.

Importantly, the more contentious form of non-electoral participation studied (participation in demonstrations) is not consistently or universally correlated to political trust, as for most countries, the relationship is nil, and for those where we find a correlation, it is sometimes positive and other times negative. Interestingly, in France, which is one of the countries where participation in demonstrations is the most prevalent the relationship between political trust and participating in demonstrations is primarily a positive one: those who participate tend to have higher levels of political trust, and only in the latter years (2018-2020 and 2020-2022) do we observe a negative correlation with political trust for France that is most likely connected to the wave of Yellow Vest mobilizations and the anti-vaccine protests in that country.
By and large, we do not find many differences in the association between national and EU-level political trust and non-electoral forms of political participation, except a recurrent pattern in Poland and the United Kingdom that points to the differential mobilization of pro-European citizens in both countries, in the former potentially as a reaction to the then governing PiS and in the latter possibly as a result of the Brexit referendum.

With these findings in mind, we can make several policy-relevant recommendations. First, the data available in cross-national surveys is quite limited to allow for a proper and comprehensive understanding of changing patterns of political participation. It would be extremely useful if the Eurobarometer or the ESS decided to include special modules every 4-5 years that queried respondents about more forms of non-electoral participation and about the specific activities of political participation they engaged in, so that researchers can undertake more fine-grained analyses on the exact motivations of political participation and their connection to political (mis)trust. This could be done by asking those who have participated in any given form of non-electoral action to think of the last one they can remember participating in and to describe what issues or demands they concerned. This would allow understanding better if protest action regarding, for example, climate change is differentially connected to political trust, political disaffection and satisfaction with democracy than — say — protest action regarding immigration. At present, existing surveys only allow us to examine whether participation itself is connected to

such political attitudes but not if the relationship is conditional on the issue or type of claims that were the object of mobilization into action.

Secondly, the legal landscape across the EU has become more repressive in the last 10 years, with many countries limiting the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression (Amnesty International 2024, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024). EU and national institutions must make greater efforts to protect these fundamental rights as they are an integral part of citizens' ability to democratically shape decision-making processes. Continued repression of these democratic expressions by the citizenry is very likely to trigger political mistrust, disaffection and a lack of support for political actors and institutions. The European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament should invite Member States to improve across the board the safeguarding and promotion of a legal and policing environment that enables civil society organisations as well as non-organized individuals to participate freely and safely in the civic and public space. This also requires considering the funding environment that civil society organisations operate in, which is often highly dependent on state and public subsidies. Political neutrality in the allocation of funding, as opposed to politically biased allocation, is critical to ensure that citizens who actively participate in the public sphere perceive fairness in the support provided by public authorities and institutions.

There are an increasing number of reports from the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU, the Council of Europe and numerous human rights organisations that show that civil society organisations are increasingly facing hindrance, insecurity and violence in Member States of the EU. No credible strategy to improve citizens' trust in political actors and institutions, including EU institutions, can be implemented by the EU if its institutions do not pro-actively engage in the monitoring and — very importantly — the enforcement of compliance by all Member States with its Council conclusions of 10 March 2023 (Council of the European Union 2023), European Parliament resolutions of 16 March 2023 on the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (European Parliament 2023) and the various relevant Directives. Enforcement of the Rule of Law and of the adherence to the core democratic principles on which the EU has been founded is essential for citizens to perceive that the EU is protecting their rights to political participation, freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression.

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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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