

“Citizen’s trust and societal polarization in times of transformation”

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The 2025 conference of the research section “Comparative Politics” of the German Political Science Association (DVPW) was dedicated to the topic: “*Citizen’s Trust and Societal Polarization in Times of Transformation: Comparative Perspectives from Different World Regions.*” Around 100 scholars from across Europe gathered from March 27 to 28 at Saarland University in Saarbrücken for the largest political science event to date hosted by the two political science chairs of the university’s still young department for European Social Research.

The conference is the result of two international research projects that are part of the Horizon Europe program: “Activating European Citizens Trust in Times of Crises and Polarization” (**ActEU**, led by the University of Duisburg-Essen and Saarland University) and **PROTEMO** (“Emotional dynamics of protective policies in an age of insecurity”, led by Saarland University). The aim of the conference was to address and discuss the most pressing challenges facing representative democracy across 20 panels: citizens’ trust—or distrust—in “their” political system, institutions, political representatives, and the EU as well as the interrelationships between trust, emotions and societal polarization. These overall topics are linked to long-term transformations related to migration and integration, climate change, technological change, gender inequalities, Europeanisation or region-specific challenges. Each of the 20 panels offered valuable perspectives on the concepts, determinants and consequences of political trust, polarization and participation.

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The conference opened with a welcome speech by the co-speaker of the DVPW's Comparative Politics section, *Thomas Richter* (Leibniz Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA)), along with the local organizing team: *Prof. Dr. Daniela Braun*, *Prof. Dr. Georg Wenzelburger* (both Saarland University), and *Dr. Kristina Weissenbach* (NRW School of Governance). They emphasized the importance and topicality of the conference's agenda by highlighting contemporary challenges to representative democracy, but also the need to study these topics with care and accuracy and the role of academia in doing so. The first day concluded with a keynote speech of the Prime Minister of Saarland, *Anke Rehlinger*, who emphasized the importance of trust for real-life politics. It was followed by a public discussion on the topic "*Transformation and Trust in Politics*", during which the negative effects of declining trust and rising polarization on the democratic system resurfaced linking academic insights with a practitioner's perspective.

The following section summarizes key insights from various panels that contribute to different areas within the social sciences. The first panel of the conference "*What are the current major challenges of (European) representative democracy and how can we resolve these issues?*" introduced the urgency of the overall theme of the conference. It was concerned with the major challenges representative democracy is facing today and offered potential solutions by investigating different forms of political trust, participation, and mobilization. The research by *Bernd Schlipphak* and *Oliver Treib* (University of Münster), as well as *Jan Menzner* (Goethe-University Frankfurt), highlighted the role of climate policies and their interplay with unconventional political participation (e.g., *protesting*, *civil disobedience*, *boycotting*), satisfaction with democracy, and political trust. If climate worries are high and political trust is low, citizens tend to partake in unconventional political participation. Although higher climate concerns seem to boost democratic satisfaction and support among the German population, this relation is regulated by trust. When it comes to conceptual and empirical linkages between political attitudes and engagement, a research gap remains. Within this panel, multiple approaches were presented and discussed that try to fill this gap, such as the concept of facilitative trust, which could be a guidance to design institutions that mobilize trust. In the end, the panel's guiding question, whether political trust is related to the way citizens engage with politics, was approached from different perspectives with elaborated concepts of political trust and its consequences, providing a foundation for the subsequent panels.

Assessing one specific key theme of the conference, panel two titled "*Polarization about protection? Governments' reactions to insecurity: Patterns, causes and consequences*" critically examined trust from the perspective of protective issues. The presenters and audience debated four contributions on state responses to insecurity and provisions of protection. Given the multiple insecurities of our times, different issues connected with protection were addressed: establishing a normative baseline to differentiate between restrictive and liberal protection (*Nicole Bolleyer*, LMU Munich), tackling the growing dissociation from democracy ("*Demokratiedistanz*") in many liberal democracies today (*Thomas Richter*, GIGA), mapping disparate political responses aimed at protecting the national economy (*Sara Konoe*, Kansai University) and measuring public redistribution attitudes in increasingly unequal societies (*Lars Lott*, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg). The

contributions all identified imminent threats to democracy. With decreasing trust in political institutions and policymakers, these legal, political, and economic considerations are highly important in the sense that they can function as predictors for the satisfaction with and—potentially—rejection of democracy as a political system.

Panel four was dedicated to “*Trust(s), political attitudes and participation*”, posing questions about contemporary perils for democracy. Similar to the concept of dissociation from democracy discussed in panel two, this panel concentrated on citizens’ loyalty or support for democracy as well as their different levels of willingness for political participation. While a variety of different societal groups was outlined according to their respective levels of and likelihood for political participation (*Kristina Weissenbach*, University of Duisburg-Essen), one specific group of “semi-loyalists” was highlighted (*Simon Franzmann*, University of Göttingen). This group is characterized by ambivalent and conditional support for democracy. Trust was also studied with regards to its relationship with populism (*Max Filsinger*, Institut Catholique de Lille) and in its relation to the democratic quality of political institutions (*Max-Valentin Robert*, Institut Catholique de Lille). In this context, scholars paid attention to different levels of trust ranging from interpersonal to EU-level trust as well as different dimensions, looking at particularized, identity-based, and generalized trust.

The fifth panel, “*Gender-based needs and polarisation in Europe*”, examined the contribution of gender-related issues to the polarisation of European politics. The first paper by *Valentina Nerino* (University of Bern), introduced the concept of ‘eristic inversion for complexity reduction’, whereby illiberal actors redefine democratic and liberal concepts (e.g., ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’) to suit their agenda and political purposes. The second article (presented by *Giuseppe Carteny*, Saarland University), used a new manifesto-coding corpus and existing survey data to show how Europe’s populist radical right attracts two distinct voter profiles: traditionalists and ‘gender-modern nativists’. It also demonstrated how far-right actors can foster support by using political communication strategies related to gender issues. The next paper, by *Colm Flaherty* (Roskilde University), analysed focus-group conversations with Danish right-wing populist voters, identifying shared ‘epistemic habits’ that fuse vocabulary relating to fairness and solidarity with an ‘everyday-knowledge-first’ epistemology, while selectively relying on statistics or media stories. This approach claims situated objectivity and echoes Danish anti-elite cultural myths. Finally, *Pablo Ortiz Barquero* (Pablo de Olavide University) presented based on original survey data that relative deprivation in six countries bred political distrust, turning gender-role views and ‘left-behind’ feelings into right-wing populist votes, whereas trust weakened this link.

The presentations in panel eight “*European identity, values and trust in times of political polarization in Europe*” linked the overall theme of the conference to social psychological constructs such as identification with Europe and emotions towards protective policies. First, in a quantitative study based on survey data, *Philipp König* (Saarland University) investigated the polarization of different forms of identification with Europe among German citizens, revealing multiple latent identity classes. After that, *Pavlo Kravchuk* (University of Coimbra) studied the European identities of forcibly displaced Ukrainians currently living in Europe. In qualitative inter-

views, he uncovers emerging polarization in the degree of identifying with Europe among Ukrainian refugees living in the EU. Last, *Katja Stempel* (Saarland University) presented her research about how policies are legitimized by political actors by appealing to emotions, such as fear and the wish for protection. Her presentation relates to the conference topic of public trust, as popular support for policies is based on trust in the benevolent intentions and capabilities of political actors.

The tenth panel “*Dynamic interrelations between political trust and political parties*”, looked at the relationship between political support and political parties. Three projects were introduced, the first project presented the results of a survey vignette suggesting that different forms of perceived party ambiguity matter for voters’ perceived similarity of their own positions to those of the parties. *Roni Lehrer* (University of Mannheim) set out questions and hypotheses about the relationship between perceived party ambiguity, perceived voter-party similarity and satisfaction with democracy, that will be explored in the next steps of the project. The second project by *Lucca Hoffeller* (Goethe University Frankfurt) provided evidence on how individuals’ perceived incongruence between their own social group and party positions negatively affects their satisfaction with democracy. More specifically, the results suggested that perceived incongruence on an issue between one’s own social class and party positions significantly affects individuals’ satisfaction with democracy, while other forms of social identity tend to play a minor role—or no role at all. Finally, the third paper presented by *Toine Fiselier* (European University Institute) showed the relationship between affective polarization and political support, and that variations in affective polarization appear to have little or no relationship with trust in politicians and satisfaction with democracy.

The two-part panels, “*Meaning and Understanding of Democracy: The Demand Side in Empirical Research of Democracy*” (11 and 12) focus on the polarized conceptions of democracy. Firstly, using German schools’ surveys, *Tim Schmidt* presented a study co-authored by *Simone Abendschön* (both University of Gießen) to examine the differences in democratic attitudes between native German children and children socialized in autocracies. Followed by *Jessica Kuhlmann*’s (University of Siegen) qualitative research focusing on local politicians’ self-perception as political actors and their roles in regional, federal and global politics.

The next presenter, *Thomas Kestler* (University of Würzburg), introduced a first draft of his research project, which explores how the concept of democracy is both contested and reified across generations and within long-term societal developments. Building on this, *Norma Osterberg-Kaufmann* (Humboldt-University Berlin) presented results from a quantitative survey study regarding democratic attitudes of young Singaporeans, offering first insights on how democratic values are perceived in a different culture context. Lastly, the panels ended with *Alexander Geisler*, who reported a study co-authored by *Tina Freyburg* and *Ioannis Vergioglou* (University of St. Gallen). Applying Q-methodology, their research investigates how Eastern Europeans understand the concept of democracy.

In Panel 13 “*Party competition, executives and institutions*”, *Alejandro Ecker* (Heidelberg University) presented his work on affective polarization, pre-electoral coalition formation, and electoral behavior, in which he seeks to disentangle the factors and incentives that drive parties to form pre-electoral coalitions and how

citizens respond to them. His contribution is both theoretical and empirical, as in addition to a robust quantitative analysis, he introduced the concept of joint electoral potential, which highlights electoral considerations as a primary driver of pre-electoral alliance formation. While Ecker focused on parties and coalitions, *Martin Acheampong* presented joint research with *Emilia Arellano*, *David Kuehn*, *Mariana Llanos*, and *Thomas Richter* (all from the German Institute for Global and Area Studies, Hamburg) on the personalization of executive power. Their study examines personalization events involving executive leaders across several countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing an original analytical framework, they focus on cases from the Global South and use media analysis to investigate whether and how chief executives attempt to personalize power. Finally, *David Schweizer* (University of Mannheim) presented his research on how public trust in Constitutional Court rulings on climate change cases affects broader political trust. Using the example of the Swiss ruling from the European Court of Human Rights, he explores how similar judicial decisions might influence citizens’ evaluations of political institutions. Overall, the three papers in this panel addressed diverse aspects of party competition, executive leadership, and institutional trust.

Moving on to Panel 15 titled “*Investigating the drivers and effects of populist attitudes*”, it addressed the conference topic of political trust by investigating the drivers and effects of populism. *Susanne Garritzmann*, *Staffan Kumlin*, *Nadja Wehl* and *Marius Busemeyer* (all from University of Konstanz) analyzed whether boys’ negative experiences in school as their first contact with state institutions raises their susceptibility to populism. *Charlotte Meyer* (Leipzig University) developed the concept of generational populism as a populist disposition against older generations. She used the Fridays for Future movement as a case study to illustrate the explanatory potential of this concept. Last, *Oliver Hidalgo* and *Stefan Christoph* (University of Passau) presented a comparative framework for the analysis of conspiracy beliefs, and how they undermine diffuse and specific support for democracy.

Panel 16 saw the conference expand its focus to “*Migration, populism, and polarization*.” *Sarah Bassisseh* (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen) presented her work on transcending borders, and the impact of past state repression on migrant political participation in Germany, using qualitative interviews to examine political participation among people with a migration background. *Alex Hartland* (Saarland University) introduced his research project on political trust and migrant groups, which uses over-sampled survey data to study political attitudes among migrant groups in France, Germany, and the Netherlands. The last presenter, *Tristan Muno*, presenting joint work with *Thomas König* (both of the University of Mannheim) on partisanship, Muslimhood, and polarization. Evidence from 25 European Countries were used to a conjoint experiment to explain how non-political factors can drive affective polarization in Europe.

While the previous panel emphasized trust and populism, the following Panel 17 offered a different perspective on “*Environmental and Climate Policy in Europe: Problems and Conflicts*”, focused on water resources, with particular emphasis on water-related conflicts, presented through various case studies from France and Germany. Two speakers (*Lena Partzsch* (FU Berlin) & *Henriette Schubert-Zunker* (Technical University of Berlin)) out of four provided in-depth analyses of these conflicts,

shedding light on the complexities surrounding the management and competition for water resources. A central theme of the panel was the role of companies in managing water resources and the competition for access to these resources. Notable examples, such as Nestlé and Tesla, were discussed to highlight the corporate involvement in water use and its implications for local communities.

While the first segment of the panel was centered on qualitative research, which focused specifically on European contexts, the second segment focused on quantitative studies (*Lars Rumpf* (Deutsche Universität für Verwaltungswissenschaften Speyer) & *Jan Menzner* (Goethe-University Frankfurt)), covering topics like the role of agriculture in water resource use. One study, for instance, analyzed the salience of water-related issues in the manifestos of 21 political parties from 13 Western European countries. The other research explored the relationship between the rejection of democratic values and the perceived threat of climate change, analyzing the positions of both proponents and opponents of climate protection measures.

Panel 18 “*New Methods in Political Polarization*” included papers studying this phenomenon from a variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives. *Sushobhan Parida* (Leipzig University) kicked off the panel with his work on the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as a case study for armed group mobilisation, in which he used semi-structured interviews to analyse the motivations for joining the KLA during conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. He finds that the influence of social capital varies at different stages of the recruitment process. Using a two-wave survey, the panel’s second presentation saw *Antonia May* describe work with *Sebastian Ziaja* (both GESIS) about the establishment of a local citizen council aimed at promoting more direct political engagement among citizens. This has an important influence on political participation and satisfaction with democracy, albeit not always in the anticipated directions. For the third presentation, *Victoria Palchikova* presented joint work with *Julia Schulte-Cloos* (both University of Marburg) on the polarizing impact of anti-democratic foreign influence on citizens’ commitment to democracy. Using an experimental survey design, they find that knowledge of foreign influence in domestic politics can harden feelings of partisanship and polarization among voters in Germany. In sum, the panel highlighted the multi-faceted nature of political polarization and the benefits of adopting a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods to address analytical challenges.

The conference ended with Panels 19 and 20; Panel 19 “*Environmental and Climate Policy in Europe: Problems and Conflicts*”. Sarah Kups (OECD Trust Survey Team) provided an overview of the OECD Trust Surveys and explained how researchers can request access to the data. The surveys are published biennially and have recently been expanded to include non-OECD countries. The panel featured three presentations by *Castellar Granados* (Instituto de Iberoamérica, University of Salamanca), *María Rodríguez Alcázar* (Ghent University & UNU-CRIS), & *Friedrich Plank* (Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz), each focusing on political trust, democracy, and social mobility. One paper examined participation in regional institutions, drawing on the CROP dataset, which analyzes 80 regional organizations and 267 treaties. Another focused on the politicization of international organizations in the Global South, providing deeper insights into various regions. It explored the concept of trust in and support for institutions, offering a comparative analysis of

which organizations are accepted and which face resistance. In the end, the panelists emphasized the crucial role of trust and political participation in ensuring the stability of democracy and stressed the need to incorporate both regional and global perspectives more effectively into political discourse.

Bringing the conference to a close, the final session offered a fitting conclusion to two days of rich and engaging dialogue. Panel 20 “*Paths of Representation: Political Careers in Europe and Politician’s Connection to Citizens*” contributed to the conference topic of political trust by examining citizens’ political representation in democracies. *Thomas Zittel*, *Manuel Diaz Garcia* (both from Goethe-University Frankfurt), *Stefanie Bailer*, *Jana Boukemia* and *Daniel Höhmann* (University of Basel) examined whether descriptive representation (specifically in the form of demographic variables) enhances citizens’ political trust. *Julius Diener* (Mannheim University) and *Mathis Brinkmann* (Leuphana University Lüneburg) investigated whether young representatives’ attitudes better reflect young peoples’ views than the attitudes of older representatives do. *Lea Kaftan* and *David Knoll* (University of Konstanz) study how democracy is discussed in German Parliamentary speeches in the time span between 1919 and 2019. In sum, the presentations offered valuable insights into how different forms of political representation shape trust, political attitudes, and democratic discourse—both historically and in contemporary contexts.

Panels 3 and 7 had to be cancelled on short notice. However, equally engaging were three additional panels that brought fresh energy and valuable perspectives to the conference discussions. Although not documented here in full detail, the insights shared in these panels significantly enriched the overall discourse and continue to resonate beyond the conference itself.

Panel six, titled “*Forms of Polarization and Polarization Processes in Developed Countries*”, brought together *Paolo Chiochetti* (HU Berlin), *Michael C. Zeller* (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), and *Priska Daphi* (Universität Bielefeld), alongside *Moritz Rehm*, *Martin Schröder*, and *Martin Ulrich* (Saarland University). Their discussion focused on polarization dynamics in various national contexts, including case studies from the UK and Germany.

In panel nine, “*Polarized Publics, Extremism, and Political Violence*”, *Teresa Völker* and *Daniel Saldivia Gonzatti* (WZB Berlin Social Science Center), *Verónica Hurtado Lozada* (School of Government, Adolfo Ibáñez University), *Mariana Ramírez Bustamante* (Heidelberg Center for Ibero-American Studies), *Alina Greiner-Filsinger* (University of Mannheim), *Max Schaub* (Universität Hamburg/WZB Berlin), *Markus Steinbrecher*, and *Heiko Biehl* (both Bundeswehr Center for Military History and Social Sciences) explored a wide range of topics, from political extremism and public opinion to organized crime and violence.

Panel fourteen, “*The Geography of Political Attitudes*”, added yet another dimension to the program. The discussion touched on right-wing populism, regional variations in political sentiment, and attitudes toward the European Union. Contributors included *Kathrin Ackermann* (University of Siegen), *Antonia Lang* (Goethe University Frankfurt), *Johannes Lattmann* (University of Mannheim), *Tuuli-Marja Kleiner* (Thünen Institute of Rural Studies), as well as *Paulina Holz*, *Felix Hörisch*, and *Christina Pöhlend* (all HTW Saar).

The conference “*Citizen’s trust and societal polarization in times of transformation*” was dedicated to current debates on political trust, societal polarization and participation and offered a space in which research gaps and new approaches were discussed—from populism to climate and gender to democracy. The contributions were characterized by methodological diversity and facilitated lively discussions; they expanded knowledge and promoted in-depth research in this area. Overall, the conference shed light on varying causes and possible solutions for increasing societal polarization and emphasized the wide-reaching impacts on different areas of research, underlining the urgency of research on the conference’s topics in order to provide answers to the challenges for representative democracy as a whole.

This is also highlighted in the reflections by the organizers Daniela Braun and Georg Wenzelburger. Looking back, the organizers also shared thoughtful reflections on the event as a whole, emphasizing its intellectual richness and vibrant atmosphere. Professor Braun highlighted the unique combination of analytical depth and genuine engagement and Professor Wenzelburger emphasized the diversity and scope of the debates. The event’s key achievements were summed up by their remarks, which also indicated future conversations and collaborations.

Besides the rich insights from the formal event, the conference laid the foundation for networking and future collaborations, connecting scientists from different areas of research.

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