

Chapter 4

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

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1. PURPOSE

The pandemic period is widely recognized as a turning point in the history of the European Union and of its member states. After the long and uneven effects of the 2008 financial crisis, the Union is now experiencing the worst public health crisis in its history with severe and immediate social, political and economic effects. **It is against this backdrop that it becomes increasingly urgent to identify the specific conditions facing European democracies individually and collectively.** The present chapter, therefore, aims to provide policymakers, politicians, activists, and the general public with a simple and informative review of the challenges to democracy in the EU. Such a comprehensive mapping will also help scholars to conceptualize the difficult choices facing European voters both in present and future national and supranational elections. Against this backdrop, textboxes will shed lights on case studies by summarising the findings of recently published articles and reports.

2. APPROACH

Research for this chapter was conducted between December 2020 and April 2021. The chapter draws upon a thorough review of academic articles, reports, policy briefs, books, and media articles, with a particular focus on outputs published between 2019 and 2021. This chapter reviews and groups together in a systematic way the disperse and fragmented social scientific evidence on those challenges that can have an impact on how individual and groups think of their electoral choices.

Secondary data was collected through online resources, including the *Eurobarometer*, OECD country profiles, studies by international organization and government agencies, the *European Social Survey*, reports from national bureaus of statistics, as well as annual reviews and datasets compiled by think tanks and international organizations, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, and Transparency International. A special attention has been devoted to handbooks, books and articles dealing with the topic of EU crises.

Sustained dialogue with all project partners and a process of internal peer review have shaped the design of this chapter and have been instrumental in drafting a well-informed synthesis on such a broad topic like challenges to democracy in the EU. As a result of this collaborative endeavour, the present chapter compiles a great deal of literature in a simple and synthetic form that can be easily accessed by a wide audience.

We acknowledge that there are different democratic configurations – such as, direct democracy, deliberative democracy, council democracy – in contemporary societies. Since the REDEM project aimed at contributing to coordinating and support research into the ethics of voting in European democracies, this chapter, however, focuses only on representative democracy, which is the overarching normative order of democratic practices at the national and supranational levels.

3. INTRODUCTION

One of the latest European Social Surveys attests that democracy as an ideal is ‘strongly supported’ by the public in almost all European countries (ESS 2020). The same survey also documents that the majority of citizens believe that democracy in Europe satisfies at least the basic procedural requirements and that the democratic performance remains more important than economic performance in determining attitudes to democracy (ESS 2020).

These trends reflect the commitment to democratic values and principles as expressed by EU fundamental treaties. According to the *Treaty of the European Union*, **“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”** (TEU, art. 2). Article 10 of the same treaty also says that “the functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy”, that ‘citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament’, and that “every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen’. Article 11 states that “The institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action”, that “the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society”, and that “the European Commission shall carry out broad consultations with parties concerned in order to ensure that the Union’s actions are coherent and transparent”.

In reality, despite such an intense commitment to democratic principles and some fairly positive trends, several indicators and reports demonstrate that the situation is not rosy, both at the supranational level and within several member states.

The *Democracy Index*, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), reports that democracy is “stagnating” in Europe. Among the causes of this stagnation, the *Democracy Index* survey lists a widening gap between political elites and citizens, a decline in media freedom and freedom of speech, and a decline in civil liberties (EIU 2020).

Regressions in terms of civil liberties are particularly worrying in some post-communist countries, such as Hungary and Poland (Freedom House 2020a). According to Freedom House, a growing number of politicians have attacked democratic institutions and undermined democratic mechanisms of checks and balances through repeated assaults on civil society groups, media, judicial independence, and parliamentary activities (Freedom House 2020a,b).

There is also a significant discrepancy between the perception of the EU as a normative order and the perception of its current functioning. While Europeans tend to have a positive view on the European Union, the *Eurobarometer* (2020) reports that only 43% of EU citizens trust the European Union as an institution. Specifically, the survey finds that trust in the EU was highest in Ireland (73% of citizens) and lowest in Italy (28%).

Albeit partial and with well-recognized biases and epistemological problems, these reports mirror the widespread pessimism about the state of democracy in the Union. Since at least the 2008 financial crisis, the number of publications on various types of democratic crises across EU member states has grown and received significant media attention (Riddervold et al. (eds.) 2021). According to a recent report (Foa et al. 2020), Europeans face a third peak in relative dissatisfaction with democracy. The first peak was during the so-called governability crises of the seventies, the second peak followed the recession in the nineties, and this last phase began with the 2009 eurozone crisis. In the last forty years, the EU, therefore, has experienced relatively regular cases of unrest, with ups, such as the end of the Cold War, and downs, but opinion polls seem to agree that “Europe’s current malaise ‘feels’ worse than past episodes” (Foa et al. 2020). Whether and when Europe can exit such a long period of institutional dissatisfaction, as the *2020 Global Satisfaction with Democracy* report says (Foa et al. 2020: 23)

will depend in large part upon the capacity of governments ‘to escape its underlying pressures - economic stagnation, regional inequality within and between countries, demographic anxieties, and imbalances of power between nation states in the post-Lisbon Treaty European Union.

A growing divide within the continent exacerbates this malaise. In terms of satisfaction, we can identify a zone of despair (France and Southern Europe) and a zone of complacency (western Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia) (Foa et al. 2020). Moreover, evidence shows that wages and regional inequalities contribute to increasingly high levels of dissatisfaction (Foa et al. 2020). In the last decade, a factor in the widening of the gap between Southern Europe and Northern Europe was the discontent with issues of economic sovereignty and the distribution of public resources. This combination of economic and political factors has opened the door for populist parties and a growing tide of Euroscepticism across the continent (Foa et al. 2020).

The divide is not only between countries, but it is increasingly prominent within the European society as a whole and within Member States societies taken individually. The findings from the *European Social Survey* show that the economic crisis has undermined social integration and people’s trust in politics (ESS 2013). They also corroborate the widespread feeling that the institutional framework of countries (for instance, the nature of welfare states, the employment regulations) had significant effect on the quality of people’s lives (ESS 2013).

A recent *European Social Survey* also documents the increasing polarization of European societies. Specifically, ‘an increased proportion of European publics felt that no migrants should be allowed to come from poorer countries outside Europe, while at the same time there was an increase in the proportion who felt that many such migrants should be allowed entry’ (ESS 2016: 12). The *European Social Survey* also attests that Europeans have become less positive about migrants from poorer countries outside Europe and have negative perceptions of the consequence of migration for crime, a country’s cultural life and public services (ESS 2016).

Rodden (2019) claims that ideological preferences are geographically distributed and that such a distribution reflects the relocation of process of economic activity. There is indeed evidence from several EU countries about a widening divide between urban and rural areas (Rodriguez-Pose 2020). The intergenerational divide also contributes to nurture polarization across Europe. As several experts report (Schmitt et al. 2016), lower birth rates and an aging population are reshaping the age pyramid of European countries. This asymmetry has enormous consequences on democratic politics, given the facts that older voters are an ever-expanding share of the electorate and that they tend to have more conservative viewpoints (Ford and Jennings 2020).

The *Eurobarometer* (2019) finds that the majority of EU citizens believe that responsibility for combatting fake news or disinformation rest on the media and public authorities. It also reports that 72% of respondents “who identify themselves by logging in via social media accounts” say they want to know how their data are used when they access other websites using these accounts.

In a context where 30% of respondents, as reported by a 2019 *Eurobarometer* survey, come across false information or information they believe misrepresents reality every day or almost every day, several studies also document a decline in internet freedom (Eurobarometer 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to moving several human activities and political interactions online. This transition, however, presents significant challenges to European democracies, both from a politics-of-emergency viewpoint and from the perspective of electoral security, especially considering the fact that current self-regulatory mechanisms struggle when the public interest clashes with the self-interest of corporate giants. The rise of digital campaigning and instruments such as micro-targeting have already proved several democracies vulnerable to attacks and exacerbated differences between marginalized segments of the society and wealthy minorities (Cagé 2020).

Electoral security in the digital era requires adequate instruments to protect data security, control the spread of fake news, and regulate new forms of digital campaigning. Meanwhile, cybersecurity researchers have reported substantial flaws in public opinion polls and Internet voting platforms (Specter and Halderman 2020) to the point that voting by mail is generally understood as the best available alternative to in-person voting in a context where both universal franchise and the security of voters are to be protected.

It is against this backdrop that in the following we will identify the main challenges to democracy in Europe. A challenge can be a social phenomenon, an economic and/or political trend that can have a negative impact on the performance of democratic institutions, the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions, the relationship between citizens in European representative democracies. By reviewing recent empirical and theoretical

academic literature as well as datasets and reports, this chapter aims to be of use for a mixed audience of policymakers, politicians and activists who want to have a practical guide to understand how and to what extent new and old challenges can shape present and future electoral choices across Europe. More specifically, this document shall address:

1. The democratic deficit in the EU
2. Economic insecurity
3. The increasing polarization of European public spheres
4. The rural/urban divide
5. Democratic backsliding in the EU
6. The pervasiveness of money in democratic campaigning
7. Emergency politics and the COVID-19 pandemic
8. Electoral security and the COVID-19 pandemic
9. Aging and the generational divide.

To be sure, the list of phenomena shaping the future of European democracies individually and collectively can be very long and, perhaps, include migration, climate change, disinformation, declining trust in institutions, corruption, elite reproduction, surveillance, and populism. In selecting 9 challenges, we have abstracted from perceptions and misperceptions in everyday talks about politics and focused only on what can be understood as being in itself a challenge for democracy, regardless of the specific context of application. This approach rules out several perceived challenges to democracy. From our perspective, migration, and climate change, for instance, are not in themselves challenges to democracy. They become challenges to democracy because of other factors, such as misinformation, polarization, and widespread economic insecurity. Our ambition is to list 9 challenges that could impact (or have already impacted) negatively on all democracies in the world. In this way, this chapter can also be an instrument for scholars, politicians, students and experts who conduct research on other contexts.

In reviewing the literature on such challenges, the chapter will combine the national and supranational level. In so doing, it aims to highlight the broad picture as well as those trends that impact on member states' democracies asymmetrically. The order of presentation should not be understood as implying any order of priority. Some trends, such as the democratic deficit, economic insecurity, aging, the rural/urban divide, the pervasiveness of money in democratic campaigning, have affected European politics for a long while. Other challenges, such as electoral security, emergency politics, and polarization are results of relatively new factors, such as the rise and success of social media and online political communication, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. Their impact, however, on democratic politics, processes and trust towards liberal democratic institutions can be long-lasting.

4. THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT IN THE EU

The so-called democratic deficit is one of the most studied challenges to democracy at the supranational level. **By the expression 'democratic deficit', EU scholars meant to capture the limited influence of the addresses of the decisions of EU governing bodies on the**

contents of those decisions and, therefore, a supposed lack of democratic legitimacy of EU's institutions (Lodge 1994).

Despite a large public and scholarly perception of the democratic deficit of supranational institutions, scholars have also argued that technical expertise, the creation of product standards, and the correction of market failures will make the public accept the EU as legitimate (Majone 2000). In the same vein, Moravcsik argues that the “myriad of institutional constraints not only render arbitrary and capricious action almost impossible but assures that legislation outside Brussels is likely to represent an exceptionally broad consensus among different groups at many levels of governance” (Moravcsik, 2004: 349). In reality, today the EU, Scicluna and Auer write (2019: 1435), looks like a highly politicized regulatory state in which democratic politics are not genuinely trusted to the point that “there is a sense in which the euro and the integration project are too important to be left to the voters”.

The most popular explanations of the democratic deficits refer to three phases: input, throughput, and output. Input-based arguments about the democratic deficit observe that the EU lacks institutional mechanisms to ensure communication between those subjected to policies and decision-makers (Bellamy 2013). Throughput-based arguments about the democratic deficit claim that EU's institutions lack inclusiveness in their high-level deliberative procedures (Schmidt 2010). Arguments about the lack of output legitimacy in the EU point at the idea that EU's policy outcomes tend to be biased against particular interests and shaped by ideological prejudices.

Even if they point at different legitimating mechanisms, these three perspectives should not be taken separately. When we consider the supranational level, deliberation and output efficiency can be seen as the primary legitimating mechanisms (Schmidt 2010), while principal-agent representation tends to be centered mainly at the national level (Hix and Høyland 2013). If we read input, throughput and output in continuity, it is possible to see that at the national level, policies can be perceived as alien impositions. Specifically, one of the main challenges to the legitimacy of supranational institutions is the fact that deliberative processes and output policies at the EU level can have a significant impact on participatory processes at the national level (Schmidt 2010: 710).

According to Stie, the crises affecting the EU over the last decades have ended up strengthening technocratic and executive bodies, demonstrating, therefore, the inability to address legitimacy problems of the Union. The EU “seems to be stuck in a pattern where genuinely political questions and challenges – such as how to deal with the eurozone and migration crises – (more or less) as a rule are met with technocratic processes and solutions” (Stie 2021). Moreover, austerity has had a severe impact on the social fabric and on the democratic politics of member states. In Greece, Katsanidou and Lefkofridi (2019) demonstrate that the asymmetry in the distribution of the negative consequences of austerity measures has opened a window of opportunities for institutional change, including changes in electoral rules.

A Europe of Creditors and Debtors

Debt relations have become entrenched in the EU institutional system and can shape the perception of state-to-state relations as well as attitudes towards supranational institutions. As Losada documents in a recent article (2020), three different orders of debt relations have contributed to transforming the Union from a *community of fate* to a *community of stability* and, eventually, to the current community of debt.

In the community of fate, financial assistance was essentially an act of solidarity. Once the European Monetary Union was agreed in Maastricht, sovereign debt, as perceived by market actors, started playing a key role. Then, since the sovereign debt crisis, direct debt relations between members states have become essential. Under this community of debt, debtors are identified through objective criteria and creditor states have gained increased leverage. Moreover, “what lies behind loans granted by the several vehicles and institutions created to that end is a clash of interests between the signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding” (Losada 2020: 798).

Reference:

Losada, F. (2020) A Europe of Creditors and Debtors: Three Orders of Debt Relations in European Integration. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58(4), 787-802.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12988>

It is also important to notice that, within the context of monetary union policies, traditional fora for democratic participation, such as the European Parliament, have lost some of their powers (Crum and Merlo 2020). At the moment, it seems that the new architecture of the European monetary union “will be more intrusive yet more distant from European citizens as we witness a mismatch between the powers exercised by the new institutions and their legitimation” (Crum and Merlo 2020: 410).

The growing relevance of supranational issues into domestic public sphere has finally politicized the integration process and helped the EU to soften some of its technocratic angles. Some EU scholars attest that during the public health crisis, incremental changes in the direction of deeper integration have occurred (Schmidt 2020). For instance, the EU has undergone “a paradigmatic shift” on the EU-level debt through the Next Generation Fund (Schmidt 2020). The problem is that during the last decade, the politicization of the integration process has brought the rise and success of several Eurosceptic movements across the Union. One of the effects of these counter-stories is that they provide an imaginary to mobilize European citizens, support claims that sustain the replacement of internationalism with illiberal nationalist policies and remain sedimented as a repertoire of collective action (Kutter 2020). Against this backdrop, Norman rightly claims (2021: 14) that

the challenge from anti-system actors pushed discussions towards an almost exclusive focus on the limits of this emerging transnational party system, rather than towards the creation of effective mechanisms for political participation [...] What the process seems to indicate is thus that the rise of anti-systemic political forces in Europe spurs reactions that may work to counter-act the democratic development of the EU.

5. ECONOMIC INSECURITY

By using the expression “economic insecurity” we aim to capture several levels of vulnerability. Economic inequality has increased since 1980 (Piketty 2020). According to the World Economic Forum (2020), economic inequality has risen or remained at the same level in 20 advanced economies with a significant unequal distribution of wealth. Rich and poor are those in the top and bottom 5 per cent of the income distribution, respectively. In a typical rich country, we are told, the poorest 5 per cent of the population receive around 1 per cent of national income. While a fair and desirable economic outcome is that income in the bottom 40% of the population grows faster than the economy as a whole, the best available evidence attests that in the EU only in a few countries the income growth of the bottom 40% of the population exceeded the per capita income growth in the national economy (EC 2020). As the *2020 Annual Review of the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion* attests (EC 2020), this was the case of Estonia, Latvia, Romania and Croatia. In most of the countries, however, income growth for the bottom 40% was below average. For instance, in Greece, between 2007 and 2017, the income of the top 10% declined much less than the economy as a whole.

In reality, the extent of poverty is very wide. This becomes obvious when we consider a longer time span. As a recent report attests (EC 2020), 24% of the working age population were below the poverty threshold at some point during a four-year time span (2014-2017), compared to around 16% if one calculates poverty over a single year.

On top of this, economic competition has reshaped the map of activities and the geographical distribution of opportunities and wealth (EC 2020). Income growth benefitted mostly high-income segments of the population (EC 2020). Moreover, in the past two decades, the EU middle class has witnessed increasingly high living costs across all EU countries and a reduction in their capacity to save money. Specifically, an OECD report (OECD 2018) documents that over the last twenty years, prices for housing, health and education have increased faster than the median income.

According to available evidence (EC 2020), the EU middle classes have also faced the COVID-19 outbreak in conditions of increasing vulnerability. There is in fact evidence that the middle-class may be fracturing (OECD 2018): **those who are part of the so-called bottom 40% are more likely to further slide down, while those who are on the top of today’s middle-class are unlikely to fall into low income and poverty.** Over the past two decades, a further divide among the middle classes appeared in several European countries (OECD 2018). Specifically, crucial expenses, such as health and housing, increased before the pandemic and became even more difficult to sustain under lockdown. Four in ten middle-class households are financially vulnerable, struggle to make ends meet and are unable to cope with unexpected expenses or sudden falls in income (EC 2020). According to the OECD (2018), one-in-seven of all European middle-class households fall into low income and poverty over a four-year period.

In the last decade, progress has been made in the fight against gender inequality. Nevertheless, as the *European Commission’s Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* documents, women in the EU earn around 16% less than men per hour, women’s pensions are 30.1% lower than men’s pensions, only 67% of women in the EU are employed compared to 78% of men, and women are responsible for 75% of unpaid care and domestic work (EC

2020). That same document also reports that only 7.7% of CEO (and 7.5% of board chairs) are women, that only 39% of Members of the European Parliament are women (EC 2020). For instance, for a long time, Italy was one of the countries in Europe with the lowest representation of women in the national parliament. From the 2006 elections onwards, we can observe an increasing trend in the number of women representatives, with 206 women MPs (30.11%) elected in 2013. Despite this increase, Belluati et al. (2020) report that the barriers that women face are still significant: a) participation relates to degrees of media consumption as well as economic and educational levels; b) female political leadership remains exceptional; c) many of the gender representation policies present loopholes; d) parties formally comply with gender representation laws while informally violating their spirit.

COVID-19 crisis and existing gender divides in Europe

An increasingly large number of studies document that the COVID-19 pandemic is opening a Pandora box of existing gender divides in European societies. This is a frequent occurrence at the outbreak of pandemics in gender-unequal societies (Wenham et al. 2020). The several task forces and COVID-19 decision-making bodies are not gender-balanced between women and men (Blaskó et al. 2020). The EU parliament reports that during lockdowns cases of domestic violence increased by a third in some member states (Blaskó et al. 2020). Blaskó and colleagues (2020) show that women, as they take up the largest share of additional caring duties, are bearing the burden of a great mental and physical workload during the pandemic. Moehring and colleagues (2020) find that especially in the first wave of the pandemic, because of their higher representation in the low-income sector, women also had a higher probability of job-loss and unpaid furlough than men. Fana et al. (2020) reports that in Italy, Spain, Greece and Poland a significantly higher prevalence of women in the closed sector is not counterbalanced by in significant representation in teleworking sectors.

References:

Fana, M. et al. (2020). *The COVID confinement measures and EU labour markets*, EUR 30190 EN. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Wenham C. et al. (2020) Covid-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak. *The Lancet*, 395(10227), 846-48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30526-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2)

Moehring K. et al. (2020) Is the Recession a 'Shecession'? Gender Inequality in the Employment Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany. Unpublished manuscript.

Blaskó, Z. et al. (2020) *How Will the COVID-19 Crisis Affect Existing Gender Divides in Europe?* EUR 30181. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Despite some positive trends, Europe remains a male-breadwinner society where a gendered division of tasks, household and care work are dominant norms in Eastern Europe and Southern Europe (Eurobarometer 2017). Even if in most European countries inequality between men and women in educational attainment in relation to class of origins has declined over the last decades (Breen et al. 2010), women's class mobility continues to be hindered by hierarchical barriers (Bukodi and Paskov 2020). Moreover, women tend to be over-represented in lower quality clerical, service and manual occupations (Levanon and Grusky 2016), in part-time employment (Hipp et al., 2015), and in intermittent careers (Dex and Bukodi, 2012). Gender inequality and the modern gender gap reverberates in political attitudes. For a long time, the idea has been that women in advanced capitalist economies

tend to be more supportive of an encompassing role of the state and in the redistribution of resources (Inglehart and Norris 2003). Recent evidence shows that in Europe, women tend to be more supportive of a large and encompassing welfare state when there is a more equal distribution of unpaid work and domestic care (Goossen 2020).

The perceived increase in inequality has been an important driver of political instability in several European democracies (Colantone and Stanig 2018; Guiso et al. 2018). The share of population that judges income differences in their country as too large has steadily increased over the past decade (OECD 2018). According to the OECD (2018), the level of perceived wage inequality, measured as a wage ratio between a top and a bottom worker, has increased in almost all EU countries. People's perception of how fair their societies depend on distributive concerns. In the EU, the dissatisfaction with income inequality correlates well with the measured income inequality at the national and even regional level (OECD 2018). The European Commission reports that a persistent imbalance in income distribution has eroded social mobility both at the intra-generational and inter-generational level (EC 2020). In the same vein, a rich body of literature (e.g., Filauro and Parolin 2019) has scrutinized regional disparities at the supranational and national level. For instance, Rosés and Wolf (2018) find that regional inequality, together with personal income inequality, started increasing again around 1980.

Inequality and Political Trust in Europe

A recent analysis shows that the relation between an individual's socioeconomic status and her level of political trust is dependent on the level of inequality. Moreover, when inequality is pervasive, all citizens become more skeptical about their political institutions. On the basis of the European Social Survey (2002-2016) data, Goubin and Hooghe (2020) find that in societies that are able to guarantee a high level of socioeconomic equality, expectations also seem to be quite high. For societies that are affected by high levels of exclusion and inequality, expectations seem to be low from the start.

Reference:

Goubin, S. and Hooghe, M. (2020) The Effect of Inequality on the Relation Between Socioeconomic Stratification and Political Trust in Europe. *Social Justice Research*, 33, 219-247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00350-z>

Against this backdrop, there is an ever-increasing evidence that economic insecurity has impacted the political choices of European citizens. Several studies demonstrate that voter turnout tends to be lower in unequal countries (Schäfer and Schwander 2019) and that democracies are becoming less responsive to the demands of the less affluent (Schäfer and Schwander 2019). As Schäfer and Schwander write (2020), “the perception of not being represented and of subjective political impotence, both sentiments increasing with growing economic inequality, can make abstention to appear a rational choice”.

Political scientists also find that economic insecurity can lead to support populist parties. Funke et al. (2016) find that the vote for populist parties peaked in elections after systemic financial crises, such as those held in 2014. In periods of economic shocks, which can worsen stagnating incomes, household debts, and unemployment, Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that voters will opt for populist movements and leaders who advocate an anti-establishment agenda and claim to punish elites. Lucassen and Lubbers (2012) argue that in several

European countries, shifts towards left-wing populism connect with perceived economic threats. In elections after the Great Recession, as Algan et al. (2017) demonstrate, regions where unemployment rose also display a sharp decline in trust towards democratic institutions.

Rodrick (2018) brings the origin of today's populism back to the globalization shock. Yet, Guiso et al. (2020) object that globalization shocks alone cannot account for the cross-country evidence of populist outbreak in Europe. Economic insecurity, they argue, is an important motive behind the demand for populist policies and parties. Specifically, Morelli (2020) finds a causal effect between economic insecurity and people's degree of trust in politics. Guiso et al. (2020) demonstrate that economic insecurity impacted on the propensity to vote for populist parties and on lower turnout rates. In general, as Rodrick succinctly puts it (2020: 7), given the wealth of available evidence, it seems plausible to say that

economic shocks can heighten feelings of insecurity, inducing voters to make sharper distinctions between insiders (“us”) and ethnic, religious, or racial outsiders (“them”). They can lead voters to yearn for an earlier era of prosperity and stability, increasing the political salience of traditional cultural values and hierarchies. And to the extent that they generate wider economic and social gaps within a nation, economic shocks may reinforce more local, less encompassing identities.

6. THE INCREASING POLARIZATION OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERES

Polarization is vastly recognized as one of the most worrying challenges to liberal democracies (SGI 2020). Polarization, as Somer et al. write, is “both a process of simplifying politics, and a condition in which an equilibrium of severe political polarization is eventually reached where neither side has the incentive to move to a depolarizing strategy” (Somer et al. 2021: 3). Polarization is both an aggregate-level phenomenon - a political system has a certain level of us-vs-them feelings - and an individual-level phenomenon - each individual has a certain level of in-and-out group feeling (Reiljan 2020).

It is possible that at certain historical junctures, a polarized political environment can contribute to disrupting undemocratic elements and promoting progress towards greater social justice (McCoy and Somer 2021). However, in contemporary Europe, there is an increasingly large consensus that polarization results from conflicts between groups with a significant divergence on key policy issues, such as migration, the role of supranational institutions, and the role of knowledge in democratic decision-making. By examining the level of trust between partisans, Westwood et al. (2018) find high levels of polarization in the UK, Belgium and Spain. On the basis of social divide, Helbing and Jungkunz (2019) also find high levels of polarization in Germany and Austria. Silva (2018) finds that in the Netherlands, the rise of Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders have contributed to the rise of the level of polarization among the Dutch public. Reiljan and Ryan (2021) find that in Sweden, voters with stronger partisan identities have exhibited higher levels of polarization. They also discover that the hostility towards Sweden's Democrats is linked predominantly to cultural issues, such as migration, and that in the Swedish context, populist right voters, who trust central institutions more, are less polarized towards mainstream blocs.

Prominent political economists (Acemoglu et al. 2013; Algan et al. 2017; Rodrik 2018) report that the general public is increasingly dissatisfied with the way traditional parties represent and advocate their interests against the policy preferences of the more educated and informed voters. This reverberates a divide between the so-called winners, better educated and trained citizens who can thrive in a globalized world, and losers, unskilled or low skilled workers who have suffered from the decline of twentieth century economic order as a result of globalization (Kriesi et al. 2006).

The share of university graduates has steadily increased in all Western European democracies. According to the *2016 European Social Survey*, graduates make up an average of 32% of the overall population across Western European states, with a significant concentration among the under 30s (ESS 2016). The expansion of higher education has already influenced the composition and distribution of the electorate and contributed to the creation of new cleavages (Ford and Jennings 2020). In recent years, several studies document that a greater share of graduates tend to have more positive views toward minorities (Storm et al. 2017), multiculturalism (Hooghe and Vroome 2015), open borders (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014), supranational governance in the European Union (Goldberg et al. 2020), and substantial environmental policies (Grant and Tilley 2019).

Meanwhile, the media landscape has become more polarized, with a growing supply of ideological news (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013). For instance, Van Aelst et al. (2017) document that some news media systematically treat science as just one opinion among others, contributing therefore to science polarization along partisan lines.

We know that citizens tend to be more polarized than parties (Goldberg et al. 2020). More specifically, Goldberg and colleagues (2020) find this pattern of attitudes toward European integration and towards more specific policies, such as common EU asylum policies and EU budget authority. A possible explanation of this trend lies in the fact that there is a higher EU politicization of knowledge among citizens (Goldberg et al. 2020). Citizens' polarization has had an impact on the quality of democratic conflicts between incumbent and oppositional political groups, with certain political actors systematically adopting polarization as a strategy to attract consensus (McCoy and Somer 2021), and on the policy agenda of populist and non-populist parties. Di Mauro and Mumoli (2020) show that there is evidence of significant public-elite convergence. With a large percentage of the public opposing immigration from non-EU countries, political elites tend to prefer national decision-making when it comes to migration quotas (Di Mauro and Mumoli 2020). Braun and Grande (2021) find that even if politicization tends to be high in national elections, there have been consistently higher levels of politicization in European Elections.

Inequality and Political Trust in Europe

A recent analysis shows that the relation between an individual's socioeconomic status and her level of political trust is dependent on the level of inequality. Moreover, when inequality is pervasive, all citizens become more skeptical about their political institutions. On the basis of the European Social Survey (2002-2016) data, Goubin and Hooghe (2020) find that in societies that are able to guarantee a high level of socioeconomic equality, expectations also seem to be quite high. For societies that are affected by high levels of exclusion and inequality, expectations seem to be low from the start.

Reference:

Goubin, S. and Hooghe, M. (2020) The Effect of Inequality on the Relation Between Socioeconomic Stratification and Political Trust in Europe. *Social Justice Research*, 33, 219-247. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00350-z>

Munoz et al. (2021) find that relative polarization contributes to higher turnouts when one of the parties is close to a voter's ideal policy and the other party is ideologically far away. They also show that the effects of polarization depend on the distribution of voters and on the electoral setting (Munoz et al. 2021). Specifically, they say that "polarization of the extremes is possibly less useful for understanding voter turnout in elections with more than two parties" (Munoz et al. 2021: 8). This suggests that meaningful opposition may draw voters to the polls and that the decline in voter turnout across European democracies is linked with a widespread adoption of centrist policies by mainstream parties. In the same vein, Wagner (2021) finds that affective polarization has a stronger association with measures for citizen engagement with democracy than with perceptions of party system polarization. Therefore, polarization also relates to lower levels of satisfaction with democracy (Wagner 2021).

According to Somer et al. (2021), politics picks up on the dynamics of increased polarization and, for instance, political leaders use polarizing narratives to discredit both opponents and internal rivals (McCoy and Somer 2021). The risk is that such an interaction can lead to an equilibrium in which "actors become locked in the behaviors that reproduce pernicious polarization unless and until either an exogenous shock alters this condition" (McCoy and Somer 2021: 10).

7. THE RURAL/URBAN DIVIDE

It is well-documented (Rodriguez-Pose 2020; Kenny and Luca 2020) that inside and outside Europe, urban areas agglomerate more economic opportunities while rural areas and smaller cities face economic stagnation and decline. The increased productivity associated with high skills and higher educational levels may have exacerbated geographical self-selection into larger and advanced urban areas (Baum-Snow et al. 2018). While territorial polarization has widened, intra-country inequalities have also risen, especially between those places that have been caught in the so-called 'development traps' (Iammarino et al. 2019). **In Europe, development traps have many faces: territories that recently reached the levels of more developed regions but stalled at middle income levels; territories that are neither rich nor poor; territories that have witnessed a negative growth in recent decades** (Rodriguez-Pose 2020).

The agglomeration of opportunities in big cities and declining prospects in rural areas and small towns have also contributed to a growing divergence in values: urban dwellers tend to shift towards more progressive social values and citizens of declining peripheral areas tend to adopt a more protective frame of mind (Rodriguez-Pose 2018). It is against this backdrop that recent research has placed an emphasis on the so-called geography of resentment (Rodriguez Pose et al. 2018). According to this literature, local economic conditions inform voting patterns by voters living in places with certain territorial characteristics (Kenny and Luca 2020).

As several studies document (Kenny and Luca 2020; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rodden 2019), the urban-rural divide is not a new phenomenon. Yet, in recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the influence of places on people. Overlapping territorial and attitudinal cleavages shed light on an expanding fracture in European societies (Foa et al. 2020). The 2019 Eurostat Statistical Yearbook (EC 2019) attests that there is a significant digital skill divide between rural and urban areas. It also documents those urban areas report population growth, that urban dwellers tend to perceive their health as good or very good, and that self-employed persons in rural areas are not satisfied with their job. Because of these processes, citizens are increasingly clustered into geographic areas, with political preferences being reinforced based on geographical distribution, while a reawakening of center-periphery conflicts has the potential to restructure European party competition.

Recent events, such as the UK 2016 Brexit vote and the 2018 Gilets Jaunes protests have drawn attention to the political relevance of the urban-rural divide. It is against this backdrop that a burgeoning literature is including spatial dynamics in the study of contemporary challenges to democracy (Dijkstra et al. 2020). As a result of this new line of research, there is an expanding amount of evidence on the extent to which there is a divide between the political outlook of urban and rural areas at the supranational level (Kenny and Luca 2020) and within European countries, such as the UK (Garretsen et al. 2018) and Italy (Rossi 2018). Scholars also report an increasingly spatially divided electoral geography in France. In France, there is a sharp divide between large urban centers, medium and small cities, and rural areas. In such areas, the working class and long-time immigrants are increasingly disaffected with the political system (Bacqué et al. 2016; Cusin et al. 2016). We find the same kind of polarization in the 2016 Austrian presidential election. In their analysis of the Brexit vote, Carreras et al. (2019) demonstrate that voters who live in economically depressed areas are more likely to develop Eurosceptic attitudes.

Urban-Rural Divide in Anti-EU Vote

Between 2013 and 2018, around 27% of voters in EU national elections voted for parties strongly opposed, opposed or moderately opposed to European integration. In a recent report, de Dominicis et al. (2020) find that (a) rural areas tend to vote more for anti-EU parties, even after taking into consideration economic, socio-demographic and local factors; (b) economic decline leads to more anti-EU voting in rural areas compared to towns, suburbs, and cities; (c) in rural areas, people aged between 40 and 64 are linked to higher rates of anti-EU votes.

Reference:

De Dominicis, L. et al. (2020) The Urban-Rural Divide in Anti EU-Divide. *Social, demographic and economic factors affecting the vote for parties opposed to European integration*. Brussels: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy.

According to Rodden (2019), the geographical distribution of ideological preferences reflects historical processes of economic activity and residential choices. Voters in a territory where prosperity has been undermined by a relocation of opportunities may choose to pick candidates that defend protectionism (Rodrick 2020). Dijkstra et al. (2020) also demonstrate that small towns and rural areas tend to be more Eurosceptic than big cities. Luca and Kenny (2020) observe that in cities, and in towns and suburbs, people tend to vote less for anti-EU parties than in rural areas. More specifically, De Dominicis et al. write (2020: 6): **“the median vote for parties opposed and strongly opposed to the EU decreases with the degree of urbanization in electoral districts. The median vote for Eurosceptic parties is 23.4% in rural areas; it declines to 20.5% in towns and suburbs, and further decreases to 15% in cities”**. Rodriguez-Pose (2020: 1) connects the origins of electoral behaviors with the decline of places that have seen better times. In contexts such as cities, towns and regions that have suffered long-term economic and industrial decline, voters “have resorted to the ballot box to express their discontent, resentment, and anger with a system they perceive as offering them no future”.

8. DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN THE EU

Central and Eastern Europe is seeing emerging democracy and rule of law crises with consequences for democratic politics at the European level. For quite a long time, enlargement processes were a flagship EU policy (Sedelmeier 2014). Despite the EU’s ambitious and explicit commitment to the promotion of democratic values, noncompliance with very core democratic principles is shaking European politics to its very core (Closa and Kochenov 2016) and, in recent years, the EU has shown itself to be a hospitable environment for the emergence of increasingly autocratic governments (Wolkenstein 2020 2021).

The term ‘democratic backsliding’ denotes “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (Bermeo 2016). In so doing, elected executives progressively undermine checks on their power and undertake a series of institutional changes that weaken the power of the opposition (Bermeo 2016). Backsliding has advanced in Hungary and in Poland to the point that they are now considered paradigmatic cases of democratic backsliding (Grzymala-Busse 2019).

When illiberal actors reach power positions, they engineer constitutional changes to defuse courts and constitutional institutions (Castillo-Ortiz 2019). According to Levitsky and Way (2010), the Orbán regime has replaced democracy with a hybrid regime that maintains the formal democratic institutions but fails to meet the minimal standards of democracy. The Orbán regime strengthened its control over most of the media and the judiciary, erased existing checks on executive power and systematically attacked civil society groups. As of 2019, Hungary was the first EU member state ever to be downgraded by Freedom House to the status of only “partly free” (Freedom House 2019: 13). Since 2010, Fidesz, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s party, has taken advantage of its parliamentary supermajority to seize control over the media, the academia, courts, and the opposition.

Other key features of Fidesz’s entrenchment in power are the transformation of an independent business sector into a partisan agglomeration and a wholesale redefinition of the informal norms of democratic inclusion (Kelemen 2020). Specifically, as Grzymala-Busse (2019: 712) writes, “Orbán has relied on rhetorical appeals to a Christian God, homeland, and family as the bases for his legitimation. His stated goal has been to defend the Christian, conservative, and ethnically homogenous Hungarian nation, which has been facing a demographic decline”. Meanwhile, the norms of accountability have also vanished (Grzymala-Busse 2019).

Since his Law and Justice Party won the majority of the seats in the 2015 elections in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński has embarked on a similar journey, which, however, clashed with the constitutional court. While Kaczyński lacked extraordinary constitution-altering powers, he faced more aggressive institutions at the supranational level and a stronger media and civil society landscape (Bakke and Sitter 2020: 12), Fidesz’ ability to change the regime “was contingent on a ‘perfect storm’ that combined a parliamentary super-majority with a weak constitution, a supportive president, a fragmented opposition, an overcautious European Commission, and a protective EU-level political party”.

The literature on democratic backsliding has focused on political leadership (Greskovits 2015), political competition (Vegetti 2019) and the role of the EU (Wolkenstein 2020 2021). Bozóki and Hegedus (2018) show that the EU has legitimized and financially supported backsliding in Hungary. According to Kelemen (2020), three factors support the EU’s authoritarian equilibrium: partial politicization, money and emigration. Partial politicization contributes to create a perverse incentive and to discourage intervention against backsliding regimes. Specifically, the EU has been sufficiently politicized that there now are strong incentives for EU-level political parties to protect national parties that deliver them votes, but it has not been sufficiently politicized to bear meaningful reputational costs for supporting autocrats. EU funding also helps support the rise of authoritarian regimes. Backsliders, Kelemen writes (Kelemen 2020), can use their power to control those same supranational funding resources that help sustain their regimes. Emigration may also contribute to the stabilization of autocratic regimes in the EU. The free movement of people facilitates the emigration by frustrated and more progressive citizens, who, in so doing, drain the resources of domestic opposition (Kelemen 2020). Moreover, remittances to family members may end up sustaining the domestic economy and, in this way, indirectly support the regime (Kelemen 2020).

Inequality and Political Trust in Europe

A recent analysis shows that the relation between an individual's socioeconomic status and her level of political trust is dependent on the level of inequality. Moreover, when inequality is pervasive, all citizens become more skeptical about their political institutions. On the basis of the European Social Survey (2002-2016) data, Goubin and Hooghe (2020) find that in societies that are able to guarantee a high level of socioeconomic equality, expectations also seem to be quite high. For societies that are affected by high levels of exclusion and inequality, expectations seem to be low from the start.

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Illiberal tendencies and the very presence of defective democratic regimes weaken the integrity of the European normative consensus (Raube and Costa Reis 2020). Specifically, difficulties in addressing the current democracy and rule of law crisis may lead to questioning the EU as a normative order and its ability to have a direct effect on the law making of Member States (Raube and Costa Reis 2020).

Moreover, democratic backsliding may have an effect on the quality and quantity of political participation. Scholars are pointing to the deterioration of deliberation and to patterns of citizen disengagement (Gora and de Wilde 2020). There is a growing dissatisfaction with the political system leading to a retreat from meaningful political participation. Van der Brug et al. (2021) find that while the liberal attitudes are more widely supported than the illiberal ones, support is much lower than previous research would suggest. For instance, around 40% of the European citizens disagree with the statement that it would be good to have “a strong leader in office, even if s/he bends the rules to get things done”. Citizens' attitudes are not clearly structured, and therefore, as scholars have recently documented (Van der Brug et al. 2021: 22), while many people support some principles of liberal democracy, the very same people may oppose some of its other principles. Worryingly, this may suggest that support for liberal democratic institutions and norms may be highly malleable and context-dependent.

9. THE PERVASIVENESS OF MONEY IN DEMOCRATIC CAMPAIGNING

Money has always been a necessary element of democratic politics, but the development of new technologies as well as the globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic have contributed to changes in the funding of elections campaigns across the world. Even if it is often perceived as the instrument for powerful groups to control government policymaking, money can enable representation of different interests, political participation and campaigning (Power 2020). Effective regulation of political finance is therefore key to strengthening the accountability of all democracies across Europe.

The regulation of political finance in Europe has recently attracted scholarly attention (Norris et al. 2015; Nwokora 2014). For years, the “cartel party” model has been the standard perspective in the field of political parties and electoral campaigns (Katz and Mair 1994). According to this model, political parties have become increasingly dependent on state

support and subsidies. This has led to a detachment from civil society. In these years, most of European parties are state-dependent (Orr 2018). Not only have systems of public funding been introduced in virtually all European countries, but, as Piccio and van Biezen write, “the availability of state support for parties is considered the norm as well as a basic tenet for democratic competition and political pluralism, to the extent that movements away from it are highly unlikely” (Piccio and van Biezen 2015: 213-214). In Great Britain, a country where state subventions for political parties remain relatively low, state subvention is seen as a less corrupt form of party finance (Toynbee 2015).

Yet, “in many places,” as the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Hane Mohammed points out, “the ability of private interests to influence elections is unfettered and the capture of the state by elites is warping the functions of state institutions”. In her *The Price of Democracy: How Money Shapes Politics and What to Do about It*, Julia Cagé (2020) investigates the impact of private money on democratic competition.

Cagé lists three categories of citizens: ordinary citizens, activist citizens and plutocrats (Cagé 2020: 9-13). Ordinary citizens participate in democratic politics mainly during elections. Activist citizens are members of political organizations. Plutocrats have money to speak and be heard. Cagé recognizes the risk of an oligarchic drift in contemporary democratic politics (Cagé 2020: 49-51). Considering the system of tax reliefs on political donations and the fact that the return in tax reliefs progressively rewards the richer cohorts of society, the system prizes the preferences of wealthy donors. On top of this, in some cases, deregulation of party financing, she argues, has transformed political parties into ‘captured parties’ where the principal sources of finance are the mega rich.

The rise in digital campaigning (the use of digital media in elections, social media, mobile services, data tools, political campaigning software) also impacts on the problems of political finance. **While it is possible for digital campaigning to broaden and deepen political participation, deliberation, and accountability (IDEA 2020), it is increasingly clear that a deregulated system can cause disinformation, increase the influence of the substantial monopoly of big-tech companies, make room for digital micro-targeting, and heighten the risk of political corruption.** Unrestrained digital campaigns can increase the cost of elections campaigns, and, in this way, increasingly expose candidates to business influence (IDEA 2020). Moreover, as the Cambridge Analytica scandal demonstrated, new digital techniques present a new challenge to democratic regimes, as they impact on people’s voting behaviour and the pace of political campaigns.

Digital campaigning and microtargeting require adequate expertise, awareness and the presence of real enforcement competences. It is against this backdrop that the Netherlands is drafting a national legislation on transparency for online political campaigns, which includes rules that must guarantee and increase the verifiability of online campaigns, prevent deception and provide clarity about who has paid for an ad (Netherlands House of Representatives 2020). In the same vein, the European Commission is currently preparing a Digital Services Act Package and an European Democracy Action Plan targeting online political advertising among other things.

Deepfakes and political microtargeting in the Netherlands.

While deepfakes (manipulated videos that can make it seem as if a person says or does something, while, in reality, they have never said or done anything of the sorts) are generally perceived as a very disturbing form of disinformation, studies on political microtargeting and the spread of deepfakes in Europe are still nascent. In a recent experiment, Dobber et al. (2020) find that microtargeting techniques can amplify the effects of deepfakes by enabling malevolent political actors to tailor deepfakes to vulnerabilities of the receiver. In the same study, Dobber et al. (2020) also finds that in the Netherlands very religious Christian CDA voters, as opposed to less religious people who may feel Christianity as less a central element in their lives, are the most susceptible parties to amplification. **The results of this study are not necessarily generalizable and do not entail that voters with other ideological or religious affiliations are less susceptible to amplification. Much more work needs to be done to justify generalizations beyond the Dutch context and to produce thorough comparative evaluations.**

Reference:

Dobber T, et al. (2021). Do (Microtargeted) Deepfakes Have Real Effects on Political Attitudes? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 69-91.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220944364>

The growth of campaign spending in European countries has worsened pre-existing problems for those groups with little or no access to political funding. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this divide by limiting gatherings and fundraising events. The political representation of women, ethnic minorities, marginalized groups, and LGBTQ groups remains low across European countries. According to a recent report, these groups experience a lack of access to sufficient political funding (IDEA 2019). For instance, low income, a lack of financial resources and costs associated with disabilities (speech-to-text services, the cost of sign language interpretation) are major barriers for disabled people to run for office (OSCE 2019).

Several international organisations (the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the OECD, Transparency International, and IDEA) conduct periodic assessments of political finance systems. As one of the latest reports in the field documents, inadequately controlled political finance is one of the "most widely exploited entry points for narrow private interests to exert undue influence over politics and political decisions" (IDEA 2019). Moreover, according to the 2021 *EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment - SOCTA* (EUROPOL 2021), the use of corruption and abuse of legal business structures are key features of most criminal activities in the EU. As SOCTA documents, corruption can take place at all levels of society, with almost all criminal groups targeting public servants.

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index can help map the perception of corruption across Europe. According to the latest Transparency International Report (2020a), in 14 EU member states over 50% of citizens rate their government badly at fighting corruption risk in the public sector. Even though there are no EU countries being classified as "highly corrupt", as of 2020, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania were at the bottom of the EU table (Transparency International Report 2020b). Eurobarometer has also been monitoring the perception of public sector corruption in EU member states. In a context

where the EU average stands at 68%, 86% of citizens in Hungary and 80% in Romania think that corruption is widespread in their country (Eurobarometer 2017). According to the same survey, 56% of respondents believe the “giving and taking of bribes and the abuse of power for private gain was widespread” among political parties, and 53% of respondents believe the same of politicians at the national, regional or local level (Eurobarometer 2017). Yet, it is very important to keep in mind that this index measures how citizens perceive levels of public sector corruption in their countries. The resulting classification does not necessarily reflect the reality, and it is vulnerable to bias and prejudices. [According to available indicators](#), the problem of public sector corruption and its detrimental effects on democratic politics is particularly evident in post-communist member states in Central and Eastern Europe. In Hungary, Romania and Slovenia, a recent research report claims that the issue of corruption seems to be so entwined with all dimensions of politics that citizens also tend to perceive EU cohesion policy through the filters of their national governments, and, therefore, as corrupted (Batory 2020). In Central and Eastern Europe, as Haughton writes (2014: 84), “the most potent impact of the EU on party politics tends to be in disputes, allegations and accusations surrounding the management and disbursement of European funds”. According to Batory (2020), ordinary citizens’ narratives on how EU money was spent and the association between EU money, corruption and waste undermines the EU’s credibility and legitimacy more broadly.

10. EMERGENCY POLITICS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused a global health crisis that has revealed systemic weaknesses of European societies. Democracy, among other normative orders, has been under stress with all EU Member States facing the difficult task of balancing between fundamental principles and public health concerns. The Covid-19 pandemic, as Afsoun Afsahi et al. vividly write (Afsahi et al. 2020: v), **“has posed an unprecedented challenge for contemporary democracies around the globe. It has led to the closure and transformation of parliaments and enabled governments to rule by decree. It has curtailed citizens’ fundamental democratic rights to assemble and protest. It has generated an unparalleled multinational policy debate and stimulated myriad digital innovations in democratic practice”**.

The most common response to the pandemic has been the implementation of social containment measures. It is widely accepted that while such measures are a good tool to contain the diffusion of the virus, they had a severe impact on fundamental liberties and economic activities (Fana et al. 2020).

Most of EU Member States (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden) introduced emergency measures with explicit time limits to contain the spread of the virus. Croatia and Hungary did not introduce a time limit for a state of emergency (Venice Commission 2020).

Available evidence already shows that the COVID-19 crisis has worsened the social and economic situation of the most vulnerable segments of our societies (Fana et al. 2020). Short-term impacts, such as income loss, new expenses related to health, service disruption,

and inadequate housing, may also translate into long-term consequences, such as a significant reduction in saving capacity, and severe consequences for children education activities.

Regardless of its specific and contextual legal forms, a declaration of a state of emergency in EU Member States entails a significant shift in the distribution of powers. An October 2020 Interim Report by the Venice Commission attests that several European parliaments (Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden) have been able to continue working as usual. Yet, some parliaments (Bulgaria, Greece) have focused only on the review of Covid-19 related activities. In many countries, such as Italy, decree laws were systematically passed by the government without the participation of parliament. Other parliaments (Cyprus, Czech Republic) have suspended their activities and handed over nearly all their powers to governments.

The potentially negative effects of emergency politics on democratic institutions have received a great deal of attention before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Honig 2009; White 2019). Holding elections in such extreme conditions may have an impact on several key democratic dimensions, such as the freedom of voters to form an opinion, the respect of human rights during campaigns, voting security, and the democratic universal franchise. Even if several constitutions (Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Spain, and Hungary) justify the option to postpone elections in emergency conditions, not holding elections, as the Venice Commission writes, may also be very problematic from the perspective of the right to periodic elections, and from a point of view of legitimacy (Venice Commission 2020).

The principle of stability of electoral law requires that changes to the rules of the game are made well in advance of elections. Nevertheless, **late changes of electoral legislation, according to the Venice Commission, can be justified in an emergency situation “if they are necessary to the holding of elections in conformity with international standards”**. Yet, postponements of elections can lead to escalating polemics, or, as Landman and Di Gennaro Splendore report (2020), they can cause power vacuum or abuses of power.

The pandemic has had an effect on voting operations. For instance, the Polish Government proposed to turn to all-postal voting for the presidential elections, which eventually did not take place (Venice Commission 2020). After forty-five years, France tried to re-authorize postal voting. Several EU parliaments have also introduced new procedures, such as the use of digital meetings, the telematic registration and the consolidation of telematic channels of citizen's participation that could become permanent.

According to Rapeli and Saikkonen, who draw upon existing scholarship and preliminary analyses of the democratic impact of the ongoing health crisis, COVID-19 seems to entail a “significant but short-lived popularity bumps for current leaders”, “small and positive yet fleeting effects on attitudes such as political trust”, and “zero impact on party identification or other factors, which might cause permanent political realignments” (Rapeli and Saikkonen 2020: 29).

Elections During Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded scholars and policymakers that there are occasions, such as epidemics and natural disasters, in which holding elections may introduce greater threats to human security and, therefore, postponing elections may be legitimate. In a recent article, James and Alihodzic claim that the postponement may break institutional certainty and lead to partisan squabbling as well as to democratic breakdown (2020: 358). A normative case-by-case evaluation should be based on five dimensions of electoral integrity: (a) opportunities for deliberation, (b) equality of contestation, (c) equality of participation, (d) electoral management delivery, and (e) institutionalization. Past experience shows that some political actors may seek to postpone elections when poll ratings are poor. Past experience also shows that there are opportunities for partisan advantage in holding elections during emergencies. Emergencies reduce opportunities for rivals to campaign and incumbents can continue using state resources.

Reference:

James TS and Alihodzic, S. (2020) When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election? Elections During Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations. *Electoral Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy*, 19(3), 344-62. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2020.0642>

There already is some evidence about current elected office holders benefiting from bumps in their popularity. Giommoni and Loumeau (2020) have studied the short-term effects of lockdown measures on voting behaviors (Giommoni and Loumeau 2020). By assessing the municipal elections in France, they found that the severity of the lockdown significantly affected electoral outcomes and voting behaviors. Specifically, in red zone municipalities, with COVID-19 incidence rates, there was stronger support for the incumbents. These results follow a standard pattern in which the trust in leaders during disasters and military crises tends to increase (Mueller 1970). Giommoni and Loumeau (2020) also found that the enforcement of ‘hard’ lockdowns increased political participation, as a longer lockdown seemed to mobilize voters and motivated them to express their choice for a leader.

Amat et al. (2021) find that the pandemic can cause a durable transformation of preference. Specifically, citizens “negatively update their beliefs about the ability of democratic representative and liberal systems to protect them against these types of threats” (Amat et al. 2021).

Scholars have also argued that the pandemic may open a window for would-be authoritarian leaders and institutions, which in the first stages will not encounter resistance from the public (Amat et al. 2021). Yet, as Rapeli and Saikkonen note (2020), the grave public health crisis and its economic consequences may end up undermining the output legitimacy of authoritarian incumbents and their capacity to distribute benefits to their supporters.

11. ELECTORAL SECURITY AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic is posing serious challenges to electoral security. In the preceding section, we have looked at the risks connected with persistent significant limitations of basic civil liberties and fundamental democratic rights. The pandemic too has disrupted elections and the adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic have caused an unprecedented revision of voting procedures to ensure the health and security of all democratic voters (Venice Commission 2020).

During a global health crisis, electoral security raises a number of questions about elections management and the capacity of democratic governments to ensure transparent and inclusive elections that are, at the same time, safe for voters.

The adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic has nurtured discussions about voting by mail and online voting. It is too early to understand whether the ongoing crisis marks a fundamental shift in how citizens and policy makers conceive electoral practices, and whether it will result in moving from in-person voting on election days to a vote-at-home experience during disasters and emergency situations and returning to a general framework that ensures regularity of elections thereafter.

Early in-person voting may help spread out voters' presence at the booth over time and dilutes the health challenges associated with election-day voting over a longer period of time. Intuitively, remote voting options appear to be the safest choice for reducing contacts between the public and the election workers.

According to Sfirniaciuc and colleagues (2021), large-scale voting system should embody several properties: 1) eligibility (all legitimate voters can vote only once); fairness (it is forbidden to obtain early results); 2) privacy (all events during the voting process should remain secret); 3) receipt-freeness (a voter does not obtain any receipt attesting that she voted for a certain candidate); 4) coercion-resistance (a voter cannot cooperate with a coercer to prove that she has complied with a threat); 5) integrity of the votes (voters can check that their individual vote was recorded and counted; anyone can monitor that all recorded votes are counted); 6) correctness of counting (the final result reflects exactly the count of the ballots that have been recorded).

If one discounts the high costs of earning an adequate level of digital competence, especially in a context like the EU, where many low-income homes do not have access to computers (EC 2020), and more than 1 in 5 young people fail to reach a basic level of digital skills (EC 2020), internet voting may reduce the costs for casting a vote, eliminate exposure to variables, such as bad weather and long lines, and, eventually, have a positive impact on turnout levels, especially among voters with reduced mobility (European Parliament 2016). For instance, Vassil finds that in Estonia, on-paper voting is 16-time more time consuming than internet voting (Vassil 2015). According to Solvak and Vassil (2016), e-voting has a positive contribution to the equality of participation in the Estonian case. Petitpas et al. (2021) have recently found that in the Geneva canton, e-voting does not impact on turnout among frequent voters but has a positive influence on old and male abstainers. Germann (2020) finds that e-voting may contribute to reduce avoidable voter mistakes.

In reality, despite internet voting reducing the cost of casting a vote, there is widespread skepticisms about a complete replacement of in-person voting with online voting (Birch et al.

2014). Scholars have argued that election day voting can ensure a greater trust in the procedure, more civic engagement, more privacy, and greater confidence that vote preferences are duly registered (Smith 2017). The limitations of current technology, and the presence of malware, may be a significant barrier to the standardization of online voting (Miragliotta 2020).

Some European countries have already experimented with e-voting (European Parliament 2016). In 2005, Estonia fully implemented e-voting for municipal elections. Since that experiment, the share of voters casting their ballot online has steadily increased. In order to allow military forces serving in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq to vote, Romania implemented a first e-voting system in 2003. The first e-voting trial in Switzerland goes back to 2003, in Anières, a municipality in the canton of Geneva. In 2004, the Canton of Geneva introduced e-voting for both cantonal and federal elections. In 2010, the federal government approved “the right of citizens of twelve cantons to vote via the Internet voting system of their respective canton in the context of a federal election” (European Parliament 2016). Norway conducted an early e-voting trial in 2011 local elections, which included ten municipalities, and another early e-voting trial in 2013 parliamentary elections (European Parliament 2016).

Several e-voting experiments have been the target of cyber-attacks. In 2013, reporters demonstrated that during mayoral primaries in Paris, “it was easy to breach the allegedly strict security of the election and vote several times using different names” (Lichfield 2013). According to researchers from the University of Michigan, the Estonian system was vulnerable to several kinds of cyber-attacks, such as taking over voters’ PCs to cast fake votes and introducing software to alter the final count. As of 2019, ten Swiss Cantons provides voters with the opportunity of e-voting. Yet, in 2019 security flaws have been found in the Swiss Post’s system. At the moment, Cantons and the Federal Government are developing a new Internet voting system in order to restart e-voting experiments across the country. These problems, however, should not discourage scholars and policymakers from exploring the opportunities offered by e-voting, which may return as “a side-effect of the Covid-19 crisis” (Petitpas et al. 2020).

12. AGING AND THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

The concept of generation is key to understanding present and future challenges to democracy in Europe (Ford and Jennings 2020). The young generation is often regarded as one of the most disengaged groups in politics. The British Social Attitudes report shows that in 2013, 57% of the respondents felt that they have the duty to vote, compared to 76% in 1987. According to the 2014 European Parliament Election Study (Schmitt et al. 2016), in the EU-28 region, the level of non-participation in European Parliament elections was higher than 70 per cent in the 16/18-24 age groups.

That young people are significantly less engaged in electoral forms of politics is hardly news. It is more interesting to note though that low levels of participation in voting do not necessarily equate with a lack of interest in politics. Several reports document that young Europeans tend to be interested in single-issue politics (IDEA 2017) and that such interest does not translate into votes for mainstream parties, but rather into preferences for the ‘Green parties such as Germany’s Bündnis 90/Die Grünen; populist parties such as Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement in Italy; the far-left, for example, Syriza in Greece; or the many

far-right parties that have polled well among 18- to 24-year-olds, including the French National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party' (Sloam 2016).

Scholars have also argued that young people are not indifferent to politics, but rather they prefer other forms of political engagement, such as protesting, signing petitions, volunteering, engaging online, being parts of organisations, and demonstrating (Norris 2003). Specifically, Sloam (2016) also finds that the political participation of young Europeans is characterised by diverse forms of participation that reflect differences in identities and lifestyles. Along the same lines, Kitanova (2020) finds that citizens aged 18-24 are more likely to be members of organizations than affiliate with political parties.

Unlike the young generation, older voters constitute an expanding share of the electorate, who, as political scientists report, are politically distinctive due to their greater propensity to turn out to vote (Blais and Rubenson 2013) and because they tend to be located on the political right (Tilley and Evans 2014). In Europe, the older generation is generally the fastest-growing age group. Despite such a rising demographic relevance and EU's commitment to put intergenerational dialogue high on its agenda, many in the older generation live in or at risk of poverty. Over the last two decades, the evolving population pyramid has impacted the quality of democratic politics and the intensity of intergenerational conflict (Lee and Mason 2014).

Spain: the critical politicization in Spain and the Crisis Generation

The 2008 financial crisis has reached huge proportions in Spain, with the significant negative effect of a prolonged recession. Corruption scandals and austerity policies have exacerbated the situation. This long political crisis has caused a critical politicization of young people and the feeling of frustration has motivated an unprecedented wave of activism during the Indignados movement. According to Benedicto and Ramos (2018), young adults, ideologically located on the left, who see their future expectations frustrated by socioeconomic difficulties, have expressed discontent through participation in both elections and protest actions. The change in the political cycle triggered by the 15-M movement has contributed to reshaping the relationship between young people and politics. Specifically, from 2011, if compared to other age groups, the number of young people satisfied or 'conformist' with the political situation 'fell very sharply, while the proportion of what we have called the 'critically politicized' doubled' (Benedicto and Ramos 2018: 23).

Reference:

Benedicto J. and Ramos, M. (2018) Young People's Critical Politicization in Spain in the Great Recession: A Generational Reconfiguration? *Societies*, 8(3), 1-30.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8030089>

Scholars have demonstrated that age is one of the strongest predictors of political participation (Stolle and Hooghe 2009). According to the 2014 European Parliament Election Study (Schmitt et al. 2015), the turnout of voters aged 65 and older was at 47-9 per cent. **As Ford and Jennings have recently written (2020), an aging population can cause new cleavage conflicts to emerge. Since most are retired, older voters tend to be more shielded from economic shocks to labour markets; older voters are less exposed to future costs, such as climate change; older voters are more reliant on the state for health services and benefits (Ford and Jennings 2020).**

It is also claimed that age shapes differences in value orientations (Grasso et al. 2019). For instance, older people are more likely than younger citizens to identify with their nation state (Ringlerova, 2019). Evidence of this kind may entail that “the lines of differences outside the ideological extremes are more clearly demarcated between those who identify with the nation state and thus remain skeptical of the EU and those who identify increasingly with the EU and thus are more supportive of it” (Clark and Rohrschneider 2021). According to Grundy and Murphy (2017), changes in the demographic composition of European societies have shaped the way in which moderate voters see European integration. Clark and Rohrschneider (2021) show that there is a demographic change within the ideological centre and the moderate right, with the far-right becoming 7-8 years older over time. This is not true in Central and Eastern European member states, where, according to Clark and Rohrschneider (2021: 11), “the far-left and moderate left are consistently much older than the other ideological groups”.

While older citizens show high levels of participation in political elections, a sense of marginalization may discourage them from being active participants in meaningful forms of collective action. Pinto and Neri (2017) report that culture and habits have an impact on senior citizens’ participation. Scholars (Falanga et al. 2021) claim that communicative competences as well as the availability of resources, such as time and money, are also good predictors of political participation. Of course, the wealth status also affects individual dispositions to political participation. Bukov et al. (2002) demonstrate that among the elderly, participation tends to be gendered: men are more likely to engage in political activities and women in volunteering and care-giving.

13. CONCLUSIONS

In this synthesis chapter, we have mapped what the most recent literature on the European Union considers as the most pressing challenges facing European democracies individually and collectively. Nine challenges (the democratic deficit in the EU, economic insecurity, the increasing polarization of European public spheres, the rural/urban divide, democratic backsliding in the EU, the pervasiveness of money in democratic campaigning, emergency politics, electoral security, and the generational divide) shape democratic practice in the Union and the kind of choices (e.g., choosing between voting and abstention, choosing one candidate against the alternatives, and choosing between in-person and remote voting) European voters will have to make during elections. In these concluding remarks, it is important to say that such challenges do not necessarily affect European democracies in the same way. There might be significant variations in significance and in the way certain challenges influence choices in different contexts.

We also want to conclude by laying emphasis on two observations. Even if we have dealt with voting challenges individually, this does not mean to imply that challenges are so easily discernible. It has been years since feminist scholars have demonstrated that different aspects of a person’s social and political identities combine to create different modes of advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw 2017). In an analogous way, it is not difficult to imagine that voting challenges are interconnected. Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly urgent to develop stronger voter-centric models that can respond to the way European voters actually perceive the interplay between different challenges and translate them into stable or fluctuating voting choices.

A voter-centric perspective should study elections and the act of voting from the first-personal perspective of the individual voter. In this way, it would unpack moral and nonmoral dilemmas influencing different voting-related decisions, such as the decision to rely on a certain source of information the decision to vote or abstain, the decision to opt for other forms of political participation, the decision to vote for a certain political party, the decision to distance from a political candidate, and the decision to vote for different political parties at local, national, and supranational levels. If seen through these lenses, the act of voting is not just a way to join a collective action process or to express a preference, but rather a constellation of multiple expressions of agency in different interrelated domains.

To set up the context of such a theoretical inquiry, it is important to have a clear and concise mapping of what scholars consider as the most relevant sources of concern in present-day European democracies. The present chapter aimed, therefore, to offer a description of the context shaping individual electoral decisions. If read in continuity with other chapters, such as the review chapter on different electoral systems in Europe (Mráz and Lever 2023) and the review report on different justifications of democracy (Häggrot 2023), it contributes to explaining those empirical circumstances and theoretical elements all normative voter-centric studies of the act of voting, should take into account.

It is also important to remember that this list is far from exhaustive. Actually, this is an intrinsic limit of all reports that cover broad topics in a synthetic form. We recognize that each European democracy can face specific challenges, such as regionalism in Belgium, the clash between federal and national interests in Germany, conflicts between nationalists and unionists in Ireland, political patronage and clientelism in Malta, the narrow equilibrium between legislative stability and government instability in Italy, a declining population and an increasing dependency ratio in Lithuania, as well as challenges to the media freedom in Croatia and Slovakia. This chapter has offered a roadmap to study challenges that face European countries taken collectively and individually. It is aimed at reviewing debates about the status of democracy in Europe and at providing substantial insights for normative research on electoral choices from a voter-centric perspective. Future research should continue investing new and old challenges facing European democracies individually and collectively as well as how certain national challenges resonate in other contexts or in the Union taken as a whole.

Even if policy pundits, experts, and academics continue to debate the decline in political participation and the changing landscape of democratic politics in the EU, many of the challenges, facing democracy individually and collectively stem from factors that can be in the control of democratic institutions. Yet, it seems naïve to conclude that responses to such challenges can be only in control of a series of administrative bodies. This perspective continues to conceptualize the citizens as a passive recipient of policies and institutional innovations, whose active role is just that of giving the go-ahead when asked to cast their vote. In reality, some challenges go deep in the preconditions for ensuring equal political rights in present-day plural, capitalist, and globalized societies and, therefore, shapes the way citizens perceive not only their democratic politics, but the desirability of democracy as a political system more generally. Against this backdrop, **it is key to continue thinking about appropriate ways to study voters and their behaviours at the normative and empirical levels. Too often, we tend to think of voters just in terms of needs and interests. This approach may have a strong explanatory power, but it distributes most agency on the side**

of institutions, which are supposed to serve the interests and needs of their citizens, and, in this way, it gives the image of a citizen who cyclically becomes politically relevant only as a source of feedback for policy outcomes. The problem is that non-democratic systems could, in principle, do at least as well as democratic governments. If we want to find a distinctively democratic response to EU challenges, it becomes increasingly important to reconsider agency distribution in the study of democratic regimes and understand what the world looks like to voters. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to find normative and empirical frameworks of analysis that are more attuned to citizen agency, to the obstacles to it, and to the distinctive capacity of voter agency of contributing to solve problems that all European citizens face.

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