

Cleavage Formation in the European Parliament and the Implications for EU Politics and the Democratic Deficit

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Introduction

It has been 16 years since Hooghe and Marks (2009) have argued that the nature of public opinion in the European Union changed from *permissive consensus* to *constraining dissensus*. Their paper attributed a greater role to public opinion and mass politics in the evolution of the EU than traditional integration theories like intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism (Kuhn, 2019). It also gave way to more intense discussion about the perceived democratic deficit of the European Union. Perceived, because there is, in fact, no consensus about what exactly the democratic deficit entails or how far reaching an issue it really is (García-Gutián, 2022). In order to define the democratic deficit, one could start from a variety of assumptions about the EU as a whole, such as that (1) true representation or accountability is missing within EU institutions, or that (2) there is no European *demos*, or even that (3) the evolution of the EU should naturally lead towards a fully-fledged democracy akin to a national state. All these assumptions about the democratic deficit can be and are routinely challenged. For example, one can claim that the European *demos* is merely the collection of the multitude of national *demoi* (Nicolaidis, 2013) or go as far as to argue that the national standards of legitimacy (like democracy) need not apply to a post-Westphalian entity like the EU (Majone, 1998). Nevertheless, what is perceived as the democratic deficit has tangible effects on politics within the European Union, which alone makes this discussion important.

One clear tangible effect is, that the average voter is disconnected from EU policymaking, both because of the many layers of barriers between them and the lawmakers (with the Commission holding the sole legal initiative), and their low engagement in EU-affairs. The latter is also particularly hard to raise, because the European public space is fragmented and there is no common EU identity to speak of, which could naturally generate a unified public space in a bottom-up process. The absence of a shared EU identity is much more than a technical item on an imagined ‘democratic EU’ checklist. The lack of it has profound implications for democratic (political) engagement. Individuals are less likely to invest interest or concern in a political system with which they do not identify. In contrast, national democracies function as strong polities precisely because they are grounded in a shared national identity, which fosters a sense of belonging and a vested interest in the polity’s future (Fukuyama, 2018).

A polity like the EU, which was elite driven – as was broadly accepted before Hooghe and Marks’ (2009) paper – will naturally have issues once the question of legitimacy and a democratic deficit arises. The most well-known issue, or consequence of the voter disconnect is the second-order nature of European Parliamentary elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Put simply, EP elections are second-order, because European voters’ go to the ballots with the national, and not the European context in mind. This additionally predicts, according to the ‘second-order election’ (SOE) model, that: voter turnout will be lower, as they will feel less is at stake; and those who vote are therefore more likely to engage in protest voting to punish political incumbents. Some would even call EP elections the “midterms” of national politics as such. Studies using the SOE model held significant explanatory power up until the 2019 EP elections. However, both the 2019 and especially the 2024 EP elections can be highlighted as not fully conforming to the SOE model (Hix and Marsh, 2011; Ehin & Talving, 2021; Hix & Cunningham, 2025). These elections coincided with a rise in voter turnout, as well as a politicization of European integration alongside the Europeanization of some policy areas. Questions about the direction of the EU have entered the public debate, making it a salient issue at the EP elections (Kriesi, 2016; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019;

Oleart, 2023: 29). Consequently, political parties mobilized voters on EU issues for electoral gains, making “party positions and public attitudes on the EU [...] increasingly well-defined as well as polarized” (Carrieri et al., 2023: 3; Ehin & Talving, 2021: 469). All this suggests that a transnational cleavage emerged, which meant that EP elections in 2019 and 2024 were about European issues as well, turning a new page for democratic engagement in the EU (Braun & Schäfer, 2022).

A growing salience of EU-related issues can be linked to the post-Maastricht period, primarily for two key reasons. On one hand, the treaty changed the dynamic of integration by creating an (incomplete) political union and slowly shifted political conflict from the economic dimension towards the cultural dimension. Increasingly, salient issues became cultural in nature, such as the question of identities, national sovereignty, European values or the question of migration. While conflict over economic issues did not cease, it was this cultural dimension that, for example, led to the rise of Eurosceptic parties¹ (Schäfer et al., 2021). On the other hand, the European Union has entered a period of polycrisis, characterized by a succession of diverse and overlapping crises, including the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the energy crisis that followed it. Consequently, these issues were politicized on an EU level, because they were issues that were best discussed (or handled) at that level. The crises thus gave a huge boost to the Europeanization and politicization of related policy areas, and these issues gradually acquired increasing salience within European societies. But naturally, as these were crises, the ‘losers of integration’ were the first to voice their discontent, contributing to the rise of the *constraining dissensus*, and Euroscepticism (Hooghe & Marks, 2019; Haapala & Oleart, 2022: 5; Carrieri et al., 2024; Ellger, 2024; Sorace, 2025). That said, the *constraining dissensus* did bring with itself one positive side-effect for those who wished for a more legitimate EU: political contestation at the EU-level. Political contestation can shape party competition by fostering the formation of opposing political forces, including distinctly pro-European voter bases as well. So, phrased differently, political contestation can help with the democratic deficit (Haapala & Oleart, 2022).

Crucially, a defining feature of this new era of political contestation is that, following Brexit - and the ordeal experienced by the UK - the fundamental existence of the European Union is no longer subject to serious debate². Instead, *what* the EU should look like, *how* it should function and *by whom it should be lead* are the core questions of the debate. This is reflected by Euroscepticism as a phenomenon moving on from the simplicity of “in or out”: Eurosceptics today are either ‘*regime sceptics*’ or ‘*policy sceptics*’. The former refers to people who question the leadership of the EU, while the latter refers to those who question the policies of the EU—in both cases, particularly that of the Commission (De Vries, 2018). All this is to say, the debate is framed as the *future* and not the *fate* of the EU. This represents a notable shift from earlier debates, as it suggests that in the current era of mass politics, the citizenry seems to actively engage with some European issues, further underlining that the EU is no longer solely an elite-driven project. Optimists would even rename *constraining dissensus* to the *empowering dissensus* (Bouza & Oleart, 2018).

¹ The emergence of such parties are tied to the Eurocrisis, but it was in the second half of the 2010s where these parties became truly influential political forces across Europe.

² Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

The Europeanisation of policy fields, the politicization of EU-level issues (such as the future of integration) and the polarization of voter positions due to party mobilization as an *ongoing tendency* can have enormous consequences for both European politics and the democratic deficit. This research paper wishes to expand this discussion by presenting two new arguments. Firstly, that this tendency is contributing to the emergence of multiple transnational cleavages that resemble the cleavages of national politics, but at the European level; and secondly, that this tendency could positively impact (the tangible effects of) the democratic deficit through increased democratic engagement, driven by polarization. Indeed, proponents of *agonistic democracy* would argue that it is precisely political conflict and contestation that fosters democratic engagement (Haapala & Oleart, 2022: 3). Both arguments ultimately converge on the claim that politics at the EU level is evolving, marked by the emergence of a unified - rather than fragmented - public sphere for political contestation among citizens, increasingly shaped through bottom-up dynamics. Finally, while this paper will not claim that this trend is also leading towards the emergence of a common EU political identity, it is a closely related issue that warrants consideration (Sorace, 2025: 19-20).

Methodology

This research paper should primarily be understood as an exercise in conceptualizing the changing nature of EU-level politics and its consequences. While it draws on interviews from relevant experts and EU officials³ and empirical research from its sources (Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Ehin & Talving, 2021; Braun & Schäfer, 2022; Carrieri et al., 2023; Carrieri et al., 2024; Ellger, 2024; Hix & Cunningham, 2025; Sorace, 2025; Hartland et al., 2025; Häusermann et al., 2025), these studies typically address individual issues (the shift from economic to cultural conflicts, polarization, mobilization, or the salience of specific cleavages to name a few). In contrast, this paper undertakes a very multidisciplinary approach, aiming to connect multiple political and social processes in order to interpret them as part of a larger, evolving tendency. There is an argument to be made that the dynamic of European politics is evolving exponentially, which will have profound implications. For example, it is a recent phenomenon that European leaders campaign for other European leaders, like in the case of Romania and Poland, effectively influencing national politics by using transnational issues in the domestic context (Burzec, 2025). One could certainly suggest based on that, that the time for transnational political campaigns across the EU is high. Yet the field of research on these issues is in the early stages, with no solid base to build on (Sorace, 2025: 6). That is partly because, as discussed in the introductory part of this paper, the relevance of some of these findings depends on what assumptions one make about the EU – and unfortunately one can only work with assumptions as long as Delors’ famous “Unidentified Political Object (UPO)” description holds true (Delors, 1985). Nevertheless, the inability to agree on which assumptions hold true do not spare us from the political consequences from ongoing trends. Thus, another broader aim of this research is then to demonstrate, that doing this conceptual exercise is not just possible, but necessary.

³ PART OF APPENDIX: As part of the Authors’ visiting fellowship in Brussels, the host institute EUROPEUM provided and helped organize several interviews between the Author and relevant stakeholders (experts and EU officials) in this particular topic. A total of 13 interviews were conducted either online, or in person. The interviews followed a semi-structured logics, whereas questions were prepared in advance, but discussions were free-flowing. In the vast majority of cases, the interviews were on the condition of anonymity, and thus information used from these interviews in this research paper are similarly referenced as anonymous.

The structure of this paper is as follows: after this introductory and methodology chapter, the politicization of EU-issues and the Europeanisation of those issues are discussed. Europeanisation in this case (in the Author's phrasing) is understood as a process by which political issues or conflicts that were previously confined to national contexts become increasingly shaped, framed, and contested at the European Union level (Radaelli, 2000). Politicization is understood in this case as a process about (1) how an issue gets marked as political; (2) by whom is it marked; (3) how it enters the public sphere; (4) the salience it creates; and how it becomes a matter of institutionalised political conflict through political actors (Wiesner, 2022: 40). Politicization is a crucial process, as it can even create cleavages seemingly out of the blue – and any issue may become political simply by a political actor successfully framing it as such. For example, “a half century ago, the weather was presented as an exemplary subject having no political dimension. Today, even hardcore climate change denialists would probably no longer say that—or, if they do, they still make weather the very core of their politics” (Palonen, 2022: 69).

After establishing the reasons for the growing politicization and Europeanisation of EU-level issues, an attempt is made to list the *potential* transnational cleavages that now exist in the European Parliament. While politics and policymaking undoubtedly occur within other EU institutions, the European Parliament is, in theory, the institution that most directly reflects the diversity of voter preferences across Europe. For this reason, it serves as the primary focus of this paper, albeit with the recognition that transnational cleavages may also manifest in other political arenas. The proposed transnational cleavages are as follows: *centralization vs decentralization*; *pro-migration vs anti-immigration*; *green transition vs competitiveness first*; and *liberal democracy vs illiberal democracy*. It may also be tempting to address the Russian aggression against Ukraine and rearmament as a salient issue, and as a cleavage as such, but it is driven by current events and may not exist in its current form in 10 years – whereas this paper argues that the four listed transnational cleavages are here to stay.

The following chapter seeks to categorize the political parties within the European Parliament according to the identified transnational cleavages, and preliminarily explore the framework of party system institutionalization theory in relation to the EP. This latter theoretical approach, rooted in cleavage theory, has been effectively applied to the analysis of post-Soviet parliaments, where democratic dynamics had to be reintroduced into existing - though largely ‘emptied-out’ - institutional frameworks (Bértoa, 2014). This analogy is not one-to-one with the EP, which is a transnational assembly, yet the rationale is similar: while institutional structures and political stakeholders are in place, genuine democratic engagement has so far been absent in the EP due to the disconnect between the EU and the citizenry. As this may be changing, preliminarily applying party system institutionalization theory to the EP is useful in conceptualization, if perhaps not definitive for the time being.

Of course, the use of that theory can only ever be relevant if there is something to *fill* the institutional framework in with – which circles the paper back to the question of a European *demos* in the last chapter. The possible future existence of such a *demos* is discussed. It should be noted, that a European *demos* in this paper is strictly defined as: a significant portion of the citizenry holding a collective, civic based political identity that does not inherently challenge the primacy of national identities (Weiler, 1995). This is a unique criteria of this paper (based on the 1995 paper of J. H. H. Weiler), which will briefly be discussed in that chapter, alongside why current political trends could allow the emergence of such a *demos*.

The rise Eurosceptic parties, and the europeanization of policies – a mutually reinforcing process

The politicization of EU-level issues has traditionally been viewed negatively, because these issues were frequently related to the crises and controversies of the European Union. In the era of the *permissive consensus*, political contestation originating from EU-level issues were imagined to be a hindrance, rather than a boon for integration. Now, in the era of the *constraining dissensus*, politicization by either parties or the media is unavoidable – yet with all its vices come some virtues. Take, for example, the Eurocrisis and bailing out certain member states, or the migration crises stemming from the inadequate protection of external borders. While these developments led to the politicization of EU-level issues (the Euro, and migration), they embroiled the Commission in controversy and contributed to the rise of Euroscepticism. All that said, however disruptive, “controversies appear indispensable for revealing the opposing arguments, as well as making them available for debate to wider publics. This in turn might prove useful for European debates in the long run, as it can expand the range of actors involved in the political debates” (Haapala & Oleart, 2022: 3). Whether harmful or helpful to the EU, conflicts generate political activity in the public sphere. In the case of the European Union, they generate political activity in the broader, European public sphere – one which is otherwise fragmented – and serve to Europeanise an issue. The argument here is that there are aspects of politicization that are ultimately beneficial for the EU.

Politicization in the EU is not done by the Commission. Even though one can speak about a ‘political’ Commission since Juncker, and the ‘presidentialization’ of the Commission since von der Leyen⁴, the communication strategy of the Commission does not inherently politicize issues. Instead, communication is done in a corporate manner. Moreover, the Commission’s preferred style of dialogue with citizens often looks like a deliberative process, that aims to create consensus. In other words, the Commission has traditionally not been a conflict generating actor. (Soldevila & Meulen, 2022: 256-262). Politicization of issues is instead left either to parties, or the media. The logic of politicizing European issues for parties is simple: it is done in an effort to gain votes.

Perhaps the best contemporary example of how an issue become politicized on the European level is migration and asylum policy. By all means, migration policy was politicized in member states before, notably during the Yugoslav wars. During and in the aftermath of the 2015 European migrant crisis, both political parties and the media assigned significant salience to the issue once more – with one distinguishing characteristic: right wing challenger or Eurosceptic parties (used interchangeably in this research) also framed the issue as a failure of the EU and the Commission to protect its external borders, thereby Europeanizing the issue. This communication strategy was successful, leading to the rise in popularity of, for example, the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*). The German party itself serves as a notable example, as from its inception in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, it politicized the European Union in a negative light to garner electoral support within Germany (Fröhlich, 2023; Hansen & Olsen, 2024). It also made sense for parties like the AfD to choose to politicize issues that could be

⁴ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

Europeanized, because they could underline the economic and cultural anxieties within society related to integration (Wiesner, 2022: 32-33; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Largely due to the influence of these parties, migration policy became central to both the debate surrounding the 2019 EP elections and the attention of MEPs. It possibly represented one of the earliest transnational cleavages centred on a specific policy issue (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Braun & Schäfer, 2022; Sorace, 2025). This raises a broader question about the political dynamics behind such developments: why have Eurosceptic parties, rather than their Europhile counterparts, been most effective at politicizing and Europeanizing salient issues such as migration? After all, there have been numerous instances in the past where specific topics held the potential for Europeanization – and were even deliberately promoted as such by more Europhile parties – yet ultimately remained confined within fragmented, nationally bounded public spheres.

From the moment they were created, EP elections functioned as first-order elections specifically for Eurosceptic parties for several reasons. Chief among them is the fact that, for these challenger parties, EP elections offered the best opportunity to gain economic resources (through EU funding), political capital and electoral support, as voters were more inclined to punish incumbents by supporting them. Additionally, unlike many mainstream parties, which often sent retired or less prominent politicians to become MEPs, challenger parties frequently nominated their most visible and capable figures – further underscoring the strategic importance of these elections for them. All this aligns with the logic of second-order elections. In certain cases, the electoral system of specific countries further facilitated this process, as seen in the case of Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN), which benefited from France's proportional electoral system. Importantly, one factor behind RN's success was also its effective politicization of EU integration and EU-level issues within domestic politics. Their momentum received a further boost during the 2019 EP elections, as the salience of EU-related issues significantly increased. As shown with the example of migration policy, the rising salience of specific EU-level issues were not merely a coincidence. Rather, similarly to the AfD, the strategic politicization of these issues by the RN both capitalized on and contributed to their increasing prominence, resulting in a mutually reinforcing dynamic (Kriesi et al., 2008: 51; Ehin & Talving, 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2019: 123; Wiesner, 2022: 35; Kauppi, 2022: 92-97; Hix & Cunningham, 2025).

Highlighting this mutually reinforcing dynamic is crucial, especially as a shift in voter behaviour was already evident in 2019, when the Eurobarometer survey showed that a majority of voters reported voting for the party whose ideas or values most closely aligned with their views on EU-related issues (Wiesner, 2022: 36). While this raises a classic chicken-or-the-egg dilemma – did Eurosceptic parties begin politicizing EU issues because of their growing salience, or did these issues become more salient as a result of their politicization? – the key takeaway is the existence of a clear link between the rise of Eurosceptic parties and the increasing contestation of EP elections. In other words, there is a connection between the europeanization of political issues, the strategic politicization of EU matters by Eurosceptic parties, and shifting patterns of voter engagement across Europe – together contributing to the transformation of EP elections from second-order contests into increasingly consequential and politically salient events in their own right (Carrieri et al., 2023; Carrieri et al., 2024). An interesting paradox of this process is of course the fact that Eurosceptic parties mobilized their voters on a sovereigntist, anti-EU line – yet regardless of their position, they “[...] are contributing to the Europeanisation of public spheres by introducing ‘Europe’ in the national political debate, [...] thus helping to connect debates transnationally” (Haapala & Oleart, 2022: 4).

Moreover, an examination of contemporary Eurosceptic groups in the European Parliament, such as the Patriots, reveals that this ‘side-effect’ of their efforts has only intensified. Today, it is these groups that exhibit the highest levels of activity among their MEPs in the EP and regularly feature national leaders appearing together at party events – addressing not only their domestic audiences but also framing their messages for a broader European public. From a historical perspective, it is striking – if not ironic – that such developments, once envisioned as the aspiration of federalists, have been most fully realized by sovereigntist actors. Yet this, too, aligns with the logic of second-order elections – or rather, with what that logic implies about the strategic pathways available to challenger parties: it made sense for them to exploit and shape emerging transnational political spaces⁵.

Whereas the main drivers of the politicization of the EU were Eurosceptic parties, Europhile (mainstream) parties tended to avoid or ignore EU-related issues and mobilize voters on the traditional left-right dimension (Carrieri et al., 2023; Carrieri et al., 2024; De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; 2020; Green-Pedersen, 2012). Even today, one hardly sees mainstream EP groups such as the EPP or S&D hosting party events where national leaders appear next to each other, addressing the broader European public. Nevertheless, as the salience of the EU and EU-issues rose, and anti-EU messages dominated public spheres, pro-EU parties had to somehow react in an effort to contest Eurosceptic parties in the political arena. (Carrieri et al., 2024: 6; Pellegata & Visconti 2022; Turnbull-Dugarte 2021). On the ‘demand’ side, Europhile voters themselves called for pro-EU parties to respond, effectively obliging these parties to compete for their support. A double-dynamic of both party-system and bottom-up pressure once again raises a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma, but it also highlights a clear tendency: the successful politicization of the EU by Eurosceptic forces compelled their opponents to react, thereby fostering a counter-movement. This process can be interpreted as a form of Polanyian ‘political double movement,’ which drives political forces in two opposing directions on EU-related issues. (Polanyi, 2001; Carrieri et al., 2023: 16-17; Carrieri et al., 2024).

Party systems experiencing an increasing shift of political forces moving toward the poles exhibit an additional aspect, which is both an important feature of this wider European tendency, and a significant consequence of ongoing processes in itself: polarization (Hutter et al., 2016; Carrieri et al., 2023: 1-2; Carrieri et al., 2024: 4-5). Polarization is key in the creation of transnational cleavages, because it transforms ‘simple’ transnational issues – such as migration, the environment, or the economy, already identified by - into a more diverse set of policy positions (Braun & Schäfer, 2022; Carrieri et al., 2024; Ellger, 2024; Font, 2025). Notably, the European political landscape is becoming increasingly polarized as political forces adopt more divergent positions on key issues, resulting in opposing voter preferences that are both clearer but more difficult to reconcile. This is already evident in the domestic politics of certain member states, including Germany, Austria, and Spain, where EU-related issues are also increasingly driving polarization (Ellger, 2024). However, similarly to politicization, polarization is also often seen in a negative light. This is much more justified, as polarization can undermine social cohesion and democratic processes by injecting ideology and, for lack of a better term, emotions into political debates – which explains why voter preferences become increasingly difficult to reconcile. Still, even here, this vice may carry certain virtues in the EU context. First, polarization tends to boost voter

⁵ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

participation and turnout, as seen in several member states, and is likely connected to the increased turnout in the 2019 and 2024 EP elections. Second, “polarization of opinion is considered to be a necessary component of politicization” (Butnaru-Troncota & Ionita, 2022: 226). This more diverse set of policy positions on EU-issues clarify the range of available positions for voters, reduce the gap between policymakers and the electorate as a result, and ultimately enhance the importance of EU matters in both national and EP elections (Braun & Schäfer, 2022, Carrieri et al., 2024). Finally, and crucially for the chapter on EU identity, because polarization fosters ideological divides by embedding emotional commitment into voter behaviour (Turner et al., 1979; Tajfel, 1982; Huddy et al., 2015; Achen & Bartels, 2016), “personal and political identities start to align, [and the] constituent’s emotions become a stronger motivation for actual behaviour. Voters engage in politics not to see their preferences put into legislation, but to express a salient part of their identity” (Ellger, 2024: 1313). This of course, is proven only for political identities embedded in the nation-state. Yet, it is not a disproven possibility that this may be relevant for an EU political identity.

Polarization within individual member states is already a well-documented and widely recognized phenomenon (Ehin & Talving, 2021; Oleart, 2022; Ellger, 2024; Hartland et al., 2025; Coffé et al., 2025). By contrast, polarization within the fragmented European public sphere is more difficult to conceptualize. In theory, a polarized transnational sphere would imply that voters across Europe could interpret certain issues within a shared political context. However, the EU’s fragmented public space also means that citizens in different member states often understand the Union in markedly different ways (De Vries, 2018, Hartland et al., 2025). It is therefore not necessarily the case that polarization within member states or across Europe on the same EU-level policy issues would lead to similar interpretations. Nonetheless, there is some empirical evidence suggesting the existence of such a tendency. Braun & Schäfer (2022) show that holding more extreme views on European integration increases the likelihood of voting in European elections, and that voters are also more likely to participate when they attach greater importance to specific policy issues. Carrieri et al. (2024) reinforces this claim by demonstrating, that “more extreme Europhile position a party takes on the EU produces more votes from citizens more aligned with that party on the EU” (Carrieri et al., 2024: 16). There are also signs that today one can “increasingly predict Europeans’ issue positions by simply leveraging the issue positions of demographically and politically similar citizens from other European Union countries” (Sorace, 2025: 17). If we, then, accept that voters across Europe increasingly recognize similar political contexts in salient debates (Fortunato et al., 2024; Sorace, 2025), the next step can be to identify which policy areas anchor this shared understanding, as they are the likeliest candidates to be transnational cleavages.

The political cleavages of European parliamentary politics

Having outlined the evolving dynamics of European politics, it is possible to propose a set of potential transnational cleavages (from now on: EU cleavages). EU cleavages can be defined as cleavages that are the most relevant and are “solvable” at the EU-level. Previous academic research often identified EU integration, migration, the environment, and the economy as prominent EU cleavages (Braun and Schäfer, 2022; Font, 2025). While these issues are undoubtedly part of broader transnational divides, they often fail to capture the full complexity of political contestation surrounding them. Drawing on Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) cleavage theory – which conceptualizes cleavages as historically rooted,

distinct and oppositional categories, such as *urban vs rural* or *centre vs periphery* – one can argue that labels like "the environment" do not, on their own, reveal two clearly opposing camps. Climate change, which is usually what people refer to when politicizing "the environment," is a widely recognized fact. It is rather the differing political responses that create political division and create cleavages. It is the hypothesis of this paper that there are four distinct European, transnational cleavages: (1) *centralization vs decentralization*; (2) *pro-migration vs anti-immigration*; (3) *green transition vs competitiveness first*; (4) *liberal democracy vs illiberal democracy*.

This list of transnational cleavages is neither definitive nor final, as it requires empirical research for validation. Such research should ideally follow the publication of this paper. However, two claims support these proposed cleavages. On one hand, recent examples and observable trends in Europe do make all these issues salient. On the other hand, the cleavages Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) identified are fading because some of them were pacified. On top of that, historical developments linked to European integration have reshaped the dimensions of political conflict, providing parties with new issues to mobilize voters and form cleavages, even while second-order issues persist, as previously discussed. What we are seeing, regardless of whether a definitive list can be established, is the emergence of new cleavages that are replacing older ones. (Kriesi et al., 2008: 24, 49; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Schäfer et al., 2021; Font, 2025; Hix & Cunningham, 2025).

Centralization versus decentralization

The original, widely accepted transnational political cleavages in the EU concerns the future of integration. The creation of this cleavage is tied to the very nature of the *constraining dissensus* and Euroscepticism, the latter being an established phenomenon in European politics by now (Hix et al., 2007; De Vries, 2016; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Pareschi, 2025: 1). The opposing positions are well-defined and publicly debated across Europe. Centralization refers to the "ever-closer-union" concept whereas ever more powers are delegated to EU institutions. It must be noted, that federalists are part of the centralization camp, but they do not define it. Centralization may for example also take the form of a seemingly deregulating agenda, as seen in the Draghi report. The report, in the end, pursues a centralizing objective, since it proposes further regulation of the single market in order to reduce its fragmentation (Draghi, 2025). Centralization can effectively be supported by most mainstream parties, particularly since it is not always seen as incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity, with an increasing number of policy issues being regarded as best addressed at the European level. Centralization can thus be best described as a tendency that drives the natural progression of EU integration, and a process that has been unfolding since the signing of the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community.

Opposing centralization are two broader camps. One consists of the old radical left, whose resistance stems from a political heritage rooted in scepticism toward supranational institutions. The other, more politically relevant camp consists of the new radical right-wing challenger parties. The question of centralization for these parties is framed in relation to sovereignty (Andguladze et al., 2022). Perhaps the EP Group that politicizes this issue most actively are the Patriots for Europe – and in their manifesto, they even directly claim that this issue is indeed a cleavage: "the political fault line today no longer runs

between conservatives and liberals or between Right and Left, but between Centralists who herald a new European “superstate”, and Patriots and Sovereignists who fight to preserve and strengthen the Europe of Nations we cherish” (Patriots, 2024). If one were to identify the core policy debate within this cleavage, setting aside the various ideological dimensions of centralization and decentralization, it would be the unresolved nature of EU law. Two principal approaches define the relationship between sovereignty and EU law: one holds that sovereignty is conditionally transferred through the consent of the member states and may be rescinded at any time, while the other maintains that sovereignty, once pooled within the EU, remains there. Since the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, this issue was never resolved⁶. Parties in the decentralization camp typically adhere to the first view, from which a range of ongoing political disputes emerges. Within this framework, what they describe as creeping European competencies constitutes a central object of politicization.

A good example of this proposed EU cleavage can be found in debates surrounding rule of law issues. The rule of law conditionality mechanism has frequently been framed as a centralization matter, with challenger parties arguing that it extends EU competences beyond their intended scope. From this perspective, Brussels is seen as promoting liberal values and interfering in nationally determined matters such as judicial systems and the constitutional order, thereby undermining sovereignty and exerting pressure on domestic politics (Krzysztosek, 2022). The Commission (and EP groups supporting it), by contrast, insists that its mandate to enforce rule of law provisions is not about imposing values, but rather about safeguarding the Union’s financial interests through monitoring corruption and ensuring the independence of national courts. Such independence is indispensable for fact-finding and adjudicating cases involving EU law, tasks for which the Commission would otherwise lack the necessary capacity. Put differently, rule of law enforcement concerns only those areas where the EU already holds competence under the treaties and the existing legal framework⁷. It is not the aim of this paper to resolve this debate, but rather to highlight how political perception places the rule of law example within the proposed *centralization vs decentralization* EU cleavage. In this regard, the argument is often made that the most federalizing institution in practice is not the European Parliament, but the European Court of Justice and, by extension, its judges, who in most cases interpret disputes in favour of the primacy of EU law. Increasingly, national courts and judges are perceived in a similar way, as their rulings frequently invoke EU law in ways that constrain domestic discretion. This dynamic, frequently described as *lawfare*, reflects the use of legal mechanisms as instruments of political contestation and has become an increasingly salient feature of member state politics (European Commission, 2024; Huemer et al., 2025; Mantovano, 2025).

Pro-migration versus anti-immigration

Migration has become one of the most firmly established and salient transnational issues since at least the 2019 EP elections. Identifying it as an EU-level cleavage should not, in theory, be controversial, yet it

⁶ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

⁷ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

does raise two important challenges. First, migration primarily mobilizes voters on the right, while it has comparatively little impact on left-wing electorates. The issue also carries a regional dimension, as it tends to be more salient in southern member states than in northern ones – the latter placing greater emphasis on environmental concerns (Braun and Schäfer, 2022; Wiesner, 2022: 36-38; Hartland, 2025: 8-9). For an EU-level cleavage to be fully developed, both sides would need to be mobilized by the issue. Yet parties seldom campaign explicitly on a pro-migration platform, since the radical right has so successfully politicized the topic that it has become highly controversial to take opposite positions – and the radical right’s efforts have contributed to a broader rightward turn in migration politics across the EU. Second, even radical right parties typically acknowledge that skilled migration is economically beneficial, which complicates their claims to a strict anti-migration stance (Freudenthaler, 2025). Nevertheless, their political communication frequently frames migration as an issue to be rejected outright. What remains abundantly clear, however, is that the salience of migration at the EU level has been undeniable since the 2015 crisis (Braun and Schäfer, 2022; Hooghe & Marks, 2018).

Migratory issues are rather best understood within a proposed *pro-migration vs. anti-immigration* cleavage in the EU as primarily cultural in nature. In 2002, Hooghe et al. introduced the “GAL–TAN” dimension (Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist), arguing that it serves as a powerful predictor of party positioning in Europe. This framework is frequently applied in the study of transnational (EU) cleavages, as it neatly places parties into two opposing camps. Within the GAL–TAN model, migration is considered a cultural issue because – following the post-Maastricht shift from economic to cultural divides, as previously discussed – it taps into cultural anxieties by being framed as a threat to national identity, cultural homogeneity, and sovereignty (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Carrieri et al. 2023; Carrieri, et al. 2024;). Parties and voters with TAN profiles typically align with restrictive positions on culture issues, whereas those with GAL profiles emphasize diversity, minority rights, human rights, and multiculturalism as core values. Taken together, this underlines that migration in the EU context is best understood as a cultural issue. The GAL–TAN model, still widely used by academics to explain party dynamics, supports this view. In this research, however, it is invoked only for that purpose, since the main objective is to analyse party dynamics through Lipset and Rokkan’s cleavage theory, which allows for a more issue-specific understanding of EU-level conflicts than the broader GAL-TAN model. Nevertheless, the existence of a *pro-migration vs. anti-immigration* cleavage seems to be well-founded already.

Green transition versus competitiveness first

Similar to migration, the environment as a salient issue presents certain challenges. As noted in the introductory chapter, referring to “the environment” does not fully capture the complexity of the matter. Moreover, it tends to mobilize primarily left-wing voters, which raises the same dilemma of whether it constitutes a fully developed EU cleavage. Nevertheless, the salience of environmental issues is also well-documented at both the domestic and EU levels (Wiesner, 2022; Haapala, 2022; Braun and Schäfer, 2022; Hartland et al., 2025; Coffé et al., 2025). Within the GAL–TAN framework, these issues are often conceptualized also as cultural (Hooghe et al. 2002: 18). The argument of this research, however, is that following the EP 2024 elections, “the environment” has been increasingly reframed as an economic cleavage. This reframing was driven above all by challenger, radical right-wing parties. Since

outright denial of climate change is not a viable political position, these parties instead directed criticism toward the Von der Leyen Commission's Green Deal, portraying the green transition as a threat to Europe's economic growth (Paillou & Camut, 2025). Polarization then further reinforced this dynamic. Left-wing parties became more firmly committed to the green transition, while mainstream right-wing parties, under pressure from radical right-wing challenger parties, also adjusted their communication strategies, increasingly emphasizing competitiveness as a counterpoint to environmental regulation. It is important to note, that, although the communication strategies of mainstream groups such as the EPP broadly resemble those of the Patriots or the European Conservatives in the EP, they are not identical. In essence, the EPP continues to support the overarching green objectives, yet seeks to present them in a more rationalized manner while avoiding the electoral risks of appearing to endorse them uncritically (Stefán, 2025). In contrast, radical right-wing parties often challenge the Green Deal and environmental regulation in their entirety (Paillou & Camut, 2025).

Assuming this argument holds, it may help address the challenge that the economy is often cited as a potential transnational cleavage, yet clear-cut opposing positions are difficult to identify. This difficulty arises because defining economic policies – particularly after some traditional cleavages identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) have been pacified – is a complex task, as they are oftentimes hardly comparable even within domestic politics, let alone across multiple member states. It may be premature to determine whether an economic EU cleavage will ultimately crystallize along the lines of this debate. However, with the Union's commitment to climate neutrality by 2050 now enshrined in EU law, the politicization of this issue is likely to persist.

Liberal democracy versus illiberal democracy

Liberal democracy versus illiberal democracy is a new type of cleavage that is firmly on the cultural axis. The term illiberalism was first popularized by Fareed Zakaria in 1997 – but to grasp what illiberal democracy signifies within the European Union, it is suggested to look to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), particularly the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the soon-to-be member states, there was an expectation that the “new age” of EU membership would restore their statehood, culture, and identity, and that the Union would provide the space for these to flourish. This hope was deeply rooted in historical experience, as such expressions had been suppressed under Soviet-backed regimes. By contrast, Western Europe had moved along a different trajectory, with values evolving toward greater emphasis on liberal democratic norms. In the words of Ivan Krastev, where “1968 symbolizes the endorsement of cosmopolitan values, [...] in the east it stands for the re-birth of national sentiments” (Krastev, 2017: 57). And so, when the CEE states joined the European Union, they brought with them not only different historical trajectories but also diverging expectations about democracy, cultural values, and sovereignty. In the established liberal democracies of Western Europe, political development since the post-war era had increasingly emphasized individual human and political rights, as well as cultural shifts linked to multiculturalism. By contrast, many CEE democracies, shaped by their post-communist transitions, tended toward restoring majoritarian understandings of democracy in which the will of the national majority holds primacy over all else. This divergence was shaped both by the legacy of enduring communist rule and by nation-state traditions that placed sovereignty, majoritarian democracy and cultural homogeneity at the heart of political legitimacy.

While it is the CEE region that best reflects what supporters of illiberalism stand for, these principles of sovereignty, majoritarian democracy and cultural homogeneity do also form the core thought of radical right-wing challenger parties across Europe – and because it is a broader phenomenon, the cleavage can also be defined by other names, such as *communitarianism versus cosmopolitanism* or *universalism versus particularism* (Wiesner, 2022: 37-39; Hooghe & Marks, 2018: 123). Interestingly, this cleavage does not align neatly with the traditional left–right divide. Instead, the dividing line is marked between mainstream right-wing parties and newer radical right challenger parties, as they contest what “conservatism” means on the cultural axis. In Western Europe, after the second world war, there was a consensus that conservatism means a support for the system of liberal democracies (not to be equated with the progressivism of today) and market liberal ideas. That said, the main strength of mainstream right-wing parties lay in their economic positioning and support for market-liberal ideas. Thus, their voter base consisted of supporters of that policy, people from higher social classes and with business interests.

The rising prominence of cultural issues after the Maastricht-treaty and the establishment of radical right-wing challenger parties disrupted the consensus on conservatism. Rather than challenging mainstream conservatives on economic grounds (where their positions largely overlap), radical right wing challenger parties entered competition on the cultural axis. This paper has already established that their strategy was driven by the advantages gained through politicizing issues such as migration and European integration, and that their strategy was successful (Häusermann et al., 2025). The dilemma of mainstream conservative parties today is that their political traditions and leadership remain tied to liberal democracy, making it difficult to abandon those commitments, but when it comes to voters, “culturally progressive attitudes are very minoritarian within the right field” (Häusermann et al., 2025: 15). The support of mainstream right-wing parties is decreasing in favour of radical right-wing challenger parties *at a time* when European politics is generally experiencing a right-wing shift. All that said, it is increasingly difficult to justify labelling radical right-wing parties as mere challenger parties, given their established presence in many member states. Moreover, several of these parties now seek to contest mainstream right-wing competitors not only on cultural issues but also in the economic domain, portraying themselves as the more capable alternative (AfD, 2025).

At the EU level, this cleavage is most clearly reflected in the contrast between the EPP and the Patriots, where dynamics resemble those found in domestic politics between mainstream and radical right-wing parties⁸. Importantly, this contest does not take place in isolation. Left-wing parties actively engage on the liberal side of the divide, mobilising their voters, as opposing illiberalism is not only partly ideological but also deeply embedded in the identity of many of their voters. At the EU level, this debate also concerns the rules of the political system itself. The EPP parties remain committed to operating within the framework of the established liberal-leaning EU institutions, while the Patriots parties openly challenge and seek to undermine it. What reinforces this cleavage is its genuinely transnational nature: one might even argue it has become a transatlantic cleavage. Since the second Trump administration, illiberal currents in the United States have visibly influenced European politics. Moreover, the liberal–illiberal conflict is highly salient in the media and prominently represented across European public spheres. The patterns and dynamics are much the same at both the domestic and EU levels, making it difficult to see them as separate. (Andguladze et al., 2022: 194; Krastev & Leonard, 2025).

⁸ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

Conclusion

In all the proposed EU cleavages, the issues identified are both salient within national contexts and relevant at the broader European level. Each of them is closely tied to radical right-wing Eurosceptic parties, which have played a central role in politicizing these debates and pushing them into the wider European public sphere. Furthermore, much like Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) classic cleavages, they all (can) rest on deeper historical foundations. First, *centralization versus decentralization* reflects the long-standing debates about the future trajectory of European integration, which now began over seventy years ago. Second, *pro-migration versus anti-immigration* has been politicized since at least the Yugoslav wars and has more recently been Europeanized by radical right-wing Eurosceptic parties. Third, the tension between the *green transition and competitiveness* is essentially an economic cleavage that has merged with environmental concerns, as the dilemmas of sustainability and growth have become inseparable. Finally, *liberal democracy versus illiberal democracy* is the newest cleavage, but one that nevertheless draws on enduring legacies of nationhood, sovereignty, and democratic traditions, and has in recent years become one of the most visible and contested dividing lines in the EP and in European politics as a whole. The next step, however, is to examine how these cleavages interact with the party system in the European Parliament: as the argument is that tendencies also point toward a party system institutionalization (PSI) in the EP. PSI is important, because for cleavages to structure politics in a lasting way, they must be clearly embedded in parties, institutions, and voter alignments. This raises the question of how far the EU itself, as a political system, can sustain and institutionalize these cleavages across member states, and what this means for its development as a polity.

Party System Institutionalization in the European Parliament

Cleavages not only define the salient issues over which politics is contested but also shape the relationships between parties within a party system. This is well established in the case of institutionalized national parliaments, yet it increasingly applies to the European Parliament as it is growing more consequential. In terms of its operation, the EP can be compared to national parliaments: groups are organized along functional rather than territorial lines. In other words, they unite around shared positions on issues or cleavages rather than nationality. These groups also establish recognizable "brands," signalling to voters, still largely uninformed and disconnected as they may be, about their distinct policy orientations. This makes it possible to apply cleavage to the EP context. However, because of the weak link between voters and representatives, the central dynamic of party politics in the EP still revolves more around legislative coordination than voter mobilization. As long as the EP lacks the right of legislative initiative, this is unlikely to completely change. Still, the emergence of strong transnational cleavages can gradually restructure party relationships by increasing pressure on them to become more responsive to citizens' preferences, with potential implications for the EU's development as a polity (Hix et al., 2006: 509; Hix et al., 2007: 39-47). More specifically, the implication is the question of whether the European Parliament is moving toward greater party system institutionalization, a process long recognized in comparative politics (at least in the national context) as central to the development of stable polities.

In his 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington argued that developed polities are characterized by strong political institutions. Their strength derives partly from the societal support they command and partly from their level of institutionalization, described as “the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability” (Huntington, 1965: 394). Political parties, in particular, must be robust for such institutionalization to take hold. This insight laid the foundation for the theory of party system institutionalization (PSI). PSI is among the theories where its conceptualization and operationalization are still incomplete – and it is not in the scope of this research to develop it further (Bértoa, 2014; Bértoa, 2016). Nonetheless, PSI was already proven to be a useful concept, for example, in analysing “*stabilization and social embeddedness of the major party alternatives and their relative policy positions, and thus regularity in the patterns of inter-party competition in the Visegrád states*” (Tóka, 1997: 8). These dynamics were especially evident in those states, because democratic politics had to be reintroduced into pre-existing but largely hollowed-out institutional structures. The analogy is not one-to-one with the EP, which is a transnational assembly, yet the rationale is similar: although institutional frameworks and political actors are in place, democratic engagement remains weak due to the persistent gap between EU-level politics and citizens. The emergence of strong EU cleavages has the potential to alter this picture by embedding party competition more firmly in voters’ perspective.

One current accepted definition of PSI refers to the extent to which “a stable set of parties interacts regularly in stable ways” (Mainwaring, 2018: 4) and come to “complete, colligate, and collaborate” in a predictable manner (Bértoa & Enyedi, 2021: 17). “Stable and predictable party systems are regarded as a critical underpinning of democracy as they generate information about who the parties are, what they stand for, and how they might behave” (Kim, 2023: 1). PSI thus offers a valuable lens for examining the interaction between mass politics, party (in this case EP group) interaction, and democratic engagement in a polity that is evolving. Here, it is best not to forget that the parliament only had its first direct elections in 1979, and that it is only after the Lisbon treaty that it became an equal institution to the Council (member states) in legislative processes. So, while still young compared to national legislatures, the EP has developed rapidly (Hix et al., 2007: 3, 216), and if the proposed (or any other) cleavages are crystallizing, we can expect a continuing tendency of self-reinforcing dynamic of bottom-up voter mobilization and top-down elite competition to continue shaping its institutionalization.

Over time, this may strengthen citizens’ identification with European groups and their policy preferences, which in turn makes EP elections more consequential. It is important to note that this unfolds gradually. If, by the 2029 elections, most voters still treat EP contests as second-order, but a growing share are better informed and vote on EU issues, that shift would still be significant and the tendency clear. A further sign that party competition is changing, as cleavages crystallize, is the question of control within parliamentary groups. In the EP, the primary link to voters runs through national parties, so groups are only as strong as their member parties. National parties supply electoral legitimacy and therefore hold most of the influence, which constrains group leaders and makes a single communication line hard to sustain across varied domestic contexts. At the same time, group leadership exercises a different kind of influence through parliamentary resources such as rapporteur positions, committee positions, and speaking time, which can encourage discipline as the stakes rise. As competition intensifies, leaders will seek tighter coordination and stronger cohesion. We already see this in the Patriots’ unified messaging despite internal diversity, and in Manfred Weber’s efforts to

centralize the EPP to remain competitive⁹.

An important underpinning of PSI is categorizing parties – in the case of the EP, groups – according to their positions on cleavages. This makes it possible to examine party system dynamics, to identify potential coalition patterns, and to assess whether cleavages are cross-cutting (when divisions overlap and reduce polarization) or reinforcing (when divisions align and deepen polarization). In this research, the ordering of groups is based on the broader political behaviour of these EP groups and the classification is presented primarily for conceptual purposes. That is also because Hartland et al. (2025) have shown that group manifestos often do not match the preferences of voters, and EP groups themselves are composed of national parties with different domestic strategies. For this reason, the following categorization should be seen as, once again, an exercise in conceptualization that highlights possible dynamics, although it requires further empirical testing in future research. Moreover, some of these categorizations are simplifications. It could be argued that, for example, Renew Europe leans towards anti-migration and competitiveness first positions as well – but are not as explicit in their communication as the EPP is.

EP group	(1) centralization vs decentralization	(2) pro-migration vs anti-immigration	(3) green transition vs competitiveness first	(4) liberal democracy vs illiberal democracy
EPP	centralization	anti-immigration	competitiveness first	liberal democracy
S&D	centralization	pro-migration	green transition	liberal democracy
Renew Europe	centralization	pro-migration	green transition	liberal democracy
Greens/EFA	centralization	pro-migration	green transition	liberal democracy
The Left	centralization	pro-migration	green transition	liberal democracy
ECR	decentralization	anti-immigration	competitiveness first	illiberal democracy
Patriots for Europe (PFE)	decentralization	anti-immigration	competitiveness first	illiberal democracy
Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN)	decentralization	anti-immigration	competitiveness first	illiberal democracy

Figure 1 - categorization of EP groups along cleavages

This categorization can be outlined as follows. The EPP represents a group whose parties have consistently supported centralization, most clearly through their backing of the Commission President, and they have positioned themselves firmly on the side of liberal democracy, as demonstrated by how the struggle between them and Fidesz ended¹⁰. At the same time, the EPP has adjusted its stance on migration and the green transition in order to compete more effectively with radical right-wing parties¹¹. The S&D, Renew Europe, Greens/EFA, and The Left broadly share the same positions on the identified cleavages. This helps explain why they often vote together on these issues in the European Parliament, although it does not imply that they are politically indistinguishable. On other salient policy matters, such as defence and rearmament, significant differences exist among them. However, as previously argued, defence constitutes an important policy area, but does not necessarily rise to the level of a cleavage. The same logic applies to radical right-wing / Eurosceptic forces, where national parties differ substantially in their domestic agendas, yet remain unified on cleavage-related positions. The case of the

⁹ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

¹⁰ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

¹¹ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

ECR also warrants particular clarification. While one might point to Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, which could appear supportive of the Commission, the group's collective stance was made evident in the 2024 no-confidence vote against von der Leyen (Genovese & Cosic, 2025).

What stands out most clearly from this assessment, is that the *centralization vs decentralization* cleavage and the *liberal democracy vs illiberal democracy* cleavage are reinforcing. This dynamic reflects the broader polarization of European public spheres, where the European Parliament is divided between the forces of the left and mainstream right on one side, and Eurosceptic or radical right-wing parties on the other. By contrast, the *pro-migration vs anti-immigration* cleavage and the *green transition vs competitiveness-first* cleavage appear to be cross-cutting. This seems to be supported by the behaviour of the EPP, which has remained in close partnership with other groups based on reinforcing cleavages, yet has also voted together with Eurosceptic forces on these more cross-cutting issues (Sorgi & Grier, 2024). Taken together, these dynamics suggest that party competition in the EP is now structured along more organized and recognizable lines.

Questions of political identity – is there a connection?

This research has approached the issue of the EU's democratic deficit through the lens of mass politics and democratic contestation. Building on the argument that agonistic democracy – understood as political conflict and contestation – offers a useful framework for conceptualizing democratic engagement in the EU, one may argue that current developments contribute to narrowing the democratic deficit (Dean et al., 2019: vi; Oleart & Haapala, 2022: 3; Oleart, 2023: 27). Yet keeping the discussion solely at this level overlooks the central question of identity. At the core of any democracy lies its *demos*. How, then, can one argue that the EU's democratic deficit is shrinking if no European *demos* exists still? This question is often sidestepped, either for the reasons outlined in the introduction or because it is assumed to threaten national identities. The latter claim should be dismissed. Identities are not necessarily cultural; they can also be political or civic in character. Moreover, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the very processes analysed in this research may be fostering the emergence of a collective EU political identity (Weiler, 1995; Kuhn, 2019: 1221; Stefán, 2023)

The first question to ask is what should be understood by an EU *demos*. This paper argues that it ought to be conceived as a collective, civic-based political identity. It must be collective, since identities only function when shared meanings are broadly recognized; and civic and political, because primordialist perspectives have long shown that it is impossible to identify even a single element of cultural heritage common to all Member States (Smith, 1990; 1992; 1993). Primordialists would further argue that a *demos* requires an *ethnos* (Weiler, 1995). Yet European history demonstrates that this is not a necessary precondition for identity formation. In Italy, the 19th-century statesman Massimo d'Azeglio famously declared: "We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians" (Doyle, 2019). Similarly, in France, where no political unification was needed, the state nonetheless preceded the nation¹². More broadly, long before the Westphalian system, history provides numerous examples of civic and political identities that did not rest on ethnic or cultural homogeneity (Stefán, 2023). In this sense, the EU could be seen as

¹² Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

following a similar path, where shared political institutions and practices may precede and eventually foster a collective European identity.

Looking at theories of European integration, postfunctionalism as developed by Hooghe and Marks (2009) emphasizes that collective identities are central to integration because of the growing role of mass politics, the salience of sovereignty-related cleavages, and “the increased participation [contestation] of European citizens in transnational interactions and their exposure to European socialization” (Kuhn, 2019: 1214). If one accepts that identities matter for integration, then the processes described in this paper can be examined step by step, and most suggest potential effects on identity creation.

First, polarization introduces ideology and emotion into political debates. In such debates, “voters engage in politics not to see their preferences put into legislation, but to ‘express’ a salient part of their identity” (Ellger, 2024: 1313; Huddy et al., 2015). There is little reason to assume that polarization over European issues would function differently. Second, the possible crystallization of EU-level cleavages signals the emergence of shared policy preferences across member states (Sorace, 2025; Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2024). Put simply, if citizens in different countries align around similar preferences and express their identity through representing them, a sense of collective political identity could gradually take shape (Sorace, 2025: 4). Third, history demonstrates that competitive and institutionalized party systems play a central role in identity formation (Hix et al. 2007: 147; Key, 1961; Rokkan, 1999). This effect can even be stronger in polarized systems, where reinforcing cleavages heighten the emotional and ideological stakes of political competition (Ellger, 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the emergence of a European *demos* is in theory possible through a bottom-up process of self-identification. This stands in contrast to the relative failure of top-down institutional reforms, which have not managed to generate a shared identity (Cerutti & Lucarelli, 2008; Lucarelli et al., 2011; Kuhn, 2019: 1221; Dean et al., 2019: vi; Carrieri et al., 2023). If so, the development of a European *demos* through polarization, shared cleavages, and institutionalized competition could not only foster collective identity but also strengthen agonistic contestation as a form of democratic engagement, further addressing the Union’s democratic deficit.

Plausible theories aside, there remains a fundamental problem: there is little evidence that a collective EU identity has truly taken root among citizens. The second-order nature of EP elections continues to persist, and, more importantly, the behaviour of collective organizations – such as parties, civil society groups, unions, or social movements – do not reflect the existence of a shared European identity. Europeans still mobilize and organize primarily within a strong national context – and while individuals may hold multiple identities, their primary sense of belonging remains closely tied to the nation. This is illustrated by the recent farmers’ protests across Europe. Although the protests emerged from a Europeanized issue that was understood in a similar way across member states, the mobilization itself never attempted to transcend the national level. Nevertheless, there are reasons to argue that the formation of a European *demos* is still possible. The building blocks exist, but the process is likely to be gradual and slow. It is even conceivable that what develops first may not be a single unified *demos*, but

rather multiple “EU-like” *demoi*, formed within member states and shaped by national contexts¹³. Exploring that possibility lies beyond the scope of this paper. What matters here is that the tendencies already underway may still have a major impact on the democratic deficit of the European Union.

Conclusion

Politics in the European Union is changing. The post-Maastricht turn shifted conflict from largely economic questions to cultural ones, and a subsequent period of overlapping crises Europeanised debates and pushed mass politics onto the EU level. This dynamic constrained integration by fostering a *constraining dissensus*, and strengthening Euroscepticism. After Brexit, however, the argument increasingly concerned the future rather than the fate of the Union. Eurosceptic parties moved first: they politicised and Europeanised issues such as EU integration, migration, and, more recently, the green transition. Their success forced mainstream pro-EU parties to respond – both to contest rival forces in the political arena and because their own voters demanded it – producing a mutually reinforcing rise in the salience of EU issues and, with it, growing polarization. By the 2019 and especially the 2024 EP elections, EU issues had become more visible and EP contests more consequential, even as second-order features persisted. Against this backdrop, it becomes plausible to speak of EU-level cleavages. This paper proposes four: *centralization vs decentralization, pro-migration vs anti-immigration, green transition vs competitiveness first, and liberal vs illiberal democracy*. The crystallization of these cleavages may allow the application of party system institutionalization (PSI) to the European Parliament, where more regular coalition patterns, routinised bargaining, and efforts to tighten group cohesion would indicate movement toward a more structured party system – even without a formal EP right of initiative.

These political developments also reopen questions of identity. Whether or not a single European *demos* is emerging, an *agonistic democracy* perspective may help the democratic deficit by engaging citizens through the political contestation of EU-level issues. In short, the Europeanisation and politicisation of key issues, the formation of transnational (EU) cleavages, and the gradual structuring of party competition may together mark a step toward a more democratic EU polity, even if any formation of collective identities are likely to be slow, uneven, and contingent.

This paper is a conceptual, theory-building exercise. Its primary aim is to sketch a plausible trajectory for EU politics, while leaving empirical tests to future research. A conceptual discussion is warranted even without full empirical backing. Political dynamics at the EU level are changing, and without such exercises it is difficult to understand them or to anticipate where they may lead. It is the hope of this paper that it advances discussions on the nature of EU politics and the democratic deficit – and indeed, the future of the European Union itself.

¹³ Source from my anonymous interviews with experts or EU officials on my 1-week visiting fellowship at Europeum, Brussels office.

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEWS

As part of the Authors' visiting fellowship in Brussels, the host institute EUROPEUM provided and helped organize several interviews between the Author and relevant stakeholders (experts and EU officials) in this particular topic. A total of 13 interviews were conducted either online, or in person. The interviews followed a semi-structured logics, whereas questions were prepared in advance, but discussions were free-flowing. In the vast majority of cases, the interviews were on the condition of anonymity, and thus information used from these interviews in this research paper are similarly referenced as anonymous.

1. Table: The characterization of respondents in interviews – in the order they happened

POSITION	RESPONDENTS
Representative of an EU Institution	Respondent 1
Expert from a Think -tank	Respondent 2
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 3
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 4
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 5
Expert from a Think-tank	Respondent 6
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 7
Expert from a Think-tank	Respondent 8
Academic researcher focusing on the topic	Respondent 9
Expert from a Think-tank	Respondent 10
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 11
Expert from an EU Institution	Respondent 12
Expert from a Think-tank	Respondent 13

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