

Unfolding GAL-TAN: the multi-dimensional nature of public opinion in Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

New cultural policy issues, such as environmentalism, nationalism, and gender, have become well integrated into the two-dimensional structure of West European party systems. However, it remains uncertain whether a similar trend towards preference alignment exists among electorates. Studies on public opinion suggest that citizens' attitudes are less ideologically constrained than parties' policy packages. Nevertheless, much of the literature on voting takes voter alignment on new cultural issues as given. This study takes a step back to examine which policy dimensions shape public opinion and how these dimensions interrelate across a broad range of West European countries between 1990 and 2017. The results reveal strong regional patterns, but provide limited evidence of temporal alignment. Notably, nationalism does not strongly shape public opinion in Southern Europe, while gender roles form a weak dimension in Nordic countries. These results shed new light on the transformation of policy spaces.

KEYWORDS Policy space; public opinion; Western European electorates; nationalism; environmentalism

West European politics is shaped by two dominant conflict lines: the traditional cleavage over the role of the state in the economy and the role of the church (Bornschier 2010; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kitschelt and McGann 1997; Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Rovny and Whitefield 2019; Thomassen 2012). These two cleavages continue to influence much of the political conflict on economic and moral policy issues. In recent decades, however, new cultural issues have gained prominence, reshaping West European policy spaces. This led to significant transformations within national policy spaces. However, European party systems essentially remain

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two-dimensional, as demonstrated by the seminal works by Kitschelt (1994), Kriesi *et al.* (2006), and Marks *et al.* (2006), with parties aligning their policy positions on new cultural issues with the established cultural dimension. Today, this transformed cultural dimension includes topics such as immigration, multiculturalism and integration, as well as questions of environmental protection, energy, and climate change or issues concerning the rights and roles of women and non-binary genders in family and society.

We know much less about the structure and development of mass public opinion. Is European public opinion also defined by two distinct lines of social conflict? There is reason to doubt it. Empirical research suggests that voters' preferences are generally less ideologically structured than party configurations (Lupton *et al.* 2015; Nie and Andersen 1974). This literature highlights two points. First, the correlation between citizens' attitudes on economic and cultural issues is quite low. Second, the number of distinct issue dimensions shaping public opinion exceeds two (Henjak 2010). For instance, Caughey *et al.* (2019) and Hellwig (2014) show that public opinion on immigration policy differs from views on traditional cultural issues. Similarly, recent empirical research by Wheatley and Mendez (2021) demonstrates that the GAL-TAN dimension, which is well reflected in West European party systems, does not capture the structure of public opinion effectively.

However, much of the literature on voting behaviour is based on the conventional wisdom that policy spaces can be adequately described by one (ideological) or two (economic and cultural) dimensions (see, e.g., Dassonneville *et al.* 2024; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). Simplifying empirical complexity to develop efficient models is, of course, central to scientific inquiry. Depending on the research objective, a two-dimensional characterisation of public opinion may be appropriate. However, some studies, particularly those examining policy congruence between voters and parties, require accurate dimensional specifications. Research has shown that mismatches between the structures of party systems and electorates create representation gaps and issue cross-pressures for voters (Kurella and Rosset 2017; Lefkofridi *et al.* 2014; Rosset and Kurella 2021). Despite their importance, empirical studies on public opinion regarding emerging cultural policy issues remain scarce.

We contribute to the literature by examining the structure of public opinion in Western European countries in two steps. First, we ask how strongly traditional and new cultural issues shape public opinion over time and across countries. Alongside established economic and religious cleavages, we analyse three new cultural policy domains typically associated with the GAL-TAN divide: nationalism, gender roles, and

environmentalism. Our aim is to characterise the content and strength of the latent dimensions shaping public opinion. Secondly, we investigate the alignment between new cultural issues and traditional conflict lines, testing whether this alignment increases over time. In particular, we explore whether European public opinion undergoes a transformation similar to that of European party systems. To this end, we hypothesise that voter alignment on new cultural issues with traditional ones is stronger when external factors heighten the issue's salience and parties emphasise it. Conversely, alignment is expected to be weaker when issue importance increases bottom-up, driven by voters.

For our empirical analysis, we combine data from the European Values Study and the Manifesto Project, covering 1990–2017. Our study is the first to provide a comparative, longitudinal analysis of West European public opinion on both traditional and new cultural policy issues across a broad range of countries.

Our results show that mass public opinion is indeed characterised by a greater number of latent issue dimensions than party policy spaces. We observe regional differences in the strength of these structuring conflicts across Europe, alongside stability within regions. Over time, nationalism becomes increasingly aligned with the two historically dominant conflict lines among electorates, whereas environmentalism and attitudes towards gender roles do not follow this pattern. Overall, public opinion on the three new cultural policy issues remains largely independent across these domains. The findings provide limited support for two of our hypotheses: exogenous issue salience appears to increase alignment, while electoral salience reduces it. However, party issue emphasis has no discernible effect. These results suggest that while party systems are strongly structured by the GAL-TAN divide, West European citizens' preferences are far less constrained by this new cultural policy dimension.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, followed by a presentation of our theoretical framework and hypotheses on the structure of policy spaces and preference alignment. The fourth section outlines our use of data from the European Values Study and the Comparative Manifesto Project to test these hypotheses empirically. We then present our empirical analyses, and the final section concludes.

Transformations of West European policy spaces

Political conflict within European countries has traditionally been structured along economic and religious lines (Rovny and Polk 2019). However, de-industrialisation and globalisation have shifted the content of the religious dimension towards new cultural issues, such as women's rights and

environmentalism, promoted by the New Left, and immigration, politicised by the New Right (e.g., Kitschelt 1992; Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Marks *et al.* 2006). While the transformation of party positions on these issues is well-studied, it remains unclear whether European public opinion has undergone a similar transformation. Specifically, it remains unclear whether attitudes towards new cultural issues are as closely aligned with traditional cleavages among voters as observed within party systems. We therefore focus on whether new cultural issues are integrated into a two-dimensional policy space at the voter level and whether this integration is driven by issue salience.

The literature offers differing conclusions regarding the issues that structure public opinion. Most studies identify economic and religious principle dimensions as central, while some also highlight an economic dimension centred on protectionism versus free trade (Hellwig 2014). Others report distinct dimensions encompassing attitudes towards European integration (De Vries 2007; Dolezal *et al.* 2013; Mader *et al.* 2020; Toshkov and Krouwel 2022), the environment (Crawley *et al.* 2022; Kitschelt and McGann 1997; Knutsen 2018), nuclear energy (Kurella and Pappi 2015), gender (Dalton 2017), and nationalism (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Henjak 2010; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Some studies subsume religious principles, nationalism, and EU integration into a single cultural dimension (Costello 2017), while Dolezal *et al.* (2013) combine immigration, gender roles, and abortion into one cultural dimension.

To our knowledge, no study has examined the relationship between the distinct policy dimensions shaping public opinion over time. As a result, it remains unclear whether public opinion on new cultural issues has been absorbed into established dimensions, maintained its uniqueness, or aligned with traditional dimensions from the beginning.

Our takeaway from that literature is that findings on the dimensions of public opinion strongly depend on the selection of issue items included in the analyses. For instance, while some studies treat religious issues and nationalism as separate dimensions, others combine them into a single dimension. As Rovny and Polk (2019: 6) notes, '[...] any inductive approach to assessing the structure of political issues—that is, their dimensionality—is fundamentally dependent on the definition of political issues and their selection for inclusion, which is in turn determined by the availability of data.' This limitation also applies to our empirical analysis. For example, due to data constraints, we do not identify a policy dimension related to European integration, even though it is frequently reported as a distinct dimension of public opinion. We acknowledge the dependency of results on data availability and will account for this in the conclusions drawn from our findings.

The mixed evidence in the literature is not solely due to differences in statistical approaches or data availability but also reflects variations in how public opinion is structured across countries and over time. Henjak (2010) provides a valuable framework for understanding these differences, challenging the idea that the transformation of value cleavages follows a uniform trajectory across advanced industrial societies in Western Europe. Instead, he argues that the interaction between welfare regimes and the historical strength of religious cleavages has led to three distinct trajectories of issue change.

Henjak's findings show that cultural issues are more prominent in countries where religious cleavages have historically been strong. Economic cleavages dominate in social democratic regimes, while cultural value cleavages are more significant in Christian democratic regimes. Among cultural issues, immigration emerges as the most salient factor influencing vote choice across all countries. This trend is further reinforced by the failure of corporatist welfare states to address the needs of globalisation's 'losers', which, according to Henjak (2010), further strengthens the salience of identity and immigration politics in contexts with strong religious cleavages and corporatist welfare systems. Conversely, in countries with historically strong class cleavages, the economic dimension remains dominant, especially in liberal and social democratic welfare regimes where religious cleavages have been less pronounced. In these contexts, the transformation of cultural issues has had a limited impact on voting behaviour.

Based on these arguments, we expect distinct patterns of public opinion in Nordic and Central Western countries. For Southern European countries, such as Spain and Portugal, which fall outside Esping-Andersen (1990)'s original welfare typology and were not included in Henjak's study, we expect yet another pattern. Given the traditional strength of the religious cleavage in these countries, public opinion is likely to follow a different trajectory. We further extend this argument by additionally considering the economic development of countries to define regional patterns of public opinion. Economic development may influence the salience of environmental issues as a new cultural concern. Recent cross-country studies show that environmental considerations are more salient in wealthier countries, particularly in Nordic Europe, than in poorer Southern countries (Crawley *et al.* 2022; Lo and Chow 2015). We therefore expect to find a stronger environmental divide in the wealthier Northern countries compared to the South.

In summary, we differentiate between Nordic, Central Western, and Southern European countries, based on the varying roles of economic, religious, and environmental conflicts within these regions. We anticipate strong economic and religious cleavages across all regions, but expect more pronounced immigration conflicts in Central Western

countries and a greater emphasis on gender conflicts in Southern countries. Environmental conflicts are likely to be more prominent in the North than in the South.

A theory of issue alignment

Based on the aforementioned literature, we conclude that West European public opinion is characterised by multiple issue dimensions. We argue that the strength of these dimensions varies across time and countries, with distinct patterns expected in Nordic, Central Western, and Southern European countries, as argued above.

In order to describe the structure of public opinion, we differentiate between the strength and the salience of a conflict line. By *strength*, we refer to how strongly attitudes within a policy domain are shaped by an underlying value principle. The stronger the structuring principle, the more consistent citizens' attitudes are towards specific policy issues from that domain. If attitudes are strongly constrained, knowing an individual's standpoint on the latent issue dimension will reliably predict their opinion on any policy issue within that domain. For example, suppose there is a strong latent dimension capturing the cosmopolitanism-nationalism conflict. A citizen with a libertarian stance on this dimension would consistently hold libertarian views on issues such as asylum policy, integration, and multiculturalism. Conversely, if there is no underlying principle structuring opinions on multiple policy issues within the same domain, we conclude that the latent dimension is weak. For instance, a citizen might support integration measures but oppose generous asylum policies. In such a case, attitudes towards these policies are independent of each other, indicating that there is no value conflict constraining citizens' opinions. This does not imply that the issues are not considered important, but rather that there is no latent social conflict characterised by two clearly defined, uncontroversial and opposing principles within the domain.

By *salience*, we refer to the importance of a conflict in shaping political behaviour. We further distinguish between three types of salience, based on their source. *Voter* salience refers to the importance of an issue dimension in guiding voting behaviour, specifically how much voters consider the policy issue in their vote calculus. *Party* salience, on the other hand, describes the significance of an issue dimension for parties, capturing the extent to which parties politicise a policy domain in their campaigns. This is often reflected in the emphasis parties place on the issue in their communications. We also define a third form of salience, termed *exogenous* salience. This captures the extent to which an issue becomes politically relevant due to exogenous factors, such as events beyond the control of parties or citizens. An example of exogenous salience is the increasing

flow of immigration, which makes the immigration issue politically and socially salient.

It is important to note that all three forms of salience can be large at the same time, but do not have to be. For instance, an issue domain may be politicised by parties even when objective exogenous salience is low. A current example is the politicisation of immigration by many moderate and far right parties, even in countries with low or declining immigration rates. Conversely, an issue like climate change can be exogenously relevant without being politicised by parties. The degree to which voters consider these issues in their voting behaviour is a separate question.¹

Our first aim is to describe the strength of latent dimensions that shape public opinion. As noted earlier, we expect the strength of traditional dimensions to vary across regions, reflecting the historical development of religious and class cleavages. It is also reasonable to assume that the strength of social conflicts addressing new cultural policies depends on their salience. External events or societal developments can bring issues to the political agenda by forcing public and political debates on topics that were previously non-existent or unimportant. This relates to our concept of exogenous salience. Examples include (natural) disasters, such as the nuclear catastrophes in Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011), which heightened public awareness of nuclear energy and environmental issues. Other examples involve large migration movements triggered by the outbreak of (civil) wars, which demand immediate solutions from receiving countries. Clearly, the effects and consequences of external events differ across countries, further reinforcing our argument that the structure of policy spaces varies across Europe.

The second aim of this article is to analyse the alignment of old and new conflict lines over time and across countries. To develop expectations about voter alignment, we draw on the literature on mass belief systems, which has a long history of studying 'attitude consistency' or 'attitude constraint' in the US context (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Converse 1964; Lupton *et al.* 2015; Nie and Andersen 1974). This literature has consistently demonstrated that public preferences are not as strongly structured as the policy positions of political leaders, activists, and parties. While party systems are typically organised along an ideological left-right dimension, this is not true for the mass public.

Lupton *et al.* (2015) argue, as many others have, that this phenomenon is due to low levels of political sophistication among the general public. Politically sophisticated citizens are more likely to structure their preferences around ideology, whereas 'much of the mass public does not possess the cognitive and motivational characteristics that connect ideology and issue attitudes' (Lupton *et al.* 2015: 371). This approach assumes the existence of ideology as an underlying super-issue. Whether citizens hold

consistent attitudes, then, depends on their cognitive capabilities. As these are higher among the educated and politically engaged, such citizens exhibit greater attitude consistency. Alternatively, this pattern may reflect the diversity of belief systems within the electorate, recognising that political leaders and parties primarily represent one – specifically, the left-right ideological framework. This alignment biases the political system towards citizens whose beliefs fit within this framework, leaving preferences outside it underrepresented. Empirical evidence suggests that a significant portion of the public holds policy preferences that are unconstrained and non-ideological.

There is thus an apparent mismatch between the structure of elite belief systems on the one hand and mass belief systems on the other. While European party systems are organised along an economic and a cultural (GAL-TAN) dimension, public opinion exhibits weak constraint. Accepting the two-dimensional party structure as an empirical reality, we argue that parties can educate voters on how new cultural issues align within this framework. Empirical evidence supports this: Kashner and Stalinski (2024) use an experimental setup to study how party cues on a policy issue that is quite unknown to the US electorate influences participants' opinion on that matter. Their results show that Republicans are significantly more likely to support the policy when informed that their party supports it, whereas Democrats are not. Similar effects have been documented in other experimental studies (Cohen 2003), as well as in studies relying on observational data (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Slothuus and Bisgaard (2021) show that voters even change their own opinion on an issue if their preferred party suddenly changes its position. This suggests that voters are not only educated but also persuaded by parties' framing: Voters adjust their preferences in line with their party's stance to avoid cognitive dissonance. Thus, exposure to party-driven discourse on policy issues should lead citizens to align their views with the dominant economic and cultural divides. Consequently, since parties bundle their policies on new cultural issues within the GAL-TAN cleavage, greater party communication on a new cultural policy issue should lead to preference alignment with a traditional cleavage line. We therefore expect that alignment of new-cultural policy issues with one of the traditional dominant conflicts will increase if parties intensify their emphasis on the policy issue.

Hypothesis 1: If a new cultural issue gets more emphasised by parties, voter preferences on the issue become more aligned with their preferences on an established issue dimension. (Education/persuasion)

Similar to the party persuasion argument outlined above, we expect that increasing exogenous salience of a new cultural issue will align

voters' preferences with an existing dominant conflict. Since voters presumably lack strong opinions on previously irrelevant issues, the sudden appearance of such an issue on the political agenda prompts them to seek guidance within the established ideological framework set by parties, leading them to adopt positions that align with their preferred party. This assumes that external events introduce uncertainties among the electorate, encouraging reliance on familiar ideological cues. To illustrate with the example of immigration, an increase in the asylum rate may raise questions about identity, openness, and social cohesion, while also addressing practical concerns such as accommodation, financing, and integration. The financial and social consequences of these policies are unclear, triggering uncertainty among citizens. In such an environment of uncertainty and social change, we expect voters to align their positions on the issue with the framing provided by the party system. This alignment offers voters orientation in times of transformation. This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: If a new cultural issue gains importance based on exogenous reasons, voter preferences on the issue become more aligned with their preferences on an established issue dimension. (Orientation seeking)

In contrast, we argue that voter salience has the opposite effect on issue alignment. Again, we take the empirical pattern as given, assuming that voters' issue constraint is initially low, such that preferences on any two policy dimensions are only weakly correlated. The more voters come to care deeply about an issue without external pressure, the stronger their opinion on that issue must be. If the salience of the issue originates not from the parties or exogenous developments, but from society itself through a bottom-up politicisation process, there is no need for citizens to seek guidance from the ideological belief system – they form their opinion independently.

A concrete example of this dynamic can be seen in the rise of the feminist movement during the 1970s. As women's rights, particularly issues like reproductive freedom and workplace equality, gained prominence, these issues were largely driven by grassroots activism rather than party agendas or external political developments. Women formed strong opinions based on their own experiences and shared grievances, which sparked political engagement. As a result, their views on these issues were likely stable and independently formed, making them less susceptible to persuasion or influence from party communications on the matter.

Empirical evidence for a similar mechanism is presented by Garner and Palmer (2016). Their results show that citizens' opinions become more independent from their in-group the more personally important the issue is to them. Bottom-up issue salience, therefore, encourages 'thinking

outside the box'. Further support for this mechanism can be drawn from Evans and Butt (2007). They analyse the relationship between British citizens' attitudes towards the EU between 1990 and 2010, covering a period when the EU issue became increasingly salient to voters. Their results demonstrate that the correlation between voters' attitudes towards EU integration and their ideological left-right positions weakened, providing further evidence that attitudes are less influenced by party framing as an issue becomes more electorally salient.

Building on these findings and our own reasoning, we expect that an increase in bottom-up, electoral salience will foster independent thinking, thus lowering or even reversing issue alignment. This leads to our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: If a new cultural issue gets more salient among the electorate, the issue becomes less aligned with a dominant conflict. (Bottom-up politicisation)

Data and research design

We rest our analyses on data from the European Values Study (EVS), waves 2–5, to get measures of citizens' attitudes on a large set of issue items for 12 countries over the last three decades (EVS 2021). The countries included in our analysis are Austria, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden. The concrete time points covered are 1990, 1999, 2008 and 2017.² Country selection is largely driven by data availability: we include as many West European countries as we could get time series data on. In total, the dataset covers over 70,000 respondents nested in four points in time and 12 countries, resulting in 48 country-year units. We further categorise the countries into three regions. For Nordic Europe, these are: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Sweden; for Central Western Europe: Austria, Germany, France, Great-Britain, and the Netherlands; and for Southern Europe: Spain, Italy, and Portugal.

Measuring the structure of public opinion

In order to analyse the number and strength of issue dimensions within countries over time, we select 15 issue items. The aim was to select as many issue items as possible per issue domain, but to have a stable set of similar items in terms of their content and number across time and countries. The 15 selected items capture respondents' policy preferences on five broad policy areas: the economy, religious/moral principles, environmentalism, gender equality, and nationalism. For the remainder of the article, we refer to the religious/moral cleavage line as *moral*.³ These data

are used to reveal the underlying latent structure in public opinion by applying explorative factor analyses.

We define the economic issue dimension to encompass policies addressing the labour market. We select the following three items: (1) whether unemployed people should have the right to refuse a job they do not want, (2) whether competition is good or harmful for the economy, and (3) whether the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. The moral dimension captures issues that address moral concerns raised by the churches. Issue items tapping into the moral dimension are also identical for each wave. The respondents were asked for their opinions on (1) homosexuality, (2) abortion, and (3) divorce. We define the gender issue dimension to encompass questions related to the role of women in society and within the family. For the gender dimension, we use items asking (1) whether a child suffers when a mother works,⁴ (2) whether most women primarily want a home and children, and (3) whether men should have more right to a job than women when jobs are scarce. The gender issue dimension is thus conceptually quite close to the moral dimension, as the catholic church also promotes a strong opinion on these matters. Yet, we argue that gender issues are mainly discussed independently from religious matters.

Issue items asking for opinions on environmentalism and nationalism are inconsistent over the course of the four EVS waves. Therefore, we have to rely partly on different items in each wave, but we always include three issue items per domain within each wave. Concerning attitudes towards environmental issues, the EVS includes one question that is repeated in each wave: whether respondents are willing to give part of their income to prevent environmental pollution. We use this issue and combine it with two additional items on the environment per wave.⁵

For the nationalism dimension, we consider three items that address attitudes towards nativism and multiculturalism. The first item is a count of which of the following groups one would not accept as neighbours: immigrants, people of a different race, Muslims, and Jews. The second item we use asks for the opinion on whether native people should have more right to a job than foreigners when jobs are scarce. The third item asks whether immigrants should maintain their own customs. We recode all items to a range from -1 (liberal/environmentalist/cosmopolitan) to 1 (conservative/anti-environmentalist/nativist).

We conduct exploratory factor analyses at the country-year level to identify latent policy dimensions for each country and survey wave separately. The primary goal of the analyses is not to explain as much variance as possible, but to extract meaningful dimensions that best explain the correlations among the included issue items. To achieve this, we

perform an *oblimin* rotation on the extracted factors, explicitly allowing for correlations between factors (Preacher and MacCallum 2003).

In the first step, we determine the number of relevant factors using parallel analysis (Horn 1965; Humphreys and Ilgen 1969).⁶ Next, we conduct factor analyses with oblimin rotation based on the determined number of latent dimensions for each country and time-point. The results of these factor analyses provide insights not only into the number, content, and strength of the latent dimensions that structure public opinion, but also into the relationships between these dimensions. We report the inter-factor correlations, which we interpret as a measure of *issue alignment*.

We operationalise *the strength of a latent issue dimension* by the number of items from the same policy issue area that load together on the same factor with a loading greater than 0.24. This reflects the idea that a strong structuring principle will constrain attitudes on all policy issues within the domain.

Since we include three issue items per policy domain, the measure ranges from 1 (since one item must load to identify the latent dimension as addressing the issue domain) to 3 (when all three items load at least moderately on the same factor).

Party salience

We draw on data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP; Volkens *et al.* 2021) to estimate party salience. We select the most proximate past election to match party salience to the respective EVS survey wave. In general, CMP items measure the share of sentences belonging to pre-defined categories in a given manifesto. Our measure of issue domain-specific party salience builds on the relative length each party devotes to a certain policy issue area in its manifesto. To get a measure of the party-system issue emphasis on new cultural issue dimensions, we calculate the vote-weighted average party salience. We follow previous work by O’Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) and Wagner and Meyer (2014) to guide our selection of the CMP categories that we consider for each new cultural issue dimension. For the nationalism dimension, we combine the CMP categories on multiculturalism and national way of life.⁷ For the environment, we combine categories covering mentions of environmental protection and sustainable economic development (anti-growth).⁸ For the gender equality dimension, we consider the categories equality (positive) and traditional morality (negative)⁹ which cover references to abortion, moral issues, homosexuality, tolerance, civil rights of homosexuals, as well as (lack of) values and norms. Thus, it is not completely separate from our conception of the traditional moral conflict line, but by considering

only negative mentions of traditional morality, which include support for modern family compositions, we believe that this is a good proxy to capture party issue emphasis of gender equality issues.

Exogenous salience

We pick one measure per new cultural issue dimension to capture the extent to which the issue becomes politically relevant. For the nationalism and environmentalism dimension, we follow Dennison and Kriesi (2023) by considering immigration rates and temperature anomalies on the country-year level. Concretely, we consider the number of asylum applications per inhabitant. These data are taken from Eurostat (2024) and UNHCR (2024). We operationalise temperature anomaly based on data from Menne *et al.* (2018) and match them to countries based on their latitude and longitude. For the gender equality dimension, we rely on the female employment rate extracted from OECD (2024) as a measure of how much the role of women within families changes or has to be redefined because of exogenous trends on the labour market.

However, our exogenous salience measures differ in the extent to which they provoke societal insecurity. The measures for the exogenous salience of nationalism and environmentalism likely represent more severe societal threats than the measure for the gender dimension. Climate change raises fundamental questions about future living conditions and contributes to extreme weather events that could potentially be life-threatening. Rising asylum rates trigger fears of status loss and identity threats. In contrast, increasing female labour force participation does not pose a similar threat but serves as an indicator of how traditional concepts of gender roles and the family are evolving. This shift could also create insecurities among parts of society.

A further limitation is that the measures for the exogenous salience of environmental and gender issues have a relatively narrow focus, capturing one important, though not the only, form of exogenous salience. For example, in addition to temperature anomalies, other environmental or nuclear catastrophes could increase the salience of environmental issues. Changing gender roles also become evident in trends such as the rise of patchwork families and patterns of paternal leave. Nonetheless, we believe that our measures capture one of the primary sources of exogenous salience.

Voter salience

In order to get a measure of voter issue salience, we estimate vote choice models for each country-year, which take as input the policy standpoints of voters on all 15 issue items as reported above. This is similar to the way Henjak (2010) operationalises the salience of policy dimensions. We

estimate multinomial logit models including party intercepts as control variables to capture non-policy related aspects of voting behaviour. For each country-year context, we estimate a full model, including voter preferences on all latent issue items together, and one model each in which we exclude items belonging to one issue dimension. Our measure of voter salience is then defined by the difference in relative explanatory power between the full model and the model in which we leave out the respective new cultural policy issue dimension items. We rely on the pseudo- R^2 -value for this. Thus, the measure picks the amount of explanatory power that the preferences on the respective policy issue dimension adds to the explanatory power of the full model.

Results

This section presents the results.¹⁰ We first present descriptive results of our data and the variables of interest, then proceed with the hypotheses tests at the voter level.

Descriptive results

First, we estimate factor analyses using respondent-level data to examine the structure of policy spaces from the citizen's perspective. The detailed results for each of the 48 country-year samples are presented in the [Online Appendix, Tables 10–57](#). A close inspection of these results supports our assumption of regional patterns. While the parallel analyses generally suggest a four- or five-dimensional solution, we define a factor as constituting a latent policy issue dimension only if at least one issue item from the respective policy domain loads moderately ($>.24$) on the factor. The strength of the latent dimension is measured based on the number of issue items from the same domain that load together on that factor.

Based on this definition, we detect significant similarities in the number and strength of latent issue dimensions within Northern, Central Western, and Southern countries, and these patterns remain relatively stable over time. A comprehensive overview of the strength of each latent issue dimension is presented in [Table 1](#) in the [Online Appendix](#). It shows that the established economic and moral cleavage lines serve as strong structuring forces across all West European countries over time. However, the strength of the three new cultural policy dimensions we consider varies across regions. A summary of the cross-regional pattern is displayed graphically in [Figure 1](#).

In the Northern countries, the latent dimensions addressing nationalism and environmentalism are quite strong, while the latent dimension

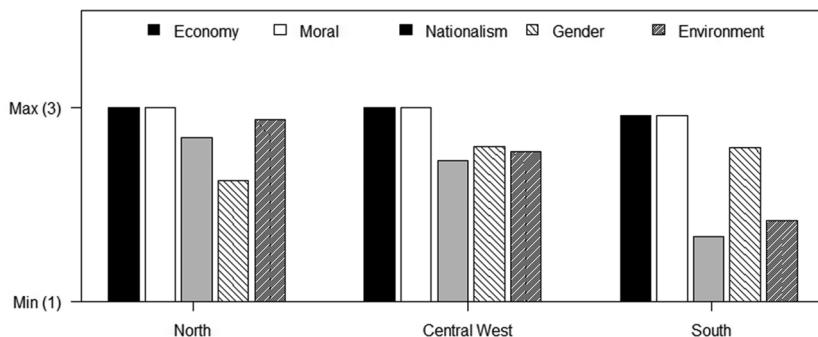


Figure 1. Average structuring strength of latent conflicts across regions.

encompassing gender equality is weak. This does not imply that gender issues play no role in public debates in these countries or that citizens are indifferent to them. Rather, it suggests that citizens' attitudes on various gender policy issues do not follow a coherent underlying structuring principle. Given the survey responses, respondents cannot be placed along a latent gender equality dimension.

In contrast, the factor analysis in Southern countries often reveals a strong gender equality dimension, but only weak conflict lines on nationalism and environmentalism. The structure of public opinion in Nordic and Southern countries is thus homogeneous within each region but quite different between these regions.

In Central Western European countries, we observe considerable variation within countries over time. While the economic and moral issue dimensions consistently serve as strong structuring forces, the strength of other new cultural issue dimensions varies significantly within countries over time. For instance, in Germany and Austria, the strength of the nationalism dimension fluctuates between values of 1 and 3. A similar variation in the strength of the environmentalism dimension is found in the Netherlands and France. Nonetheless, the overall trend points towards the presence of multiple strong cultural conflicts in parallel within Central Western countries.

Overall, we find that public opinion is characterised by three to five strong latent issue dimensions, which makes it more complex than the two-dimensional party systems. This conclusion is further supported by examining the levels of inter-factor correlation. Tables 1–3 show the average inter-factor correlation for citizens by region. In general, the correlations are quite low, with the only exception being the gender issue dimension, which correlates moderately with the moral issue dimension (up to .44) in the Northern and Western regions. In the Southern region, it correlates with .43 with the nationalism dimension. Beyond this, we observe that new cultural issues tend to be more strongly related to the

Table 1. Average inter-factor correlation by region: Northern countries.

	Economy	Moral	Nationalism	Gender
Moral	0.05			
Nationalism	0.13	0.25		
Gender	0.07	0.44	0.36	
Environment	0.18	0.17	0.24	0.23

Table 2. Average inter-factor correlation by region: Central Western countries.

	Economy	Moral	Nationalism	Gender
Moral	0.07			
Nationalism	0.09	0.21		
Gender	0.09	0.43	0.32	
Environment	0.05	0.19	0.27	0.24

Table 3. Average inter-factor correlation by region: Southern countries.

	Economy	Moral	Nationalism	Gender
Moral	0.15			
Nationalism	0.14	0.24		
Gender	0.15	0.37	0.43	
Environment	0.02	0.11	0.11	0.16

traditional moral issue dimension than to the economic conflict line. However, in Northern countries, environmentalism aligns slightly stronger with the economic dimension. Overall, the level of preference alignment is quite low, including between the new cultural policy domains themselves.

For comparison, we examine the correlation between parties' positions on distinct policy issue domains using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, as presented in Tables 3–8 in the [Online Appendix](#). These correlations range mostly between 0.5 and 1. It shows that parties' policy positions on new cultural policy domains are strongly aligned, with correlations between .88 and .95 across regions. They are also strongly correlated with the traditional cultural conflict line. Even the economic and cultural dimensions exhibit strong correlations, ranging from .58 in Central Western Europe to .93 in Southern European party systems. Thus, the descriptive findings strongly support the idea that public opinion on new cultural issue dimensions is not well aligned with traditional conflict lines, even though such alignment is observed at the party level.

Hypotheses tests

We now proceed to test the hypotheses about when to expect alignment of a new cultural issue dimension with an established conflict line. Hypotheses 1–3 propose that both party salience and exogenous salience have positive effects on alignment, while voter salience has a negative effect. To test these hypotheses, we estimate panel regression models for each issue domain separately. The analysis is conducted at the country-year level, with two

models presented for each issue domain. The first model tests for alignment with the economic issue dimension, while the second tests for alignment with the moral issue dimension. The dependent variable in these models is the inter-factor correlation between the respective new cultural policy issue dimension and one of the two dominant conflict lines.¹¹

We do not have clear expectations regarding whether new cultural issues will align more strongly with the economic or moral issue dimension, as there are potential connections to both. Nationalism, for instance, has a moral component related to questions of compassion and identity, but it also involves concrete economic aspects, such as the financing of accommodation, welfare payments, and access to the job market. Similarly, gender issues are connected to both economic and moral concerns. For example, modern family concepts, such as increased female labour force participation, raise the demand for public financing of childcare facilities and parental leave, while simultaneously challenging traditional views of women's roles in society. Environmentalism, on the other hand, clearly raises questions about how to finance environmental protection measures but also involves moral aspects, such as promoting sustainable lifestyles, eating habits, and responsibility for future generations. As a result, it is possible that new cultural issues may become increasingly aligned with both established conflict lines, or with only one of them.

Table 4 presents the results of panel regression models, where we regress the inter-factor correlation – estimated by the factor analyses – between each new cultural issue dimension and the economic conflict line, using our three salience concepts as predictors. First, we estimate one model for each issue, including a linear time trend and region dummies.¹² The results show that there is statistically significant alignment over time between nationalism and the economic conflict line, but not for environmentalism. In fact, there is an opposite trend for the gender issue dimension, which is becoming increasingly de-aligned from the economic conflict. Additionally, the results highlight regional differences across all three new cultural conflicts. Nationalism is more aligned with the economic conflict line in Nordic and Southern countries than in Central Western countries. Alignment between environmentalism and the economic conflict is stronger in the North, while the gender dimension is more aligned with the economic conflict in Southern countries.

Table 5 presents the results concerning alignment with the traditional moral conflict line as the dependent variable. Again, there is a significant time trend for nationalism, but no evidence of increasing alignment between environmentalism or gender roles and the established moral cleavage. The results also indicate regional differences. Gender roles and environmentalism are less aligned in Southern countries, where they both function as only weak structuring principles.

Table 4. Results of panel regression models of alignment with economic dimension.

	Dep.var: Interfactor correlation with economic dimension					
	Nationalism		Environmentalism		Gender Equality	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant	0.01 (0.03)		0.01 (0.04)		0.17*** (0.04)	
Time trend	0.03*** (0.01)		0.02 (0.01)		-0.03*** (0.01)	
Region: North	0.05* (0.03)		0.14*** (0.03)		-0.02 (0.03)	
Region: South	0.06* (0.03)		-0.03 (0.03)		0.06* (0.03)	
Asylum rate		0.08 (0.18)				
Temp. anomaly				0.04 (0.04)		
Fem. lab. force						-0.59 (0.38)
Party salience		0.01 (0.01)		-0.002 (0.005)		-0.003 (0.01)
Voter salience		0.001 (0.002)		0.003 (0.002)		0.01* (0.005)
N	45	44	48	48	48	46
R ²	0.23	0.11	0.41	0.07	0.23	0.18
Adjusted R ²	0.18	-0.33	0.37	-0.32	0.18	-0.19
F Statistic	4.14**	1.15	10.26***	0.83	4.36***	2.29*

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

Table 5. Results of panel regression models of alignment with moral dimension.

	Dep.var: Interfactor correlation with moral dimension					
	Nationalism		Environmentalism		Gender Equality	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Constant	0.14*** (0.04)		0.14*** (0.05)		0.39*** (0.03)	
Time trend	0.03* (0.01)		0.02 (0.02)		0.02 (0.01)	
Region: North	0.04 (0.04)		-0.02 (0.04)		0.004 (0.03)	
Region: South	0.03 (0.04)		-0.08* (0.04)		-0.06** (0.03)	
Asylum rate		0.30 (0.25)				
Temp. anomaly				0.15** (0.06)		
Fem. lab. force						0.16 (0.34)
Party salience		0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.01)		-0.002 (0.01)
Voter salience		-0.0002 (0.003)		-0.01*** (0.003)		-0.01** (0.004)
N	45	44	48	48	48	46
R ²	0.10	0.07	0.10	0.45	0.16	0.15
Adjusted R ²	0.04	-0.38	0.04	0.22	0.11	-0.23
F Statistic	1.58	0.72	1.65	9.00***	2.87**	1.85

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

When evaluating the results regarding the effect of party salience on issue alignment (Hypothesis 1), a clear conclusion emerges: none of the coefficients in [Tables 4](#) and [5](#) are statistically significant at conventional levels. Parties' issue emphasis does not lead to an increase in the alignment of voter preferences on any of the three new issue dimensions, neither with their preferences on the economic issue dimension nor on the traditional moral issue dimension. Therefore, the results do not support the idea that voters are being educated or persuaded by parties' framing of new issues. Instead, the structure of public opinion seems to evolve independently of parties' framing and communication efforts.

Regarding the question of whether an increase in exogenous salience leads to increased alignment (Hypothesis 2), we find weak evidence. The coefficient for temperature anomaly is significantly positive at the 5% level¹³ in [Table 5](#). This suggests that increases in climate change and severe weather conditions cause voters to align their attitudes on environmentalism more strongly with their moral preferences. In other words, rising temperature anomalies frame the environmental conflict more in moral terms. However, we do not detect statistically significant effects for any of the other issue dimensions, although the coefficients for asylum rates move in the expected direction. We interpret these results as weak support for Hypothesis 2. Our reasoning is based on the idea that exogenous salience triggers insecurity, prompting citizens to seek orientation within an established (ideological) framework. The increasing temperature anomalies are associated with extreme weather events that could potentially be life-threatening, and our results indicate that this connects environmental policy preferences with traditional moral values.

Finally, we assess the pattern of results in relation to Hypothesis 3, which posits that when voter salience is high, the alignment between new cultural issues and the traditional conflict line will be low. While there is no effect of voter salience on alignment with the economic issue dimension, [Table 5](#) provides evidence supporting Hypothesis 3 for environmentalism and gender equality. Specifically, for both conflict lines, alignment with the moral cleavage decreases as voter salience increases. For nationalism, the coefficient moves in the same direction but does not reach a conventional level of statistical significance. Thus, when an issue gains more attention from voters bottom-up, it is less likely that public opinion on that issue will align with the traditional moral cleavage, which plays a significant role in shaping party systems. Interestingly, the coefficient for voter salience regarding the alignment of gender equality with the traditional economic conflict is positive. This suggests that as gender issues gain importance from the bottom-up, they are increasingly perceived as an economic issue, further highlighting their independence from the traditional moral cleavage.

Taken together, one might conclude that our hypotheses are not well suited to explain the structure of mass public opinion. However, we believe that a more interesting conclusion is that mass public opinion is not highly structured to begin with. We find that new cultural policy issues are not well aligned with the two established conflict lines, and we observe a time trend for only one issue: nationalism. Attitudes towards environmentalism and gender equality do not become increasingly aligned with either moral or economic cleavages over time. Overall, the structure of public opinion in West European countries is characterised by multiple lines of conflict that vary in strength across regions and are only weakly related to one another. This suggests the presence of pluralist societies. Even though preferences on nationalism are becoming more aligned with the economic cleavage, there remains one prominent cross-cutting new cultural issue: environmentalism in the Northern countries and gender equality in the Southern countries. Central Western countries also exhibit a complex structure. Therefore, our results do not show a clear trend of new cultural policy issues becoming integrated into a two-dimensional policy space over time.

Furthermore, we find no evidence to suggest that parties play an important role in shaping the structure of public opinion. Party salience does not have a significant effect on issue alignment among the general public. This implies that parties may not drive alignment through persuasion or education of the electorate. However, we do find that the exogenous salience of environmentalism triggers preference alignment with the traditional moral conflict. Climate change, in particular, may create insecurity, prompting citizens to rely on their existing moral belief systems for guidance.

Conclusion

West European politics are shaped by two dominant cleavages – economic and cultural – which have integrated new issues like immigration and environmental concerns while maintaining a largely two-dimensional party system (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Kriesi *et al.* 2006). However, existing literature on the US has shown that public opinion is less ideologically structured (Lupton *et al.* 2015; Nie and Andersen 1974). We use this as the starting point to describe the structure of West European public opinion, and ask whether it underwent a similar transformation towards a two-dimensional space as we observe within West European party systems. Our guiding question is whether new cultural policy issues are integrated into a policy space that is characterised by the two traditionally strong cleavages on the economy and religious principles. Based on the existing literature as well as on our own reasoning, we formulate

three hypotheses on when to expect alignment between these new cultural conflict lines and the traditional two cleavages. Our empirical analyses cover the time span from 1990 to 2017. We combine data from the European Values Study and the Comparative Manifesto project in our analyses.

Our results show that the structure of public opinion is characterised by four to five lines of conflict, with similar patterns regarding the strength and nature of conflict lines within the different West European regions of the North, Central West and South. This confirms our assumption that public opinion is shaped by more latent policy dimensions than West European party systems. By treating the correlation between new cultural policy issues and traditional conflict lines as the dependent variable, we demonstrate that alignment can occur when external events bring new cultural issues to the political agenda. Increasing temperature anomalies lead to greater alignment between environmentalism and the established moral conflict line. We attribute this effect to heightened insecurity, which prompts citizens to seek guidance by relying on existing belief systems, rather than developing an independent underlying principle for the new issue domain. In contrast, we hypothesise that when an issue domain receives greater attention bottom-up from citizens, independent of party campaigns or external events, it is more likely to emerge as a distinct dimension within the electorate. Our empirical results confirm this hypothesis for environmentalism and gender equality, showing a negative effect of voter salience on issue alignment with the established moral conflict line. Nationalism stands out in that attitudes towards this latent dimension increasingly align with the two-dimensional structure of party systems. However, the degree of alignment remains low, with inter-factor correlations well below 0.3.

Overall, our results indicate that public opinion is multi-dimensional, in contrast to the two-dimensional structure of party systems, which have evolved towards an economic and a cultural GAL-TAN dimension. Party policy packages thus reflect a strong issue constraint, while citizens' preferences on various issues remain relatively unconstrained. From a normative perspective, this situation is compelling if we define one of the roles of parties as reducing the complexity of political issues into a simplified underlying principle, which we refer to as ideology. On the other hand, this scenario can have negative implications if the ideological policy packaging of parties systematically misrepresents the preferences of certain groups within the electorate. Such citizens suffer from issue-cross pressures, potentially lowering their political participation and satisfactions with democracy (Hillen and Steiner 2020), and ultimately leads to representation gaps (Kirkizh *et al.* 2023; Rosset and Kurella 2021; Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009).

However, there is also a positive aspect to our results. West European electorates are pluralist and appear to have remained so over the past three decades. This suggests that Western Europe has followed a different path from the USA, which has experienced increasing levels of social sorting and rising affective polarisation over time (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Lelkes 2016). Although similar results on affective polarisation have been reported on certain European countries as well (Bettarelli *et al.* 2023), our findings show that the underlying structure of public opinion in Western Europe has remained pluralist over an extended period.

Our study is not without limitations. Data availability is a significant constraint here, limiting our analyses to just five policy issue dimensions and excluding important areas like EU integration and foreign policy. Therefore, the results on the structure of public opinion likely represent a lower limit, and we cannot rule out the possibility of even more latent conflicts shaping public opinion. Additionally, our respondent-level data contain substantial gaps. While we view the long time span of the EVS as an asset, it comes at the cost of missing developments that occurred in between. Panel data at the individual level would be particularly valuable to analyse the causal relationships underlying the effects we hypothesise. We leave this to future research.

Notes

1. All three forms of salience correlate weakly in our empirical data ($r \leq 0.22$).
2. Fieldwork periods for wave 2 is 1989–1993, for wave 3 it is 1999–2001, for wave 4 it is 2008–2010 and for wave 5 it is 2017–2020.
3. For data availability reasons it was not possible to include issues addressing additional, potentially relevant policy domains like EU integration, international trade, or security. Our analysis therefore potentially underestimates the complexity of West European policy spaces.
4. For this item, the wording slightly deviates for different waves of the EVS.
5. For wave 2, it is an item concerning the acceptance of environmental problems in the fight against unemployment and an item on the importance of environmental protection. In wave 3, we combine it with two issues asking for the opinion on higher taxes to prevent environmental pollution and whether it's the government's responsibility to reduce environmental pollution. In wave 4, we combine it with an issue on the strength of nature to cope with impacts of industrial nations and the possibility of catastrophic environmental consequences. For wave 5, we use an issue on the importance of environmental protection and the exaggeration of environmental threats.
6. In a parallel analysis, two screeplots are compared: one based on the reduced correlation matrix of the original data and one based on random data. The intersection of the Eigenvalues is taken as the minimum Eigenvalue of the last dimension to consider. We perform 30 runs for the parallel analyses each.

7. These are: per601, per602, per607 and per608.
8. These are: per501 and per416.
9. These are: per503 and per604.
10. All of the following analyses were performed using the statistical software package R (R Core Team 2021).
11. As a robustness check, we also estimated all the models with the correlation of indices based on the respective three issue items that we include in the factor analyses. The pattern of results are broadly in line with the pattern reported in the main text. Results are presented in the [Online Appendix, Tables 2 and 3](#).
12. Since these covariates are time-invariant, we report the between-estimator for the models with time and region effects.
13. Due to the low number of observations, we report statistical significance at the 10% level.

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